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LEGACY

TRANSFORMATION IN ACTION

Prioritize People to Solve School Challenges



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If you're in education long enough, you realize most school challenges aren't due to a lack of strategy; they're due to a lack of people-centered problem-solving.

Schools are navigating waves of challenges: teacher retention, student achievement gaps, disengagement, burnout, and initiative overload. Leaders are asking, How do we solve problems without burning people out? How do we get real traction on student outcomes without making school miserable for staff and students?



*“Our answer: Prioritize people first.
Then solve the problem together.
We have to include teachers in
our innovations!”*

At ISTE + ASCD 2025, we had the joy of sharing how school leaders can make our schools truly irresistible - not by adding another initiative, but by re-centering the people who make school work. The key? Prioritize people to solve problems. In this article, we'll share the core of our ISTE+ASCD 2025 Conference session: a practical, people-centered problem-solving process that school leaders can start using tomorrow.



Why Prioritize People?

Too often, school improvement is approached like this:

A school leader sitting alone in his/her office mulling over a challenge. It could be an operational issue, an instructional obstacle, or data that doesn't hit the mark. Feeling the sense of urgency, s/he decides to address the challenge. Then the school leader shares the solution with others and wants it to happen. When challenges are approached in this manner, staff feel like passive participants who are being told what to do and are expected to make it happen without a voice or support. This also provides staff with an "out". They have no ownership or investment in the solution. When it doesn't work, they can sit back and say, "Your idea didn't work. What's next, boss?"

We're proposing a reframe grounded in implementation science: Start with your people. Empathize. Build trust. Design WITH them, not FOR them. This doesn't mean ignoring data or lowering expectations. It means using a structured yet flexible approach, like the SCALE Implementation Leadership Framework, where you involve the right voices, set a clear vision, and move forward with strategic design and intentional implementation to create sustainable improvement.



Modify design thinking by integrating the SCALE model to prioritize people and solve challenges.

To bring Implementation Science to life, we align each phase of design thinking with the **SCALE Model** - a five-step leadership framework that supports collaborative, sustainable school improvement:

S – Set the Vision & Team

C – Create the Script

A – Act & Communicate

L – Learn, Listen & Reflect

E – Empower & Elevate

Let's walk through how all of this looks in practice.

1 Step 1: Identify and refine the problem

(S - Set the Vision and Team)

We began our session by sharing a common challenge: “We are not getting the academic results we want.” But vague problems lead to vague solutions. So instead of stopping there, we dig deeper: What grade level? What subject? What's the pattern?

For example, we might land on: “Our 6th grade math scores are not where we want them to be.” Now we have a defined problem, which becomes the starting point for thoughtful, targeted action.

Begin with clarity and inclusion. What is the challenge? What do we want to be true when we're successful? And - crucially - who will help us get there?

Narrowing the focus lets us get specific. It also helps us identify who is most involved and most impacted - teachers, students, interventionists, even families. Those people should be part of the process.

Now we can ask: Who needs to be on the team?

This is where SCALE begins - with setting the vision and forming a diverse implementation team that includes those most affected and those best positioned to influence change. Implementation research shows that including stakeholders early builds buy-in and improves the quality of solutions. Teachers, families, and even students become essential contributors.

2 **Step 2: Empathize. Prioritize People** (Continue to Set the Vision & Team) Ask: "Who should be involved?"

We lean into design thinking, not as a buzzword but as a practical structure rooted in empathy. We start by listening. Before rushing to solve anything, we gather voices from all sides - those directly involved and those indirectly impacted. In our 6th grade math example, this might include:

- 6th grade math teachers
- Students
- EXED and ELL teachers
- RTI specialists
- Families
- School leaders
(administrators, instructional coaches, department chairs)
- Even 5th and 7th grade math teachers



Each perspective adds depth to our understanding. We ask: What do they see? What are their pain points? What are their ideas? Empathy prevents us from making assumptions and fosters trust. This may also help to continue refining the identified challenge. With real insights in hand, we narrow the focus.

Instead of saying, “math scores are low,” we might define the challenge as “Students struggle to retain and apply fraction concepts introduced in 5th grade when they encounter them again in 6th grade.”

That’s a much clearer, more solvable challenge.



3 Step 3: Vision Casting (C - Create the Script)

Ask: “What will people be saying if this works?”

SCALE’s second step is about creating the script - and that starts with a shared vision. Use co-constructed language to define what success looks like. Build a path that includes professional learning, time to collaborate, and checkpoints for progress. Be very specific when collaborating on what this will look like so everyone involved in the initiative is crystal clear what it should look like.

Create a script that includes:

- Professional learning tailored to the challenge
- Capacity-building strategies (e.g., coaching, planning time, collaboration protocols)
- Fidelity tools, such as checklists or rubrics
- Clear metrics for success and systems to measure progress

Too often, leaders skip this step. Implementation science tells us that successful change requires more than vision; it needs clarity, planning, and support structures. Teachers can’t carry a plan they don’t understand or didn’t help build. This stage is about making the plan visible and doable.

Implementation Science tells us that setting short- and long-term goals, with clearly defined roles and responsibilities, increases fidelity and sustainability. Without this script, even the best ideas struggle to take root.

Lead with vision, not mandates. Every successful initiative begins with clarity: What do we want to be true? What do we want the outcome to be? What do we want to hear people saying if we are successful?

4

Step 4: Ideate

(Combines Create the Script and A - Act and Communicate)

Ask: “Are there other schools succeeding here?” and “How might we...”

Now we brainstorm. What could we do to address this challenge? Are there schools seeing success in this area? What are they doing differently?

We cast a wide net, gathering ideas from all stakeholders. The goal here is quantity, not perfection. Innovation thrives when people feel free to imagine - and when their ideas are genuinely heard. Ideate solutions based on models of success and local context or construct a new solution.

Now we begin testing ideas, but not in isolation. In the SCALE model, acting means collaborative action. Gather ideas from the team and encourage innovative thinking. The school leaders need to do more listening than speaking.



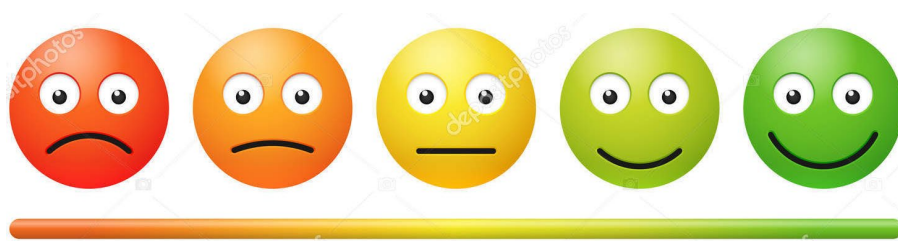
Don't skip communication: keep everyone informed as you act. Leaders must be visible in implementation, not as directors, but as facilitators. Use shared language, celebrate early wins, and model adaptability. Now, implementation

begins. But this is not a firehose of change. Instead, use communication as a tool for alignment and motivation.

- Regularly share progress and celebrate wins
- Keep the team informed on adjustments
- Use multiple formats: staff meetings, newsletters, shout-outs, informal check-ins

This step corresponds with the initial implementation phase in implementation science - when people begin doing the work and leaders provide responsive support. When educators are involved from the start and know they're supported, change doesn't feel like something being done to them, but with them.

Implementation Science emphasizes “active implementation” - not just launching a program but coordinating supports, removing barriers, and engaging staff in real time.



5 Step 5: Get Feedback.

(L- Learn, Listen, and Linger)

Implementation is rarely perfect the first time. That's why this step is so powerful.

- Use data - but also listen deeply to feedback
- Linger in classrooms and conversations
- Ask what's working and what's not
- Refine the plan based on what you're hearing

This is the continuous improvement stage of implementation science. Feedback loops (both formal and informal) allow leaders to adapt with integrity. When principals show up, listen, and iterate, they build trust - and that trust fuels momentum.

Ask: “What am I not thinking about?” and “How can we improve this idea before trying it?”

While feedback is listed here, it should happen throughout the design thinking process - and especially as you begin to implement - it becomes your greatest resource.

We often treat feedback as a final step, but it should be baked into every phase of the work. Whether you're in the middle of piloting a new strategy or scaling a successful one, real-time feedback helps you adapt with integrity.

Feedback is an ongoing mindset. In SCALE, we deliberately pause to learn from the field. Reflect with your team. Listen to teachers. Survey families.

This phase requires humility. Implementation often fails because we skip reflection or avoid hard conversations. Build reflection into every meeting. Ask, “What’s working?” and “What needs to change?” - and then act on what you hear.

This builds a culture of trust and collaboration where teachers feel heard, supported, and willing to keep innovating. We recommend a process we call



“Feedback with a Peer.” Bring your ideas, your plans, even your half-formed solutions to a trusted colleague.

Ask:

- “What am I missing?”
- “Does this align with what you’re hearing from others?”
- “If you were part of this team, what would you need to feel successful?”

Then - really listen.

Gather informal feedback from students (“What helped you today?”), from families (“How is homework feeling at home?”), and from teachers (“What made this easier - or harder - for you?”). The best implementation plans stay open to input and evolve over time.

When feedback is frequent, non-punitive, and woven into the culture, it builds ownership, trust, and results that last.



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Step 6: Prototype & Test

(Continue Learn, Listen, & Linger, include E - Empower and Elevate)

Ask: “What is reasonable and feasible to try?”

Choose one or two promising ideas and try them on a small scale. Maybe it’s a targeted co-teaching model. Maybe it’s spiral review work built into daily lessons. Maybe it’s a shift in when and how fractions are introduced.

The prototype phase is about learning, not perfecting. You’re testing the concept before investing fully. Once you try something, reflect honestly. What’s working? What needs adjusting? Gather feedback, observe classrooms, and ask students and teachers how it feels. Then revise. Keep what’s effective. Rethink what’s not. And if needed, prototype again.

Then we empower the people who helped develop the idea to lead its next phase. Support teacher-leaders to scale the work, train peers, and own the process. This is the heart of SCALE’s final step: Empower & Elevate.



Celebration matters here. Highlight growth, not just results. Sustain success by building systems: onboarding tools, leadership pipelines, and embedded reflection. That's how you create long-term, people-powered transformation.

This final step is where sustainability lives.

- Celebrate individual and team successes
- Build leadership capacity so others can own the work
- Embed the initiative into your school improvement plan, budget, and onboarding processes
- Create leadership pipelines among teachers and staff

This is the sustainability phase. Implementation science shows that success isn't just about launching new practices; it's about embedding them in the



system and transferring ownership. Empowering teachers and staff to lead the next iteration ensures long-term impact.

So What Does This Look Like in Action? Let's revisit our 6th grade math challenge.

Set the Vision and the Team:

You assemble a team of 5th and 6th grade math teachers, interventionists, and an instructional coach. Together, you craft a goal: By spring, 80% of students will demonstrate proficiency on fraction applications that span both grade levels.

Create the Script:

Align your PD to focus on conceptual understanding of fractions, add 15 minutes of collaborative planning each week, and introduce a simple fraction spiral review into morning work.



Act and Communicate:

Update families on what students are learning and why. You highlight teacher efforts at staff meetings. You post fraction strategy posters in every classroom.

Learn, Listen, and Linger:

Visit classrooms weekly, check in with students, and gather anonymous feedback from teachers. You tweak the pacing and adjust instructional support based on what you learn. Then meet back with your Implementation Team to share what you've discovered and ask them their insights.

Empower and Elevate:

Invite a teacher to lead the next round of PD. You create a video series on successful strategies. And at the end of the year, you celebrate the team's efforts publicly, naming the impact and spotlighting the leadership of those involved.

Why SCALE Works

Unlike top-down initiatives, the SCALE model honors the science of change management and the human side of leadership. It turns implementation from something leaders do to people into something leaders do with people.

This model draws directly from Implementation Science principles:

- Co-creation builds buy-in
- Clear vision and roles guide implementation
- Active communication supports execution
- Ongoing feedback refines efforts
- Celebration and shared ownership sustain change

When applied thoughtfully, SCALE ensures your initiatives aren't just well-designed, they're well-lived by the people who matter most.

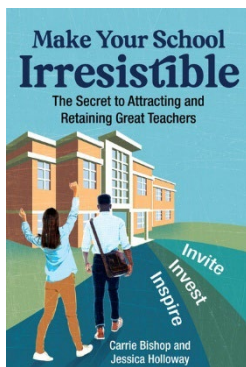
Want to go deeper? Our books, *Make Your School Irresistible: The Secret to Attracting and Retaining Great Teachers* by Carrie Bishop and Jessica Holloway, and *Leading Change That Lasts: 5 Steps to SCALE Your Vision Into Successful Implementation* by Kelly Hastings, expand on these strategies with examples and resources.

For now, we challenge you:

- What's one problem of practice in your building?
- Who are the people you'll prioritize to solve it?
- And how will you SCALE your solution?



Final Thought

Transformation is possible when we lead with people in mind. If you're leading a school, remember this: The answer to your toughest problems is already in your building. Your teachers, your students, and your families hold the insight, the ideas, and the energy you need. Put these practices in place and continue to listen. The best leaders don't solve problems for people. They solve them with people. That's how we make schools irresistible.





Carrie and Jessica are the authors of [Make Your School Irresistible: The Secret to Attracting and Retaining Great Teachers](#) (ASCD, 2025), a practical guide for attracting and retaining talented faculty by inviting them into your school community, investing in their careers, and inspiring them to advance in their profession.





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Legacy is the official journal of The Worthy Educator, elevating the good work being done by leaders in education who are working to change the narrative on the profession and actively plan for impact that transforms its future to serve the needs of a diverse, decentralized, global society that is inclusive, equitable and open to all people as next generations adapt, evolve and contribute by solving problems and creating solutions that meet the needs of a world we have yet to envision.

Submissions are accepted on a rolling basis from educators who are implementing new and innovative approaches in the classroom and at the building and district levels. Information on specifications and instructions to submit can be found online at theworhtyeducator.com/journal.