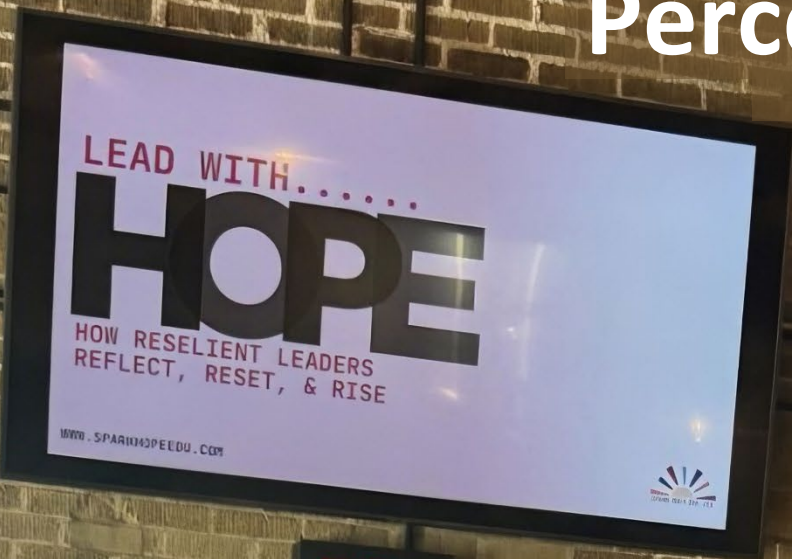


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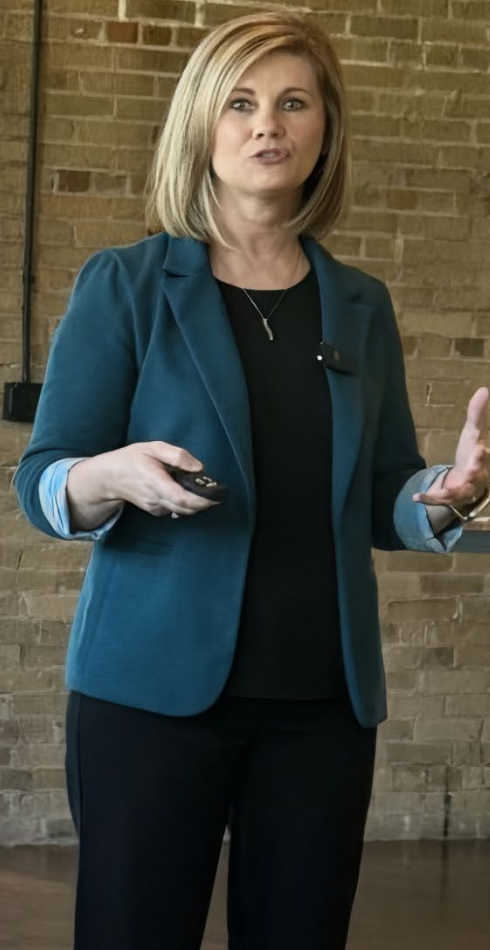
# LEGACY

*TRANSFORMATION IN ACTION*

Perceptions of School Leaders on Fostering Collective Efficacy: A Call for Systemic, HOPE-Fueled Implementation



EXIT



**Brandi Kelly**



The Worthy Educator  
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## Perceptions of School Leaders on Fostering Collective Efficacy: A Call for Systemic, HOPE-Fueled Implementation

Dr. Brandi Kelly, Ed.D., LCSW  
Founder, Spark HOPE Edu  
Author, Speaker, and Coach  
Mount Olive, Illinois



### Hope Isn't Soft; It's the Difference Maker

On a gray Monday morning, a principal stood in the hallway greeting students as they arrived. Two teachers passed each other, exchanged a smile, and quietly said, *"We've got this today."* There was no pep talk, no urgent staff email, no motivational poster freshly taped to the wall. Just a shared confidence... *steady, calm, and unspoken.*

That moment was not accidental.

In education, hope is often misunderstood. It is frequently framed as a feeling: something inspirational yet intangible, nice to have but not essential when the "real work" begins. However, in schools that continue to grow even amid challenge, hope shows up as something far more concrete and powerful: a shared belief system embedded in daily practice (Weldon, 2016).

Schools are places where confidence is shaped every day... *for students and for adults.* Principals and teachers are navigating relentless accountability pressures, emotional fatigue, staffing shortages, and constant change. Yet students still need one thing more than anything else: adults who believe, collectively, that growth is possible and that their actions matter.

That belief has a name: Collective Teacher Efficacy (CTE) - the shared conviction among educators that, together, they can positively influence student learning and outcomes. Research has consistently identified collective teacher efficacy as one of the most powerful influences on student achievement. When belief becomes collective, effort multiplies. Challenges feel solvable. Forward motion becomes possible again.

This focus on hope is grounded in the foundational work of Dr. C. R. Snyder's Hope Theory (2002), which provides a concrete framework for this belief system:

Hope is defined as the perceived capability to derive pathways to desired goals and motivate oneself through agency thinking to use those pathways. This belief system is anchored by three core components:

**Goals:** The cognitive anchor, which must be of sufficient value to warrant sustained conscious thought and effort.

**Pathways Thinking:** The perceived capability to generate usable routes to a goal, including alternative routes when obstacles arise.

**Agency Thinking:** The motivational component, representing the perceived capacity and mental energy to begin and continue using a pathway to reach goals, especially when encountering impediments.

This article explores a question many school leaders are quietly asking:

***"How do we move belief from theory into daily practice; through systems that make hope sustainable rather than situational?"***



Drawing on findings from our multi-state survey of principals in Illinois and Missouri (Draper, et al, 2023), this article connects empirical data with practical leadership application through the lens of **HOPE**. Together, these findings offer a clear message: collective efficacy is not built through slogans or charisma. It is sustained through aligned systems that reinforce **belief, trust, and shared responsibility**.

### Leadership That Builds Belief Starts Within

Leadership always begins internally. Before leaders can cultivate belief in others, they must hold a grounded sense of belief within themselves. Leaders who trust their ability to guide others through complexity tend to approach challenges with steadiness rather than fear. Conversely, leaders who doubt their own capacity, even quietly, often transfer that uncertainty to their teams through inconsistent decisions, over-control, or avoidance.

Interestingly, findings from the principal survey by Draper, et al, 2023 suggest that most school leaders do *not* view their own self-efficacy as a primary barrier to collective efficacy. Only 15% of respondents indicated that their own self-efficacy hindered efforts to foster collective teacher efficacy. The majority disagreed or strongly disagreed with this notion. This suggests that principals largely believe in their own leadership capacity.

However, belief in self alone is insufficient.

Effective leaders hold two beliefs simultaneously:

1. *I can lead people through complexity.*
2. *This team, collectively, can make a meaningful difference.*

It is the second belief, the belief about the group, where collective efficacy truly takes root.

Survey findings revealed strong alignment with this perspective. Principals overwhelmingly reported that teachers in their schools felt supported by leadership (88%) and were empowered to make decisions related to teaching and learning (85%). These leadership behaviors, empowerment, support, and trust, signal more than goodwill; they communicate confidence in teachers' professional judgment (Draper, et al, 2023).

One principal interviewed shared a moment that brought these numbers to life. Early in the year, she resisted the urge to "fix" a struggling instructional issue and instead asked her teachers, *"What do you need, and what do you think will work best for your students?"* The shift was subtle but significant. Teachers stepped forward with solutions, collaborated across grade levels, and followed through because they knew the trust was real. These leadership behaviors, empowerment, support, and trust, signal more than goodwill; they communicate confidence in teachers' professional judgment.

Belief precedes behavior. When leaders act in ways that demonstrate trust, teachers are more likely to engage with ownership, creativity, and collective responsibility. Leadership behaviors that empower teachers are not symbolic gestures. They are structural reinforcements of belief.



### Connecting Hope Theory to Principal Practices

Analysis of principal interviews in a study by Weldon, 2016 revealed specific, actionable attributes that align with Dr. Snyder's Hope Theory framework:

- **Goal-setting attributes** included:
  - Creating teacher buy-in
  - Hearing the teachers' voice
  - Encouraging teacher ownership
- **Pathway thinking attributes** included the principal being:
  - Well-organized
  - Self-confident
  - Knowledgeable
- **Agency thinking (motivation) attributes** included:
  - Establishing high expectations
  - Offering encouragement
  - Supplying feedback and reflection time

Additionally, the study identified **seven leadership practices of hopeful principals** that effectively convey hope to the faculty:

1. Building relationships
2. Effectively communicating
3. Solving problems
4. Offering and accepting feedback
5. Maintaining priorities and focus
6. Maintaining professional composure
7. Encouraging and modeling professional growth

**Reflection Prompt:**

*How do your daily leadership behaviors structurally reinforce belief and trust in your teachers' professional capacity, and where might they unintentionally communicate doubt?*



**Culture Doesn't Live on Posters; It Lives in Systems**

One school opened the academic year with a beautifully designed vision statement displayed in every classroom. The language emphasized collaboration, shared responsibility, and student-centered learning. Yet by midyear, staff morale had declined. Teachers reported feeling stretched, disconnected, and uncertain whether their voices truly mattered.

The vision was well written. The culture, however, was unsupported.

School culture is not created by what leaders *say*; it is created by what leaders *structure*. Systems, the invisible architecture of schools, shape how adults experience their work every day. Meeting norms, collaborative structures, feedback routines, and decision-making processes quietly communicate what is valued most.

This distinction is clearly reflected in the survey findings related to systems and practices (Draper, et al, 2023). Principals reported very strong agreement that implementing both a **common curriculum (86%)** and a **viable curriculum (87%)** were priorities in their schools. The overall weighted mean for systems supporting collective efficacy was the highest of all guiding questions (4.58), indicating strong perceived alignment between instructional systems and shared purpose.

However, systems must extend beyond curriculum documents.

Collaboration time provides a critical example. While 83% of principals reported that teachers were provided with time to collaborate frequently, only 58% indicated that Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) consistently engaged in collective inquiry around evidence-based instructional practices. This gap reveals an important tension: time alone does not guarantee meaningful collaboration (Draper, et al., 2023).

As James Clear reminds us, *“You do not rise to the level of your goals; you fall to the level of your systems.”*

In one school highlighted through qualitative responses, leaders made a seemingly small but profound shift. Collaborative time was protected, not as a flexible option, but as a non-negotiable priority. Norms were co-created. Agendas were purposeful. Data conversations focused on learning rather than compliance. Progress was celebrated publicly, and challenges were addressed collectively.

Nothing about the school's vision changed. What changed was system alignment.

Culture is reinforced, or eroded, through consistent system design. When systems support collaboration with clarity and purpose, belief becomes embedded in daily practice rather than dependent on morale.

**Reflection Prompt:**

*Which of your current systems most strongly reinforce your school's vision, and which quietly undermine it? When, where, and how do staff have intentional opportunities to identify, discuss, and strengthen these systems together?*

## Collective Efficacy Thrives at the Intersection of Vision and Practice

Among all survey findings, one result stood out with near-unanimous agreement: **99% of principals affirmed that a leader’s vision has a direct impact on school culture.** Vision clearly matters. Yet vision alone is not enough (Draper, et al, 2023).

Vision sets direction; systems determine traction.

Qualitative data further illuminated this connection. When principals were asked to describe their understanding of collective teacher efficacy and provide examples, responses consistently centered on four themes: efficacy, teachers, teacher efficacy, and students. Teachers were mentioned most frequently (32%), followed by efficacy (25%) and students (23%). These themes suggest that principals conceptualize collective efficacy as inherently relational, rooted in adult collaboration, and directly connected to its impact on student learning (Draper, et al, 2023).

Importantly, the qualitative responses ranged in tone. While many principals provided positive examples of collaboration and shared responsibility, others expressed frustration or uncertainty, describing collective efficacy as aspirational rather than fully realized. This variation reinforces a key conclusion: **belief is uneven when systems lack consistency.**

One principal captured this reality during a coaching conversation when she paused mid-sentence and said, *“I believe my teachers are capable... I just don’t think we’ve given them a way to see it yet.”* She described faculty meetings filled with good intentions and hard work, but no shared measures, no consistent structures, and little time to connect effort to outcomes. Teachers were doing the work, but they couldn’t name the impact, so the belief faded as quickly as it formed.

Vision inspires, but systems operationalize belief. Collective efficacy strengthens when teachers can see, name, and measure the impact of their collective work on students.

### Active Engagement:

*Invite your leadership team to articulate, not just your vision, but the specific systems that make that vision visible in classrooms every week. Where are those systems strong, and where are the gaps that need attention?*



## Monitoring Implementation Without Undermining Trust

Monitoring and evaluation often create tension in schools. When leaders attempt to ensure fidelity, teachers may perceive increased oversight as mistrust. Yet without clear monitoring, initiatives fade and belief erodes.

Survey data revealed encouraging patterns alongside areas for growth. Principals largely reported that they regularly observed classroom practice and provided feedback linking teacher effort to student results (82%). This practice is foundational to collective efficacy, as it helps educators make explicit connections between instructional choices and outcomes (Draper, et al, 2023).

However, data related to PLC inquiry revealed inconsistency. Only slightly more than half of principals reported that PLCs regularly engaged in collective inquiry around evidence-based practices. Nearly one-quarter reported that PLCs *somewhat* engaged, and nearly one-fifth reported that they *did not engage* at all (Draper, et al, 2023).

**This unevenness highlights a critical leadership challenge:** maintaining accountability without compromising relational trust. Effective monitoring focuses on learning, not surveillance. When feedback loops emphasize growth and collective problem-solving, evaluation strengthens rather than weakens belief.

### Reflection Prompt:

*How do your current feedback and monitoring practices communicate shared ownership of outcomes rather than individual blame? Name the systems and practices that are in place to build agency and collective teacher efficacy.*

## Barriers That Challenge Collective Belief

While overall perceptions of collective efficacy were positive, principals also identified meaningful barriers. Sixty-two percent indicated that low teacher self-efficacy was a barrier to fostering collective efficacy, and 46% identified teachers’ low expectations of students as contributing to negative self-fulfilling prophecies (Draper, et al, 2023).

These findings underscore a critical truth: collective efficacy cannot ignore individual belief. When individual teachers doubt their impact, or hold limited expectations for students, collective belief is weakened.

Yet the data also offer hope. Most principals did not view these barriers as insurmountable. Instead, they reflect opportunities for leadership intervention through professional learning, coaching, and system redesign. Collective efficacy grows when leaders intentionally address both individual and collective belief systems.

One principal chose to start small and with intention. Rather than launching a new initiative, she began by changing the way learning was framed. At the next faculty meeting, she asked teachers to reflect on one instructional move they had tried that month and one small win they had seen in students. The room was quiet at first. Then a teacher shared how a simple check-for-understanding had helped a struggling group stay engaged. Another built on the idea. The principal captured the language on chart paper and returned to it in later PLCs, naming patterns and progress.

Over time, she embedded hope into the system. Coaching conversations focused on clarifying **pathways thinking** instead of deficits. Professional learning highlighted teacher-led strategies already working in classrooms. In PLCs, the agenda shifted from focusing on compliance (**Goals** of *what are we required to cover?*) to centering on evidence of impact (clearly defined **Goals** of *what evidence do we have that our choices are working?*). By connecting effort to visible outcomes, teachers built powerful **Agency Thinking**, seeing themselves not as implementers of someone else’s plan, but as architects of their collective impact.

Hope grew because success was visible and shared. And collective efficacy took root, not through inspirational language, but through everyday leadership moves that consistently reinforced a simple message: *what we do together matters for kids, and we are getting better at it.* **Supporting individual teacher efficacy is a prerequisite to building collective efficacy.**



### A HOPE-Fueled Way Forward

The findings clearly underscore that addressing individual teacher efficacy is the necessary prerequisite for collective growth. However, this growth is not sustained by individual effort alone. Collective teacher efficacy does not grow through charisma, compliance, or isolated initiatives. Instead, it is structurally sustained through clarity, consistency, and care, which are all embedded within aligned systems. This systemic work, and the change it creates, must begin with the leader. The process of operationalizing hope can be framed through the **System of H.O.P.E.** as the leader’s pathway for action (Kelly, 2025):

- **Habits** that reinforce reflection, efficacy, and shared learning
- **Optimistic Outlook** grounded in evidence of growth and progress
- **Purpose** that keeps students at the center of decisions
- **Excellence** sustained through intentional, aligned structures

When leaders design systems that help educators consistently see the impact of their collective efforts, hope becomes durable. As one principal reflected at the end of a challenging year: “

*We didn’t fix everything, but we believed together, and that changed how we showed up.”*

That belief is not soft. It is hope + leadership in action.

### What the Findings Make Clear

Taken together, the quantitative and qualitative findings present a compelling and consistent message: **collective teacher efficacy** is not an abstract construct, nor is it sustained through isolated leadership behaviors. Principals largely believe in their teachers, value collaboration, and recognize the importance of vision and culture. However, belief alone is insufficient without systems that consistently reinforce it.

Where structures for collaboration, feedback, inquiry, and curriculum coherence are intentionally aligned, collective efficacy strengthens and becomes visible in daily practice. Where misalignment exists, belief becomes fragile under pressure. The findings underscore a critical leadership imperative for today’s schools...*hope must be operationalized.*

When leaders intentionally align vision and curriculum coherence to establish clear **goals**, implement structures for collaboration and inquiry to build shared **pathways**, and ensure visible, consistent success to fuel **agency**, collective efficacy becomes a durable force that supports educators, sustains momentum, and ultimately improves outcomes for students.

## A Call to Action

Begin with your systems, not your intentions. Ask yourself where teachers regularly experience feedback, collaboration, and decision-making... *and where they don't*. Pay attention to what is consistent rather than what is aspirational. Listen for the language teachers use when they talk about student learning: Do they speak in isolation or as a collective? Do they name effort and impact, or compliance and fatigue? *Assessment starts by noticing what your people actually live inside every day.*

**Affirm what is already working.** Every school has pockets of hope: teams who collaborate well, practices that lead to student growth, moments where belief is visible. Name those openly! When leaders publicly recognize effective collective practices, they reinforce agency and send a powerful message: *this is who we are becoming.*

Then, **course correct where needed with intention.** Choose one or two leadership moves that strengthen alignment: clarifying PLC purpose, tightening feedback loops, or redesigning professional learning to center evidence of impact. Small, consistent adjustments matter more than sweeping change. Collective efficacy grows when leaders make belief visible through structure.

**Collective efficacy is not built overnight, but it is built intentionally.** School leaders are invited to pause and reflect: *Do my systems reinforce the hope I already hold for my people and my students?*

Hope is not a strategy by itself. But when embedded in systems, it becomes a force that sustains people and transforms schools.

To continue this conversation, school leaders are encouraged to connect with **Dr. Brandi Kelly** and complete a **free HOPE Leadership Clarity Assessment**, designed to help leaders identify where belief and systems are aligned and where strategic redesign may be needed. Learn more at [Spark HOPE Edu](#).

For a deeper research foundation, see:

Draper, E., Kelly, B., & Molina, K. (2023). *Perceptions of school leaders on establishing and sustaining systems to foster collective efficacy*. Doctoral Project, Saint Louis University.

Snyder, C. R. (2002). *Hope theory: Rainbows in the mind*. *Psychological inquiry*, 13(4), 249-275.

Weldon, S. (2016). *The Role of Hope in School Leadership*. (Ph.D. Dissertation). Auburn University.



*Dr. Brandi Kelly brings 20+ years of heart, hustle, and hands-on leadership in education. She is a Licensed Clinical Social Worker and Maxwell Certified Coach who has served as a school social worker, principal, and as a superintendent. As a two-time Principal of the Year Award honoree, Brandi is now the founder of [Spark HOPE Edu](#). Through her H.O.P.E. System—Habits, Optimistic Outlook, Purpose, and Excellence—she shares the good stuff: hope, love, and joy. Her mission is to equip leaders to build resilient schools and communities where people feel seen, heard, and valued.* [in](#) [✉](#)

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