

SEEING THE SYSTEM, LEADING CHANGE

A Practical Field Guide for
District, School, and Teacher Leaders

Using Systems Thinking, Design Thinking,
and Improvement Science to
Navigate Challenges, Opportunities, and Change

Stephanie Hollar, M.Ed.



Book Preview — For personal review only.
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A Note About Artificial Intelligence

Artificial intelligence was used as a thinking partner during the development of this book. AI assisted with brainstorming, editing, organizing ideas, refining language, and reviewing drafts. All content was reviewed, revised, and curated by the author based on professional experience and judgment.

The ideas, stories, examples, reflections, and conclusions presented in this book reflect the author's thinking and experiences working alongside educators, leaders, students, and school communities.

In the spirit of this book, AI was not used to replace thinking. It was used to support it.

Whether you're a **classroom teacher, instructional coach, principal, district leader, or member of a school improvement team**, this book will help you navigate the complexity of change and the uncharted terrain of today's educational challenges with greater clarity, purpose, and confidence.

Every educator wants to improve outcomes for students. Yet too often, improvement efforts focus on symptoms rather than the systems that produce them. New initiatives are launched, energy is invested...and then progress stalls.

Seeing the System, Leading Change offers a practical alternative. Drawing on the complementary strengths of systems thinking, design thinking, and improvement science, this book introduces a simple four-step process to help you move beyond quick fixes, make better decisions, and create meaningful, sustainable change.

See the System → Understand Needs and Experiences → Improve the Work → Reflect and Repeat

Filled with authentic examples, practical tools, and reflection prompts, this guide will help you

- see patterns instead of isolated problems.
- better understand the needs and experiences of those you serve.
- test small changes that lead to meaningful improvement.
- build a culture of learning, collaboration, and continuous improvement.

Become a more thoughtful navigator of complex systems—seeing more clearly, leading more intentionally, and improving what matters most for students.



See more. Learn more. Lead change.

Visit connectinged.com/system for additional resources and tools.

Seeing the System, Leading Change is THE resource for teams looking to dig deeper and create meaningful solutions to the complex challenges that confront the modern education system. No matter your role, Stephanie Hollar has provided a guide that combines asking the right questions with intentional collaboration. This guide may be just what you need to see a familiar problem differently, spark a new possibility, and take your next step forward.

ANGIE RYE, KnowledgeWorks Coach and former Chief Academic Officer

Recognizing and respecting the many positions we represent and lead from is a difficult practice. *Seeing the System, Leading Change* does this with an incredible approach that ensures no matter what seat you are in, you are supported and can be heard. All educators can find value in the systems and structures presented here.

BRAD PETTIT, CTO of Meta Solutions

Seeing the System, Leading Change challenges educators at every level to look beyond the problem in front of them to better understand the systems and experiences that influence their work. This book creates meaningful opportunities to pause, reflect, and connect its ideas to the real challenges and opportunities within your own classroom, school, or district. By the final page, you are not simply left with new ideas about improvement...you have the beginnings of an actionable plan for leading meaningful change.

MIKE LYNCH, Asst. Superintendent for Mentor Public Schools

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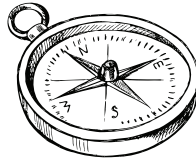


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CHAPTER 1

THE ELEPHANT IN THE SCHOOL

Several years ago, a high school principal became concerned about what he was seeing in classrooms. Students spent much of their day listening, taking notes, and completing relatively low-level tasks. While there were certainly bright spots, many learning experiences felt passive rather than active or dynamic. Engagement appeared inconsistent, and the principal began asking a question that many school leaders have asked before: Why are students so disengaged?

As conversations began, people offered different explanations. Some pointed to phones, screen time, and increasing distractions. Others were convinced students' attention spans had changed. Some believed motivation was the issue. Others argued that instructional practices were not creating enough opportunities for active learning. A few felt assessment systems were rewarding compliance more than mastery. Others believed teachers simply needed more time to facilitate discussion, collaboration, and deeper learning experiences. Everyone seemed to see something different.

The situation reminded me of a story I heard many years ago: the story of the blind villagers and the elephant.

In the story, several blind villagers encounter an elephant for the first time. One touches the trunk and insists it's a snake. Another touches a leg and argues it's a tree. Another feels the side and describes a wall. Another grabs the tail and is convinced it is a rope. Each villager is convinced they are right. In reality, each person is experiencing part of the elephant, but none is experiencing the whole elephant.

**Every perspective contributes something important,
but none tells the whole story on its own.**

Educational challenges, opportunities, and change efforts often work the same way. Each person experiences part of the elephant.

In this case, the principal believed if teachers had longer class periods, perhaps they would have more opportunities for discussion, collaboration, projects, and deeper learning experiences. He began exploring a 90-minute block schedule. In this type of schedule, traditional 40- to 50-minute class periods are replaced with longer instructional blocks intended to support deeper learning and more flexible instruction. A move to a 90-minute block schedule seemed like a reasonable solution to a problem many people could see.

SYMPTOM VERSUS SYSTEM

What gets our attention depends on where we sit, what we experience, and what we believe. Sometimes what gets our attention is a problem we want to solve. Other times, it's an opportunity we want to pursue, a vision we want to realize, or an idea we believe could make something even better.

A third-grade teacher wants to create more flexible learning environments. A kindergarten team wants children to become more independent during learning centers instead of relying on adults for decision making. A district wants to create more diverse learning pathways. A school wants to adopt personalized learning. A leadership team wants to strengthen how students develop and apply durable skills. Whatever form it takes, something captures our attention and creates a desire to act.

It's natural to want to act. Most educators enter the profession because they care deeply about students and want to make things better. When we care about something, our instinct is often to try to fix it.

Imagine visiting a doctor because you have a persistent cough. Most of us would be concerned if the doctor immediately prescribed treatment without asking questions, gathering information, or trying to determine what might be causing the symptom. Yet in education,

— FIELD NOTES —

ZOOM OUT

Think about a challenge, opportunity, or change effort in your organization.

- What first brought it to your attention?
- How is it currently being discussed?
- What solutions or implementation ideas have already emerged?
- What might still need to be understood before moving forward?

ZOOM IN

- What challenge, opportunity, or change effort has **YOUR** attention right now?
- Why does it matter to you?
- What assumptions might you already be making about it?
- What are you most curious to learn?

NOTES

PROCESS IN ACTION: EXAMPLES

The following examples illustrate how the four-step process in this guide can be applied at different levels of an education system. Notice how understanding evolves, how implementation becomes part of the learning process, and how each educator or team strengthens its capacity to navigate future challenges.

The examples are organized by three different lenses:

-  **Classroom:** An individual teacher
-  **School:** A school learning team
-  **District:** District learning teams

You can explore the example most relevant to your role or read all of the examples to see how the same four-step learning process applies across different contexts.

At the end of each example, you'll find the familiar **Zoom Out**, **Zoom In**, and **Small Next Step** reflection prompts. These questions are designed to help you deepen your learning, connect the examples to your own context, and support discussion with colleagues or learning teams.

If you'd like to explore what this process looks like when the challenge is especially complex, visit connectinged.com/system to read "When the Challenge Feels Too Big." This extended case study follows one school's 15-month learning journey as a team works to better understand and improve attendance, discipline, family engagement, language barriers, and other interconnected challenges. Rather than jumping to quick solutions or staying stuck in conversations that never lead to change, the team learns its way toward thoughtful action and lasting improvement.

CLASSROOM TEACHER EXAMPLE: THE PARTICIPATION ELEPHANT

This example demonstrates how an individual teacher used the four-step process to explore a classroom challenge before deciding what to change.

Few classroom challenges are more frustrating than trying to get all students involved in discussions.

A fifth-grade teacher began noticing a pattern that seemed to repeat itself every day. During

SEEING THE SYSTEM, LEADING CHANGE FIELD TOOL

● STUDENT LENS ● CLASSROOM LENS ● SCHOOL LENS ● DISTRICT LENS



CHALLENGE-OPPORTUNITY STUDY PROTOCOL

A practical tool to help you lead change

PURPOSE

This protocol helps individuals and teams slow down to better understand a challenge or opportunity before moving to solutions or implementation. It guides users to identify the systems influencing the challenge, understand how people experience it, and improve the work through evidence, learning, and iteration.



EXAMPLES BY LENS

Use the lenses to understand how different people experience a challenge. Focus on the lens closest to your role or examine the challenge across multiple lenses.



Ensure student experiences and perspectives are informing decisions. Students can participate by sharing feedback, identifying barriers, and helping adults understand how a challenge is experienced from their perspective (e.g., gathering input on belonging, relevance of learning, assessment experiences, school climate, or technology use).



Individually or with a PLC, examine classroom challenges or opportunities through student experiences, instructional practices, and classroom systems, gather student feedback, and test small changes to improve learning experiences (e.g., investigating a behavior issue, low assignment completion, student engagement, assessment practices, or classroom routines).



Better understand how challenges or new ideas are experienced within your building and identify which systems may be contributing (e.g., exploring behavior concerns, family engagement, school culture, or inconsistent instructional practices).



Explore district-wide challenges, identify patterns across schools or departments and the systems that may be contributing to those patterns, gather stakeholder perspectives, and determine where deeper learning is needed before launching new initiatives (e.g., attendance trends, AI implementation, grading practices, or Portrait of a Graduate alignment).



AI THINKING PARTNER

RECOMMENDED UPLOADS

- Meeting notes
- Survey results
- Student feedback
- Walkthrough data
- Strategic plans
- Observation notes
- Assessment data
- Other relevant data

PROMPTS

- Analyze the information and help us identify:
 - systems that may be influencing the challenge or opportunity
 - patterns
 - positive contributing factors/bright spots
 - missing perspectives
 - assumptions we may be making
- Suggest questions worth exploring before we decide on solutions or a plan.
- Focus on understanding rather than generating solutions or plans.



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CHALLENGE-OPPORTUNITY STUDY PROTOCOL (PAGE 1 OF 2)

NOTICE: What is it that you are noticing? Identify symptoms that may be getting your attention.

Define the challenge, opportunity, or change effort:

You may have to come back to this after Step 1, or it may change as you work through this process.

What would success look like?



Purpose: Understand what is happening before you decide what to do.

Big Question: What do we need to better understand?

Explore:

- What patterns exist in our data and experiences?
- What evidence do we have?
- What evidence don't we have?
- Which systems appear most connected to the challenge, opportunity, or change effort? Why? (i.e., Assessment, Grading, Communication, Scheduling, Professional Learning, Student Supports, Leadership, something else?)
- Where are the bright spots?

Notes:

Remember: The goal isn't to understand everything. It's to understand enough to take the next thoughtful step.



Purpose: Understand people's experiences before you design solutions.

Big Question: How is this experienced by different people?

Explore:

- Who experiences this challenge, opportunity, or change effort?
- How do they experience it?
- What barriers or differences in access might shape how people experience this?
- Who have we not heard from?
- What assumptions are we making?

Notes:

Remember: Student experiences belong at the center of the conversation.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



I have spent more than three decades serving as a teacher, instructional coach, administrator, curriculum leader, consultant, and school founder. Through my work with connectingEd, I partner with schools, districts, and educational organizations across the country to help connect vision to daily practice.

My work focuses on helping educators better see the systems influencing learning, listen closely to the people experiencing those systems, and work alongside them to create meaningful, sustainable improvement through intentional changes over time.

I am thankful to the countless educators, students, leaders, school communities, and professional organizations across the nation who have trusted me to learn with them. Their challenges, insights, successes, and questions continue to inspire and inform this work every day.

I am especially grateful to my longtime colleague and friend, Sarah Folzenlogen, whose partnership, thinking, and encouragement have been a blessing throughout this journey. Without her, the creation of this guide would not be possible. To my family, thank you for the countless ways you have supported this work and the time it requires.

Learn more at <https://connectinged.com/about-us>.