

Schooling by **D** E S I G N

an ASCD
ActionTOOL

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Schooling by Design is a call to action. On the basis of that book, this ASCD action tool originated through pointed and poignant conversations with education leaders around the world who have been drawn to the vision and simply want to know, “How do I do this?” Those who have read *Schooling by Design* know that answering this question is far from simple, fast, or easy. Nor is it supposed to be. In *Schooling by Design*, Wiggins and McTighe set forth the challenge:

In the absence of a clear mission and a common-sense approach to reform, schools are likely to remain mired in unexamined habits and rituals, and limited by incoherent practices and structures that continue to miss the mark in preparing students for the demands of today’s “real world.” The challenge is not to invent some ideal school that is unmoored from reality, but to build exemplary schooling “backward” from its long-term goal of making students thoughtful and accomplished at worthy tasks.

One of the assumptions at the root of *Schooling by Design* is that many educators work, in good faith, on the wrong job. Although the language might sound impressive and efforts appear well coordinated, they often have little effect on student learning—and if students don’t learn, the school has failed them. To counteract this assumption, this action tool offers four basic tenets to refocus the design of schooling:

1. *The job of all educators is to cause students to learn.* Acquisition of content knowledge and skills specified by standards and benchmarks is necessary, but alone it is an insufficient educational goal. *Schooling by Design* calls for educators to identify desired learning results in terms of the “big ideas” of content worth understanding and larger mission-related goals, such as critical thinking and development of habits of mind.

2. *What students are expected to learn must be clearly defined and appropriately measured.* Evidence of student understanding and productive use of habits of mind are revealed when students can apply (transfer) knowledge and skills effectively to new situations.

3. *When students aren't learning, the job of all educators is to bring to bear the resources, talents, and experiences of the entire school to close gaps.* A key part of a teacher's job is to regularly review learning results based on multiple measures (achievement data, student work, feedback) and to make necessary adjustments to curriculum, instruction, use of resources, and so on, to improve student performance.

4. *Effective schools "plan backward" from mission and goals.* The actions of educators need to be logically derived according to desired results; that is, the structures, policies, job descriptions, and practices of schooling must be planned backward to ensure alignment throughout the system.

These tenets align with the recommendations of many prominent educators and researchers. What distinguishes Schooling by Design is the explicit focus on understanding and mission-related goals (rather than concentration on content standards), evidence of learning provided by authentic assessments requiring transfer (rather than primarily state and national tests), and a backward design approach to school improvement.

1. The job of all educators is to cause students to learn.

Instead of seeing a mission statement as a necessary abstraction that offers little help or meaning to the daily work within the school, the mission statement roots every effort, every investment, every point of contact—and the leader makes those roots explicitly clear until everyone “gets it.”

Instead of seeing achievement in school as the collection of an established number of credits, scores, and grades, achievement is communicated through the understandings students have gained by completing cornerstone tasks that anchor each discipline.

2. What students are expected to learn must be clearly defined and appropriately measured.

Instead of seeing education as the teaching and learning of lengthy lists of knowledge and skills that is somehow meant to be eventually meaningful and useful, an education devoted to meaning and transfer helps learners see from the beginning why the content matters, what can be done with it, and how they can transfer it immediately.

Instead of seeing each grade level as a unique phase of development in a subject area, staff, students, and parents can connect any individual part (lesson, unit, course) to the whole (program), so that even when working with a handful

of content, concepts, or skills in isolation, the relevance of the learning is anchored in program accomplishments and understandings.

Instead of seeing data and results as depressing creativity, innovation, and risk taking, educators embrace results as the only reliable way to determine whether current efforts are causing the desired results; challenge assumptions about causality, preferences, and effectiveness through dialogue and experimentation; and determine how to proceed on the basis of that information.

3. When students aren't learning, the job of all educators is to bring to bear the resources, talents, and experiences of the entire school to close gaps.

Instead of seeing curriculum as a script that must be executed irrespective of results, staff have the latitude to make appropriate adjustments, keeping in mind goals that are to be accomplished and ripple effects that may influence future learning—much as a coach makes adjustments in a game regardless of what the initial plan may have been.

Instead of seeing student achievement as a number, staff view student achievement as a compilation of individual struggles and successes that require both effort to reform curriculum, assessment, and instructional design and commitment to personalize learning and the learning environment to facilitate individual growth.

4. Effective schools “plan backward” from mission and goals.

Instead of seeing the classroom as a safe haven where individual pedagogy and preference dictate what is taught and how learning is assessed, educators see instructional practices in all classrooms as transparent—showing what learning looks like in the school; whether that learning supports the mission, learning principles, and curriculum of the school; and the extent to which that learning is producing the desired results.

Instead of seeing professional learning communities as a way of fostering collegiality, staff use every staff meeting (formal or informal) to engage in the serious challenges and possible solutions presented, regardless of whether their candor, information, or ideas produce discomfort, displeasure, or delight.

In crafting *Schooling by Design*, Wiggins and McTighe worked to intersperse theoretical principles and constructs to frame the work of schooling with practical examples of what schooling might look or sound like. *Schooling by Design* provides the vision: the need to know what success actually looks like. Although the task of designing, implementing, and re-forming a mission-based curriculum framework is daunting, it is nonetheless eminently doable and absolutely necessary. If a school is purposeful, it can transform hundreds of seemingly discrete tasks, activities, and objectives into a few mission-critical goals. An effective school will then translate those goals into methods and create paths that will lead to achieving the goals. In

other words, to have a mission and honor it means never losing sight of the priorities. This action tool provides practical support in service of that vision so that every leader can provide all members of the school community with clear direction.

Organization of This Action Tool

This action tool offers educators a collection of practical and proven processes, protocols, and examples for accomplishing many of the tasks identified in *Schooling by Design*. The tools are designed to provide leaders (administrators, supervisors, and teacher leaders) with concrete strategies and tactics that can be quickly personalized and implemented to further short- and long-term school improvement efforts. Although the tools are inspired by and occasionally excerpted from the text of *Schooling by Design*, they have not been organized according to the book chapters. Rather, each tool is anchored in a particular section, reflecting key areas of educational leadership:

- **Mission and Learning Principles**
- **Curriculum and Assessment Systems**
- **Instructional Programs and Practices**
- **Personnel: Hiring, Appraisal, and Development**
- **Policies, Structures, Governance, and Resource Allocation**

Figure 1.1

