

What Alignment Actually Looks Like

Before School Starts



Every August, leadership teams gather at schools around the country before the students return. There is usually a vision on the screen, a set of goals for the year, and a room full of people nodding in agreement. It all sounds right. Then the year begins, and the agreement that felt so solid in August quietly comes apart, as well-meaning people start pulling in different directions.

What I saw this summer in the districts I worked with looked different, and it was different on purpose. These teams treated the weeks before school as the time to do the harder, quieter work that a vision alone never does. They were deliberate about how they would actually lead together once the year got hard.

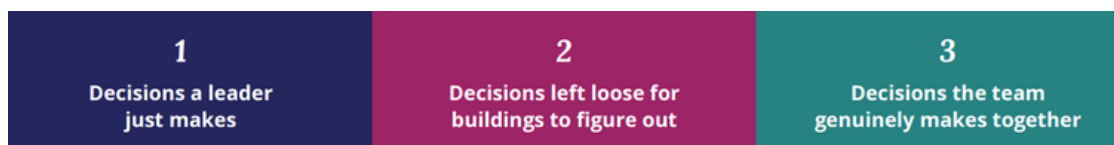
“Vision matters, but a vision everyone agreed to and no one can act on is just a nice sentence on a wall.”

That is the distinction I keep coming back to. Vision matters, but a vision everyone agreed to and no one can act on is just a nice sentence on a wall. What carries a district through a difficult year is not the sentence. It is alignment, and alignment is not a feeling in the room. It is a set of things you can watch people do.

Real alignment starts with shared goals and a genuine commitment to shared leadership, and then it becomes real through a handful of practices that most districts skip. Here is what that looked like this summer, before a single student walked in.

It Looks Like Knowing Who Decides What

Most teams I meet are not divided on values. They're divided on decision rights, and they don't know it yet. Everyone assumes they're aligned because they all want what's best for kids, and then September hits and two well-meaning leaders both think the call was theirs to make. One district I worked with spent real time this summer sorting their actual decisions into three buckets:



Then they went one level deeper and named, decision by decision, who plays each of these four roles:

Recommends	Decides	Implements	Communicates
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It is not glamorous work. It is a little tedious. But watching a team stop guessing about who owns what is one of the clearest signs of alignment I know, and you cannot get there from a vision statement.

It Looks Like Commitments You Can Actually See

“We value collaboration” is not a commitment. It’s a hope. A commitment is something specific enough that you’d notice if someone broke it.

The teams that did this well didn’t write more values. They wrote behaviors. One group landed on a short list they could all repeat without the handout. Another named their commitments around the things that usually go sideways in a district.

Commitments About How We Work Together	Commitments About Where Things Go Sideways
<i>Come together as one team</i>	Decision closure
<i>Stay open to every perspective</i>	Meeting structure
<i>Participate actively</i>	Communication flow
<i>Learn together</i>	Follow-through
<i>Keep the conversation going between sessions</i>	

When a commitment is that concrete, you can hold each other to it in October without it feeling personal. That’s the point. Alignment you can name is alignment you can protect when the year gets hard.

It Looks Like Shared Goals, Shaped by the Right People

So much of what passes for misalignment is really people finding out about a goal, or a decision, after it was already set. Most districts bring staff in at the rollout, to explain what has already been decided.

The districts that align well do something harder. They bring staff voice, and often their association, into the goal-setting itself, so the goals are truly shared rather than announced.

“It means sharing the pen, not only the plan.”

That is a real shift in how leadership works. It is slower in August, and it asks leaders to hold their own ideas a little more loosely. But shared goals that people helped shape are the ones that still hold up in February, and shared leadership is what turns a vision on a screen into work an entire system is willing to own.

It Looks Like a Plan to Check, Not Just to Launch

The last piece is the one August teams skip most. They align beautifully during a two-day retreat and then assume it will hold. It never does on its own. The teams with the greatest chance of meeting their goals built a cadence into their first ninety days, a regular, low-drama moment to ask whether we’re still doing what we said we’d do. Not a new initiative. A checkpoint.

Alignment is not something you achieve in August. It is something you maintain from August on, and the teams that know that build the checkpoint before they need it.

It Looks Like a Plan to Check, Not Just to Launch

None of this replaces vision. It gives vision something to stand on. If there is one thing I would ask every leadership team to do this month, it is to step back from the vision statement and sit with a few harder questions.

- 1** Are the goals we are naming truly shared, shaped by the people who have to carry them, or are we mostly announcing them?
- 2** Are we prepared to lead this together, with real shared ownership rather than ownership held at the top?
- 3** Do we actually agree on who decides what?
- 4** Have we committed to anything specific enough that we would notice if we broke it?

None of this replaces vision. It gives vision something to stand on. If there is one thing I would ask every leadership team to do this month, it is to step back from the vision statement and sit with a few harder questions. Shared goals, shared leadership, and the everyday practices that make them real- that is the work worth doing before the students arrive. Everything else is just a nice sentence on a wall.

**SYSTEM
CONTEXT**



PEOPLE

STRUCTURES



CULTURE

POLICIES



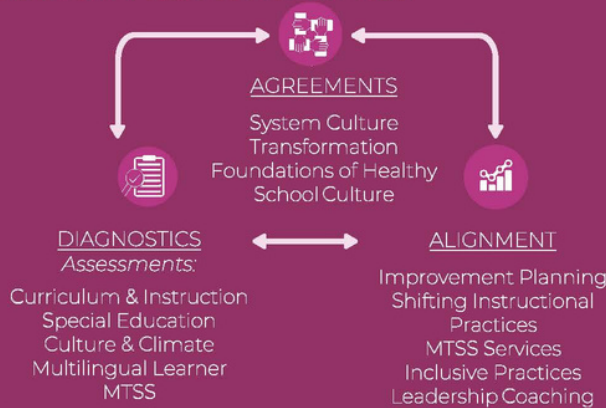
DATA

RESOURCES



COMMUNICATION

CAPACITY BUILDING INPUTS



MEASURABLE OUTCOMES

SHORT-TERM	
SYSTEM IMPACT	PEOPLE IMPACT
Decision-Making	New Knowledge or Skills
Policy Changes	Attitude Shifts
Resource Flow	Common Language
	Adapting Practice
MID-TERM	
Sustaining Practice	Strengthened Culture
Improved Alignment	Empowered Educators

LONG-TERM OUTCOME:

Increased system capacity to orchestrate equitable, inclusive transformation to reach intended outcomes through large-scale organizational change.

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When stakeholders work together around shared agreements...the unthinkable is possible. CEC's focus on the **System Agreements** in school reform efforts aim to realign the adult culture and dynamics. We know when systems cultivate healthy, values-based relationships within each school and classroom measurable outcomes are more likely. People matter. And people working together really matters in schools. Developing a strong adult culture as a foundation of a change agenda is what makes CEC stand apart.

CEC uses **System Alignment** to create collective efficacy on the agreed upon improvement aims of a school or district. Our tools and processes are designed to empower those closest to the issues to own the work. Our change management approach intentionally paces improvement through attainable short-term, mid-term, and long-term goals. It is the "secret sauce" of school improvement.

We invite you to explore the role our **Logic Model** might play in your system's large-scale improvement. Our website includes [FREE](#) resources that might be helpful in opening up dialogue with key stakeholders. Let's work together to turn ideas into action, so we can all see what's possible for our schools.