

# The Learning Spring

## An Education Podcast Series



## Group Discussion Guide

### Episode One

## Leadership for Reinventing Schools

Featuring guests Kevin Fahey, Jacy Ippolito, Cathy O'Connell

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A discussion that draws on ideas from their book *An Uncommon Theory of School Change: Leadership for Reinventing Schools* (Teachers College Press, 2019) by Kevin Fahey, Angela Breidenstein, Jacy Ippolito, and Frances Hensley

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1. The discussion explores how our traditional strategies for school improvement (or the “Common Theory”) can indeed improve certain aspects of schooling—but proposes that the Common Theory tends *not* to fundamentally change teaching and learning in impactful ways.
  - a. Do you agree with this? Explain.
  - b. With what kind of goals do you feel the “Common Theory” can be most effective?
  - c. Do you feel there are some types of goals that might need a more effective approach?
2. The “Uncommon Theory” is based on a *deep dive* approach that focuses on developing a school community’s collective capacity, investigating assumptions, processing *why* a change could be beneficial, and envisioning a reimagined future.
  - a. Have you ever been a part of a “deep dive” approach with a school community? Explain.
  - b. Are there statements in your school mission statement or current improvement goals that you think need this type of approach in order to bring them fully into reality? Explain.
  - c. What are examples of some of the steps and/or strategies that you feel would be important to implement during such a collective “deep dive”?
  - d. What sort of involvement and/or support do you think you would need in order to successfully lead a deep dive? (From supervisors? From faculty? From students? From the community?)
3. The “deep dive” concept encompasses different “depths” that are often part of organizational culture. These include a level *just below the surface* that involves easily visible artifacts (such as our master schedules, school awards, or student artwork on the walls); a *mid-level* depth that encompasses our espoused theories (such as our mission and vision statements), and the *deepest* level that involves our underlying and sometimes unexamined assumptions.

- a. Do you agree that an exploration of the deepest levels is necessary to truly achieve transformational results? Explain.
  - b. As you reflect on the various depth “levels” of your school culture, do you think they all align? Or are there some disconnects—for instance, between “what we say we do” and “what we actually believe and do”? If so, how might these disconnects be brought into better alignment?
4. *Adult Development* is discussed as a key part of the “uncommon” approach, and the discussion explores the idea that successful educational leaders tend to embrace the idea that adult development must be a core part of their ongoing work.
  - a. In what ways, do you feel that an organizational commitment to ongoing adult development has or has *not* impacted your own growth and professional development as a leader?
  - b. In what ways, do you make adult development a priority in your work as an educational leader? (With faculty? With staff? With community?)
5. Regarding adult development, this quotation from the book is discussed: *“The hardest adult development work that leaders do is with themselves . . . If the leader cannot think in complex ways about teaching, learning, and the purpose of schools, then the school cannot. Only when the leader can grow, learn, and develop in complex ways will the school grow, learn, and develop—and open the door to deep change.”*
  - a. Do you agree that it’s important not only for leaders to continually engage in their own development but also to model their ongoing learning for others? Explain.
  - b. In what ways do you ensure your own ongoing learning and professional development?
  - c. Can you give examples of topics for which your own understanding has been enhanced in recent years as a result of your own professional learning—or ways in which your beliefs or assumptions might have changed or evolved as a result of your own development? What are some current topics that you would like to explore as part of your own ongoing learning?
6. The discussion explores the importance for leaders to be continuously shaping the organizational culture. Guests also discuss that while both “climate” and “culture” are important concepts to nurture for a school and district, it is also very important to understand the differences between them.
  - a. How do you define or understand the differences between school “climate” and “culture”?
  - b. What are some steps you take to continually nurture a congenial and positive *climate*?
  - c. What are some steps you take to continually nurture a collegial and productive *culture*?
7. The discussion ends with this quotation from the article “How to Build Schools Where Adults Learn” by guests Kevin Fahey and Jacy Ippolito: *“The leadership lesson from our work is twofold. The first is simple: Think like—and consequently lead like—a teacher.”*
  - a. What do you think are examples of expertise that teachers tend to develop—or important skills that teachers learn during their career that would be especially important for a school leader?
  - b. Do you think there are current norms or expectations for some leadership positions that can make it difficult to put such skills or expertise into practice and “lead like a teacher”? Explain.

