

Founder's Expanded Edition

# THE EXPECT MORE LEADERSHIP *PLAYBOOK*



*Raise the Standard. Align the System.  
Develop the People. Deliver the Results.*

HERBERT O'NEIL

FOUNDER, EXPECT MORE LEADERSHIP

VISION · STRATEGY · RESULTS

# The Expect More Leadership Playbook

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*A field guide for superintendents, principals, and leadership teams who believe organizations are capable of becoming more than they believed was possible.*

HERBERT O'NEIL — FOUNDER, EXPECT MORE LEADERSHIP

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*Part I*

# The Leader's Entry

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*Before a leader can change an organization, the leader must understand it. Entry is not ceremonial — it is diagnostic, relational, and strategic.*

CHAPTER 1 LISTEN BEFORE YOU LEAD · CHAPTER 2 DIAGNOSE THE CURRENT REALITY

## 01 Listen Before You Lead

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When I arrived in Hempstead ISD, I did not walk into a district without people who cared. I walked into a district where people cared deeply, but the system had lost direction. The board wanted improvement. The staff wanted improvement. The community wanted improvement. The students deserved improvement.

But years of challenge had taken a toll. Academic performance was low. Trust had been strained. Morale was inconsistent. Facilities needed attention. Systems needed alignment. The district had experienced too much disappointment, and disappointment has a way of lowering expectations over time.

That is why I knew I had to listen. Listening does not mean delaying leadership. Listening is leadership.

I listened to board members, principals, teachers, support staff, parents, students, community members, people who were hopeful, and people who were frustrated. Every conversation gave me information. Every conversation helped me understand the history. Every conversation revealed something about the culture.

*A leader who does not listen will eventually misdiagnose the problem. When leaders misdiagnose the problem, they prescribe the wrong solution.*

## ENTRY PLAYBOOK MOVES

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- 1 Meet individually with board members or supervising leaders.
- 2 Meet with the cabinet or leadership team.
- 3 Visit every campus or department.
- 4 Listen to teachers, staff, students, parents, and community members.
- 5 Review academic, financial, staffing, safety, facility, and culture data.
- 6 Identify what people are proud of.
- 7 Identify what people are concerned about.
- 8 Identify what has become accepted that should be challenged.
- 9 Communicate what you are learning.
- 10 Avoid launching major initiatives before understanding the system.

### ENTRY REFLECTION QUESTIONS

*What am I hearing repeatedly?*

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*What are people afraid to say publicly?*

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*Where has the organization lowered expectations?*

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*Where is the strongest evidence of hope?*

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*What needs immediate attention? What requires deeper study?*

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*What relationships must be strengthened first?*

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*What must I understand before I act?*

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## 02 Diagnose the Current Reality

After listening, a leader must eventually name the current reality. This is where leadership becomes difficult. People often say they want honesty, but honesty can be uncomfortable when it names something people have learned to live with.

When I arrived in Hempstead, there were things that had to be acknowledged. Student outcomes were not where they needed to be. Instruction was inconsistent. Systems were not aligned. Trust needed to be rebuilt. Facility needs had to be addressed. Adult expectations had to rise. Those statements were not attacks. They were truths.

*There is a difference between blaming people and confronting reality. Blame creates defensiveness. Reality creates clarity.*

A leader must learn to tell the truth in a way that does not destroy people. The purpose of naming reality is not to shame the organization. The purpose is to create the clarity required for improvement. Organizations cannot improve what they refuse to acknowledge.

### THE EXPECT MORE LEADERSHIP DIAGNOSTIC

Before a leader launches the work, the leader should diagnose the organization through the four-part framework.

Raise the Standard	Align the System	Develop the People	Deliver the Results
Are expectations clear?	Are priorities clear?	Are leaders being coached?	What are the key measures?
Is mediocrity being tolerated?	Are departments aligned?	Are teachers being supported?	Are we monitoring progress?
Do people know what excellence looks like?	Are resources connected to goals?	Are difficult conversations happening?	Are we adjusting when results stall?
Are students and adults being challenged to grow?	Is communication consistent?	Are people growing or only being evaluated?	Are wins being celebrated?

This diagnostic gives the leader a starting point. It does not answer every question, but it helps a leader identify where the organization is strongest, where it is fragmented, where people need development, and where results must improve.

*Part II*

# Raise the Standard

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*Before a strategic plan matters, the standard matters. A leader must answer the question: what are we willing to accept?*

CHAPTER 3 TRANSFORMATION BEGINS BEFORE RESULTS · CHAPTER 4 WHAT RAISING THE STANDARD REALLY MEANS

## 03 Transformation Begins Before Results

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When I arrived in Hempstead ISD in May 2022, I inherited a district that had experienced years of challenges. Student performance was low. Organizational culture was struggling. Morale was inconsistent. Trust had been strained. Facilities needed attention. Academic outcomes were not where they needed to be. Most concerning, there was a growing sense of resignation that things simply were what they were.

Yet what I remember most is that the people had not given up. What was missing was not desire. What was missing was direction.

One of the first lessons I learned about transformation is that struggling organizations are often filled with good people. The problem is not always effort. The problem is alignment. People can work incredibly hard and still fail to move an organization forward if everyone is pulling in different directions.

### CONFRONTING REALITY

As I walked classrooms, I saw things that concerned me. In many classrooms, instruction lacked urgency. Student engagement was inconsistent. Teachers often remained seated behind their desks. Students frequently had their heads down. There were pockets of excellence, but they were not yet the standard.

*What troubled me most was not what I saw. It was what appeared to have become acceptable. Organizations rarely rise above the standards they are willing to tolerate.*

### THE GUT PUNCH

Then the accountability ratings arrived. The district received a 58, an F. At the time, this placed Hempstead among the lowest-performing districts in Texas. I was crushed, not because of what it said about me, but because of what it represented for children.

Data is never personal. But it is always important.

The accountability rating confirmed what many people already felt: the system was not producing acceptable outcomes. It would have been easy to become defensive, to blame circumstances, poverty, staffing challenges, funding issues, or historical problems. But excuses never improve outcomes. Reality must be acknowledged before transformation can begin.

That rating became a defining moment. Not because it represented failure, but because it forced clarity. The district could either accept the result or commit to changing it. We chose to change it.

## 04 What Raising the Standard Really Means

Raising the standard is not giving a speech. It is not putting a slogan on a wall. It is not telling people to work harder. It is not embarrassing people with data. It is not pretending challenges do not exist.

Raising the standard means defining what excellence looks like and leading people toward it with clarity, support, and accountability. It means saying our students can learn more, our adults can lead better, our systems can become stronger, our community deserves confidence, and our future does not have to look like our past.

*A leader who challenges without support creates fear. A leader who supports without challenge creates comfort. A leader who combines belief, clarity, support, and accountability creates growth.*

### WHAT LEADERS MUST STOP TOLERATING

- Low-quality instruction that has become normal.
- Poor communication that creates confusion.
- Weak follow-through that damages trust.
- Low expectations for students disguised as compassion.
- Adult excuses that replace adult ownership.
- Dysfunction at the leadership table.
- Initiatives that create activity without producing progress.

## RAISE THE STANDARD PLAYBOOK MOVES

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- 11 Define what excellence looks like in clear language.
- 12 Identify what has been tolerated that can no longer continue.
- 13 Use data to create clarity, not shame.
- 14 Communicate belief before demanding performance.
- 15 Replace excuses with ownership.
- 16 Make expectations visible and consistent.
- 17 Connect the standard to students, not adult comfort.
- 18 Celebrate examples of the standard being lived.
- 19 Address misalignment quickly.
- 20 Repeat the standard until the organization can say it back.

### RAISE THE STANDARD REFLECTION QUESTIONS

*What does excellence look like here?*

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*What have we tolerated too long?*

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*Where have expectations been lowered?*

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*What are we unwilling to compromise?*

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*What must adults believe differently? What must students experience differently?*

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*What language will define the next chapter?*

## *Part III*

# Align the System

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*Hope is not a strategy. Organizations do not improve simply because people want them to improve. Organizations improve when systems improve.*

CHAPTER 5 ALIGNMENT TURNS EFFORT INTO PROGRESS · CHAPTER 6 STRATEGIC  
PLANNING AS A LEADERSHIP TOOL · CHAPTER 7 GOVERNANCE ALIGNMENT

## 05 Alignment Turns Effort Into Progress

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After establishing a higher standard and creating a shared vision, the next challenge became obvious: the system itself was not aligned. Teachers were often teaching different things. Instruction varied significantly from classroom to classroom. Expectations varied from campus to campus. Leadership practices varied from leader to leader. The organization was relying too heavily on individual effort and not enough on organizational systems.

*When success depends on heroes, improvement is temporary. When success depends on systems, improvement becomes sustainable.*

Alignment occurs when people understand what we are trying to accomplish, why it matters, how we will get there, what success looks like, and how progress will be measured. Without alignment, even talented people pull in different directions. With alignment, ordinary efforts become extraordinary results.

## 06 Strategic Planning as a Leadership Tool

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Many organizations have strategic plans that nobody uses. That is not strategic planning. That is compliance. A real strategic plan should guide board decisions, cabinet work, campus plans, budget priorities, staffing decisions, professional development, communication, facilities, and accountability.

In Hempstead, Learning and Leading to Higher Heights became more than a strategic plan. It became the roadmap. It gave the district common language. It gave the community a way to understand the work. It gave leaders a way to make decisions.

Every major decision could be tested against the plan: Does this move us toward Higher Heights? Does this support the goals? Does this strengthen student outcomes? Does this align with the future we said we wanted?

## STRATEGIC PLAN DEVELOPMENT PROCESS

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- 21 Listen to stakeholders before drafting priorities.
- 22 Review academic, financial, operational, facility, safety, staffing, and culture data.
- 23 Identify the few priorities that matter most.
- 24 Create clear goals and measures.
- 25 Build action steps that departments and campuses can use.
- 26 Align the budget to the plan.
- 27 Communicate the plan in language people can remember.
- 28 Monitor progress publicly and repeatedly.
- 29 Revise when the data or context demands it.
- 30 Make the plan a living document, not a binder.

## 07 Governance Alignment

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For superintendents, alignment begins with governance. A district cannot align classrooms, campuses, departments, and community priorities if the board and superintendent are not clear about direction, roles, and expectations.

*Strong governance does not weaken the board. Strong governance strengthens the district.*

The board sets direction. The superintendent leads the system. Together, they create conditions for the district to succeed. When governance is aligned, the organization gains stability. When governance is unclear, confusion travels through the system.

A superintendent must communicate clearly, consistently, and transparently with the board. Board members should never have to guess what is happening. They should understand the priorities, the progress, the challenges, and the decisions ahead. Trust at the top creates confidence throughout the organization.

## ALIGN THE SYSTEM PLAYBOOK MOVES

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- 31 Build or clarify the strategic plan.
- 32 Involve stakeholders so they own the work.
- 33 Connect board goals to district priorities.
- 34 Connect district priorities to campus plans.
- 35 Connect budget decisions to strategic priorities.
- 36 Align curriculum, instruction, assessment, and intervention.
- 37 Align communication so people hear the same message.
- 38 Align cabinet and leadership meetings to the highest priorities.
- 39 Stop initiatives that do not support the direction.
- 40 Monitor progress publicly and consistently.

### ALIGN THE SYSTEM REFLECTION QUESTIONS

*Do we have a clear direction? Can people explain the priorities?*

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*Are departments working together or separately?*

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*Does the budget reflect the strategy?*

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*Do principals understand what matters most? Do teachers understand the instructional priorities?*

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*Does the board have clarity?*

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*What needs to be stopped because it does not align?*

*Part IV*

# Develop the People

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*You cannot hate people into improvement. Pressure can create compliance. Lasting transformation requires belief.*

CHAPTER 8 PEOPLE ARE THE STRATEGY · CHAPTER 9 DEVELOPING LEADERS AT EVERY LEVEL  
· CHAPTER 10 DEVELOPING TRUST

## 08 People Are the Strategy

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One of the greatest misconceptions about accountability is that improvement comes from pressure alone. It does not. Pressure can create compliance and short-term gains, but lasting transformation requires something deeper. It requires belief.

When I arrived in Hempstead ISD, many people were carrying the weight of years of disappointment. Some had experienced initiative after initiative. Some had heard promises before. Some had been criticized repeatedly. Some had begun doubting whether improvement was even possible.

Before I could ask people to perform differently, I needed them to believe differently. Many leaders begin by identifying weaknesses. I wanted to begin by identifying value. People need accountability, but people also need affirmation. They need to know they matter, that someone sees their potential, and that their work has purpose.

*Every strategic plan eventually depends on people. A plan does not teach a child. A framework does not lead a campus. A dashboard does not build trust. A policy does not inspire a team. People do the work.*

That is why development is not optional. It is central to improvement. In schools, this means developing principals, assistant principals, teachers, counselors, directors, support staff, and student leaders. Every person contributes to culture. Every person either strengthens or weakens the system.

## 09 Developing Leaders at Every Level

Organizations rarely outperform their leadership. If leaders improve, organizations improve. If leaders stagnate, organizations stagnate. That is why leadership development must become a priority.

Principals matter. Assistant principals matter. Teacher leaders matter. Department leaders matter. Counselors matter. Coaches matter. Leadership is not limited to titles. Leadership exists throughout the organization.

### PRINCIPAL DEVELOPMENT

- Instructional leadership
- Culture building
- Data use
- Teacher feedback
- PLC expectations
- Student support
- Communication
- Parent engagement
- Operations
- Staff accountability
- Leadership presence

### TEACHER DEVELOPMENT

- Clear curriculum
- Strong planning support
- Effective PLCs
- Useful data
- Timely feedback
- Coaching
- Professional learning
- Time to collaborate
- Leaders who understand instruction
- Leaders who are present in classrooms

A superintendent or supervisor must help principals move from managing the building to leading the learning. Teachers deserve leaders who invest in their growth. If instruction must improve, then teacher support must improve. Leaders cannot simply tell teachers to produce better outcomes without providing the conditions, tools, feedback, and development needed to get there.

## 10 Developing Trust

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Trust is one of the most valuable forms of capital any leader possesses. Without trust, every decision becomes difficult. Without trust, communication becomes harder. Without trust, change becomes slower.

*Trust is built through consistency. People watch what leaders do far more closely than they listen to what leaders say.*

In Hempstead, trust did not rebuild overnight. It grew through repeated action. Communication improved. Visibility increased. The strategic plan created shared ownership. The bond work required community confidence. Academic improvement created evidence. Over time, people began to see that the district was moving differently.

## DEVELOP THE PEOPLE PLAYBOOK MOVES

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- 41 Identify the key leaders who must grow for the system to improve.
- 42 Create a leadership development plan.
- 43 Coach principals regularly.
- 44 Strengthen assistant principals and teacher leaders.
- 45 Make classroom feedback more consistent.
- 46 Use PLCs as development spaces, not just meeting times.
- 47 Celebrate growth publicly.
- 48 Address underperformance honestly and respectfully.
- 49 Build leadership pipelines.
- 50 Protect morale while increasing expectations.

### DEVELOP THE PEOPLE REFLECTION QUESTIONS

*Who needs development most right now?*

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*Are we coaching or only evaluating?*

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*Do people know what growth looks like?*

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*Are we supporting the people carrying the work?*

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*Where is leadership capacity too thin? Who has potential that needs to be developed?*

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*What trust must be rebuilt?*

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*How will we help adults improve so students can improve?*

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*Part V*

# Do the Work

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*Leadership eventually has to become action. If the daily work does not change, the results will not change.*

CH. 11 ACADEMICS · CH. 12 FACILITIES · CH. 13 FINANCE · CH. 14 SAFETY · CH. 15  
COMMUNICATION · CH. 16 CULTURE

## 11 Academic Systems That Move Results

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Student outcomes improve when instructional systems improve. Academic improvement requires aligned curriculum, effective instruction, strong PLCs, campus leadership development, intervention systems, assessment practices, data use, teacher support, student engagement, and clear expectations.

*A superintendent cannot improve academics from an office. A principal cannot improve instruction from behind a desk. Leaders must be close enough to the work to understand it.*

### ACADEMIC PLAYBOOK MOVES

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- 51 Define the instructional priorities.
- 52 Align curriculum and assessments.
- 53 Strengthen PLCs around student work and data.
- 54 Visit classrooms consistently.
- 55 Provide feedback to principals and teachers.
- 56 Build intervention and enrichment systems.
- 57 Monitor attendance, behavior, failure rates, and assessment data.
- 58 Use data meetings to support decisions, not shame people.
- 59 Celebrate academic wins.
- 60 Adjust when instruction is not producing results.

## 12 Facilities Are Instructional Resources

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Facilities are not separate from instruction. Buildings communicate value. Classrooms communicate value. Safety systems communicate value. Athletic facilities communicate value. Fine arts spaces communicate value. Early childhood spaces communicate value.

When students and staff walk into facilities that are neglected, it sends a message. When communities see investment, planning, and improvement, it sends a different message.

In Hempstead, facility needs could not be ignored. The district needed a new Early Childhood Center, safety improvements, campus additions, and athletic upgrades. But before a community supports a bond, it must trust the district.

*Bond work is not just construction work. It is trust work, communication work, planning work, listening work, and stewardship work.*

## FACILITIES AND BOND PLAYBOOK MOVES

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- 61 Conduct a facility needs assessment.
- 62 Connect facility needs to student learning, safety, and opportunity.
- 63 Engage the board early and often.
- 64 Listen to community concerns.
- 65 Communicate the why clearly.
- 66 Use transparent timelines and cost information.
- 67 Show how the work supports the strategic plan.
- 68 Build trust before asking for support.
- 69 Monitor construction and communicate progress.
- 70 Treat facilities as part of the student experience.

## 13 Finance and Stewardship

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Resources reveal priorities. Leaders cannot claim that something matters while refusing to align resources behind it. Finance is not separate from leadership. Finance is one of the ways leadership becomes real.

Strong financial stewardship requires balanced budgets, clear priorities, competitive compensation, fund balance awareness, tax-rate decisions, grant strategy, and transparency with the board and community. A leader must understand the numbers well enough to connect them to the mission.

### FINANCE PLAYBOOK MOVES

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- 71 Know the financial position of the organization.
- 72 Understand revenue, expenditures, fund balance, staffing costs, and future obligations.
- 73 Align the budget to the strategic plan.
- 74 Communicate financial realities honestly.
- 75 Protect student-facing priorities.
- 76 Invest in people strategically.
- 77 Build scenarios before decisions become urgent.
- 78 Connect compensation, staffing, and retention.
- 79 Monitor financial health regularly.
- 80 Make stewardship visible.

## 14 Safety and Crisis Leadership

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Safety is one of the most important responsibilities of leadership. Students cannot learn if they do not feel safe. Staff cannot serve well if they do not feel supported. Parents cannot trust the system if they do not believe safety is taken seriously.

Safety work includes clear protocols, strong communication, training, relationships with law enforcement, facility assessments, emergency planning, student supervision, threat response, parent communication, staff clarity, and after-action reviews.

*Leaders cannot wait until a crisis to build safety systems. The systems must be built before they are needed.*

## **SAFETY PLAYBOOK MOVES**

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- 81* Review current safety plans and procedures.
- 82* Build relationships with law enforcement and emergency responders.
- 83* Train staff before emergencies occur.
- 84* Clarify communication protocols.
- 85* Assess facilities for vulnerabilities.
- 86* Review supervision systems.
- 87* Create after-action processes.
- 88* Communicate with families quickly and responsibly.
- 89* Support staff and students after crisis events.
- 90* Treat safety as an ongoing system, not a one-time checklist.

## 15 Communication Builds Confidence

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Leaders must tell the story of the work. If leaders do not communicate clearly, others will define the story for them. Communication should be clear, honest, timely, consistent, human, aligned to priorities, focused on students, grounded in facts, and connected to the vision.

Do not communicate only when something is wrong. Communicate progress, priorities, celebrations, challenges, next steps, and the why. Trust grows when people know what is happening and why it matters.

### COMMUNICATION PLAYBOOK MOVES

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- 91 Create a communication rhythm for the board, staff, families, and community.
- 92 Repeat the vision until people can say it back.
- 93 Tell the story of progress before others define it.
- 94 Use multiple tools: board updates, staff messages, newsletters, videos, social media, campus visits, and community meetings.
- 95 Communicate challenges honestly.
- 96 Celebrate students and staff consistently.
- 97 Make communication aligned to the strategic plan.
- 98 Be visible in the work.
- 99 Respond quickly when trust is at risk.
- 100 Use communication to build confidence, not noise.

## 16 Relationships and Culture

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Culture is what people experience every day. It is what leaders tolerate, celebrate, correct, and model. Culture is not changed by slogans alone. It is changed by repeated leadership behaviors that create new expectations and new experiences.

*Accountability without relationships creates resentment. Relationships without accountability create comfort. Effective leadership requires both.*

Relationships matter because people do difficult work for leaders they trust. Relationships do not replace accountability, but they make accountability possible.

### CULTURE PLAYBOOK MOVES

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- 101 Be visible.
- 102 Celebrate wins.
- 103 Address disrespect and dysfunction.
- 104 Model the behavior expected from others.
- 105 Protect student dignity.
- 106 Support staff while increasing expectations.
- 107 Build rituals that reinforce the culture.
- 108 Listen to staff and students.
- 109 Communicate what the organization values.
- 110 Correct what violates the standard.

*Part VI*

# Deliver the Results

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*The students we serve deserve outcomes, not excuses. Good intentions do not educate students.*

CHAPTER 17 MEASURE WHAT MATTERS · CHAPTER 18 THE HEMPSTEAD RESULTS SNAPSHOT

## 17 Measure What Matters

One mistake organizations often make is measuring too few things or measuring the wrong things. Data must become a tool for improvement, not punishment. The purpose of measurement is not to identify people to blame. The purpose is to identify opportunities to improve.

### DISTRICT DASHBOARD

- Accountability rating
- Campus ratings
- STAAR and EOC performance
- Student growth
- Graduation rate
- CCMR
- Attendance
- Discipline
- Teacher retention
- Vacancies
- Fund balance
- Budget health
- Facility progress
- Safety data
- Staff culture
- Community engagement

### CAMPUS DASHBOARD

- Attendance
- Discipline
- Failure rates
- Common assessment data
- Student growth
- Walkthrough trends
- PLC quality
- Intervention data
- Teacher attendance
- Student engagement
- Parent concerns
- Culture indicators

*What gets monitored gets attention. What gets attention gets improved.*

## 18 The Hempstead Results Snapshot

The Expect More Framework was not theory. It was tested through real work. In Hempstead ISD, the results reflected a district that raised the standard, aligned the system, developed the people, and delivered measurable outcomes.

INDICATOR	STARTING POINT	IMPROVED RESULT
District Accountability	58 / F	<b>Projected 77 / C — +19 points, two-letter-grade improvement</b>
High School	59	<b>78</b>
Middle School	59	<b>85–86, pending final confirmed number</b>
Elementary School	60	<b>70</b>
CCMR	33%	<b>96% for the Class of 2026</b>
Graduation	88.2%	<b>95.9%</b>
Dual Credit	228 credit hours	<b>903 credit hours</b>
Bond	No successful bond in 18 years	<b>\$45.7M bond passed — Prop A 73%, Prop B 68%</b>

These results were not accidental. They were connected to standards, systems, people, and disciplined execution.

## DELIVER THE RESULTS PLAYBOOK MOVES

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**111** Define the results that matter most.

**112** Build a dashboard.

**113** Monitor progress regularly.

**114** Use data to improve, not shame.

**115** Identify what is working.

**116** Identify what must change.

**117** Celebrate progress.

**118** Communicate results clearly.

**119** Adjust systems when outcomes stall.

**120** Raise the next standard after success.

### DELIVER THE RESULTS REFLECTION QUESTIONS

*What results matter most right now?*

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*Are we measuring the right things?*

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*Who reviews the data and how often?*

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*What is improving? What is not improving?*

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*What system needs to change?*

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*What should be celebrated?*

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*What standard must be raised next?*

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*Part VII*

# The Expect More Leadership Principles

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*Twelve convictions, tested through real leadership, that anchor the framework.*

# Twelve Guiding Principles

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## *Principle 01*

### **Leadership Is Influence**

Leadership is not a title, position, or authority. Leadership is influence. The most effective leaders understand that people choose daily whether they will follow. Leadership is earned through trust, competence, consistency, and service.

## *Principle 02*

### **Expectations Drive Outcomes**

People generally perform at the level of expectation that surrounds them. Low expectations create low performance. High expectations create the possibility of excellence. The challenge is refusing to lower expectations when circumstances become difficult.

## *Principle 03*

### **Alignment Precedes Achievement**

Hard work alone is not enough. People can work incredibly hard while moving in different directions. Alignment creates momentum. Alignment turns effort into achievement.

## *Principle 04*

### **Culture Is What You Tolerate**

Culture is not a slogan, mission statement, or poster. Culture is what people experience every day. Culture is shaped by what leaders model, tolerate, celebrate, and correct.

## *Principle 05*

### **People Support What They Help Create**

The best leaders do not simply make decisions. They build ownership. Involvement creates investment. Investment creates commitment. Commitment creates momentum.

## *Principle 06*

### **Improvement Begins With Adults**

Students do not control curriculum, systems, or organizational culture. Adults do. When adults improve, student outcomes improve.

### *Principle 07*

## **Accountability and Relationships Must Coexist**

Relationships without accountability create comfort. Accountability without relationships creates resentment. Effective leadership requires both.

### *Principle 08*

## **Poverty Is Context, Not Destiny**

Challenges are real, but leaders must never allow reality to become an excuse for low expectations. Compassion should never require lowered expectations.

### *Principle 09*

## **Momentum Matters**

Momentum changes organizations, culture, belief, and outcomes. Leaders must celebrate progress because progress fuels belief.

### *Principle 10*

## **Results Matter**

Leadership is about people, culture, service, and results. Results matter because people matter.

### *Principle 11*

## **Success Is Never Final**

One of the greatest threats to improvement is success itself. Every accomplishment creates a new challenge and every success creates a new standard.

### *Principle 12*

## **Make It Real**

Vision without implementation creates disappointment. Plans without action create stagnation. The responsibility of leadership is to make possibility reality.

*Part VIII*

# Why Improvement Efforts Fail

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*Many organizations work incredibly hard and still fail to achieve meaningful improvement. The sequence is usually the reason why.*

# Master the Sequence

One of the most frustrating realities of leadership is that many organizations work incredibly hard and still fail to achieve meaningful improvement. The effort is real. The commitment is real. The intentions are good. Yet the results remain disappointing.

*Improvement is often attempted out of sequence. Organizations try to deliver results before developing people. They try to develop people before aligning systems. They try to align systems before establishing standards. The result is frustration.*

## RAISE THE STANDARD FIRST

Most transformation begins with expectations. Before systems change, expectations must change. Before performance improves, expectations must improve. The first responsibility of leadership is defining the standard: What is acceptable? What is expected? What does excellence look like? What are we unwilling to compromise?

## THEN ALIGN THE SYSTEM

Good people do not automatically produce great results inside broken systems. A poor system eventually defeats good intentions. Systems, curriculum, communication, leadership practices, and resource allocation must all support the standard.

## THEN DEVELOP THE PEOPLE

Many organizations create plans, goals, and accountability, then assume people automatically know how to execute. People deserve development, coaching, support, and investment. The responsibility of leadership is not simply to evaluate people. It is to develop people.

## THEN DELIVER THE RESULTS

Results are not the starting point. Results are the outcome. When standards rise, systems align, and people develop, results eventually follow. Sometimes quickly, sometimes slowly, but consistently.

*Skip a step and improvement weakens. Ignore a step and progress slows. Master the sequence and transformation becomes possible.*

*Part IX*

# The Courage to Expect More

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*People naturally drift toward comfort. That is why leadership  
requires courage.*

# Courage Is the Prerequisite

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One of the greatest myths in leadership is that people naturally want excellence. People naturally want comfort. Organizations naturally drift toward comfort. Systems naturally drift toward comfort. Cultures naturally drift toward comfort. That is why leadership requires courage.

*Without courage, standards decline. Without courage, accountability weakens. Without courage, mediocrity becomes normal.*

One of the first responsibilities of leadership is confronting reality. Reality is not pessimism. Reality is not negativity. Reality is truth. Leaders cannot improve what they refuse to acknowledge.

Expect More Leadership is not about criticizing organizations. It is about believing organizations are capable of becoming more. The goal is not to make people feel worse about where they are. It is to help them see what they can become.

*The courage of leadership often becomes the hope of the organization. People borrow belief from leaders until they develop belief of their own.*

*Part X*

# The Hempstead Case Study

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*Applying the Expect More Framework in practice. Can it produce results?*

# Applying the Framework in Practice

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Leadership frameworks are only valuable if they work in the real world. Ideas matter. Principles matter. Philosophies matter. But eventually every leadership framework must answer a simple question: Can it produce results?

The turnaround of Hempstead ISD became the testing ground for the framework that would later become Expect More Leadership. The district did not improve because of a single initiative. It improved because of a series of intentional leadership decisions guided by a consistent philosophy.

## THE SITUATION — MAY 2022

When I arrived in Hempstead ISD, the district faced significant challenges: student performance was struggling, organizational morale was inconsistent, trust had been strained, facilities needed attention, the board was not always moving in complete alignment, and many systems required improvement. Most concerning, there was a growing sense of resignation that things simply were what they were.

#### CHALLENGE ONE

**Low Expectations Had Become Normal.** As I visited classrooms, I observed disengaged students, inconsistent instructional practices, environments where urgency was often missing, and a culture that had become comfortable with outcomes that should have concerned everyone. The issue was not effort. The issue was expectation.

#### STRATEGIC DECISION: RAISE THE STANDARD

Instead of discussing limitations, we began discussing possibilities. This did not immediately improve test scores. It did something more important. It began changing belief.

#### CHALLENGE TWO

**Lack of Organizational Alignment.** People cared. People worked hard. People wanted success. Yet many parts of the organization were moving in different directions. There was no unified roadmap, no common destination, no shared language for success.

#### STRATEGIC DECISION: CREATE HIGHER HEIGHTS

Working alongside staff, community members, parents, business leaders, and stakeholders, we developed a five-year strategic plan: Learning and Leading to Higher Heights. From that point forward, the organization began moving together.

#### CHALLENGE THREE

**Instruction Needed Improvement.** Student outcomes would not improve without stronger instruction. The classroom remains the most important place in any school system.

#### STRATEGIC DECISION: ALIGN INSTRUCTION

The district strengthened curriculum alignment. PLCs became more intentional. Instructional support, coaching, and classroom expectations increased. The goal was not a few successful classrooms. The goal was a successful district.

#### CHALLENGE FOUR

**People Needed Development.** Many organizations attempt transformation through pressure, but pressure alone rarely produces sustainable results. People needed support, coaching, development, and belief.

#### STRATEGIC DECISION: DEVELOP THE PEOPLE

Leadership development, teacher growth, and principal development became priorities. The message remained consistent: We care about you. We support you. We believe in you. And we are going to expect more.

#### CHALLENGE FIVE

**Community Trust and Facilities.** Improvement requires trust. The district also faced significant facility needs. Instead of ignoring those needs, the district engaged the community and connected facility improvement to student opportunity, safety, and long-term confidence.

#### STRATEGIC DECISION: ENGAGE THE COMMUNITY

Communication improved. Transparency increased. Rather than presenting a plan and hoping for support, the district involved the community in the process. The work resulted in the first successful bond in 18 years: Prop A passed at 73 percent and Prop B passed at 68 percent.

### THE RESULTS

The results did not happen overnight. Transformation never does. But over time, measurable progress emerged. Student performance improved. Graduation outcomes improved. CCMR increased. Dual credit opportunities expanded significantly. The district launched Hempstead Early College High School. The district passed a major bond. Most importantly, the organization began believing in itself again.

*Transformation occurs when leaders create conditions where improvement becomes possible. The framework is simple. The work is difficult. But when leaders remain committed to the process, organizations can become more than they believed was possible.*

*Part XI*

# Expect More Leadership Tools

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*A playbook should not only inspire leaders. It should help them act.  
Ten tools to move from belief to execution.*

# Tools for Execution

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## Entry Plan Template

First 100 days — listen, diagnose, align, and move

### FIRST 30 DAYS: LISTEN AND LEARN

- Meet with board members or supervising leaders.  
\_\_\_\_\_
- Meet with cabinet or leadership team.  
\_\_\_\_\_
- Visit every campus or department.  
\_\_\_\_\_
- Listen to principals, teachers, staff, students, parents, and community partners.  
\_\_\_\_\_
- Review academic, financial, staffing, facility, safety, culture, and communication data.  
\_\_\_\_\_
- Identify urgent issues and early opportunities.  
\_\_\_\_\_

### DAYS 31–60: DIAGNOSE AND ALIGN

- Identify strengths and gaps.  
\_\_\_\_\_
- Clarify board or organizational priorities.  
\_\_\_\_\_
- Build a preliminary dashboard.  
\_\_\_\_\_
- Determine what must stop, start, and continue.  
\_\_\_\_\_
- Identify leadership development needs.  
\_\_\_\_\_
- Begin aligning meetings, communication, and priorities.  
\_\_\_\_\_

### DAYS 61–100: COMMUNICATE AND MOVE

- Share entry findings.  
\_\_\_\_\_
- Name early priorities.  
\_\_\_\_\_
- Align cabinet or leadership team work.  
\_\_\_\_\_
- Establish expectations.  
\_\_\_\_\_
- Launch the first improvement cycle.  
\_\_\_\_\_
- Create communication rhythms and progress monitoring.  
\_\_\_\_\_

TOOL 02

## System Alignment Checklist

Use before board meetings, cabinet retreats, or strategic reviews

Strategic plan is clear and current.

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Board goals or supervising priorities are aligned to the plan.

---

Budget decisions reflect priorities.

---

Campus or department plans connect to the plan.

---

Leadership meetings focus on priority work.

---

Communication repeats the common direction.

---

Data dashboard measures progress.

---

People understand what success looks like.

---

Misaligned initiatives are stopped or redesigned.

---

Progress is monitored consistently.

---

## Campus Walkthrough Reflection Tool

Use during classroom visits and post-visit debriefs

What are students doing?

---

What is the teacher doing?

---

Is the learning target clear?

---

Is instruction aligned to the standard?

---

Are students engaged?

---

Is there evidence of checks for understanding?

---

What feedback should the teacher receive?

---

What support does the teacher need?

---

What trend does this reveal for the campus?

---

What should leadership do next?

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TOOL 04

## PLC Quality Checklist

Use to monitor and coach Professional Learning Communities

The team is focused on student learning.

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Teachers use common standards and materials.

---

The team reviews student work or data.

---

The team identifies students who need support.

---

The team plans intervention and enrichment.

---

Instructional decisions are evidence-based.

---

Action steps are clear.

---

Follow-up occurs at the next meeting.

---

The principal or leader monitors PLC quality.

---

The PLC produces changes in instruction.

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## Leadership Team Meeting Agenda

A seven-part rhythm for cabinet and leadership meetings

- 121* Review the standard: What are we trying to accomplish?
- 122* Review the data: What does the evidence show?
- 123* Review the system: What is working and what is not?
- 124* Review the people: Who needs support or development?
- 125* Review communication: What must be shared and with whom?
- 126* Review action: Who owns the next steps?
- 127* Review results: What will we monitor before the next meeting?

TOOL 06

## Board Communication Template

Structure for briefing memos and board updates

PRIORITY OR ISSUE

---

WHY IT MATTERS

---

CURRENT STATUS

---

CONNECTION TO STRATEGIC PLAN

---

DATA OR EVIDENCE

---

ACTION BEING TAKEN

---

TIMELINE

---

RISKS OR CONCERNS

---

COMMUNICATION PLAN

---

DECISION NEEDED, IF ANY

---

## Results Dashboard Template

The categories every leadership dashboard should track

Student achievement

---

Student growth

---

Graduation

---

CCMR

---

Attendance

---

Discipline

---

Staffing and retention

---

Finance

---

Facilities

---

Safety

---

Communication and engagement

---

Culture indicators

---

TOOL 08

## Raise the Standard Reflection Guide

Use for personal reflection or leadership team discussion

What has become normal that should concern us?

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Where are expectations unclear?

---

What adult behaviors must change?

---

What student experiences must improve?

---

What standard must be communicated repeatedly?

---

What will we celebrate when we see it?

---

What will we correct when it is misaligned?

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TOOL 09

## People Development Plan

Use for coaching conversations with individual leaders

LEADER OR TEAM BEING DEVELOPED

---

CURRENT STRENGTHS

---

GROWTH AREA

---

SUPPORT NEEDED

---

COACHING ACTIONS

---

EVIDENCE OF PROGRESS

---

TIMELINE

---

FOLLOW-UP DATE

---

TOOL 10

## Make It Real Action Planner

The final translation from framework to next thirty days

What standard are we raising?

---

What system must be aligned?

---

Who must be developed?

---

What result are we trying to deliver?

---

What action will happen in the next 30 days?

---

What evidence will tell us if it is working?

---

What will we communicate?

---

What will we adjust if progress stalls?

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*C l o s i n g*

## The Pathway

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*Everything in leadership eventually comes back to a simple truth:  
organizations improve when leaders improve. Systems improve  
when leaders improve. Culture improves when leaders improve.  
Results improve when leaders improve.*

*Raise the Standard because expectations shape outcomes. Align  
the System because hard work without alignment creates  
frustration. Develop the People because people drive every result  
an organization produces. Deliver the Results because leadership  
must ultimately improve lives.*

*The future rarely belongs to those who accept things as they are.  
The future belongs to those courageous enough to pursue what  
could be.*

EXPECT MORE. ACHIEVE MORE. BECOME MORE. MAKE IT REAL.

— HERBERT O'NEIL, FOUNDER, EXPECT MORE LEADERSHIP