



2025 CASS ANNUAL LEARNING CONFERENCE
March 21, 2025

VISIONARY LEADERSHIP

INSIGHTS FROM A RURAL PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOL

DOUG NICHOLLS, NEW HUMBLE COMMUNITY SCHOOL

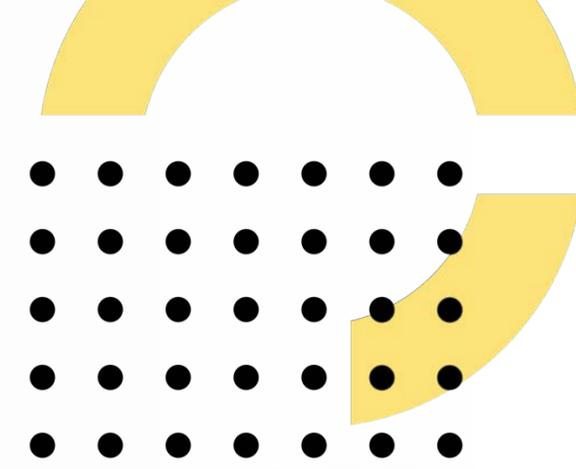
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In today's session we will...



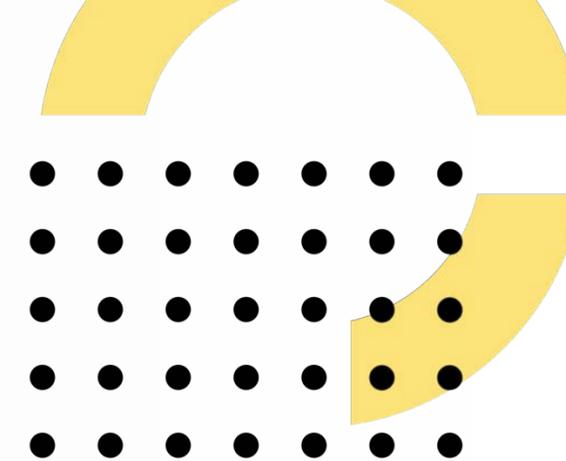
 **Provide an overview of public charter schools in Alberta**

 **Share empirical findings: rural public charter school (New Humble Community School)**

 **Explore vision activation through strategic thinking framework (Mintzberg)**

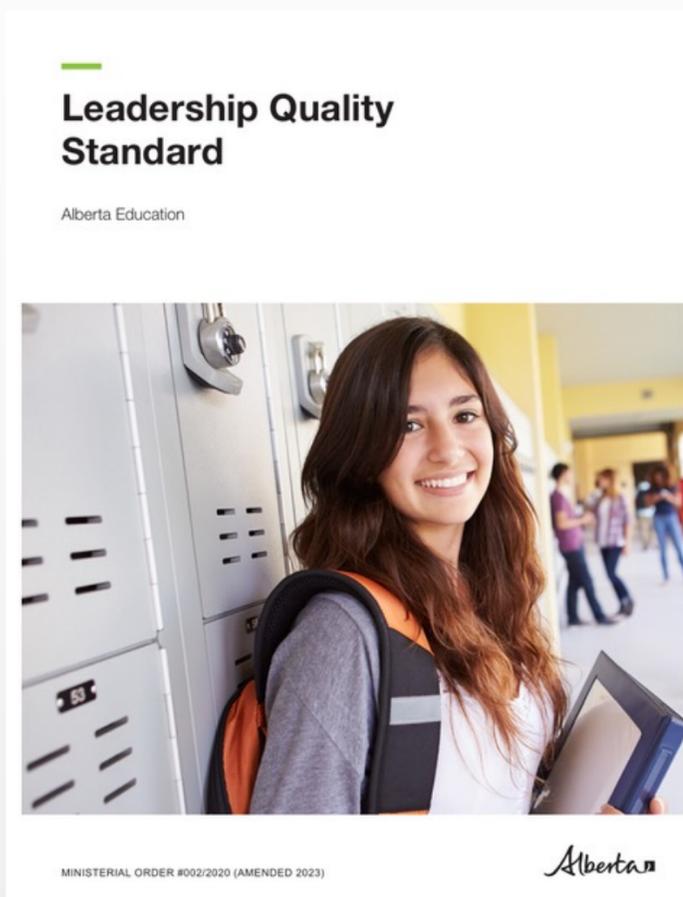


In today's session you will...



-  gain insights into the value of creating a vision that finds commitment beyond the school walls;
-  learn about a strategic thinking framework that may be used in varied leadership contexts, decisions, or tasks;
-  consider how empirical findings from a unique context may inform your own professional practice; and,
-  learn from your colleagues the shared and unique challenges and opportunities that system and school leaders experience when it comes to putting a vision into action.

Superintendent Leadership Quality Standard Foci



**Visionary
Leadership**

School Authority Operations and Resources



**Building
Effective
Relationships**

Supporting Effective Governance

Brief Overview of Public Charter Schools

Public Charter Schools in AB



History

- Alberta government passed legislation in 1994 for allow charter schools, the only province in Canada to do so.
- The first three charter schools opened in 1995; currently there are 40 (231 private schools)



Mandate

Charter schools are autonomous, non profit that provide basic education in a different or enhanced way, follow Alberta programs of study and have a focus not already offered by the board of the authority in which the public charter school is located.



Relationship

- The relationship between public, Catholic & charter Schools in Alberta

Opportunities for:

- collaboration (e.g. extracurricular)
- partnership (e.g. transportation)

Charter schools

25(1) The Minister may issue a charter to establish a charter school in accordance with the regulations if the Minister is of the opinion that the program to be offered by the charter school

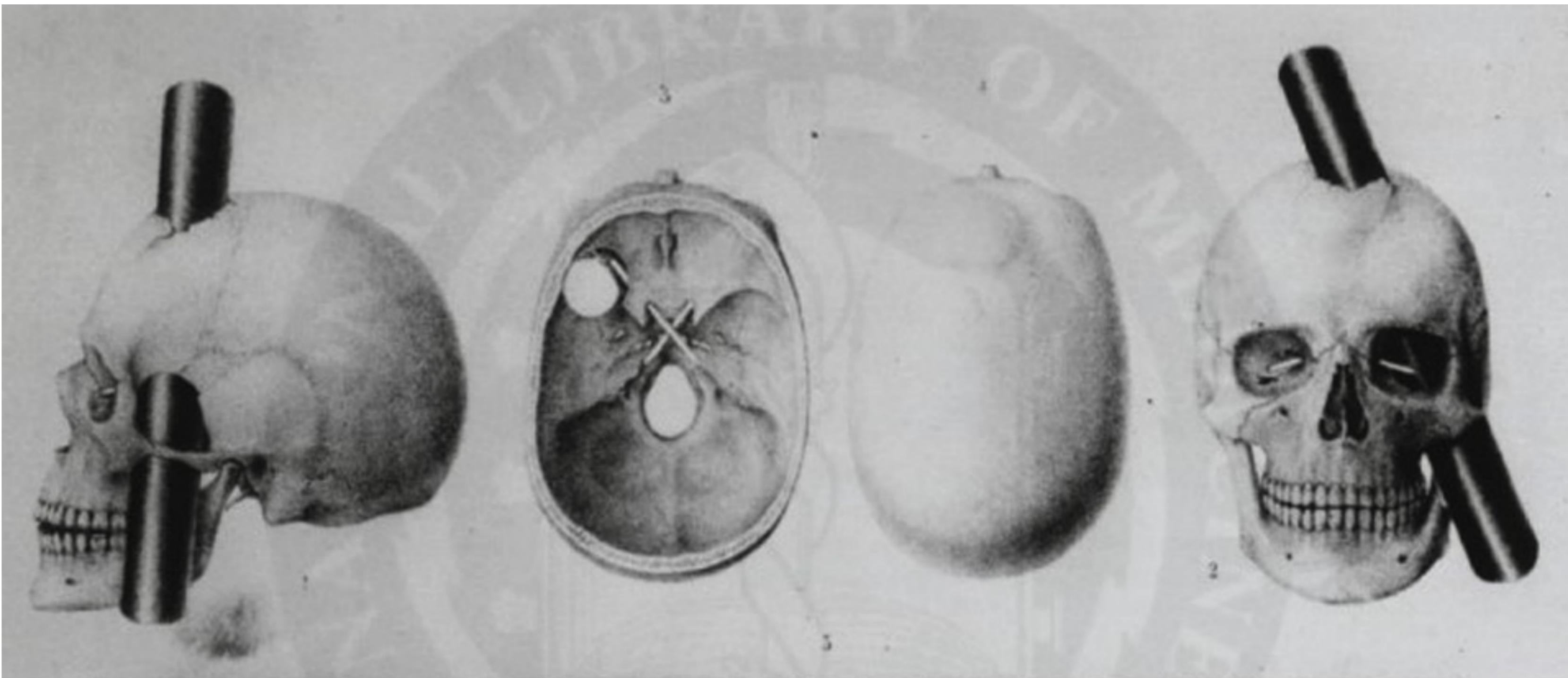
- focuses on
 - a learning style, a teaching style, approach or philosophy or pedagogy that is not already being offered by a board of a public or separate school division or Francophone regional authority operating within the geographic area in which the charter school will be located, or
 - vocation-based education,
- has the potential to improve student learning outcomes,
- demonstrates collaboration or engagement with a post-secondary institution or a school division, and
- has the potential to provide improvements to the education system as a whole and to enhance education research and innovation in Alberta.

**New Humble Community
School: Agricultural Literacy,
Experiential Learning, Land
Stewardship**



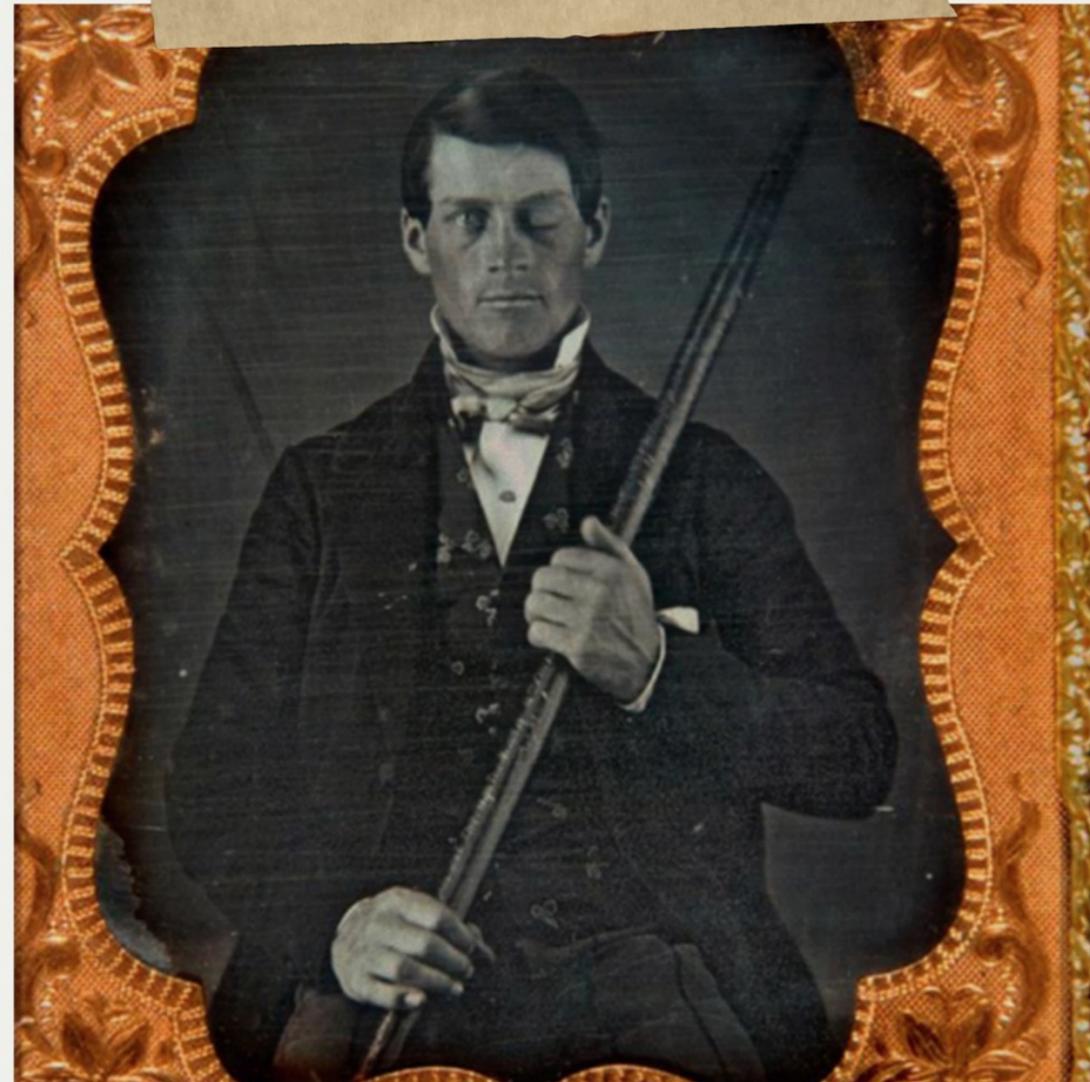
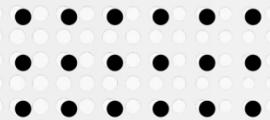


New Humble Community School: Agricultural Literacy, Experiential Learning, Land Stewardship



<https://www.mcgill.ca/oss/article/history/living-half-brain-phineas-gage>

Intrinsic Case Study



[HTTPS://HMS.HARVARD.EDU/NEWS/NEW-VIEW-PHINEAS-GAGE](https://hms.harvard.edu/news/new-view-phineas-gage)

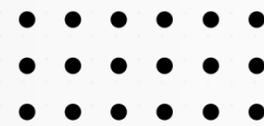


What can be learned about visionary leadership **from an intrinsic case** study (a rural public charter school)?

Visionary Leadership Defined

A leader's
image of the
future

Change goals



Ylimaki, R. M. (2006). Toward a new conceptualization of vision in the world of educational leaders: Cases of the visionary archetype. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 42(4), 620 - 651. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X06290642>

Research Findings

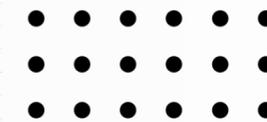
Data

Individual interviews with parents & community members



Data

Web-based survey of parents



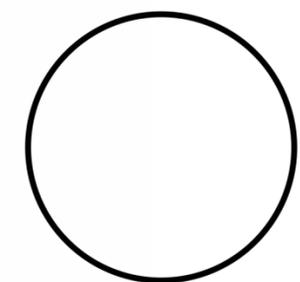
Agency

Manifestation of the capacity to act

Collective agency

Implications for system educational leaders:

- set the conditions for power sharing;
- managing process;
- identifying, mobilizing, and empowering others to make things happen



Collaboration

**Interdependence operationalized
for the public good**



Implications for system educational leaders:

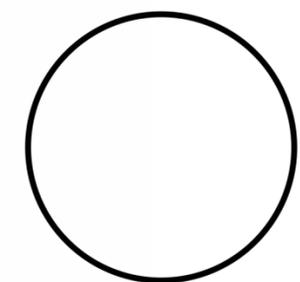
- requires mental agility; inclusion through “pulling” rather than “pushing” ideas together;
- facilitate connections to something larger; navigate multiplicity and ambiguity;
- cultivating a collaborative culture based on trust

Commitment

**Being dedicated to a cause,
activity, etc.**

Implications for system educational leaders:

- understanding community values;
- aligning community and school expectations;
- including stakeholders to create ownership;
- communicating policy, regulations;
- focusing on achievement of key outcomes



DATA DISCUSSION

1

How do agency, collaboration, and commitment play a role in your implementation /articulation /development of vision?

Do these findings align with your experiences as a system visionary leader? Have any of these findings challenged or differed from your experience?

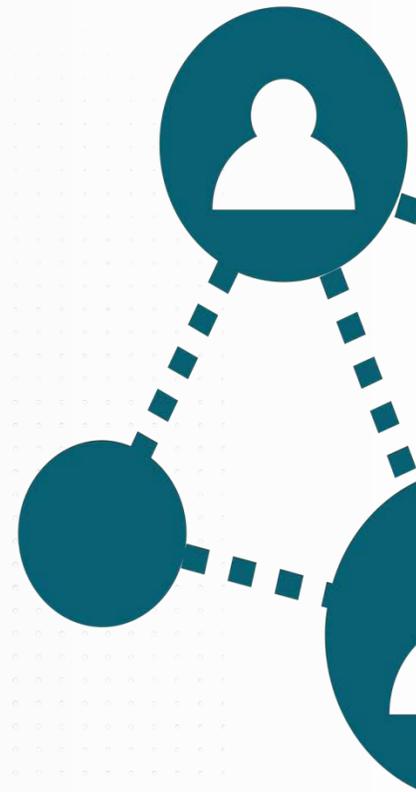
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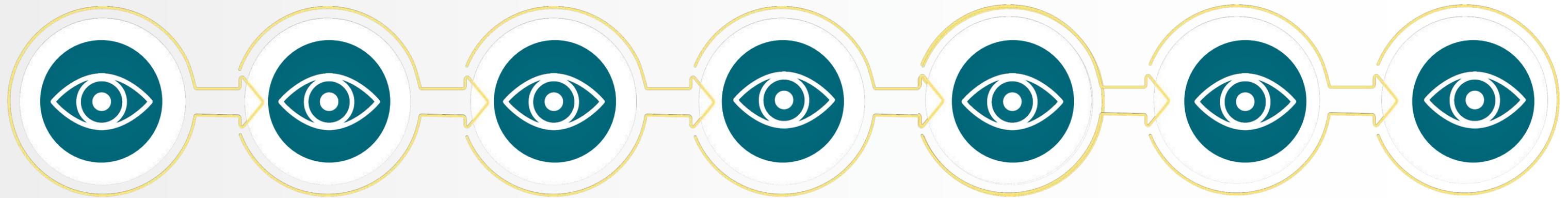
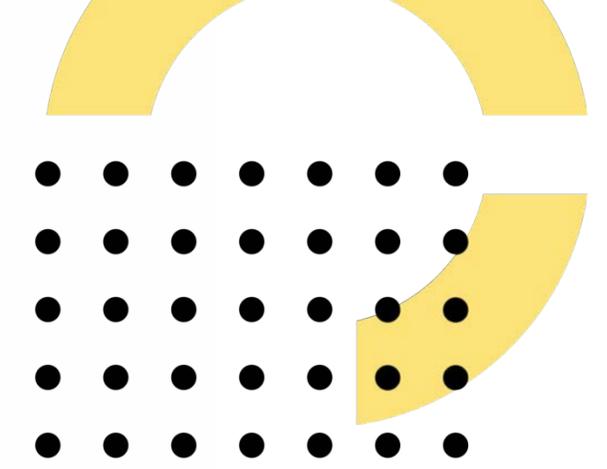
In what ways do these findings potentially inform or transform your thinking about visionary leadership? Do the findings point to actionable steps?

Strategic Thinking Framework: Mintzberg's "Seeing"

"Leadership cannot simply delegate management; instead of distinguishing managers from leaders, we should be seeing managers as leaders, and leadership as management practiced well"
(Mintzberg, 2009, p. 9)



Ways of Seeing



Ahead

Behind

Above

Below

Beside

Beyond

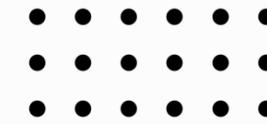
Through

Caldwell, B. J. (2019). Visionary leadership in the search for certainty. *Australian Educational Leader*, 41(3), 12 - 15.
Mintzberg, H. (1995). *The rise and fall of strategic planning*. Free Press.



Seeing Ahead

Anticipating future
challenges

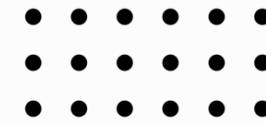


KEY QUESTIONS FOR LEADERS

- What external trends (e.g. demographics, policy, economy, technology) will impact education generally, and my schools' vision specifically, in the next 5-10 years?
- How can I help school leaders and stakeholders address the challenges and opportunities our students will face in the future? What AGENCY do we have with respect to these trends?
- What leadership skills are needed in the schools to manage upcoming change?
- What do I want to be known for in 20 years? What do I hope our schools are known for in 20 years?

Seeing Behind

Reviewing and
learning from the
past

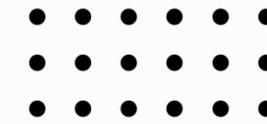


KEY QUESTIONS FOR LEADERS

- What lessons from my schools' or my school authority's history should inform our decisions?
- What past leadership decisions helped or hindered the realization of our vision?
- What values or traditions from the past resonate with my school community? How should they be included? How should they evolve?
- What COMMITMENTS do I need to be aware of? Which ones are negotiable/non-negotiable?

Seeing Above

Understanding the 'big picture'

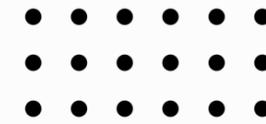


KEY QUESTIONS FOR LEADERS

- How does the vision in my schools and/or the vision in my school authority align with broader societal and local community needs?
- What external forces (e.g. government, industry, social organizations like parent groups) influence our ability to realize our vision?
- To what extent is a focus on day-to-day operations resulting in our missing larger strategic shifts that we could/should make?

Seeing Below

**Understanding
operational
realities**

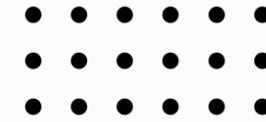


KEY QUESTIONS FOR LEADERS

- What are the needs, interests, motivations, and aspirations of the teachers, students, parents, and community stakeholders? Will COLLABORATION work to unify/activate the vision?
- How does our vision (school and school authority) show up in the daily operations and experiences involving students, teachers, staff, and families?
- Are there gaps between what we say we value and how our school or school authority operates?
- What meaningful actions can be taken to reinforce our vision as something that serves as a guide for the decisions we make?

Seeing Beside

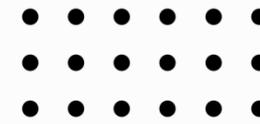
**Networking
professional
knowledge**



KEY QUESTIONS FOR LEADERS

- Do I look beyond my own school authority to advance my thinking?
- Who is in my network, and how are they helping me conceptualize and activate our vision?
- What structures and/or supports are available or missing, and how can system educational leaders address this?
- Who are the best sources for advancing my professional knowledge?
- How can I COLLABORATE with schools/school authorities outside of my own?

Seeing Beyond



**Seeking out practice
beyond the field of
education**

KEY QUESTIONS FOR LEADERS

- What can other professional fields help me understand about the questions I have?
- Are there common challenges that professions or other fields share?
- In my problem solving and visionary decision making, am I paying attention to innovation in other fields?
- When I look at the books on my shelf, what kind of disciplinary range do the titles represent?

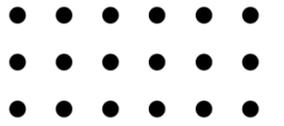
Seeing Through

**Being consistent
and persistent**

KEY QUESTIONS FOR LEADERS

- Are my own actions consistent with the long-term vision that is set for my school authority?
- What strategies do I use to persist with the vision when faced with uncertainty to ensure I am not derailed by short-term pressures?
- How do I continue to build commitment in others when faced with diverse, competing perspectives?
- When should I NOT persist with our vision?
- When do I NOT have AGENCY?

Reflect & Connect



WHICH OF THESE 'WAYS OF SEEING' DO YOU NATURALLY FOCUS ON? HOW DOES THIS IMPACT YOUR ABILITY TO BE A VISIONARY LEADER?



WHEN YOU REFLECT ON YOUR EDUCATION PLAN, IS THERE EVIDENCE OF MULTIPLE 'WAYS OF SEEING'? HOW DOES THIS IMPACT YOUR SCHOOL AUTHORITY'S ABILITY TO IMPLEMENT AN EDUCATIONAL VISION?



In what ways can this framework serve as an orienting device in your own future work, or as a tool for school leaders, school council, etc.?



“There is no more powerful engine driving an organization toward excellence and long-range success than an attractive, worthwhile vision of the future, widely shared”

(Nanus, 1992, p. 3).

“SHARED ROOTS LIVE LONGER.”

From “The Aspen Grove” (p. 17) in Mark Nepo’s *More Together Than Alone: Discovering the Power and Spirit of Community in Our Lives and in the World* (2018).

THANK YOU!

