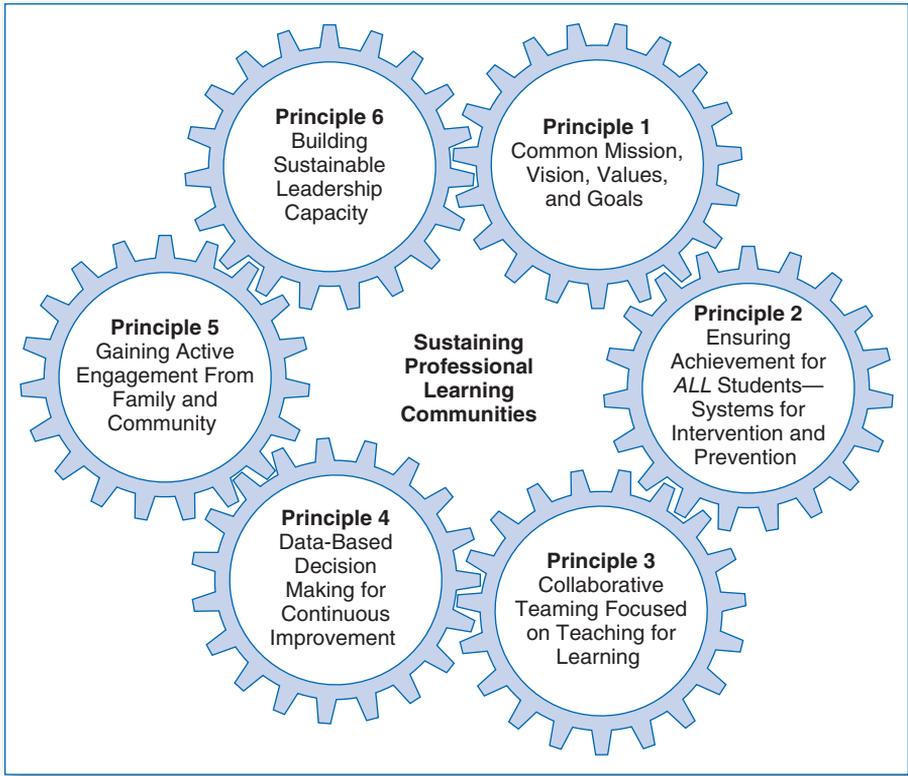


**Figure 1.3** FNO Principles as a System



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## Case Story 1

### Maintaining a Collaborative Learning Community While Introducing Teacher Evaluation and Merit Pay

In 2012, Fort Wayne Community Schools (FWCS) in Indiana decided to take on the challenge of piloting the state’s forthcoming teacher evaluation system, called RISE. Both the risks and rewards have been great. Due to several key factors, the district has succeeded in navigating some treacherous waters and retains the collaborative culture they built over the past decade.

## Laying the Ground for Collaboration

About six years ago, the district set out to build a collaborative community to support the “Three Ps” of “Precision, Personalization, and Professional Community in pursuing their Moral Purpose” (Fullan, 2001a). The district then came into contact with the “Six Principles that Guide Student Achievement in High-Performing Schools” (Blankstein, 2004, 2010), and they did a beta test in the six schools that volunteered to begin the work in what was called the “Courageous Leadership Academy.”

The process they used involved networking those six schools together and using a new construct for advancing conversations within and across the schools. For example, teacher-leader teams discussed good instruction and how to recognize it when it was present. At the end of each meeting, the leadership teams created “reentry plans,” which allowed them to bring the process back to the schools. This expanded the collaboration and excitement for the initiative.

Based on the outcomes of these six schools, FWCS leaders decided to use the process and the Academy with all of their 51 schools. The entire district now uses the same language to describe success in detail, quickly evaluate it, and make adjustments based on that evaluation. Moreover, they now have structures and systems for quickly sharing best practices across the district and making those practices the norm. This can range from simple tactics practiced by a teacher to keep students engaged throughout the day to the more complex process of establishing a collaborative work environment for teachers. FWCS recognized long ago the value of daily collaboration, and they collectively established time for this within the teachers’ workday.

The environmental changes made in FWCS were rooted in its strong moral purpose to “educate all students to high standards.” With a clear focal point set by Superintendent Dr. Wendy Robinson in 2003, staff members knew the direction in which they should head. Trust built as the school board established a clear mission, a strong vision, and three key goals aligning all efforts from the boardroom to the classroom. With the development of a Balanced Scorecard, there was and is now transparency of district activity and achievement with the community.

Trust, collaboration, and communication are at an all-time high in this district, which is on its way to making Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) for the third time in as many years, although for this diverse district this requires achieving success levels in 37 categories. One of the biggest challenges to come, and now listed as a top agenda item for the district, is the introduction of a new teacher evaluation system and corresponding pay for performance.

## The Challenge

The teacher evaluation in Indiana is similar to the one that is being introduced in most states in America. It calls for observable performance measures and a student

data rating. Next year, pay for performance will also be attached to the evaluations. As Project Manager Laura Cain notes, “We have built our common language, collaboration, and cohesion these past few years. We need to ensure that we continue this culture of collaboration that allows teachers to help each other get better. We have an amazing teacher workforce that is having conversations about children and student achievement every day. That collaborative culture is a big part of why we had consistent growth in student achievement” (personal communication, 2012). As new teachers and administrators enter the system, this becomes an even greater challenge. Here are some of the strategies the district is using:

- **Move toward the danger.** Fort Wayne had the option to take on this teacher evaluation pilot or duck. Consistent with their district leaders’ disposition, they decided to take the lead instead of waiting for the new systems to be foisted on them. In this way, they started a year earlier, determined the extent and nature of the challenges, and shaped the final evaluation program to be implemented next year throughout the state.

- **Maintain trust by communicating fully and transparently.** The trust built over the years and described briefly above has been maintained by real-time sharing by the district leadership with all staff any information from the Department of Education (DOE). “This is the reality of our world now. There is competition of choice externally. So we must collaborate internally,” Dr. Robinson told her staff (personal communication, 2012). The teacher-leader teams have been one mechanism for communicating and processing complex issues like teacher evaluation.

- **Focus on the work.** Fort Wayne planned its introduction of the new evaluation program by working through the particulars in advance of it affecting anyone’s salary. Teacher contracts were already signed and would not be affected in any way for more than a year prior to beginning the pilot. As a result, everyone knew they were able to focus on the work—not the conflict that might arise were they to “go live” with a new system in a way that could affect salaries. As a result, the focus was on success for everyone, and how that could be obtained.

- **Rename, reframe, and own the initiative.** Many evaluation systems coming from the state are seen as onerous and are indeed divisive. This district has as its ethos this statement: “We did it the Fort Wayne Way.” Consistent with this, they renamed the challenge and what it meant in terms that made sense for them. “We don’t have a choice as to whether we will have teacher evaluation,” Laura Cain said to a group of teacher leaders and their principals, “but we can decide whether we are going to let it tear us apart” (personal communication, 2012). In addition, terms like Student Learning Objective (SLO) were seen as negative and renamed “Goals of student achievement.”

- **Meet new demands with support.** FWCS collectively decided that 70% of the principals' time would be spent on instruction. To accomplish this, the systems and constructs mentioned above became supports focused on helping reorganize people's time and the principals' effectiveness. The district also brought in instructional coaches to support teachers' professional growth.

- **Create consistent instructional processes.** As noted, FWCS uses a support system that establishes principals as instructional leaders. Starting the first day of school, the process includes frequent and quick classroom visits by principals to provide immediate feedback to teachers, as well as longer visits that are used to further provide support to teachers to improve their instruction. Throughout the year, teachers are given written and oral feedback from their principal to become better educators. The system is considered a support system and not a final evaluation until the end of the year. This work began in the district's eleven schools that piloted reform initiative and was later used in other schools as part of FWCS' participation in the teacher evaluation pilot. This gave FWCS a two-year head start on establishing a system that favors support and collaboration instead of a punitive evaluation process.

- **Engage staff formally and continuously.** Sessions with teacher leaders focused on this new priority, and surveys were used prior, during, and after the yearlong pilot. Teachers reported both positive aspects of the new evaluation and things that need to be changed. The district continues to work collaboratively to make this program successful for all their staff.

*Source:* Laura Cain, Dan Bickman, and Wendy Robinson, personal communication, 2012.

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## Moving Forward

As this chapter emphasizes, failure simply cannot be an option as we work to guide all students through the challenges of the 21st century. Moreover, there are ways to succeed even in the toughest of times. As the Chilean disaster points out, it begins with an “inside-out” approach rooted in your core purpose. From there, the lead team gets in synch on processes to support collective teacher efficacy to sustain student success. In Chapter 2, courageous leadership is further defined and serves as the foundation for the rest of the work to be done to exemplify Failure Is Not an Option.