

Building Professionalism in ECE: A LEADERSHIP ROADMAP



Welcome to the Map: A Visual Guide to Leadership That Lifts

THIS IS YOUR INVITATION TO LEAD DIFFERENTLY. LET'S FIND YOUR PLACE ON THE MAP.



This system map represents a real-world problem in early childhood education: *why educators walk away*.

But instead of stopping at the problem, this map points us toward solutions. Ones rooted in leadership, clarity, and shared vision.

Each section of the map reflects a common leadership challenge in early childhood education, alongside the impact it can have and the opportunities we have to lead differently. By naming these patterns, we create space to grow, adapt, and build stronger, more intentional programs together.

Explore this extended presentation to see the full story behind the visuals, including questions you can reflect on in your own program.

START

1

Keys Without a Map

*Navigating Leadership
With Gaps in Support*



Congrats
YOU'RE A LEADER!

Many early childhood leaders step into their roles excited and ready to make a difference...

- Only to find themselves overwhelmed, undertrained, and unsure where to turn.
- They're handed the keys to a school (sometimes literally) but no map for how to lead it.
- Mentorship is inconsistent.
- Systems are unclear.
- Expectations may or may not exist.

START

1

Keys Without a Map

*Navigating Leadership
With Gaps in Support*

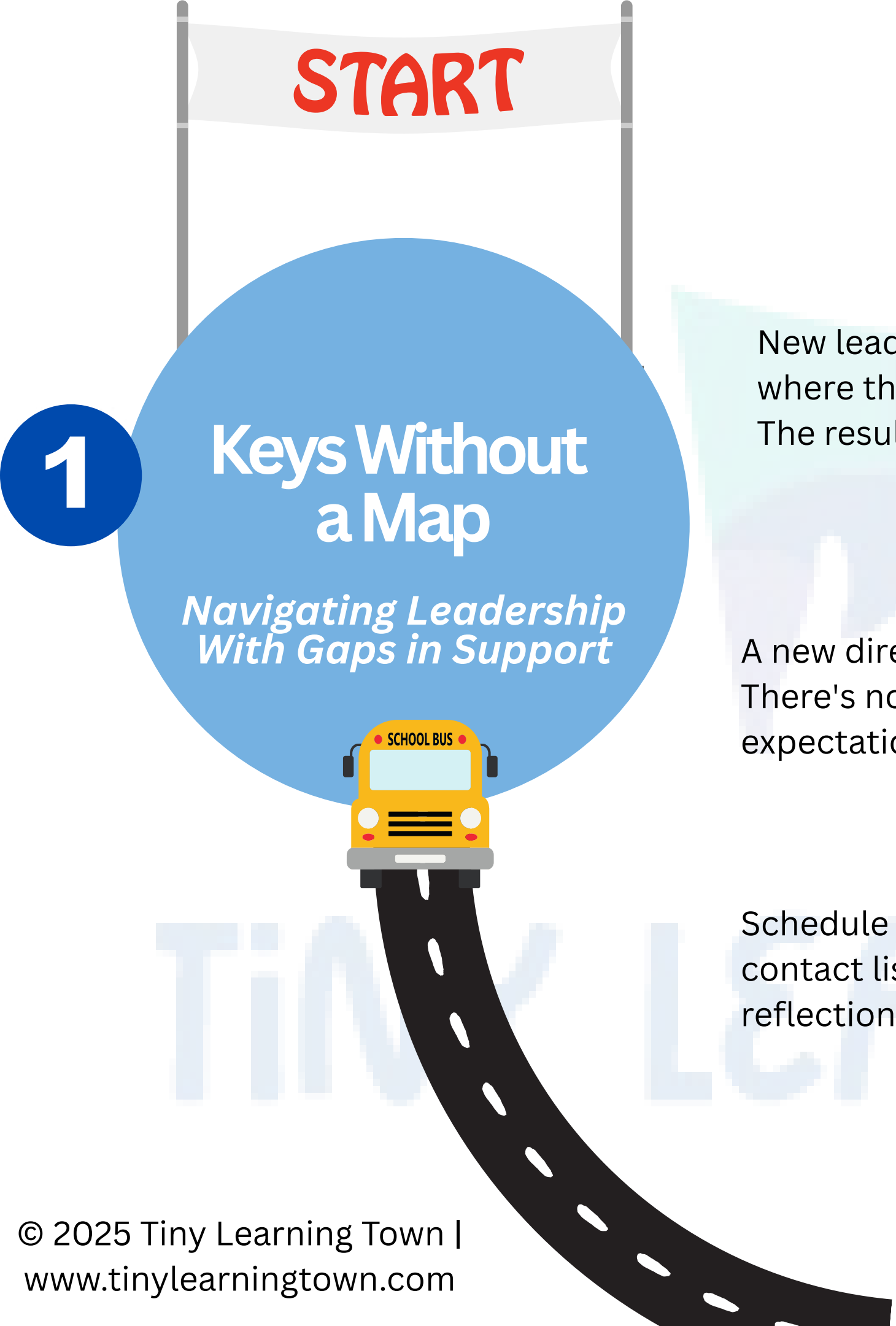


Key Points

When leaders step into roles without consistent guidance or systems in place, it creates more than just stress, it creates ripple effects across the entire program.

These key points highlight the real-world impact of unsupported leadership and why it's so critical to address.

TINY LEARNING TOWN



START

1

Keys Without a Map

Navigating Leadership With Gaps in Support

Sink or Swim Culture

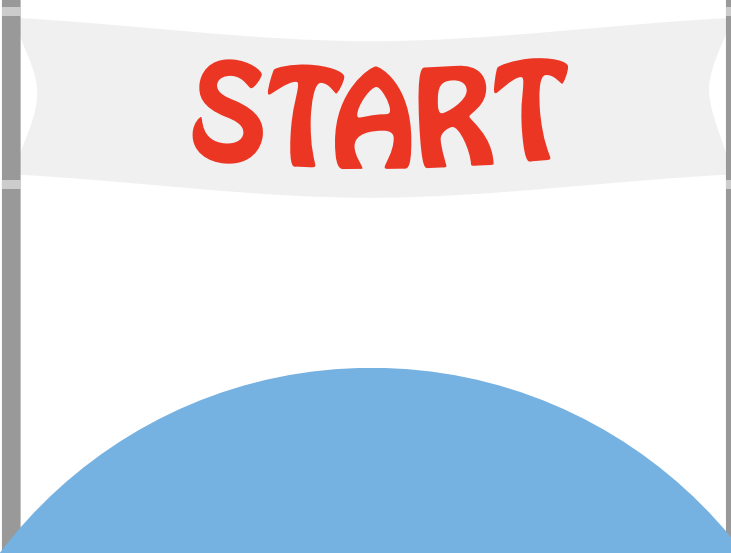
New leaders are often expected to “figure it out” on their own, especially in programs where the outgoing leader left abruptly or under tension. The result? Survival mode leadership, reactive decision-making, and mixed messages to staff.

✗ *What not to do:*

A new director is handed the office keys and told, “You’ll figure it out, it’s not that hard.” There’s no transition meeting, no documentation, and no introduction to licensing expectations. Within weeks, they’re overwhelmed and reactive, losing credibility with the staff.

✓ *What to do:*

Schedule a proper handoff. Provide a transition binder with licensing info, staff notes, and contact lists. Pair the new leader with a mentor for the first 90 days. Normalize check-ins and reflection time, not just crisis management.

A grey banner with the word "START" in red, hanging from a pole.

START

1

Keys Without a Map

*Navigating Leadership
With Gaps in Support*



Pressure Without Preparation

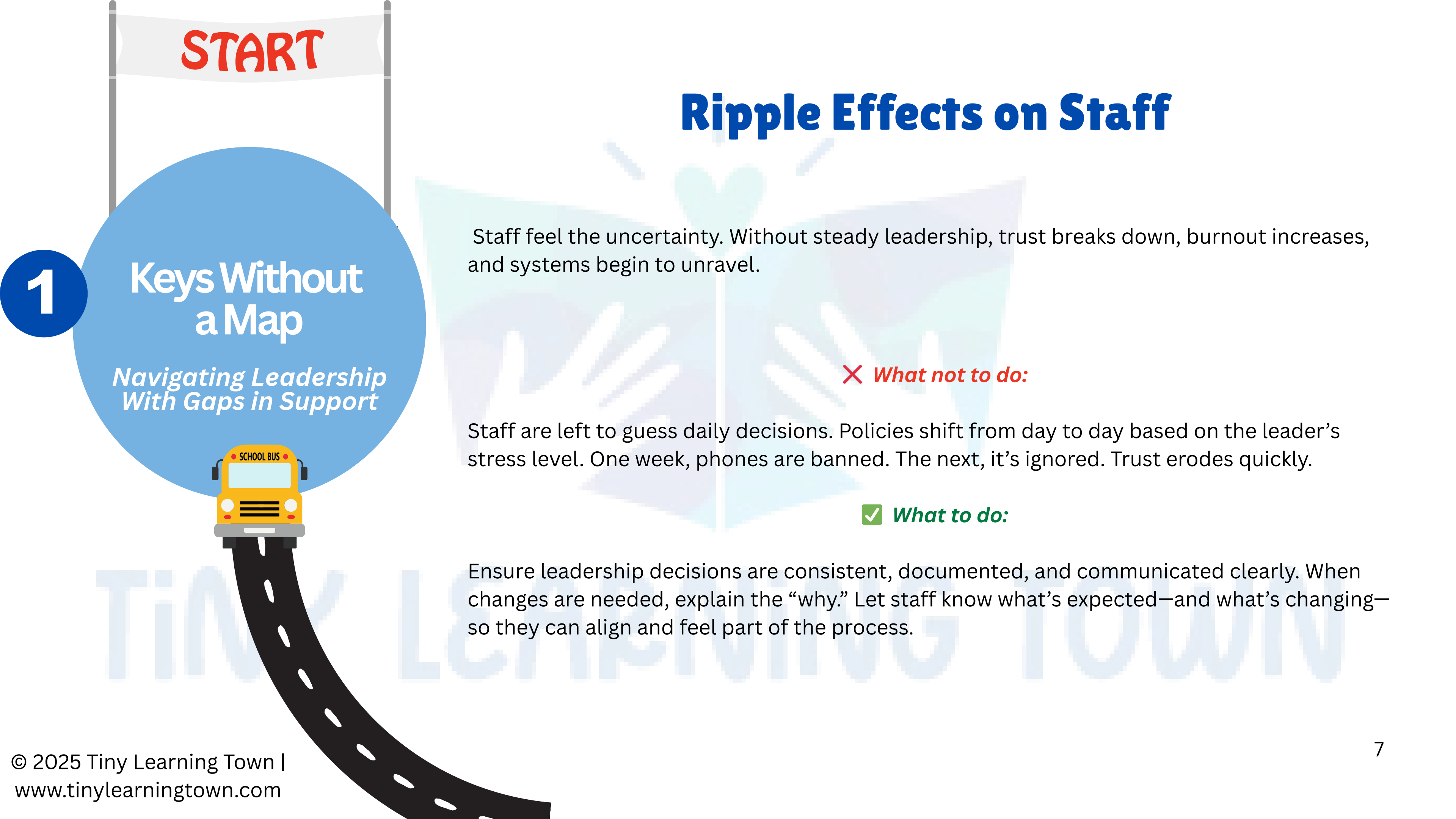
When a leader doesn't fully understand how to navigate licensing, support staff personalities, or balance family relationships, that stress trickles down into the classroom.

✗ *What not to do:*

A leader is expected to handle licensing, family issues, staff drama, and classroom coverage—without guidance or training. They're forced to Google their way through regulatory requirements.

✓ *What to do:*

Create a leadership onboarding plan. Break down responsibilities into manageable chunks and provide training in time management, conflict resolution, and documentation systems. Invite them to shadow experienced admins and debrief what they learn.



START

1

Keys Without a Map

Navigating Leadership With Gaps in Support

Ripple Effects on Staff

Staff feel the uncertainty. Without steady leadership, trust breaks down, burnout increases, and systems begin to unravel.

✗ *What not to do:*

Staff are left to guess daily decisions. Policies shift from day to day based on the leader's stress level. One week, phones are banned. The next, it's ignored. Trust erodes quickly.

✓ *What to do:*

Ensure leadership decisions are consistent, documented, and communicated clearly. When changes are needed, explain the "why." Let staff know what's expected—and what's changing—so they can align and feel part of the process.

START

1

Keys Without a Map

Navigating Leadership With Gaps in Support



The Narrative That Follows

"She's not a good leader."

"He just doesn't know what he's doing."

...When in reality, they were never given a foundation to stand on.

✗ **What not to do:**

Staff start whispering: "She's in over her head." Rumors and frustrations grow because the leader seems unsure and lacks backup. The team goes into survival mode.

✓ **What to do:**

Shift the narrative by offering public praise for leadership efforts, even small wins. Say, "We're all still learning, but I appreciate how you handled that tough conversation." Model grace and growth. Ask: "What support do you need from me this week?"

START

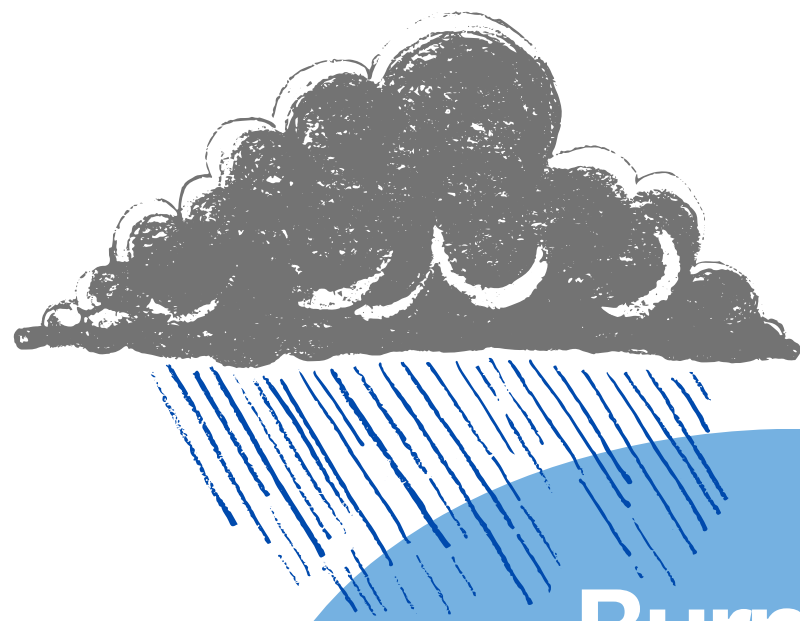
1

Keys Without a Map

*Navigating Leadership
With Gaps in Support*



**Before we talk about
professional identity, we have
to acknowledge this:
leadership without support
doesn't just hurt the leader it
impacts the entire tone of the
school.**



2

Burnout Bay

Educator challenges & system strain



Educator Challenges & System Strain

Burnout Bay is where:

- We see the weight of unsustainable systems press down hardest on our educators.
- This isn't just about "tired teachers."
- It's about good teachers running on empty, emotionally and physically, because the structures meant to support them are either broken or missing entirely.
- Burnout doesn't start in the classroom, it starts in leadership, systems, and culture.

TINY LEARNING TOWN

Leadership Isn't a Title

It's a Culture Shift

We have the power to transform the field, one leader, one choice, one culture shift at a time.

2

Burnout Bay

Educator challenges & system strain



When leadership is missing:

- X Educator burnout
- X Constant turnover
- X Staff feel unseen, unheard
- X Programs held together with "duct tape"

What's needed:

- ✓ Leadership with intention
- ✓ Personalized support
- ✓ A culture of professionalism
- ✓ A stable foundation

Unclear Roles, Unrealistic Expectations

2 Burnout Bay

Educator challenges & system strain



Educators are asked to be:

- Caregivers,
 - Behavior specialists,
 - family liaisons,
 - therapists,
 - and more
- often with little clarity or support.

 **Example:** A teacher spends 45 minutes de-escalating a child, then gets scolded for not finishing the bulletin board.

 **What helps:** Clear role definitions, realistic goals, and supportive supervision.

 **What hurts:** Vague expectations, “do it all” culture.

Lack of Planning Time = Constant Catch-Up



2

Burnout Bay

Educator challenges & system strain



Teachers rarely have protected time to prep, reflect, or collaborate. Everything is reactive.

🔄 **Example:** They clock in and immediately begin a 10-hour shift with no pause to review IEPs or prep materials.

✅ **What helps:** Built-in non-contact time and collaborative planning blocks.

❌ **What hurts:** Expecting teachers to plan on their own time without pay or recognition.

TINY LEARNING TOWN

Behavior Escalation Without Support



2

Burnout Bay

Educator challenges & system strain



Challenging behaviors increase when staff feel isolated or unsupported in managing them.

🔄 **Example:** A teacher requests support for a child multiple times before leadership steps in. By then, the relationship is already damaged.

✅ **What helps:** Responsive behavior support plans and consistent backup.

❌ **What hurts:** Blaming teachers for challenges without giving them tools.

TINY LEARNING TOWN

"Self-Care" Culture Without Structural Change

2 Burnout Bay

Educator challenges & system strain



Educators are told to take bubble baths while still covering 3 classrooms.

🔄 **Example:** PD Day includes a meditation session, but the schedule is still overloaded and sub coverage is scarce.

✅ **What helps:** Systemic improvements that reduce stressors.

❌ **What hurts:** Wellness lip service without meaningful change.

TINY LEARNING TOWN

Reflection Question

2

Burnout Bay

Educator challenges & system strain

Where in your program are educators being asked to give more... without receiving more?



TINY LEARNING TOWN

Reflection

2

Burnout Bay

Educator challenges & system strain



After acknowledging the exhaustion that so many educators face, the next step is to shift the lens, not just on the system, but on ourselves.

Let's journey toward Perspective Peak, where we examine how our own beliefs, experiences, and leadership habits shape the culture around us.

TINY LEARNING TOWN

Leadership Reflection & Mindset Shifts

Perspective Peak is:

- The moment we pause and look back
- Not just at our team, but at ourselves.

This stop on the map:

- Challenges us to examine how our mindset
- Habits
- And assumptions influence the culture we're trying to build.

We often ask teachers to self-reflect...
But how often do leaders do the same?

Leadership is:

- Not just about setting expectations
- It's about recognizing the impact of our tone
- Our timing
- Our transparency

3

Perspective Peak

Shift leadership mindset



LEADERSHIP STARTS WITH MINDSET

We're not just filling slots—we're building futures.

3

Perspective Peak

*Shift leadership
mindset*



🚫 Words That Undermine Professionalism

- "Just make it through the day."
- "Just survive the week"
- "She's just a floater."

Leadership Lessons

- You're not a friend, you're a leader.
- Leadership is visible words carry weight.
- We can't wait for people to magically show up with the mindset we want.
- Boundaries create safety and trust.
- Mindset shift = culture shift.
- Poor leadership style = Damage.
- People rise when leadership believes the role is worth rising for.

Mirror Moments: Leadership Starts With You

3

Perspective Peak

*Shift leadership
mindset*



If we want to see professionalism, empathy, and teamwork... we have to model those things first.

🔄 **Example:** When a teacher misses a deadline, do you ask what support they need or jump to assumptions?

✅ **What helps:** Self-awareness, calm check-ins, and modeling accountability.

❌ **What hurts:** Leading with blame or shame before listening.

Bias & Assumptions Shape How We Lead

3

Perspective Peak

Shift leadership mindset



Sometimes we hold unspoken biases about certain staff or roles especially if we were once in those roles ourselves.

🔄 **Example:** Assuming assistants aren't capable of contributing to planning just because that's not how it was when you started out.

✅ **What helps:** Acknowledging bias and opening space for all voices.

❌ **What hurts:** Letting old norms define current expectations.

Growth Requires Discomfort

3

Perspective Peak

Shift leadership mindset



Reflecting on your own leadership gaps isn't always easy but it's essential for real change.

🔄 **Example:** Realizing you may have unintentionally contributed to a toxic culture doesn't mean you're a bad leader, it means you're becoming a better one.

✅ **What helps:** Courageous reflection and willingness to evolve.

❌ **What hurts:** Defensiveness, denial, or blaming the team alone.

Reflection Question

3

Perspective Peak

Shift leadership mindset

What's one leadership habit you might need to unlearn to grow into the leader your team needs?



Reflection

3

Perspective Peak

Shift leadership mindset



Once we've looked inward and begun unpacking our own habits and assumptions, the next question becomes:

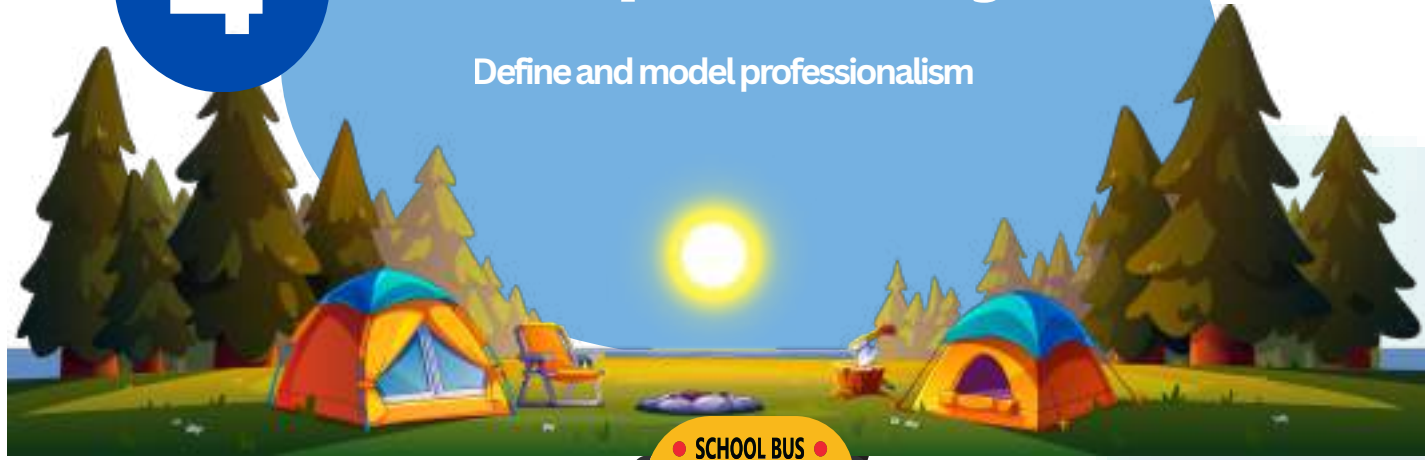
- What does it actually mean to be a professional in this space?
- How do we define it for others?

Let's head into Professional Pathways, where we explore identity, expectations, and shared standards.

4

Camp Clarity

Define and model professionalism



Where Expectations Meet Communication

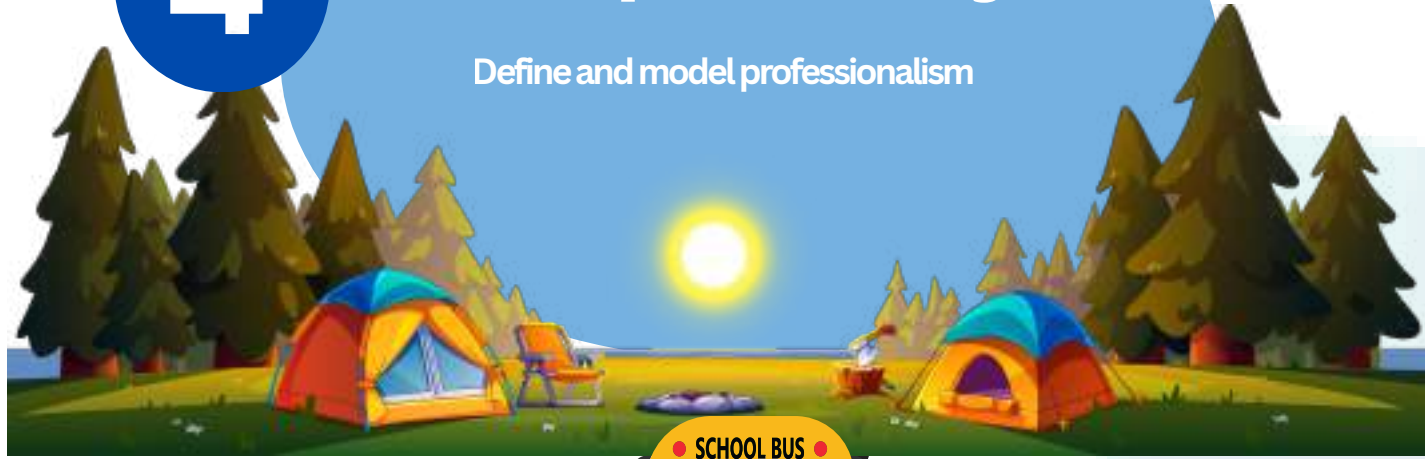
Camp Clarity represents the critical point in leadership where expectations, modeling, and accountability intersect. It's where your team begins to understand not just what is expected, but why it matters, and how it shows up in daily practice.

When expectations are vague, assumptions take over. When expectations are clearly defined and reinforced, alignment follows.

4

Camp Clarity

Define and model professionalism



What Professionalism LOOKS LIKE

A strong team starts with clear expectations.

Unspoken Expectations

- "I thought they knew..."
- "I assumed it was obvious..."
- "We talked about it once..."

Clear Expectations

- "We've defined this as a team."
- "It's written, revisited, and reinforced."
- Expectations are consistent not silent.

Team Definition of Professionalism

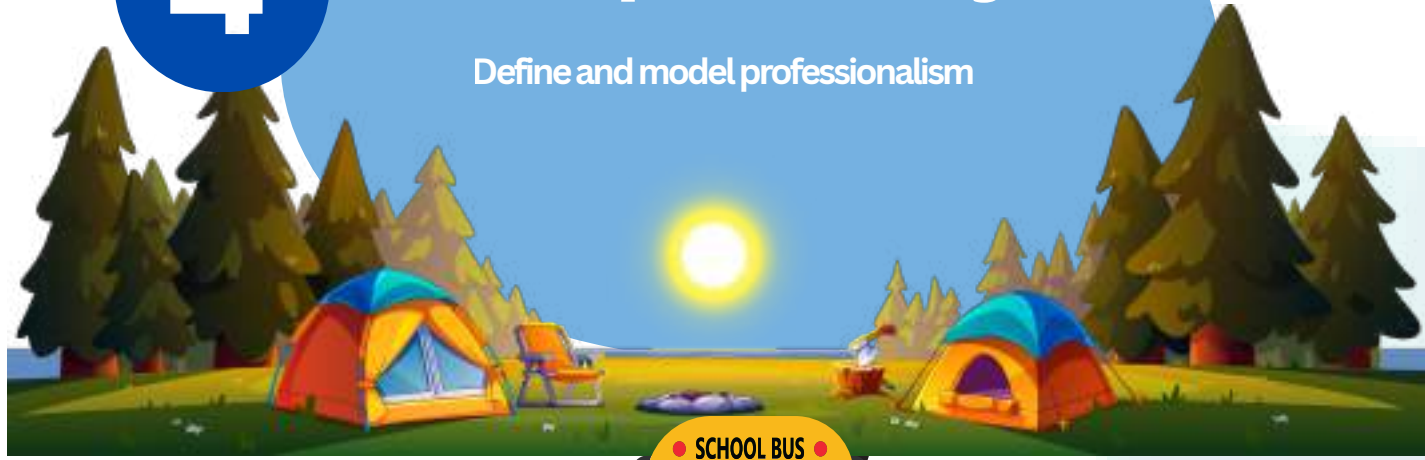
- Arriving early shows respect.
- Speaking up respectfully is valued.
- No gossip = more trust.
- Team collaboration.

Consistency builds culture. Shared standards build trust. 26

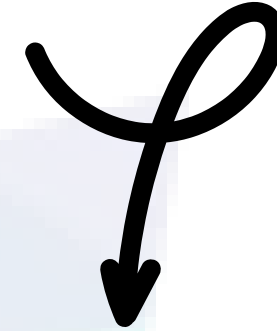
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Camp Clarity

Define and model professionalism



Undefined Expectations



Unspoken Frustration

What Not to Do:

Only mention rules when they're broken. Expect staff to "just know."

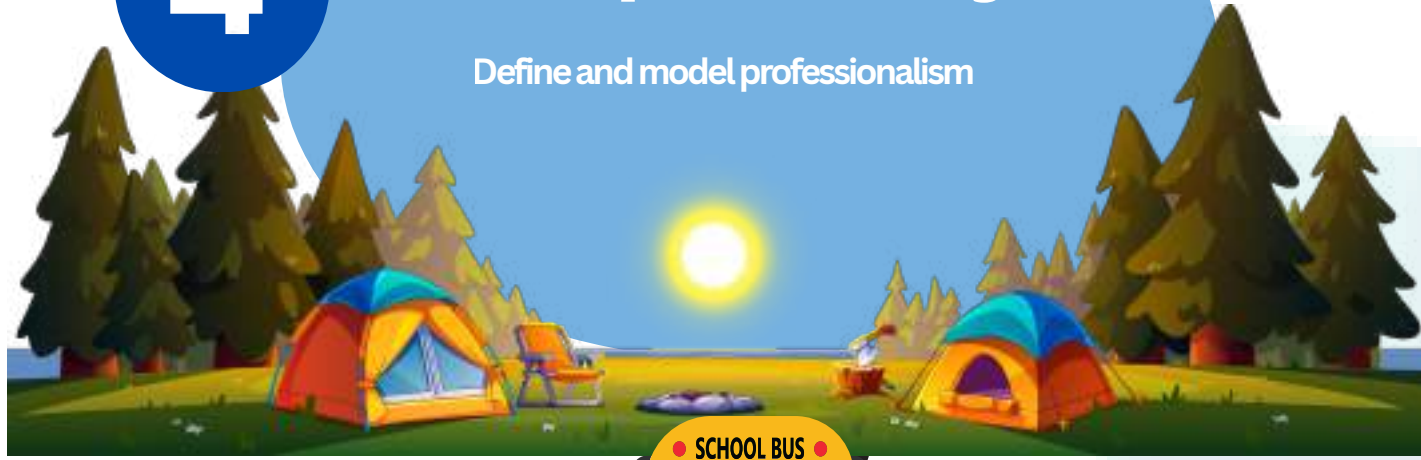
What to Do Instead:

Proactively state expectations. Use onboarding, staff meetings, and posted reminders to make norms clear and visible.

4

Camp Clarity

Define and model professionalism



Inconsistent Modeling

Staff Disengagement

What Not to Do:

Say “be respectful” but gossip about families or criticize teachers openly.

What to Do Instead:

Show what respect looks like, especially in moments of stress or disagreement.



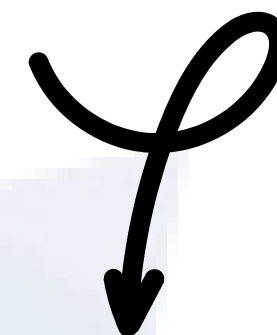
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Camp Clarity

Define and model professionalism



Vague Professionalism



Cultural Drift

What Not to Do:

Use “professionalism” as a buzzword without defining it. Let everyone interpret it their own way.

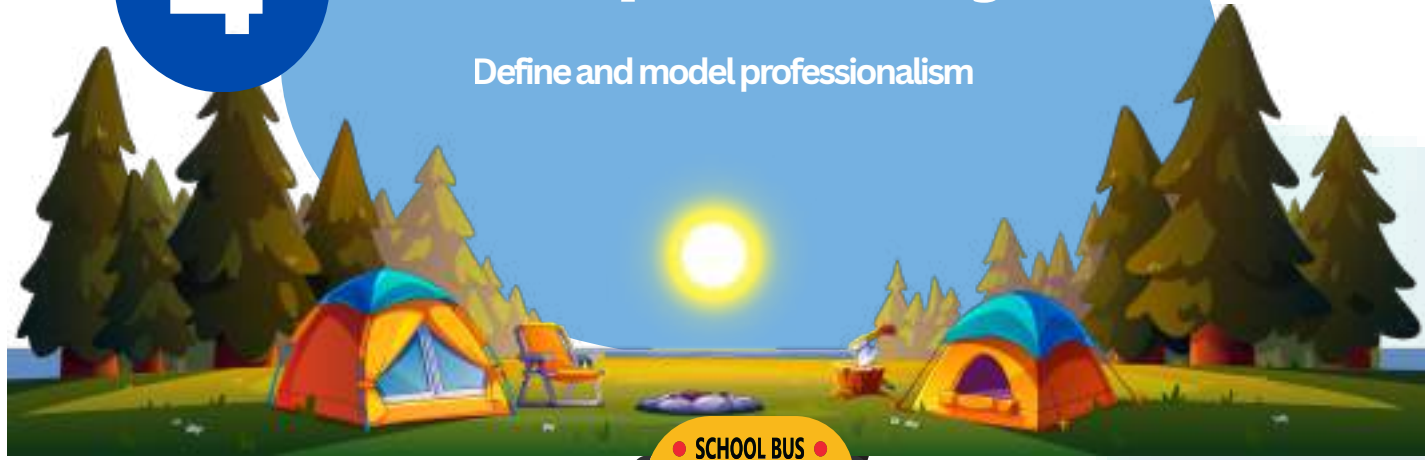
What to Do Instead:

Collaboratively define what professionalism looks like in your center. Post the list. Revisit it regularly.

4

Camp Clarity

Define and model professionalism



Reflection Question

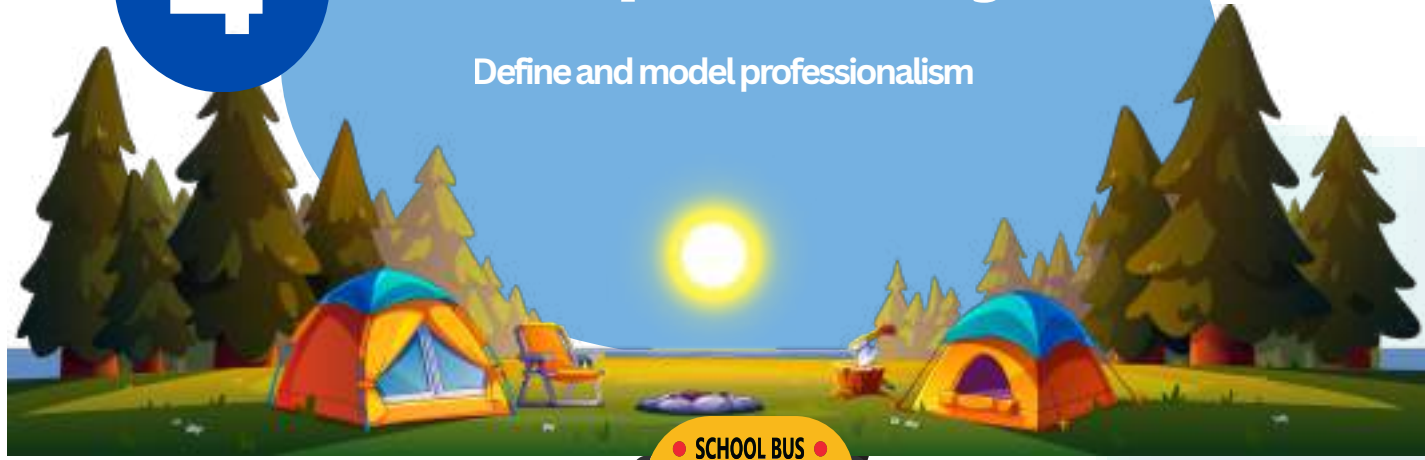
- How clear are your expectations?
- How often do you reinforce them through your own actions?

TINY LEARNING TOWN

4

Camp Clarity

Define and model professionalism



Reflection

When expectations are clear and shared, we create stability, but to truly transform our programs, we must go deeper: into how educators see themselves, their value, and their place in this profession.

That journey starts on the next path: Professional Identity.



Career Development and Opportunities

5

Growth Gardens

Mentorship & career development



Growth Gardens symbolizes:

- The places in our programs where educators can plant roots, be nurtured, and flourish.
- It reminds us that professional development isn't a one-day event, it's an ongoing, intentional process.
- Just like a garden, growth takes time, care, and the right conditions.
- When we invest in our staff's development, we cultivate confidence, purpose, and long-term commitment.

In strong gardens, teachers and administration don't just survive, they thrive.



5

Growth Gardens

Mentorship & career
development



Support Growth,

BUILD RETENTION

Every time you grow a teacher, you grow your program.

What Real Professional Development Looks Like

What It's NOT:

- ✗ One-size-fits-all
- ✗ Recycled trainings
- ✗ Icebreakers for the sake of it

What It IS:

- ✓ Tailored to team needs
- ✓ Ongoing & relevant
- ✓ Builds confidence & connection

Intentional PD isn't about what's required. It's about what's needed.

- Growth = Retention.
- Not just degrees, real-time support, mentorship, and coaching.
- Generic PD won't move your team forward.
- Intentional PD should meet actual needs not just check boxes.

Ask yourself:

- Where is my staff struggling?
- Does this training close that gap?
- Are we growing teachers or just filling time?
- Skip the icebreakers that don't connect.
- Build relevant connection, not just compliance.



Career Development Is More Than PD Hours

5

Growth Gardens

Mentorship & career
development



What to Avoid: Relying only on required trainings like First Aid or Mandated Reporter.

What to Do Instead: Offer personalized coaching, skill-based workshops, and leadership shadowing.

TINY LEARNING TOWN



5

Growth Gardens

Mentorship & career
development

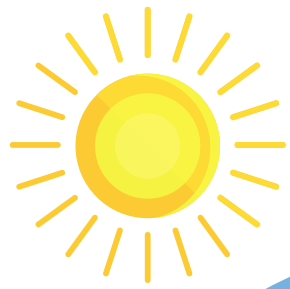


Growth = Retention

What to Avoid: Waiting until performance reviews to talk about goals.

What to Do Instead: Check in regularly, ask about aspirations, struggles, and what support they need next.

TINY LEARNING TOWN



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Growth Gardens

Mentorship & career
development

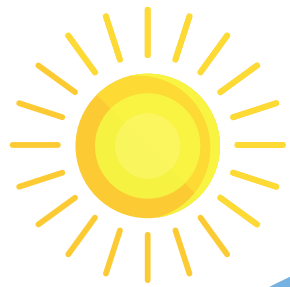


Purposeful and Intentional Training

What to Avoid: One-size-fits-all PD, especially during stressful times like classroom setup week.

What to Do Instead: Plan PD around real staff needs, classroom management struggles, family communication, or burnout recovery.

TINY LEARNING TOWN



5

Growth Gardens

Mentorship & career
development



Mentorship & Real-Time Support

What to Avoid: Expecting staff to figure things out alone.

What to Do Instead: Pair new staff with peer mentors and offer just-in-time coaching, not just evaluations.



5

Growth Gardens

Mentorship & career
development



Reflection Question

- What's one growth opportunity you wish you had earlier in your ECE journey?
- And how could you offer that to someone else now?



5

Growth Gardens

Mentorship & career
development



Reflection

When we cultivate growth, we don't just raise strong teachers, we grow future leaders. And leadership, as we'll see next, isn't limited to the title on your badge...

TINY LEARNING TOWN

Perspective, Vision, and Intentionality in Leadership

6

Leadership Lookout

Empower teachers as
leaders



Leadership Lookout is

- The place on the map where leaders rise above the daily chaos to see the bigger picture.
- It represents the ability to pause, reflect, and lead with intention instead of simply reacting to whatever's urgent.
- From this vantage point, you can spot both challenges and opportunities, before they escalate or disappear.
- It's where decisions aren't made in survival mode, but through clarity, consistency, and intention.

A healthy Leadership Lookout is not about perfection, it's about perspective. Leaders who make time to reflect on their values, communicate their vision, and build trust are more equipped to guide their programs with consistency and calm.

LEADERSHIP IS A MINDSET

Not everyone wants to be a director. But everyone can be a leader.

Leadership = ownership, voice, confidence.

Professionalism starts with trust, inclusion, and voice.

Are you inviting your team to lead or just asking them to follow?

Build leadership moments:

- Planning meetings
- Peer mentorship
- Decision-making spaces

When teachers feel like leaders, they act like leaders.

And that ripple effect changes everything.

6 Leadership Lookout

Empower teachers as leaders



Perspective Over Panic

6

Leadership Lookout

Empower teachers as
leaders



Strong leaders don't just react to what's loudest. They reflect on what matters most, and make space for that reflection even in the busiest seasons.

Effective leaders don't operate from constant urgency. They make space for reflection so their actions align with values, not just immediate fires.

How to Build This:

- Schedule non-negotiable reflection time weekly (even 15 mins to journal or review goals).
- Use a visual or digital leadership dashboard to track what matters most (not just what's loudest).
- Practice- pause before responding- take a breath, gather facts, then act.



Clarity in Vision

When your team knows where you're headed (and why), they're more likely to trust the journey. Your vision doesn't have to be grand it has to be clear.

When educators know the “why,” they’re more likely to invest in the “how.”

How to Build This:

- Craft a 1-sentence vision for your school or team and share it often.
- Use bulletin boards, email signatures, or staff meetings to reinforce that vision.
- When making decisions, say out loud: “This supports our vision because...”

Trust Is Built in the Quiet Moments

Daily leadership habits, like following up, keeping your word, listening deeply, and apologizing when needed are the real trust builders.

*Trust doesn't come from grand gestures.
It grows through consistency and authenticity.*

How to Build This:

- Follow up on what you say, small promises matter most. Stay Consistent.
- Say “I don’t know, but I’ll find out” when needed. It builds credibility.
- Acknowledge mistakes with grace and accountability, model what you expect from staff.

6

Leadership Lookout

Empower teachers as
leaders



Communication Anchors Culture

Leadership is not about broadcasting, it's about creating two-way communication loops. Leaders at the lookout don't just speak... they listen.

Communication isn't just logistics, it's how we create belonging and shared direction.

How to Build This:

- Set up 2-way feedback loops (anonymous forms, regular check-ins, open office hours).
- Replace generic emails with personalized praise or support.
- Don't just inform, involve. Ask for input in real-time decisions when possible.

6

Leadership Lookout

Empower teachers as leaders



Reflection Prompt

6

Leadership Lookout

Empower teachers as
leaders



- How do you currently create time and space to reflect as a leader?
- What messages (intentional or unintentional) do your daily actions send to your team?

TINY LEARNING TOWN



Reflection

When we empower educators as leaders, we stop asking them to follow and start inviting them to co-create.

Leadership isn't about control, it's about connection, clarity, and commitment.

- We've scanned the horizon.
- We've mapped the terrain.

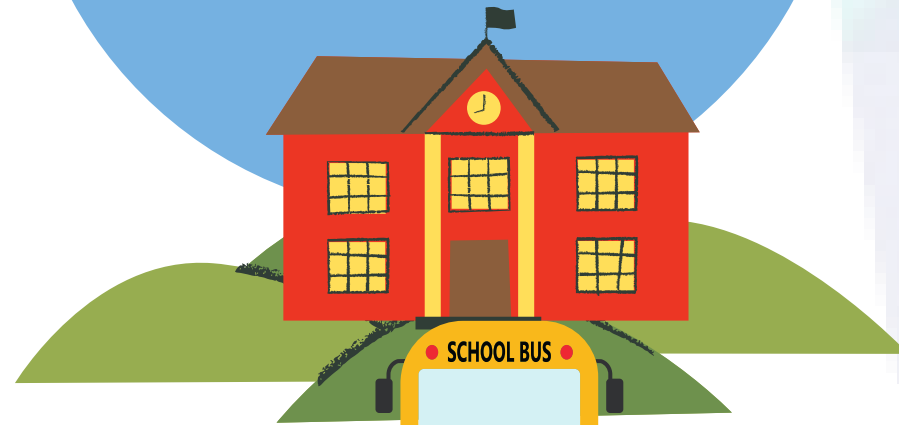
Now, we arrive at the destination ✨ A thriving school where leadership:

- Is shared
- Support is ongoing
- And professionalism becomes the foundation
- Not the afterthought

7

Leadership Landing

Destination: retention, stability, quality



Retention, Stability, and Quality

Leadership Landing is where the map leads when all parts of the journey come together.

Where intentional leadership:

- Creates a school culture that is cohesive
- Confident
- And sustainable

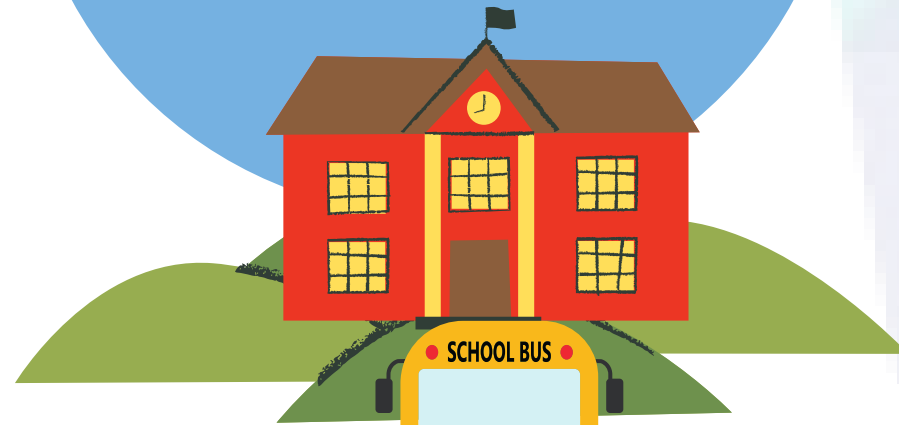
This is the destination where:

- Professionalism is the norm, not the exception.
- Teachers feel invested, heard, and empowered.
- Systems support (not stifle) growth.
- Turnover slows because people want to stay.
- We're no longer managing chaos, we're building legacy.

7

Leadership Landing

Destination: retention,
stability, quality



What Happens When We Invest in PROFESSIONALISM?

We don't just keep people, we elevate them!

We create:

- Schools where teachers see a future
- Leadership that feels empowering, not isolating
- Classrooms where adults feel grounded, equipped, and respected

✦ From chaos → consistency

✦ From burnout → belonging

✦ From “just a job” → a real profession

This is how we build a strong, stable ECE workforce. And it starts with us choosing to lead differently.

7

Leadership Landing

Destination: retention,
stability, quality



Retention Through Relationships

Staff stay when they feel connected, respected, and supported.



Tip:

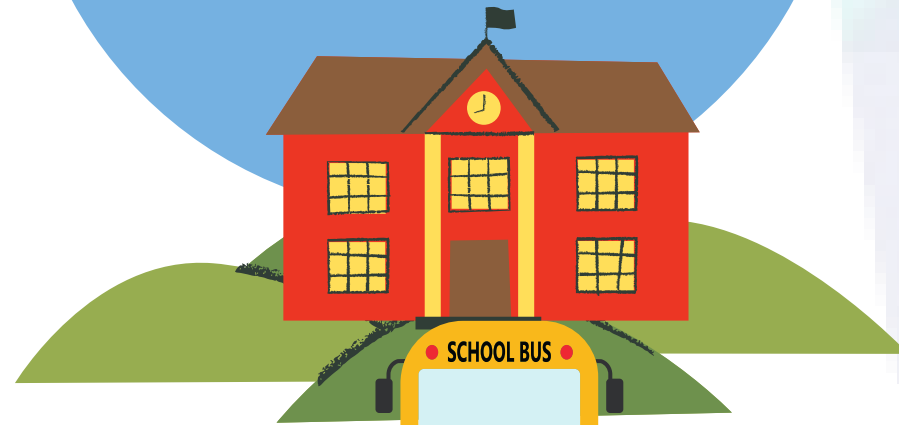
- *Invest in check-ins, feedback loops, and meaningful recognition.*

TINY LEARNING TOWN

7

Leadership Landing

Destination: retention,
stability, quality



Stability Through Structure

Clear systems create predictability, which builds trust.



Tip:

- *Use walkthroughs, shared calendars, and role clarity to reduce confusion.*

TINY LEARNING TOWN

7

Leadership Landing

Destination: retention,
stability, quality



Quality Through Consistency

A strong culture isn't about perfection, it's about alignment.



Tip:

- *Revisit expectations together and hold everyone (including leadership) accountable.*

TINY LEARNING TOWN

7

Leadership Landing

Destination: retention,
stability, quality



Leadership That Grows Leaders

When administrators lead with transparency and invite collaboration, teachers rise, because the culture makes space for them to do so.

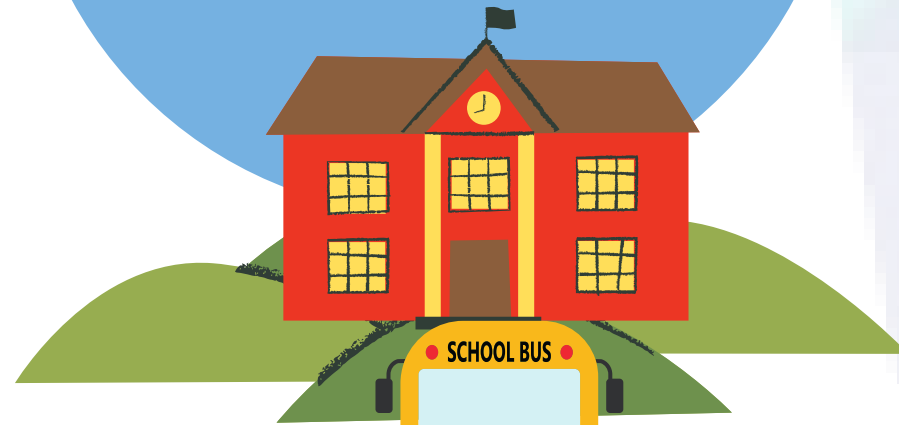
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Reflection Prompt

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Leadership Landing

Destination: retention,
stability, quality



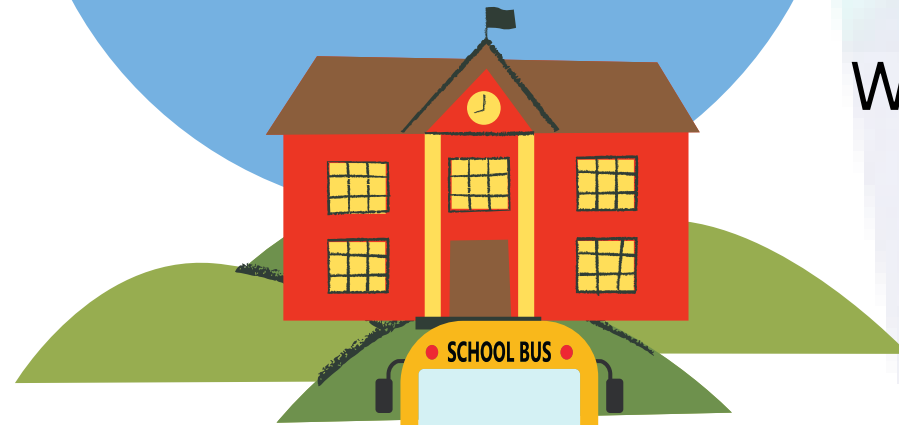
- *What does “success” look like in your program?*
- *And how are you bringing others along with you?*

TINY LEARNING TOWN

7

Leadership Landing

Destination: retention,
stability, quality



Reflection

We've arrived at the end of Leadership Landing, but the work doesn't stop here.
Every strong leader knows: the map keeps evolving.
Let's keep walking it together.

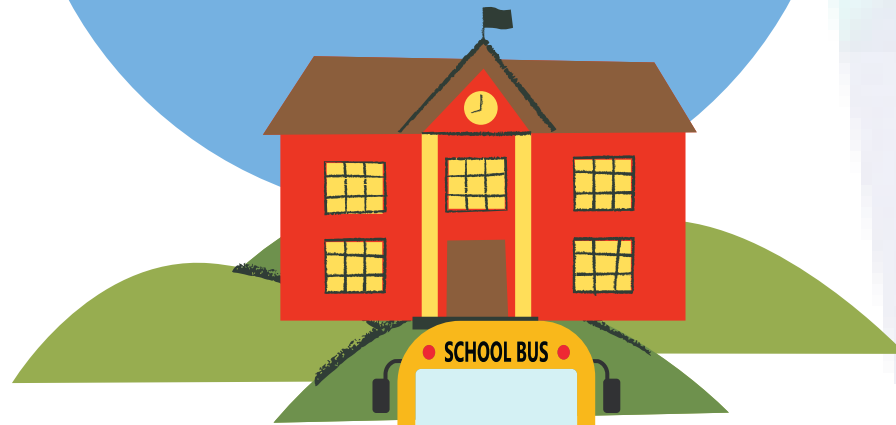
TINY LEARNING TOWN

Next Steps

7

Leadership Landing

Destination: retention,
stability, quality



Now it's time to:

- Reflect
- Which section of the map feels most familiar to your current reality?
- Where as a leader are you thriving and where is there room to grow?
- Reconnect
- Reimagine
- What would it look like to rework your leadership systems with this roadmap in mind?
- What small shifts could spark real change?

Reach Out!

- I'm always looking to connect with other leaders and educators.
 - Visit tinylearningtown.com
 - Follow @tiny_learning_town_



7

Leadership Landing

Destination: retention,
stability, quality



Thank You

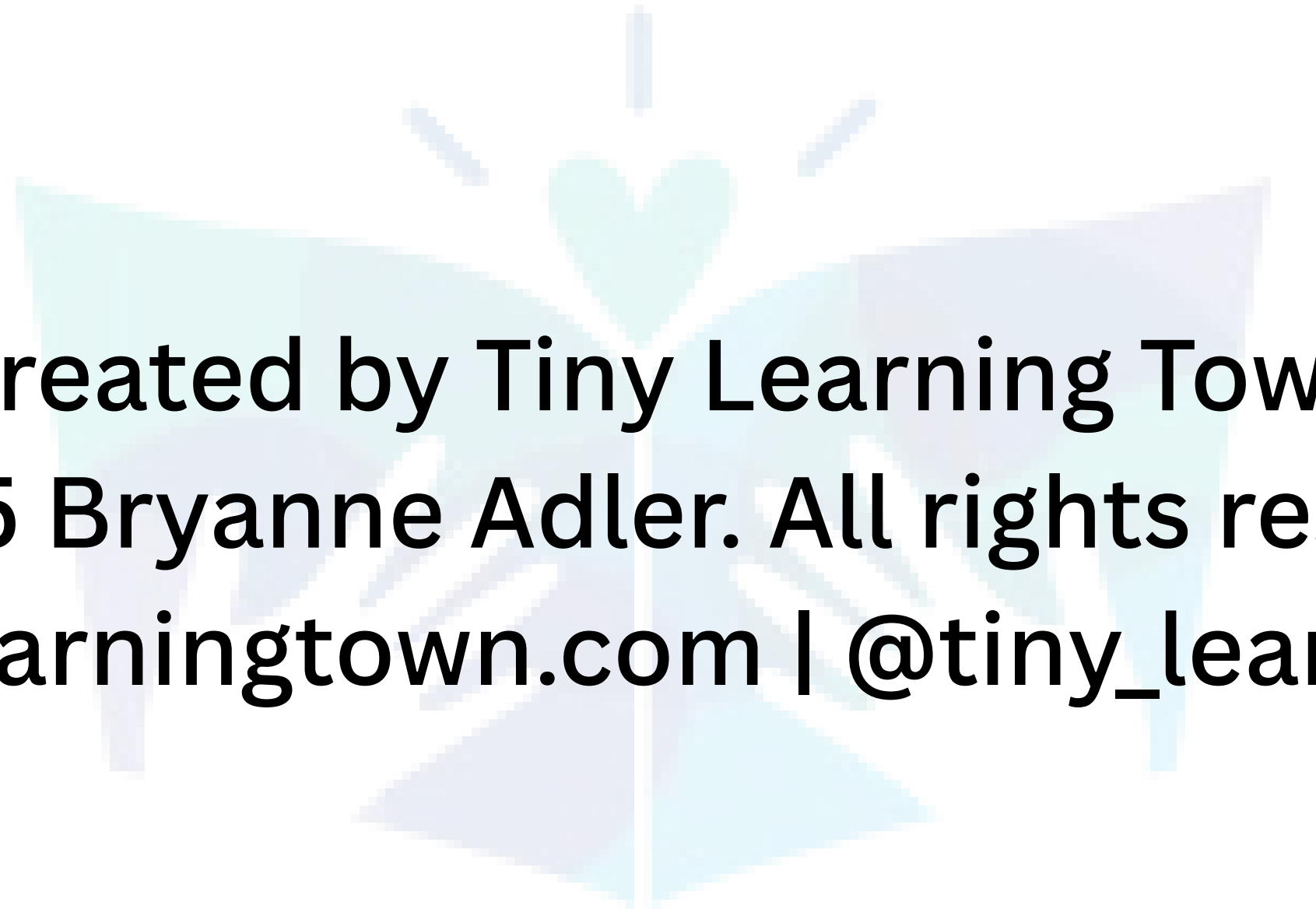
Thank you for walking this map with me.

This project was born out of lived experience, late-night reflections, and the stories of countless educators and leaders who deserve more than survival mode.

- We can build better systems.
- We can create programs where people stay, grow, and lead.

Let's keep going together.

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