

# Leading Teacher Clarity



# Leading Teacher Clarity

A Guide for Implementation Success

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LEADING TEACHER CLARITY

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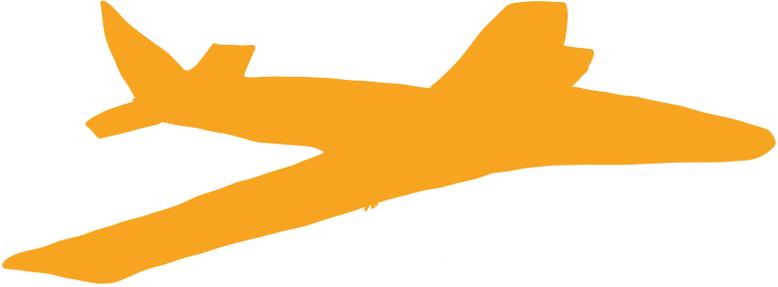
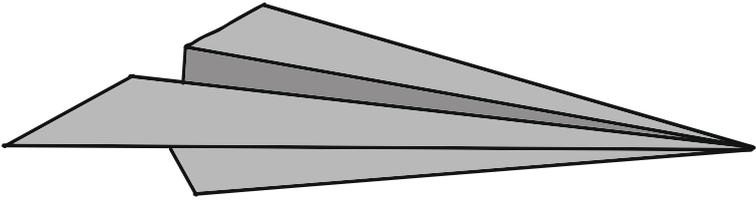
Dr. DiTullio was a National Board Certified Teacher (NBCT) from 2003-2013 and is an esteemed member of both PDK International and the Pi Lambda Theta International Honor Society. Her passion for educational leadership and instructional excellence is reflected in her published work in *Kappan Magazine*, *Edutopia*, *SAANYS Vanguard*, and *K12 Digest Magazine*.



**Dominique Smith, Ed.D.**, is an award-winning educator, author, and school leader who has dedicated two decades to transforming schools into inclusive, safe, and empowering spaces for students and educators alike. He currently serves as Principal at Health Sciences High and Middle College in San Diego, California. Dominique

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

earned his doctorate in Educational Leadership from San Diego State University and a Master of Social Work from the University of Southern California. A passionate advocate for belonging, restorative practices, and leadership development, Dr. Smith has coauthored several influential books, including *Belonging in School: Creating a Place Where Kids Want to Learn and Teachers Want to Stay*, *Better Than Carrots or Sticks: Restorative Practices for Positive Classroom Management*, *Building Equity: Policies and Practices to Empower All Learners*, *Leader Credibility, How Leadership Works: A Playbook for Instructional Leaders*, and *The Restorative Practices Playbook*. Through his leadership, writing, and speaking, Dr. Smith continues to champion the belief that when students feel seen, heard, and valued, they are empowered to thrive, both academically and personally. His work challenges schools to move beyond compliance and discipline toward cultures of belonging, accountability, and restorative growth.



# Introduction

In every school, learning depends on more than curriculum, resources, or programs. It depends on clarity: a shared understanding among teachers, leaders, and students of what is being learned, why it matters, and how success will be recognized. Teacher clarity is not a new initiative. It is a mindset and a framework that transforms the way schools think, plan, and talk about learning. When clarity lives in every classroom, conversation, and decision, teaching becomes intentional and learning becomes visible.

Classrooms often hum with activity. Students appear engaged, teachers are working hard, and learning seems to be happening everywhere. Yet beneath the surface, a crucial question remains: *Do students know what they are learning?* The answer to that question reveals the difference between activity and understanding. Students who can describe what they are learning, why it matters, and what success looks like are empowered to take ownership of their education. They become partners in the learning process rather than passive participants in a series of tasks.

Teacher clarity bridges the gap between teaching and learning. It ensures that students do not merely complete assignments but develop the knowledge and skills those assignments are designed to foster. When students understand learning goals and success criteria, their engagement deepens, their confidence grows, and their outcomes improve. Clarity ensures that every learner, regardless of background or ability, has access to the same vision of success. It turns learning from something that happens to students into something that happens with them.

For clarity to thrive, it must be modeled, protected, and sustained by leadership. Teacher clarity does not flourish through compliance or isolated classroom practice. It becomes culture only when leaders

## LEADING TEACHER CLARITY

create the conditions for teachers to collaborate, reflect, and grow together. Leaders set the tone by communicating purpose before process. They ensure that time, tools, and teamwork support the work. They make clarity visible in their own leadership, in staff meetings that include learning intentions, in transparent decision making, and in feedback that celebrates progress as much as performance.

Leading clarity requires more than professional learning; it requires persistence. Implementation takes time and courage. It requires leaders to listen, to build trust, and to stay steady through the discomfort of change. Above all, it asks leaders to hold a long-term vision: clarity as a way of thinking, not a temporary initiative.

*Leading Teacher Clarity* is designed for principals, instructional coaches, district leaders, and anyone responsible for shaping instructional culture. It is both a guide and a reflection tool. It is practical enough to act on immediately and deep enough to sustain over time. The book is organized as a progression, mirroring the way clarity itself develops in schools. Each section builds upon the last, leading readers from foundational understanding to systemic transformation of the culture and climate of the school.

## THE FIVE DIMENSIONS OF THE TEACHER CLARITY JOURNEY

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Part	Focus	Core Leadership Question	Theme Word	Description
<b>Part I: The Why—Building the Case for Clarity</b>	Establishes purpose and belief  Defines the moral and instructional rationale for clarity	Why does clarity matter for every learner?	<i>Believe</i>	Leaders develop the moral and empirical case for clarity and build shared urgency for change.

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Part	Focus	Core Leadership Question	Theme Word	Description
<b>Part II: The What—Defining Teacher Clarity</b>	Clarifies the core practices, language, and evidence base of teacher clarity	What exactly is clarity, and how do we recognize it?	<i>Understand</i>	Leaders and teachers align on definitions, frameworks, and indicators of clarity to ensure consistency of practice.
<b>Part III: The How—Leading the Journey</b>	Moves from knowing to doing  Translates clarity into structures, systems, and professional learning	How do leaders make clarity happen in real schools?	<i>Act</i>	Leadership moves from concept to action through planning, readiness, rollout, and professional learning design.
<b>Part IV: The System—Embedding Clarity Into Culture</b>	Builds the operational and relational systems that make clarity sustainable	How do leaders integrate clarity into the routines, feedback, and language of the school?	<i>Embed</i>	Leaders ensure coherence by aligning policies, professional learning communities, and feedback systems so clarity becomes the way the school works.
<b>Part V: The Legacy—Sustaining Clarity Through Leadership</b>	Reflects on leadership impact and long-term cultural endurance	What endures when clarity becomes culture?	<i>Influence</i>	Leaders cultivate successors, preserve the language of clarity across transitions, and expand influence beyond the immediate school context.

The journey unfolds in five stages, each with a distinct purpose and emotional focus. Leaders first believe in the moral case for clarity, then understand what it is, act to build systems, belong to a collective culture that sustains it, and finally become the kind of leaders who leave a legacy of learning that endures beyond their tenure.

## RECURRING FEATURES OF THIS BOOK

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Each chapter in *Leading Teacher Clarity* follows a consistent rhythm to help leaders translate ideas into practice. The recurring features that appear throughout the book are designed to support both reflection and action and to prompt thinking, spark conversation, and guide implementation.

**Planning Your Pitch.** Leadership begins with communication. Each “Planning Your Pitch” section provides concise talking points that help leaders introduce key ideas to staff or colleagues. These ready-to-use statements are designed to make complex concepts accessible, credible, and motivating. They help leaders speak with purpose and coherence about the work of clarity.

**The Thinking Leader.** Leadership is as much about reflection as direction. The Thinking Leader feature offers questions for self-assessment and team discussion. These prompts invite leaders to pause, examine their own beliefs and behaviors, and consider how their daily actions model clarity. The goal is not to provide answers, but to provoke deeper professional thinking.

**A Leader’s Perspective.** Each Leader’s Perspective highlights the lived experience of educational leaders who have engaged in this work. These brief stories illustrate how clarity unfolds in real schools and includes the challenges, breakthroughs, and lessons learned. They serve as mirrors and models, reminding readers that leadership for clarity is both human and hopeful.

## INTRODUCTION

**Leadership Checklist.** Implementation succeeds when leaders move from intention to action. Each Leadership Checklist section provides concrete, observable steps that leaders can take to apply ideas in their own context. Written in direct, actionable language, these lists function as practical tools for coaching, planning, and professional learning.

**Leadership Takeaways.** Every chapter concludes with Leadership Takeaways. These are three to five key ideas that distill the essence of the chapter into memorable insights. These concise statements connect research, practice, and belief, offering a final reflection on what matters most. They are designed to be revisited and shared, reinforcing the habits and mindsets that sustain clarity over time.

Together, these features create a through line across the book, blending reflection with application. They turn *Leading Teacher Clarity* from a text to be read into a resource to be used as an ongoing companion for leaders committed to making learning purposeful, visible, and shared.

## FROM FRAMEWORK TO PURPOSE

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The structure of this book is intentional, but the purpose extends far beyond organization. The tools and features are designed to model clarity in action by turning principles into practice and reflection into movement. They are the framework through which the deeper work of clarity unfolds.

Clarity changes how people think about learning, how they talk about success, and how they work together. It makes goals explicit, progress visible, and effort meaningful. The promise of teacher clarity is not perfection but progress. When everyone in a school community—both adults and students—can answer the three essential questions,

clarity has become more than a practice; it is part of the organizational culture (Fisher et al., 2016):

1. *What am I learning?*
2. *Why am I learning it?*
3. *How will I know when I've learned it?*

*Leading Teacher Clarity* offers the roadmap for that transformation. This roadmap builds belief, strengthens systems, and leaves a legacy of learning for every student.

## A NOTE FROM GINA

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When I first began this work as a principal at an elementary school in Rochester, New York, I thought we had clarity. Our teachers were hardworking, our students were engaged, and on most days, classrooms hummed with activity. But when I began asking students a simple question—“What are you learning?”—I was surprised by how few could answer. They could tell me what they were doing. They responded that they were cutting out shapes, reading a chapter, working on math problems, but not what they were learning, or why that learning mattered.

When I asked, “How will you know when you’ve learned it?” the answers were equally vague. A few others offered answers that stayed with me:

- “When we turn it in.”
- “When I get a sticker.”
- “When everyone else stops working.”

One student looked at me and said, “I don’t know. The teacher just tells us.” Another shrugged, “I guess when I don’t get it wrong anymore.”

## INTRODUCTION

None of them mentioned understanding, improvement, or success criteria. Their answers weren't careless. They were honest reflections of the messages we had unintentionally sent. For them, learning had become an activity to complete, not a process to master.

Those conversations changed me as a leader. I realized that clarity wasn't just about posting an objective on the board; it was about students owning their learning. I began talking with teachers, asking the same questions, and discovered that many of them also struggled to name the precise learning behind their lessons. They knew the activities, but not always the deeper intent or success criteria.

That was my turning point. If we, as educators, couldn't clearly articulate the learning, how could we expect our students to?

Teacher clarity isn't a program, a fad, or the next initiative that will come and go. It's a mindset shift. It's a collective commitment to make learning visible, purposeful, and achievable for every student. Leading this work is both challenging and rewarding. It requires patience, persistence, and a belief that clarity benefits everyone: students, teachers, and leaders alike.

When our faculty began the teacher clarity journey, we committed to analyzing standards together, writing learning intentions and success criteria, and sharing them with students. Change didn't happen overnight. But as our collective clarity deepened, our students' confidence grew. They could talk about their progress with pride and take ownership of their learning. The change was visible and measurable. As our students grew, we looked more purposefully at alignment, especially in making sure that our assessments and learning experiences truly reflected the goals for learning.

I know because we are doing it. And that's why I wanted to contribute to this book. I want to help other leaders guide their own communities through the same transformation.

## A NOTE FROM DOMINIQUE

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“This school feels different.” We hear this from students, families, and visitors to Health Sciences High in San Diego, California, all the time. We have strong teachers, engaged students, and classrooms full of activity. Students know what they are learning and what successful learning looks like. I attribute the climate and culture of achievement at our school to our Visible Learning journey.

More than a decade ago, our self-assessment pushed us to embrace the concept of success and to design lessons aligned with daily definitions of success in learning, language, and social skills. Today, classroom instruction is aligned with what students need to learn and tasks and assessments align with the success criteria. In fact, teachers at Health Sciences High share multiple success criteria with students each period. This allows teachers to better chunk learning and to ensure that students experience success multiple times in each class.

Over the past decade, I have learned that clarity isn’t something achieved once and for all. It is something built, refined, and sustained together. Today, our challenge isn’t introducing clarity; it’s keeping it alive. Each year, new teachers join our community, and with them comes the opportunity—and responsibility—to reinvest in the habits that made this work successful in the first place. Supporting new teachers isn’t just about explaining what learning intentions and success criteria are; it’s about helping them *experience* what clarity feels like.

When a teacher steps into our classrooms, the difference is visible. Students can explain what they are learning, why it matters, and how they will know when they’ve learned it. That didn’t happen by accident. It came from years of intentional collaboration, peer coaching, and constant reflection. Veteran teachers model clarity not only for students but also for colleagues. They talk about learning, not activities. They invite feedback on how well students can articulate their goals.

## INTRODUCTION

As a principal, I've learned that sustaining clarity requires as much leadership as launching it. New teachers arrive with enthusiasm, but they need guidance to understand that clarity isn't a strategy; it's a mindset. We pair them with mentors, invite them into planning sessions, and emphasize that clarity isn't about compliance or posting objectives; it's about connection and communication.

The most rewarding part of this work is seeing how quickly new teachers embrace the culture once they see its impact. When they hear students using the language of learning or see them self-assessing their progress, they understand what clarity really means. They realize that our goal isn't just for students to finish tasks. It's for them to take ownership of their learning.

After a decade of sustained focus, clarity has become part of who we are at Health Sciences High. But that doesn't mean the work is done. Every new hire, every new initiative, and every changing group of students requires us to reaffirm our purpose. Supporting new teachers to join that effort keeps the work alive, and it ensures that every student, in every classroom, benefits from the same shared focus on learning.

My motivation for contributing to this book comes from watching how clarity transforms not just classrooms, but entire school communities. After more than a decade of leading this work, I've seen new teachers find their confidence, experienced teachers rediscover their purpose, and students take ownership of learning in ways that change their lives. I want to share what we've learned so that other leaders, whether they're just beginning or years into their journey, can build schools where clarity is not an initiative, but a way of thinking, teaching, and leading together.





Part  
**1**

## The Why—Building the Case for Clarity

Every lasting improvement in education begins with a belief that something essential can be made better for students. Teacher clarity is rooted in the conviction that learning should never be a mystery reserved for a few. It should be transparent, intentional, and achievable for all. The teacher clarity journey begins with a simple but revealing question:

## LEADING TEACHER CLARITY

*Are students truly clear about what they are learning and why it matters?*

This question challenges even the most successful schools, because engagement and understanding are not the same. Students can be busy without being purposeful. Teachers can be skilled without being aligned. Leaders can be supportive without ensuring that learning is visible to everyone in the system.

The first step toward clarity is recognizing that this work is not about fixing teachers or rewriting curriculum. It is about making teaching and learning transparent for both. It is about ensuring that every learner has access to the purpose, direction, and meaning of their education. When schools pursue clarity, they move beyond activity-based instruction toward learning-centered practice.

Leaders who commit to clarity are not chasing a trend; they are fulfilling a promise. Clarity honors the dignity of both learners and educators by making success explicit, attainable, and shared. Leading with clarity means leading with both head and heart. It requires communicating not only the research behind clarity, but also the reason it matters most: Students deserve to understand their learning.

In the early stages of this work, teachers look to their leaders for both permission and purpose. They need to know that clarity is not “one more thing” but *the* thing, a framework that unites every other initiative. In other words, teacher clarity is the connective tissue for related efforts seeking to improve the student and adult experience. Leaders make this visible through language, consistency, and celebration.

Modeling matters. Every faculty meeting, coaching conversation, and email can reflect the principles of clarity by articulating purpose, defining success, and reinforcing shared vision. When leaders model clarity, they signal that it is not simply a strategy but a standard of professionalism.

Clarity work also requires courage, including the courage to examine current practices honestly, as well as the curiosity to imagine what is possible when assumptions are questioned. Gathering student voice and examining lessons can identify uncomfortable truths; yet these moments are not failures—they are opportunities. They invite the kind of reflection that turns information into insight. Leaders who approach this phase with humility and empathy build the trust that makes long-term improvement possible.



### Leader's Corner

Belief fuels courage, and courage sustains change.

The goal of this first part of the book is to establish *why* clarity matters, including the moral, emotional, and instructional foundations for everything that follows. Part I provides the rationale leaders need to communicate, the evidence they can collect to make the work real, and the mindset that will guide each step of implementation. When leaders understand the purpose of clarity, they stop asking *if* they should do it and start asking *how* to do it well. The chapters ahead move from belief to evidence, from concept to conversation, and from assumption to action.



### Leader's Corner

Clarity begins with belief. Once people see why it matters, they'll find a way to make it happen.



## Chapter

# 1

## See the Power of Clarity

Students and schools thrive when purpose is visible. In instruction, that visibility begins with clarity, which is the shared understanding between teachers and students about what is being learned and why it matters. Clarity gives direction to teaching and meaning to learning. Few teaching practices demonstrate as consistently strong an impact on student learning as teacher clarity. Across more than five decades of research, clarity has emerged as one of the most reliable and influential elements of effective instruction and curricular design (Titsworth et al., 2015).

Clarity is critical because it sits at the intersection of instruction, motivation, and engagement. When teachers make learning transparent by clearly communicating *what* students are learning, *why* it matters, and *how* they will know when they've succeeded, students are more engaged, focused, and capable of self-regulating their progress. When lessons line up to what students are learning and success is measured in ways that are consistent with the criterion for success, students are more likely to learn.

For school and system leaders, teacher clarity represents both a pedagogical and a cultural lever. Pedagogically, it ensures that all teachers plan, teach, and assess around a shared vision of success. Culturally, it signals coherence allowing all the faculty to recognize the clarity of purpose, expectations, and communication.



## Planning Your Pitch

It is crucial to take into consideration your stakeholders' perspectives. In this case, consider what it is that educators care deeply about: student learning and engagement and fostering a school environment where children and adults thrive. As you think about pitching clarity to your school, consider the following:

- **Clarity helps every learner succeed.** When students understand what success looks like and how to reach it, learning becomes purposeful and achievable.
- **Clarity fuels engagement.** When students know what and why they're learning, effort, motivation, and confidence increase.
- **Clarity connects the work.** It aligns planning, instruction, feedback, and assessment so that teachers and students share a common understanding of goals.
- **Clarity strengthens school culture.** Shared expectations and consistent communication build trust, focus, and collective momentum.
- **Clarity starts with leadership.** When leaders model clear goals, purposeful feedback, and visible success criteria, clarity becomes a schoolwide habit.

## DEFINING TEACHER CLARITY

Teacher clarity refers to the degree to which teachers communicate learning goals, success criteria, and pathways for achieving those goals in ways that are understandable and actionable for students. The concept emerged in the 1970s in studies of “instructor clarity” (Rosenshine & Furst, 1971) and has since been refined through decades of classroom research.

Hattie (2009) defines clarity as “the organization, explanation, examples and guided practice, and assessment of student learning—such that clarity of speech and the organization of ideas is exhibited” (p. 126). Fendick (1990) notes that it is “the extent to which teachers’

explanations and instructional structures reduce ambiguity for learners and promote understanding” (p. 3). Killian (2017) argues that clarity is more than stating objectives; it is a dynamic process of alignment among instruction, assessment, and student understanding.

Most models of clarity describe four interrelated dimensions (Fendick, 1990; Marzano, 2007):

1. **Organization:** Lessons and units follow logical progressions that connect new concepts to prior knowledge.
2. **Explanation:** Teachers communicate ideas and vocabulary in ways students can grasp and retain.
3. **Examples and Practice:** Students see what success looks like through modeling, exemplars, and scaffolded tasks.
4. **Assessment and Feedback:** Teachers and students gather and use evidence to guide next steps in learning.

Clarity lives not only in teacher actions but also in student understanding. As we have noted, teachers do not get to decide if they are clear; students make that decision. And when clarity is consistent across a classroom, school, or system, it becomes part of the culture of school and a way that all students expect to learn.



## Leader's Corner

Clarity doesn't just make learning visible—it makes it possible.



## The Thinking Leader

- When you walk into classrooms, what evidence do you see of clarity?
- Can students articulate what they're learning and why it matters?
- Do your teachers share a common understanding of what success looks like?

## THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

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The enduring impact of clarity can be explained through multiple complementary theories:

- **Cognitive Load Theory.** Sweller (1994) noted that learners have finite cognitive resources. Ambiguity, unnecessary complexity, or lack of instructional focus create *extraneous load*, leaving fewer resources for processing essential information. Teacher clarity reduces cognitive overload by providing well-sequenced explanations and unambiguous goals, allowing students to direct their attention toward deep understanding rather than confusion.
- **Feedback and Self-Regulation Theory.** Hattie and Timperley's (2007) feedback model, answering "Where am I going? How am I going? Where to next?" depends entirely on clarity. Students can only act on feedback if they understand the learning target and the criteria for success. Clarity transforms feedback from judgment to guidance, building the skills of self-monitoring and self-regulation essential for lifelong learning.
- **Self-Efficacy and Perceived Control.** Fryer and Leenknecht's (2023) theoretical model suggests that clarity supports the development of self-efficacy. When expectations are explicit and goals are achievable, students perceive control over their outcomes, which fosters persistence and resilience. Clarity also enhances the feedback loop: Students who understand their progress feel more capable of improving it.
- **Expectancy–Value Theory.** Expectancy–Value Theory (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002) suggests that learners are motivated when they both expect to succeed and value the task. Clear goals raise expectancy by making success attainable; explicit relevance raises value by connecting learning to purpose. In this way, teacher clarity directly fuels motivation.

- **Belonging and Positive Psychology.** Zheng (2021) connects clarity to teacher immediacy and credibility, two relational qualities that strengthen trust and engagement. Students in clear classrooms report a greater sense of belonging because expectations are consistent, fair, and predictable. Clarity reduces anxiety and increases psychological safety both of which are a prerequisite for risk taking in learning.

Together, these theories show that clarity is more than a teaching technique. It's also a leadership priority. When leaders understand how clarity supports both the thinking and the emotional needs of learners, they can design systems, professional learning, and feedback structures that make those conditions thrive in every classroom.



## Leader's Corner

Clarity turns intentions into impact. When everyone understands the purpose of learning, effort becomes focused and progress becomes visible.

## A Leader's Perspective

### Celebrating Small Starts

When principal Alexandra Ramirez first introduced teacher clarity, she underestimated how much change it would require. Teachers had to rethink not just what they taught, but how they designed and communicated learning. It wasn't about adding new tasks. It was about shifting habits, language, and expectations. That kind of change takes time and trust.

Alexandra noted that the early wins were modest but meaningful. Teachers began by posting learning intentions and referring to them consistently throughout lessons. Students started to echo those intentions

in their own words with simple statements like, “We’re learning to compare fractions,” or, “I’ll know I’m successful when I can explain my strategy.” Those moments mattered. Once students could verbalize their learning, engagement improved, and teachers began to see clarity as a living part of instruction rather than a checklist item.

The leadership team made sure to celebrate each step forward. Handwritten notes of appreciation, hallway shout-outs, and quick staff-meeting highlights turned small practices into shared pride. The energy shifted from compliance to commitment. As clarity grew, so did confidence. Over time, those small starts became the foundation of a schoolwide culture where purpose, progress, and pride were visible in every classroom.

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## EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE

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Over fifty years of research leave little doubt: Clarity is one of education’s surest bets. Across thousands of classrooms and dozens of international studies, the evidence clearly indicates that when learning is made explicit and success criteria are clear, student outcomes improve dramatically. This consistency makes clarity a rare anchor in a field often marked by shifting priorities. For instructional leaders, it offers confidence and direction: Clarity is not new work; it is the work that makes everything else work. This section offers an overview of the evidence for clarity, with the goal of building your own foundational knowledge, so as to aid your efforts in leading a teacher clarity initiative for your organization.

### Meta-Analyses and Synthesis Studies

A **meta-analysis** is a research method that combines and analyzes data from multiple studies on the same topic to identify overall trends, patterns, or effects. Hattie’s (2009, 2023) weighted average of the collection of placed teacher clarity’s effect size at 0.85, meaning it nearly doubles the rate of typical learning progress because the

average effect size for all influences is 0.40. Killian (2017) reported average effect sizes of 0.88 for academic learning and 1.21 for motivation, placing clarity among the highest-impact influences on both achievement and engagement. Two meta-analyses summarized by *Tips for Teachers* (2023) found that clarity accounted for roughly 13 percent of variance in student achievement across studies, with stronger effects on affective outcomes like motivation, enjoyment, and confidence.

Fendick's (1990) earlier meta-analysis reported that clarity is positively correlated with achievement across all subjects, grade levels, and measurement types. Importantly, this meta-analysis found that clarity benefits every learner but has disproportionately strong effects on struggling students, who rely more heavily on instruction and structure.

## Large-Scale and Contemporary Studies

Benton and Li's (2021) analysis noted student ratings of how frequently the instructor "Explained course material clearly and concisely," an item measuring teacher clarity, have the strongest correlation with the global measure. "Overall, I rate this instructor an excellent teacher." In other words, teacher clarity impacts student's perceptions of the skills of their teacher.

Zheng (2021) found that teacher clarity predicts emotional engagement and motivation primarily through its relationship with teacher credibility or how competent, trustworthy, and caring students perceive their teachers to be. When instruction is transparent and well organized, students view their teachers as more knowledgeable and supportive, which increases their willingness to participate and take risks in learning. Zheng's study, grounded in positive psychology, demonstrated that clarity fosters a sense of safety and belonging that encourages persistence even when tasks are challenging. In essence, clarity builds relational trust, and students engage because they feel seen and guided, not managed.

Fryer and Leenknecht (2023) further demonstrated that clarity interacts dynamically with feedback and self-efficacy to form a reinforcing cycle of learning. When teachers articulate expectations and success criteria clearly, students better understand the meaning of feedback and can use it to improve performance. As they act on feedback and experience growth, their confidence and motivation strengthen, which in turn deepens engagement and receptivity to further feedback. This reciprocal process creates what the authors describe as a “virtuous cycle of clarity” or a pattern in which transparent instruction, meaningful feedback, and student belief continually amplify one another.

In an experimental study, Serki and Bolkan (2023) explored how teacher clarity supports both learning and motivation by reducing cognitive load. Participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions: a clear, structured lesson or an unclear, unstructured lesson on social cognitive theory. The clear lesson included signaling cues, logical sequencing, and explicit connections between ideas; the unclear version presented the same material without structure or transitions.

Results showed that students in the clarity condition experienced significantly lower cognitive load, higher self-efficacy, and greater task value than those in the unclear condition. Reduced mental effort freed attention for understanding, while stronger motivation led to better performance of about a 3 percent gain on comprehension measures. The researchers described this dual benefit as avoiding “double jeopardy”: Unclear instruction not only hinders learning but also discourages students from trying.

Each of the studies reviewed indicates that clarity improves both cognitive and affective outcomes for students. Students learn more, remember more, and enjoy learning more when instruction is clear. Engagement rises because clarity satisfies the human need for direction and purpose.



## Leader's Corner

Teacher clarity is not one more thing on a teacher's plate. It is the plate that holds everything else.

## TEACHER CLARITY AND STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

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While clarity's effects on achievement are powerful, its influence on engagement is equally significant, and perhaps even more immediate. Fredricks and colleagues (2004) describe three dimensions of engagement (behavioral, emotional, and cognitive), all of which are strengthened by clarity:

1. **Behavioral engagement** increases when expectations are transparent. Students know what success looks like, when they are meeting expectations, and how to adjust their effort when they are not. In clear classrooms, off-task behavior decreases not because of stricter management, but because students have a clear purpose for their work.
2. **Emotional engagement** strengthens when learning feels purposeful and fair. When students understand the "why" behind a lesson, they are more willing to invest emotionally. Clarity builds trust and students see that teachers have organized the learning to help them succeed, not to catch them off guard.
3. **Cognitive engagement** deepens when students can monitor their progress using explicit success criteria. Clarity enables students to self-assess, set goals, and take ownership of next steps.

Wang and Eccles (2013) and Zheng (2021) demonstrate that clarity enhances students' sense of belonging, autonomy, and competence, which are three key drivers of intrinsic motivation. When these needs are met, students approach learning with persistence and enthusiasm.

This connection between clarity and motivation is well supported by self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Clarity supports autonomy by giving students meaningful choices within well-defined goals; it strengthens competence by showing them what success looks like, and it reinforces relatedness by fostering trust in teachers' expectations and fairness.

The difference is visible. In classrooms where clarity is strong, students ask better questions, take more intellectual risks, and use academic language with confidence. Conversations center on learning, not logistics. When asked what they are learning, students can answer without hesitation and they can explain why it matters.

In other words, clarity transforms compliance into commitment. Students engage not because they are told to, but because they understand the goal, value the process, and can see their progress.



### The Thinking Leader

- What small wins can you highlight to build momentum around clarity?
- How might you communicate those successes to your staff?
- How can you celebrate teachers who are making learning visible in new ways?

## Leadership Checklist: Building Clarity

- Model clarity in every professional learning session** by beginning with explicit learning intentions and success criteria.
- Establish a shared language of clarity** across teams and ensure terms like *learning intention*, *success criteria*, and *evidence of learning* are defined and used consistently.
- Use walkthroughs and coaching cycles** to observe evidence of clarity in both teacher communication and student voice.
- Gather and analyze data from student responses** to monitor how well learners understand *what*, *why*, and *how* they are learning.
- Embed clarity into coaching and evaluation processes** so feedback consistently connects to learning intentions and success criteria.
- Protect collaboration time** for teachers to unpack standards, design aligned success criteria, and examine student work.
- Align school systems and tools** such as pacing guides, lesson templates, and assessments to clarity principles.
- Celebrate clarity in action** by highlighting teachers who model success and students who articulate their learning confidently.
- Sustain momentum** by revisiting clarity regularly in meetings and professional learning; clarity requires maintenance as well as innovation.

## Leadership Takeaways

- **Clarity drives engagement.** When students understand what they're learning and why it matters, effort turns into ownership.
- **Clarity creates coherence.** Transparent goals align teaching, feedback, and assessment so everyone is working toward the same destination.
- **Clarity strengthens culture.** Shared purpose and consistent communication build trust, collaboration, and collective confidence.

