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## From Theory to Practice: Applying the Essential Elements of Cultural Proficiency to Strategic Planning

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*Connecting Theory to Practice*

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This theoretical paper explores the application of the *Essential Elements of Cultural Proficiency* to the strategic planning process as well as the implementation and evaluation of the plan. This application ensures the cultures of the individual school community members are factored in to improve current policies, practices, and behaviors. Student outcomes often reflect the degree to which Cultural Proficiency is operationalized. School districts can bridge the gap between reality and vision by fostering a culture of collaboration, continuous reflection, and culturally competent practices. The strategic planning process can be enhanced by planning for and implementing actions aligned to the five Essential Elements of Cultural Proficiency: assessing culture, valuing diversity, managing the dynamics of difference, adapting to diversity, and institutionalizing cultural knowledge. Coherence, guided by transformative leadership principles and informed by data-driven decision-making, empowers educators to close the achievement gap and ensure all students reach their full potential.

**Keywords**

cultural proficiency; transformative leadership; strategic planning

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## Introduction

*Where children from all cultural backgrounds thrive in a safe and welcoming community that fosters a love for lifelong learning, a strong sense of belonging for every family, and pathways where individuals can realize their full potential.*

Vision statements set the tone for an intended future. Collaborative visioning is one of the most critical stages of strategic planning, a process that school districts engage in regularly to move from current reality to the district's vision. These processes require time, resources, deep levels of transformative leadership, and coherence to plan, implement, and evaluate.

In many cases, state-accredited school districts are often required to complete annual comprehensive school improvement plans, which are purposed for continuous growth and improvement of the district towards achieving the organization's vision. Given decades of academic student achievement data highlighting gaps between and among individuals and groups of students from various racial and social class backgrounds, there is evidence of the need for coherent strategic planning processes for school improvement. This requires deeply considering individual and collective culture in the planning, implementation, and evaluation stages.

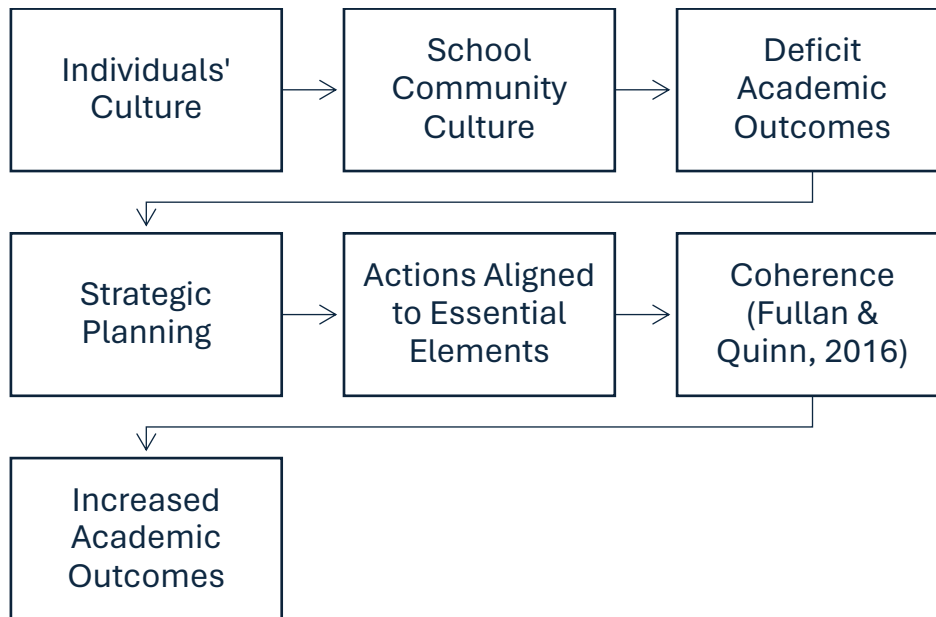
This reflection on the coherence of strategic planning, student academic achievement, and culturally proficient educational practice connects the theory of school change to action-oriented practice. It is designed to invite leaders into a reflection and dialogic process for applying the *Essential Elements of Cultural Proficiency* to strategic planning, implementing actions to address strategic goals, and evaluating outcomes. The discussion provides a guide for how to improve strategic planning by applying theory to practice.

## Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework illustrates the major concepts involved in this theory to practice paper and their relationship to one another. (Figure 1). The relationships provide the foundation for the application of the *Essential Elements of Cultural Proficiency* to strategic planning and school improvement. The concepts are supported with an introductory review of literature.

Individuals of the school community gather inside districts and schools as one. We know that when we value the diversity of these communities, accepting all who enroll in the public school system, we inherently gain the cultural conflicts that come with diversity. Culture can be defined with terms such as values, beliefs, experiences, and traditions; terms associated with identities such as race, ethnicity, language, gender, sexual orientation, ability, social class, and religion; or terms associated with nuances of culture that impact trust and can change relationships such as eye contact, notions of fairness, theories of disease and wellness, child-rearing principles, and tempo or completion of work (Hammond, 2014; Lindsey et al., 2019; Welborn et al., 2022). Using this definition of culture, we all have a culture.

Hundreds of individuals come together with their own cultures to create a school community. Inherently, the school community adopts an organizational culture. This is where the current reality

**Figure 1***Conceptual Framework*

of the school system is presented, often reported through data such as academic achievement scores. When these numbers are lower than the school community expects or desires, or the state or federal government begin to pay close attention, this elevates the importance of strategic planning to achieve the district's mission and vision, and the importance of developing and executing action plans toward continuous school improvement.

As suggested above, applying the Essential Elements of Cultural Proficiency to the strategic planning process, and then the implementation and evaluation of the plan, can ensure the cultures of the individual school community members are factored in to improve current policies, practices, and behaviors. The student outcomes often reflect the degree to which Cultural Proficiency is operationalized. Coherence is necessary for applying the Essential Elements throughout the process.

### **Coherence of Strategic Planning**

Research studies confirm that strategic planning, focused on a school district's vision, mission, and values, is a valuable process for continuous school improvement that is sustained over time. Fullan & Quinn (2016) indicated that consistency of purpose, policy, and practice "requires the individual and collective ability to build shared meaning, capacity, and commitment to action" (p.1). The right drivers in action include 1. focusing direction, 2. cultivating collaborative cultures, 3. deepening learning, and 4. securing accountability. "Leaders must find the right combination of these four components to meet the varying needs of their context" (Fullan & Quinn, 2016, p. x). Senge (2006) emphasized five disciplines for effective learning organizations. "Each provides a vital dimension in building organizations that can truly "learn," that can continually enhance their

capacity to realize their highest aspirations” (p. 6). The five disciplines, including personal mastery, mental models, shared vision, team learning, and systems thinking, are essential for strategic planning in a coherent way (Senge, 2006). Peter Senge describes systems thinking as, “... the discipline that integrates the disciplines, fusing them into a coherent body of theory and practice” (2006, p. 12). To relate this coherent leadership framework and the five disciplines to strategic planning, a team must clearly understand the purpose and nature of the work that will be done individually through action and collectively in the district.

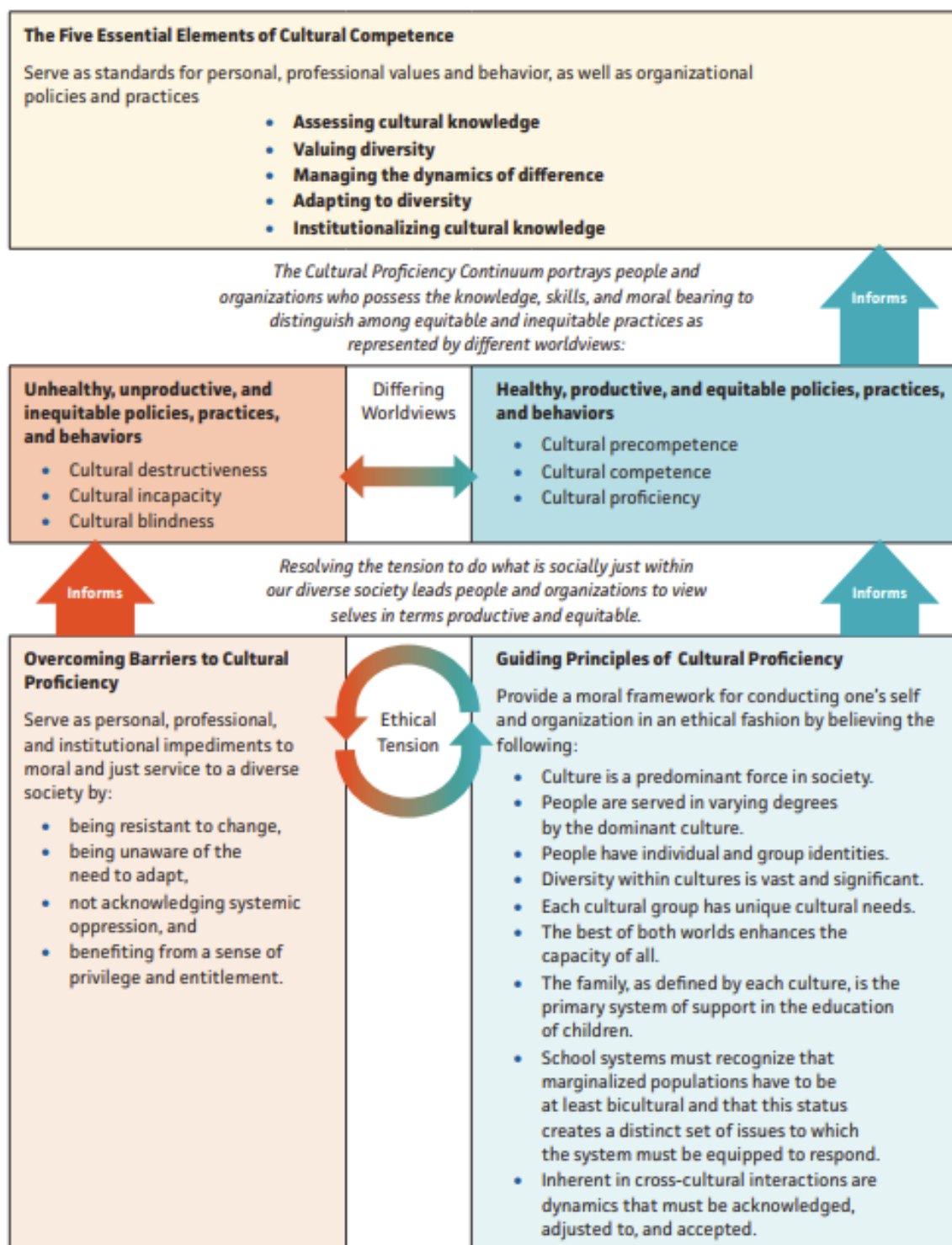
### **Cultural Proficiency: Tools for Strategic Planning**

Cultural Proficiency is a mindset and inside-out approach to "the personal values and behaviors of individuals and the organization's policies and practices that provide opportunities for interactions among students, educators, and community members" (Lindsey et al., 2010, p. 12). This conceptual framework provides four tools educators can use to examine and change, if necessary, their practices and behaviors. Simply stated, one of the tools, the *Essential Elements* allows educators to plan for change. Figure 2 illustrates the four Tools of Cultural Proficiency (Welborn et al., 2022, p. 9).

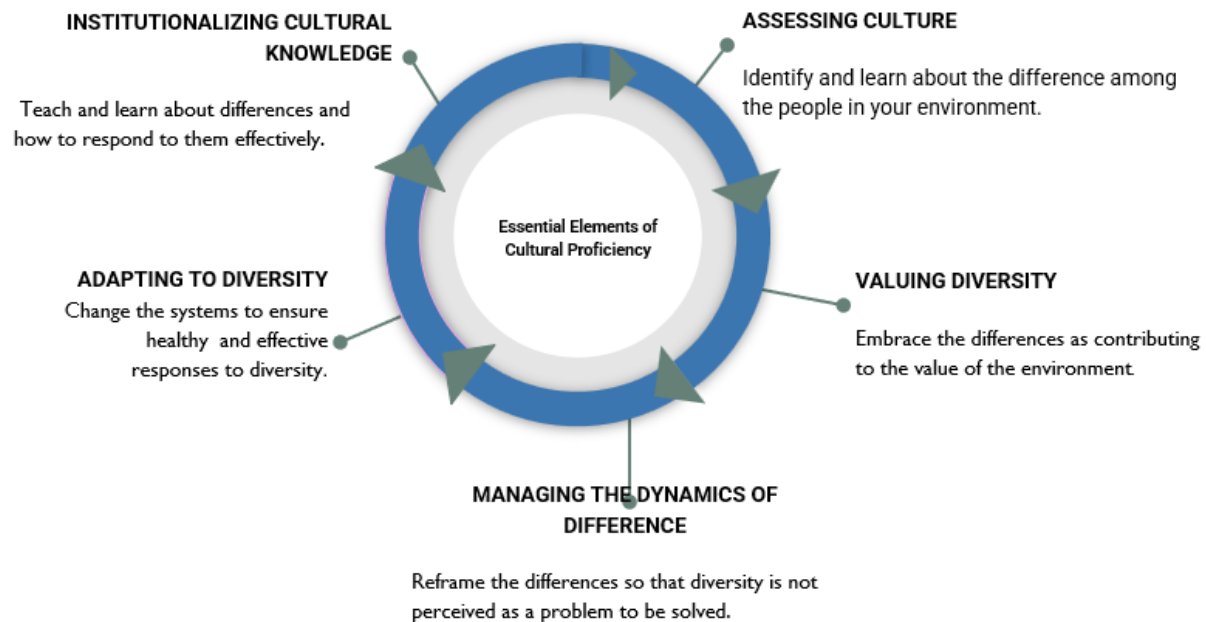
### **Essential Elements of Cultural Proficiency**

The action-based, Essential Elements are standards that can guide district strategic planning teams in being intentional about the actions identified to meet the goal. "The Essential Elements guide you in the development of behaviors and practices congruent with the culturally proficient values and policies you profess to your colleagues, your students, and the community you serve" (Lindsey et al., 2019, p. 144). First defined by Cross (1989), the five essential elements include assessing culture, valuing diversity, managing the dynamics of difference, adapting to diversity, and institutionalizing cultural knowledge. Figure 3 demonstrates that together these actions work in a continuous cycle. Essentially, change does not occur in a linear order. Below is a short description of each Essential Elements. Table 1 includes a question to guide your teams in reflection and dialogue in the strategic planning process and an example of a strategic planning action focused on academic achievement.

Figure 2

*Cultural Proficiency Conceptual Framework*

Source: Adapted from R. B. Lindsey, Nuri-Robins, and Terrell (2009, p. 60).

**Figure 3***Essential Elements of Cultural Proficiency: Action Verbs for Change****Assess Culture***

Assessing culture refers to claiming cultural differences between staff, students, and the culture of the school and district (Cross, 1989; Lindsey et al., 2019; Welborn et al., 2022). When considering the actions involved in developing and implementing a strategic plan, leaders must focus on using disaggregated data to inform all stakeholders about the progress and needs of culturally diverse groups (Lindsey et al., 2007).

***Value Diversity***

Valuing diversity refers to including cultural differences in the school's functions. When considering the actions involved with strategic planning and implementing the plan, transformative leaders must focus on valuing diversity by using disaggregated data from multiple sources to develop an accurate picture of student achievement (Lindsey et al., 2007). Equally important is showing a value for diversity by the people selected for the strategic planning team and their involvement in final decision-making processes that leads to developing the strategic planning goals and actions.

***Manage the Dynamics of Difference.***

Managing the dynamics of difference refers to framing the conflicts caused by cultural differences. It focuses on problem solving when conflict arises in strategic planning. A transformative leader

uses achievement gap data to inform ongoing inquiry and decision making to meet the needs of diverse student groups (Lindsey et al., 2007). The success of the strategic plan and implementation will be primarily based on the ability of the leaders to resolve conflict. Leaders who acknowledge that conflict is natural and lead norm-setting set themselves up for successful cross-cultural relationships in which all members feel valued and can articulate actions that will lead to school improvement.

### ***Adapt to Diversity***

Adapting to diversity involves changing for and with others to acknowledge cultural differences (Cross, 1989; Lindsey et al., 2019; Welborn et al., 2022). In strategic planning and implementation, transformative leaders must use student assessment data to make decisions for improving learning and achievement for all demographic groups (Lindsey et al., 2007). This action step relates to the benchmarking of short-term goals highlights that adaptations to diversity are necessary to meet the ultimate strategic planning goal by the end of the implementation period.

### ***Institutionalize Cultural Knowledge***

Institutionalizing cultural knowledge refers to training about the differences to spread change throughout the school district (Cross, 1989; Lindsey et al., 2019; Welborn et al., 2022). This essential element is about spreading cultural knowledge and changes that have positively impacted students throughout the district. During the evaluation process, institutionalization can occur through continuous learning and professional development. Transformative leaders involved in the strategic planning process can implement a system of vast structures and resources that allow educators to collaborate on assessment strategies and improve learning for underserved demographic groups (Lindsey et al., 2007). The lack of application of this essential element is one reason disparities in academic student achievement persist throughout the United States. When cultural knowledge becomes mainstream and influences all educational practices in every learning space of a district, true institutionalization of that cultural knowledge is demonstrated through student learning outcomes and decreased gaps in student achievement.



**Table 1***Reflection and Dialogue Process for Strategic Planning by Essential Element*

<b>Essential Element</b>	<b>Question for Reflection and Dialogue</b>	<b>Strategic Planning Action Step Example</b>
<b>Assessing Cultural Knowledge</b>	What might be some ways your team builds relationships with students and families to understand the cultural differences within the school and meet their individual needs?	Develop individual student learner profiles, including current information such as demographic data (race, gender, social class, ability, language, etc.), learning styles and preferences, skill sets, strengths, and potential growth areas.
<b>Valuing Diversity</b>	What might be some ways your team engages students and families in decision-making processes? In what ways has their involvement aided in changing instructional and assessment practices based on survey data?	Form a diverse committee to develop an ideal picture of a district graduate with input from local stakeholders, internal and external to the district. Ensure diversity in race/ethnicity, social class, gender, language, etc.
<b>Managing the Dynamics of Difference</b>	What might be some ways you provide opportunities for administration and staff to dialogue about academic student outcomes and related instructional and academic progress?	Meet monthly to review district and building-level academic data, utilizing strategies to discuss conflicts in actions and the reality of the current data.
<b>Adapting to Diversity</b>	How do your current policies and procedures, related to academics, impact students? What changes might you make to program and support related to instruction and assessment, as necessary?	Increase academic program offerings and opportunities.
<b>Institutionalizing Cultural Knowledge</b>	How might you build partnerships and increase professional learning opportunities for staff to examine biases, increase cultural knowledge, and reduce gaps in academic data?	Provide professional learning opportunities to support the implementation of curriculum, instruction, and assessment with individual learning profiles considered.

**Applying the Essential Elements of Cultural Proficiency to Strategic Planning**

Research studies confirm that strategic planning, focused on a school district's vision, mission, and values, is a valuable process for continuous school improvement that is sustained over time. Coherence of the right drivers in action for schools, districts, and systems is essential for developing a strategic plan, implementing that plan, and evaluating outcomes (Fullan & Quinn, 2016). Just as Kowalski (2013) identified six stages to the strategic planning process, Lindsey et

al. (2019) developed five actions rooted in cultural competence. The alignment between the stages and *Essential Elements* defines an original approach to strategic planning and educational practice. The guidance below is meant to support leaders in applying the *Essential Elements of Cultural Proficiency* to strategic planning, moving from the theory of change to practice.

### **Strategically Plan with Culture and Diversity in Mind**

Transformative leaders must first consider who will be involved when starting the strategic planning process. Kowalski (2013) indicated that inclusive participation means including district employees such as administration teachers and staff and other stakeholders such as board members, community partners, and families. In connecting Fullan & Quinn's (2016) coherence framework, cultivating collaborative cultures involves cultivating the expertise of those invited to participate in the strategic planning process. As you plan for inclusive participation in this process, culture and diversity must be considered. Assessing cultural knowledge is one of the Essential Elements of Cultural Proficiency. District leaders must create spaces to reflect and dialogue about the culture of the individuals from the district who will participate in the planning, the culture of members outside of the district, the culture of the students served in the district, and the culture of the organization. It is essential to recognize how each of those cultures interact with one another and impact the strategic planning process and, ultimately, student outcomes (Welborn et al., 2022).

Additionally, inclusive participation in the strategic planning process also leads to the need for collaborative visioning (Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Kowalski, 2013). As the vision of the school district and the mission and core values are reviewed in the strategic planning process, transformative leaders find ways to ensure value for the diversity of those selected as part of the strategic planning team. Applying the third *Essential Element of Cultural Proficiency* and operating with a mindset of following a culture of growth, the team can create a strategic plan that is purpose-driven and focused on continuous engagement from stakeholders so that goals are developed we are right there that will help the district move from the current reality the previous place and to the vision (Fullan & Quinn, 2016). Managing the dynamics of difference includes relying on techniques to manage differences in opinions, beliefs, and values that surface through behaviors in the strategic planning process. The final strategic plan document will be better situated to meet the needs of students and help the district achieve student academic goals and the vision if there are actions written that relate to the five *Essential Elements*.

### **Implement the Strategic Plan with Comprehensive Action**

Once the strategic plan is finalized and all actions are aligned to the five *Essential Elements of Cultural Proficiency*, implementing this plan commences. Comprehensive action includes actions that consider the culture of the students, the culture of the district staff, and the organizational culture and how those impact one another. Assessing cultural knowledge allows us to be reflective as transformative leaders and recognize how our actions are impacting those who are different from us. As Kowalski (2013) identified, environmental scanning and an internal audit are two primary strategic planning steps. Environmental scanning helps a strategic planning team to identify opportunities and challenges in reaching the goal. Suppose the action steps are aligned with the Essential Elements; in that case, opportunities become more apparent, and challenges can be overcome by examining, challenging, and changing, if necessary, policies and educational

practices that are negatively impacting students (Kowalski, 2013). For an internal audit, this strategic planning stage is a process for identifying district strengths, weaknesses, and limitations (Kowalski, 2013).

In implementing the strategic plan, looking at all aspects of the organization that impact student achievement goals and actions is essential. Professional learning for staff is vital in ensuring that those educating students are prepared to respond to cultural differences and recognize when educational practice perpetuates achievement gap outcomes. Fullan and Quinn (2013) highlighted learning leadership and capacity building for effective change when we think about coherence and having the correct drivers in action for school districts and systems. Through professional learning, teachers can develop clarity of learning goals, build precision and pedagogy, and shift practices through building capacity to recognize culture's role in teaching and learning impacts (Fullan & Quinn, 2013). The Essential Element highlighted in this stage of the strategic planning process, implementing actions toward change, is Adapting to Diversity. This Essential Element is when staff changes how things are done to acknowledge the complexity of cultural differences among staff, educators, and students in the community (Lindsey et al., 2019; Welborn et al., 2022). Without alignment of the actions to all five Essential Elements, the implementation dip can occur which causes the goals defined in the strategic plan to fall short, as demonstrated by student outcomes.

### **Evaluate the Strategic Plan by Outcomes**

The last two stages of strategic planning involve transformative leaders focused on short-term goals and evaluating data. According to Kowalski (2013), short-term goals are essential and serve as benchmarks. Regarding the Essential Elements of Cultural Proficiency, it is vital to engage in collaborative work to reflect on the degree to which changes impact students academically. The evaluation component allows the district to realize if they are moving in the right direction with the changes made through action steps. Fullan and Quinn (2016) identified securing accountability as a driver for action. Securing internal and external accountability allows systems to experience success in strategic planning. As related to the Essential Elements of Cultural Proficiency, institutionalizing cultural knowledge is essential for spreading change throughout the system (Cross, 1989; Lindsey et al., 2019; Welborn et al., 2022). When done efficaciously, the changes throughout the system can be sustained over time, validating improved academic achievement for students. Institutionalizing cultural knowledge involves transformative leaders who incorporate cultural knowledge into the organization's mainstream and drive changes in professional learning systems. This adds to the value and outcomes of the strategic planning process.

### **Conclusion**

School districts can bridge the gap between reality and vision by fostering a culture of collaboration, continuous reflection, and culturally competent practices. The strategic planning process can be enhanced by planning for and implementing actions aligned to the five Essential Elements of Cultural Proficiency: assessing culture, valuing diversity, managing the dynamics of difference, adapting to diversity, and institutionalizing cultural knowledge. Coherence, guided by transformative leadership principles and informed by data-driven decision-making, empowers educators to close the achievement gap and ensure all students reach their full potential.

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