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Build Guardrails, Not Walls

How district leaders can create clarity and alignment without prescribing every step



District leaders carry the weight of thousands of decisions. Each one has a ripple effect across educators, students, families, and the broader community.

That responsibility isn't taken lightly – nor is it easy to navigate.

There aren't clear-cut answers for where to allocate resources, how much support to give principals, or which priorities to tackle first. Giving more direction isn't always the answer, and not every need can be taken on at once.

But setting up guardrails can help.

Guardrails allow district leaders to set boundaries and expectations without prescribing every step along the way. This guide breaks down the difference between setting a guardrail and building a wall, where that distinction matters most, and how to know if they're working as intended.

This guide brings together insights shared by veteran district leaders Dr. L. Oliver Robinson and Dr. Kristin Dudek during the webinar, **The First 90 Days: Leadership Strategies That Define the School Year**.

What Are Guardrails?



You encounter guardrails while driving all the time – stop lights, lane dividers, meridians. They aren't prescriptive. They don't set your speed or turn your steering wheel. Instead, they create a barrier and provide a sense of safety. Drivers have the freedom to make decisions but know there are boundaries.

Leadership guardrails work the same way.

They provide support and guidance to keep teams moving in the right direction but don't outline every move that needs to be made. This is especially important in K-12 districts. District leaders are charged with creating alignment around shared priorities and expectations while still leaving room for schools to make decisions based on their own needs. Some expectations, such as student safety procedures or data privacy protocols, may be non-negotiable while others, like family communication, can be adapted by individual schools.

But when **every** move is prescribed, a guardrail starts to become a wall. Walls are rigid and unmovable. They leave little room for judgment or autonomy. Those kinds of strict environments make it difficult for schools and principals to respond to the unique needs in front of them.

Where Guardrails Can Help

Every district has different needs where guardrails can support. Here are a few areas where they can be useful and what each might look like in practice.

Area	Why a guardrail helps	Build a guardrail, not a wall	Example in practice
Principal support	Principals need clear expectations and flexibility to make decisions based on experience, capacity, and school-specific needs.	Set expectations, don't micromanage	**District-wide rollout:** When rolling out a new district initiative, define what each school is expected to accomplish, but give principals ownership over how they communicate it, implement it, and build buy-in within their school.
School identity	District-wide alignment can be achieved without requiring every school to operate the same way.	Create alignment not uniformity	**Student Wellness** Set a district-wide goal for student wellness, but allow rollout to look different across schools and grade levels. What works for a first grader doesn't have to be the same approach used for a high school senior.
Priorities and initiatives	Districts face a constant flow of new needs and ideas, but they can't take on every priority at once.	Stay focused, don't chase every idea	**Mid-year opportunity:** When a new program is proposed mid-year, don't automatically add it to the district's priorities. First ask: Does it support an existing goal, improve student outcomes, carry a risk if left unaddressed, and do we have capacity?
New opportunities	New opportunities can be worth exploring, but they can also introduce risk.	Set boundaries without shutting down exploration	**AI exploration:** As staff begin experimenting with AI, give them room to explore how it can support their work but set clear boundaries around PII, confidential data, accuracy, and appropriate use.

The Guardrail Gut Check

Guardrails aren't meant to be set and forgotten. Once they are in place, they still need maintenance to remain strong, reliable, and supportive. Use these questions to check in on your guardrails and make sure you're striking the right balance of direction and flexibility.

Question 1:

If we removed this guardrail, what would actually change?

Question 2:

Are people finding workarounds instead of working inside the guardrail? If so, why?

Question 3:

Has the guardrail become more restrictive over time than we intended?

Question 4:

Has anything changed since it was put in place that should change the guardrail too?

Question 5:

Who is the guardrail helping and who might it be making things harder for?

Question 6:

When did we last ask the people working within the guardrail whether it's working as intended?

District leadership is full of decisions and knowing where to set boundaries is just one of them. Hear more from fellow district leaders about the strategies they use to set priorities, support principals, and keep schools moving in the right direction all year long.

Watch the webinar >



Looking for solutions that support your district priorities? **Talk to our team.**

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