

LEADING IMPROVEMENT IN TEACHER EDUCATION

A Problems-to-Possibilities Toolkit

Using Complexity Leadership Theory to diagnose persistent problems,
create movement, and build shared leadership capacity

Based on:

Yendol-Hoppey, D., & Butler, B. M. (2026).

Complexity leadership in teacher education: Problems, practices, and possibilities.

In J. McIntyre, D. Byrd, & J. Snow (Eds.), *Handbook of Research on Teacher Education* (4th ed.). Routledge.

How to Use This Workbook

Teacher education problems are rarely just people problems. A fragmented clinical model, an unresolved curriculum disagreement, a stalled redesign, or an overburdened program coordinator may look like separate concerns. Often, however, they reflect deeper system conditions: missing knowledge, disconnected expertise, inaction, concentrated responsibility, avoided conflict, or the absence of spaces where people can actually think and design together.

This workbook turns the six Problems of Practice and the three leadership functions described by Yendol-Hoppey and Butler (2026) into practical tools for teacher educators who want to improve their programs, partnerships, courses, clinical experiences, and professional learning contexts. It is designed for use by formal leaders and by people who lead through expertise, relationships, and influence.

The core premise: You do not have to be in charge of the whole system to create movement within it.

The Five-Step Improvement Cycle

1. NOTICE	2. NAME	3. LOCATE	4. LEAD	5. MOVE
What seems to be happening?	Which problem(s) sit underneath it?	Where does the problem live, and who is connected?	What kind of leadership is needed?	What feasible next action can we take?

The cycle is intentionally recursive. After acting, return to noticing. Complexity leadership assumes that improvement develops through interaction, experimentation, feedback, and adaptation rather than a single linear solution.

The Six Problems of Practice

Problem	What it looks like
Knowledge Base Problem	A lack of shared language, preparation, or conceptual tools for teacher education.
Teacher Education Expertise Problem	The needed knowledge spans pedagogy, curriculum, clinical practice, policy, adult learning, partnerships, and systems – and is rarely held by one person.
Inaction Problem	The system recognizes persistent problems but does not convert concern into sustained movement.
Responsibility Problem	Complex leadership work is concentrated in a few roles rather than distributed across the people who shape teacher learning.
Conflict Avoidance Problem	Important tensions are suppressed or softened in ways that protect surface harmony but stall learning and improvement.
Absence of Adaptive Spaces Problem	People lack sustained structures where they can co-design, test, question, and refine new practices together.

Three Leadership Functions

Entrepreneurial leadership: Spot tensions, question assumptions, reframe stagnation, and seed possibilities.

Enabling leadership: Create the relational conditions and adaptive spaces where people can learn, disagree, design, and act together.

Operational leadership: Embed promising improvements into structures, roles, resources, policies, routines, and expectations so that change lasts.

Tool 1. What Are We Actually Stuck On?

Purpose: Surface which of the six Problems of Practice may deserve closer attention. This is a conversation starter, not a diagnostic score.

Problem area / statement	Rarely	Sometimes	Often
Knowledge Base			
We struggle to articulate what effective teacher education looks like.	☐	☐	☐
People responsible for leading improvement have received little preparation for this work.	☐	☐	☐
We lack shared language for discussing program improvement and change.	☐	☐	☐
Expertise			
Important decisions require knowledge that no one person possesses.	☐	☐	☐
Expertise exists across our system but is not routinely brought together.	☐	☐	☐
School-based, clinical, candidate, and university expertise are not consistently valued as complementary.	☐	☐	☐
Inaction			
We repeatedly identify the same problems without resolving them.	☐	☐	☐
Promising ideas often remain isolated pilots or disappear when a champion leaves.	☐	☐	☐
People want change, but existing structures make action difficult.	☐	☐	☐
Responsibility			
Improvement depends heavily on one or two people.	☐	☐	☐
Formal leaders are expected to solve problems they cannot solve alone.	☐	☐	☐
People with useful expertise do not always see improvement as part of their responsibility.	☐	☐	☐

Conflict Avoidance			
We talk around difficult issues rather than naming them directly.	☐	☐	☐
Maintaining collegiality sometimes takes priority over addressing real problems.	☐	☐	☐
Important disagreements remain unresolved or are repeatedly postponed.	☐	☐	☐
Adaptive Spaces			
We have many meetings but few places where we actually design or learn together.	☐	☐	☐
Collaboration is squeezed into existing agendas rather than protected with dedicated time.	☐	☐	☐
Faculty, supervisors, mentor teachers, school partners, and candidates rarely work together on improvement.	☐	☐	☐

What two problem areas deserve the closest attention right now?

What evidence or experience led you there?

Use the pattern of responses to identify where to look more closely. Avoid reducing the exercise to a numerical score.

Tool 2. The Problem Behind the Problem

Purpose: Move from a surface concern to the deeper system conditions that may be sustaining it.

The problem people are currently talking about:

What do we see happening? Be concrete.

Possible underlying problem	Questions to ask	What we notice
Knowledge Base	Do we lack shared concepts, preparation, or language?	
Expertise	Whose knowledge is missing, disconnected, or undervalued?	
Inaction	What have we known for a long time but not acted on?	
Responsibility	Who is carrying too much? Who is not yet participating?	
Conflict Avoidance	What disagreement or tension are we not naming?	
Adaptive Spaces	Do the right people have a place to actually work on this together?	

Our working explanation of the deeper problem(s):

Tool 3. Who Has What We Need? Expertise Map

Purpose: Identify the knowledge already present in the system and the expertise that must be connected to address the challenge.

Challenge or improvement goal:

Person / role / group	What knowledge or perspective do they hold?	What influence or access do they have?	How could they contribute?

Whose expertise is routinely overlooked?

Who has responsibility but not enough expertise? Who has expertise but little formal authority?

Tool 4. The Inaction Breaker

Purpose: Help a group move from repeated discussion toward a small, testable next step.

WE KNOW...

What do we already understand about the problem?

WE KEEP SAYING...

What conversation, complaint, or explanation keeps repeating?

WE HAVEN'T TRIED...

What plausible action remains unexplored?

WE COULD TEST...

What could we try in the next 30–60 days without redesigning the entire system?

Entrepreneurial leadership prompt: What if we treated this as a design challenge rather than a permanent condition?

The smallest useful experiment we could begin:

Tool 5. Leadership Load Map

Purpose: Make visible where improvement work is concentrated and where responsibility could be distributed.

Area of work	Who owns it now?	Who contributes?	Who else could lead part of it?	What happens if the current leader leaves?
Curriculum coherence				
Clinical partnerships				
Mentor preparation				
Candidate assessment				
Program improvement				
Faculty learning				
Recruitment / pathways				
Accreditation / policy				
Equity / access				

Where is the system most brittle?

What responsibility could be redistributed now?

Tool 6. Productive Tension Protocol

Purpose: Help a group engage disagreement as a source of learning without turning conflict into a contest.

The tension we need to address:

Examples: faculty autonomy AND program coherence; innovation AND compliance; university knowledge AND practitioner knowledge; consistency AND responsiveness to context.

Commitment / perspective A	Commitment / perspective B

What value is each position trying to protect?

What does each side fear losing?

What assumptions sit underneath each perspective?

Where do we actually disagree?

What do we agree must remain true?

What could we test without requiring either side to 'win'?

Creative abrasion is not conflict for its own sake. It is the productive engagement of divergent perspectives within relationships and structures that can hold disagreement.

Tool 7. Is This Actually an Adaptive Space?

Purpose: Distinguish spaces that report or coordinate work from spaces where people can genuinely create, test, and improve.

Indicator	Yes	Not yet
A genuine problem or question is being worked on.	☐	☐
Multiple relevant perspectives are represented.	☐	☐
Participants have permission to question existing arrangements.	☐	☐
Relationships are strong enough to support honest dialogue.	☐	☐
Productive disagreement is possible.	☐	☐
Time is used for design and learning, not only updates.	☐	☐
The group can test ideas in practice.	☐	☐
Feedback from implementation returns to the group.	☐	☐
Participants can revise ideas based on what they learn.	☐	☐
The group is connected to people or structures that can operationalize successful changes.	☐	☐

Reporting space: People exchange information.

Coordinating space: People organize existing work.

Adaptive space: People create, test, question, and improve.

What would make this space more adaptive?

Tool 8. Three Leadership Moves Planner

Purpose: Match the problem to the kind of leadership work needed next.

ENTREPRENEURIAL	ENABLING	OPERATIONAL
What needs to be questioned, reframed, or imagined? • What tension should we surface? • What assumption might we challenge? • What small experiment could we propose?	Who needs to work and learn together? • Whose knowledge do we need? • What relationships need strengthening? • What space should we create? • What disagreement needs to become discussable?	What would make improvement last? • What policy or routine needs changing? • What resource needs allocating? • What role needs clarifying? • What should become normal practice?

Which leadership function is most needed first—and why?

How will the other two functions eventually need to join the work?

Tool 9. Who Can Lead From Here?

Purpose: Identify leadership capacity across roles instead of defaulting to the person with the formal title.

Problem or improvement priority:

Person / role	What do they know?	What influence do they have?	What could they lead?
Ex., Program coordinator	Program structures	Formal / relational	Operational alignment
Ex., Methods faculty	Curriculum and pedagogy	Expert	Entrepreneurial redesign
Ex., Mentor teacher	Classroom enactment	Expert / referent	Clinical redesign
Ex., Clinical supervisor	Patterns across settings	Relational / boundary-spanning	Enabling dialogue
Ex., Teacher candidate	Learner experience	Experiential	Feedback and co-design
Ex., Chair / dean / district leader	Resources and policy	Formal	Operational support

Who is best positioned to lead the next part of the work?

Whose leadership capacity could be developed through this effort?

Tool 10. The 30-Day Leadership Experiment

Purpose: Convert analysis into a bounded action that produces learning and momentum.

Problem we are addressing:

What we think is sustaining it:

Leadership function most needed now:

☐ Entrepreneurial ☐ Enabling ☐ Operational

One thing we will do in the next 30 days:

People we need involved:

Permission, resources, or support we need:

What we will pay attention to:

When we will reconvene:

What decision we expect to make next:

Return to the Cycle

Complexity means there may be no single solution. It does not mean there is nothing you can do. The purpose of this toolkit is to help teacher educators notice more carefully, name persistent conditions, locate expertise and influence, select leadership moves, and create enough movement to learn what should happen next.

After the Experiment

What changed?

What did not change?

What surprised us?

What did we learn about the problem?

What did we learn about the system?

Whose leadership emerged?

What now needs entrepreneurial, enabling, or operational leadership?

What is our next move?

A Reminder for Practice

You do not have to be in charge of the whole system to create movement within it.

To cite: Butler, B. M., & Yendol-Hoppey, D. (2026). *Leading improvement in teacher education: A problems-to-possibilities toolkit*. The Teacher Educator Exchange.