

# UNBUILDING THE SILOS

*From Program-Centered Institutions to  
Partnership-Driven Ecosystems*

Peer-to-Peer Leadership Roundtable  
April 1st, 2026 | 10:30 AM CST | 60 minutes



## WHY EVERYTHING FEELS DIFFERENT NOW

If you're leading a K-12 district or college today, you know something fundamental has shifted. The old playbooks don't work. Strategic plans feel outdated before they're approved. Small problems cascade into crises overnight. And despite working harder than ever, you feel like you're always reacting, never getting ahead.

You're not imagining it. And you're not failing.

We've moved from a VUCA world to a BANI world, and most of our organizational structures are catastrophically mismatched to this new reality.

### From VUCA to BANI: The Framework Shift

#### VUCA (What we prepared for):

- Volatile - Things changed quickly, but patterns were recognizable
- Uncertain - The future was unclear, but you could scenario plan
- Complex - Multiple variables interacted, but modeling helped
- Ambiguous - Cause and effect were unclear, but analysis revealed connections

#### BANI (What we're actually in):

- Brittle - Systems appear solid but shatter under pressure
- Anxious - Constant dread without clear threats to defend against
- Nonlinear - Small actions trigger disproportionate consequences
- Incomprehensible - Information volume overwhelms sense-making

**The critical difference:** In VUCA, you could analyze your way to strategy. In BANI, your organization itself must be fundamentally restructured to survive. Futurist Jamais Cascio, who coined the BANI framework in 2020, describes this as moving from managing external chaos to managing the internal psychological fallout of that chaos.

## BANI IN YOUR DAILY REALITY

### QUICK DIAGNOSTIC: Which BANI Condition Is Dominating

Your Leadership Right Now?

- BRITTLE** - A system feels one shock away from breaking
- ANXIOUS** - Your team operates in constant dread
- NONLINEAR** - Small decisions trigger huge consequences
- INCOMPREHENSIBLE** - You can't make sense of what's happening anymore

**Check one.** This is your starting point for the roundtable.

### For Superintendents

#### Brittleness:

In early 2026, a Las Vegas Sun investigation revealed that Douglas County, Nevada lost 1,000 students (17.4%) over a decade. Superintendent Matt Alvarado recalled that when he interviewed for the position less than two years ago, financial metrics showed the district was “healthy.” His first six weeks on the job revealed structural crisis. The problem isn't unique to Nevada. Portland Public Schools is cutting 242 positions while Seattle faces an \$80 million shortfall and San Francisco is reducing its budget by \$113 million for the 2025-26 school year.

Nevada superintendents describe the “perfect storm”: flat per-pupil funding (\$2 increase for 2025, \$70 increase for 2026), increased costs eroding reserves, declining enrollment, and policy changes. At least one district is now eligible for state takeover.

#### Anxiety:

A January 2026 EAB survey of superintendents captured the climate: “Every year it feels like we're waiting for the other shoe to drop—enrollment, state funding, something—and then reacting instead of planning.” Leaders face simultaneous pressures from state legislatures, parent groups, labor unions, and boards with conflicting political orientations.

The same survey found that “traditional strategic plans ask districts to move everything forward at once, which feels unrealistic given staffing constraints, political pressures, and rapidly shifting external conditions.” Leaders report carrying “long lists of initiatives without a clear way to

prioritize.”

### **Nonlinearity:**

In 2025, California districts laid off over 1,200 staff members as enrollment decline in one area triggered budget cascades elsewhere, according to K-12 Dive’s year-end staffing analysis. In Texas, Leander ISD discovered that enrollment projections 400 students lower than estimates would create a \$4 million revenue reduction, triggering \$2 million in immediate staffing adjustments—small enrollment changes creating disproportionate consequences.

The same EAB research notes that a single curriculum decision can now trigger organized challenges from activist groups, with effects rippling across entire districts.

### **Incomprehensibility:**

According to Wonkhe’s December 2024 analysis of institutional challenges, leaders spend more time managing between disconnected departments than leading education. Students must repeatedly “explain their story” to disconnected offices. Digital fragmentation prevents comprehensive understanding of student journeys, while leaders report needing to coordinate support across “multiple disconnected units, each with different priorities”—creating cognitive overload that leaves no capacity for addressing actual challenges.

## **For Presidents**

### **Brittleness:**

Higher Ed Dive’s January 2026 analysis found that over 7,800 grants were canceled or suspended in 2025, representing \$1.6 billion in unspent federal research funding. The University System of Maryland cut its budget 7% for the second straight year to offset a \$155 million reduction in state funding, with leaders warning that furloughs or pay cuts may still be necessary at some campuses. According to Pew Charitable Trusts’ November 2025 fiscal analysis, institutions where 25% of enrollment comes from international students now face “significant drops, definitely hitting the budget.”

### **Anxiety:**

Inside Higher Ed’s January 2026 review documented multiple presidential resignations in 2025 under federal pressure: Jim Ryan at the University of Virginia, Michael Schill at Northwestern University, and Mark Welsh at Texas A&M University. Columbia University is on its fourth leader in three years, with a presidential search extended indefinitely as the University Herald reported

in December 2025: “The job has become so difficult, so politically fraught, so personally costly that highly qualified candidates are declining opportunities.”

An American Council on Education pulse survey found 98% of higher education leaders report federal policymaking has introduced uncertainty into institutional planning, with over 70% extremely or moderately concerned about threats to institutional independence and academic freedom.

As Macalester College President Suzanne Rivera told NPR in April 2025: “It’s been a challenging time to lead... Higher education institutions have become targets for political conflict. It can feel like a lot of abuse is being hurled at college and university presidents.”

### **Nonlinearity:**

Brown University struck a formal agreement with the Trump administration in July 2025 to settle investigations. By December, the Education Department had opened a new probe. Small policy decisions now trigger multiple simultaneous federal investigations, with consequences impossible to predict.

### **Incomprehensibility:**

Inside Higher Ed’s analysis found presidents caught between campus constituents’ expectations and trustees’ desires “based on pressures from legislatures or their own political beliefs.” Higher Ed Dive’s year-ahead forecast notes boards are being built “for compliance, not independence” — ideological shifts making traditional leadership impossible.

## **HOW SILOS AMPLIFY BANI CONDITIONS**

Your organizational structure isn’t neutral. **Silos make brittleness worse, anxiety higher, non-linearity more chaotic, and comprehension impossible.**

### **Silos Create Brittleness**

When departments operate independently, you optimize for efficiency by removing redundancy—the exact redundancy that prevents catastrophic failure. Wonkhe’s research on institutional challenges shows that digital fragmentation alone makes institutions more vulnerable to cyber attacks while inhibiting progress on strategic agendas.

**Evidence:** When Seattle’s kindergarten enrollment dropped, it cascaded through the entire \$1.3 billion district operation, creating an \$80 million shortfall. Each unit optimized independently

meant when one piece broke, everything shattered.

## Silos Fuel Anxiety

When staff don't understand connections between their work and others', when communication requires "heroic individual efforts to overcome structural barriers," anxiety becomes the institutional climate.

**Evidence:** EducationDynamics' 2025 Landscape of Higher Education Report found 30% of prospective students feel unfamiliar with college application processes due to disconnected systems. Research published in *The International Educator* shows educators are forced into competitive mindsets to protect enrollment, funding, and reputation—collaborative risk-taking gets disincentivized.

## Silos Generate Nonlinear Chaos

In siloed organizations, small decisions in one area trigger unexpected consequences elsewhere. Transfer policies created by one department impact enrollment in another. Budget cuts in facilities create academic problems. Causes and effects become impossible to trace.

**Evidence:** The same EducationDynamics report found 36.8 million Americans have "some college, no credential" because students face a "confusing constellation of transfer requirements" created by disconnected systems between community colleges and four-year institutions.

## Silos Make Everything Incomprehensible

When data lives in isolated systems, when expertise exists in separate departments, when no one has a comprehensive view of student journeys, you cannot make sense of what's happening.

**Evidence:** Leaders report needing to coordinate student support across "multiple disconnected units, each with different priorities"—the cognitive load leaves no capacity for addressing actual challenges

## RESPONDING TO BANI: WHAT RESEARCH SHOWS

Research published in *Frontiers in Education* (November 2025) on leading through BANI conditions reveals specific organizational responses:

BANI Condition	Required Response	What This Means
Brittleness	Resilience & Slack	Build redundancy; create bendable structures; develop cross-sector relationships
Anxiety	Empathy & Trust	Foster transparency; build psychological safety; create collaborative problem-solving
Nonlinearity	Context & Adaptability	Form small adaptive teams; understand interconnections; enable rapid pivoting
Incomprehensibility	Transparency & Connection	Distribute sense-making; share understanding across networks; build collective intelligence

The study, examining educational leadership strategies in BANI environments, concludes: “Brittleness is met with resilience and institutional slack; anxiety is eased with empathy, mindfulness, and trust; nonlinearity requires context and adaptability; and incomprehensibility demands transparency and intuition.”

The pattern: Every BANI condition is made worse by silos and improved by unbuilding them.

## A REAL EXAMPLE: COLUMBUS, OHIO

In 2024, Columbus City Schools Superintendent Dr. Angela Chapman faced a classic BANI challenge: students were learning skills that didn’t match the jobs being created in Columbus’s booming economy. The traditional approach would be: convene internal task force, analyze data, create new programs—all within existing silos.

Instead, Chapman unbuild the silo between K-12 and workforce development (documented in JPMorgan Chase’s October 2025 case study):

### **What she actually did:**

- Joined Ohio’s Regional Workforce Collaborative (launched with \$2.1 million from JPMorgan Chase, led by One Columbus economic development organization)
- Brought together business leaders, nonprofits, educators, community organizations, and government officials
- Created cross-sector teams with specific mandates: “address employment disparities, enhance workforce development”
- Worked with Ohio Excels and New Skills Ready Network to align curriculum with actual employer needs

### **Monday morning reality:**

- Students now participate in work-based learning tied to real regional employer needs
- Industry voices directly inform what students learn—not through advisory boards that meet twice a year, but through ongoing collaboration
- As Chapman told JPMorgan Chase: “Our students deserve a seamless experience; from the classroom to college to career, and that only happens when we’re building those bridges together. The Collaborative creates the structure to do just that.”

The result: Students experience pathways “from classroom to college to career”—not because Chapman fixed internal silos, but because she unbuild the external ones between education and workforce systems. The initiative grew rapidly; according to the case study, “That growth didn’t happen by chance. It’s the result of strategic partnerships and a shared commitment to preparing our students for the future.”

## **WHAT DOESN’T WORK: THE “COLLABORATION COMMITTEE” TRAP**

Many leaders try to unbuild silos by creating... another silo.

They form a “Cross-Departmental Collaboration Committee” that meets monthly, creates a charter, drafts collaboration protocols, and produces recommendations that sit on shelves. Meanwhile, departments continue operating exactly as before.

Why it fails: You can't committee your way out of structural brittleness. Real unbuilding requires actually changing who makes decisions, where resources flow, and how information moves.

The difference between Chapman's approach and the committee trap:

- Committee approach: Create new meeting about collaboration
- Chapman's approach: Put K-12 superintendent in actual decision-making room with workforce development leaders

One adds process. The other changes power structures.

## **ROUNDTABLE PURPOSE**

This is not a session about collaboration theory. This is a diagnostic conversation for leaders ready to:

1. Name specific BANI conditions in your daily work
2. Identify which silos amplify those conditions
3. Explore one specific silo you could unbuild
4. Learn from peers who've done it

## **Roundtable Ground Rules**

### **We Will:**

- Share honestly about feeling overwhelmed
- Name specific silos without defensiveness
- Listen for patterns across contexts
- Focus on building resilience, not defending brittleness

### **We Won't:**

- Pretend we have it all figured out
- Defend "the way we've always done it"

- Present prepared talking points

## REFLECTION GUIDE

### Before You Arrive, Identify:

#### Your Primary BANI Condition: Which feels most acute right now?

- Brittle: What system could shatter under pressure?
- Anxious: Where is constant dread present?
- Nonlinear: Where did small changes cascade unexpectedly?
- Incomprehensible: What overwhelms your ability to make sense?

#### Your Most Damaging Silo: What division in your organization amplifies that BANI condition?

- Which departments don't talk to each other?
- Where do students or staff fall through cracks?
- What information lives in only one place?
- Where does collaboration require heroic individual effort?

Your Monday Morning Action: If you could unbuild ONE silo that would reduce ONE BANI condition, what would it be?

## PROVOCATIVE QUESTIONS

### On BANI Leadership:

- When did you realize the old playbook no longer works?
- How much of your leadership energy goes to managing anxiety?
- What would change if you stopped pretending to have it all figured out?
- **On Organizational Structure:**
  - Which silos were designed for VUCA but amplify BANI vulnerabilities?

- Where have you optimized for efficiency to the point of brittleness?
- What redundancy do you need to rebuild?
- **On Starting Monday:**
  - What's the ONE silo amplifying your biggest BANI challenge?
  - Who could you call to start unbuilding it?
  - What would success look like in 90 days?

## THE INVITATION

### Join us if:

- BANI conditions (brittle, anxious, nonlinear, incomprehensible) describe your daily reality
- You recognize silos amplify rather than mitigate these challenges
- You're willing to examine which structures you maintain out of habit rather than necessity
- You want to learn from peers navigating the same impossible conditions
- You're ready to identify ONE specific silo to unbuild

This roundtable won't give you answers. BANI conditions resist linear solutions. Instead, we'll create space to acknowledge how hard this is, examine how our structures make it harder, and explore what becomes possible when we stop defending divisions designed for a world that no longer exists.

## WHAT TO EXPECT

**Before the Session:** Scan this Reflection Guide to consider your primary BANI condition and most damaging silo.

### **During the 60 Minutes:**

- No presentations or lectures
- Structured dialogue with superintendent and president peers

- Cross-sector synthesis—what can each learn from the other
- Each participant identifies ONE silo to unbuild

After the Session: You'll receive an executive brief synthesizing themes and a follow-up invitation for other networks for continued peer connection between quarterly roundtables.

## REGISTER NOW

This roundtable is limited to 25 participants to ensure genuine peer dialogue.

Registration closes when we reach capacity.

Register: <https://www.higherperformancegroup.com/p2p-page>

Already full? Join the waitlist for our June 3rd session.

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“In times of change, learners inherit the earth, while the learned find themselves beautifully equipped to deal with a world that no longer exists.” – Eric Hoffer

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