

MEMBER SPOTLIGHT

Andrea von Biberstein

Position: Teacher and program coordinator at Ridgeview Charter School in Sandy Springs, Georgia

In education: 21 years

Learning Forward member since: 2007

How Learning Forward helped her: The Annual Conferences are excellent. There's a wide variety of topics, the people who present are the practitioners, and you get incredibly good ideas. You get the chance to reflect and collaborate with colleagues all over the country.

On the Learning Forward Foundation:

In 2010, the Learning Forward Foundation awarded funding to a team of teachers at my school to lead a professional learning innovation as well as provided me a scholarship to participate in the Learning Forward Academy in 2016. Through participation in conference events, foundation-funded projects, coaching calls, and conferences, I have been able to collaborate and learn from experts in the field of professional learning and develop the skills and expertise to support teacher learning in ways that develop teacher capacity and build a positive school culture.



“I think, over time, when you’re supporting teachers, you get better at it. It’s essential to really channel your efforts on their professional goals, not just yours.”— Andrea von Biberstein

It’s fitting that Andrea von Biberstein began her education career coaching soccer because she’s been focused on goals ever since. After starting her teaching career more than two decades ago, she has alternated roles as teacher, coach, and a professional learning program director. She spent her first decade in the classroom as a high school teacher in Marietta City Schools in Atlanta, Georgia. Then she followed her calling to “help novice teachers who were entering public education and then supporting them” as a middle school improvement specialist, a “sort of teacher supporter/school innovation leader.” Since then, she’s mentored experienced teachers, earned her doctorate, and returned to the classroom, all part of her personal continuous cycle of learning. She’s now a half-time teacher and half-time Middle Years Program coordinator in Georgia, a job she says helps her add to the many goals she’s already achieved.

You taught for 10 years, then you were a mentor and improvement specialist. Why go back into the classroom?

After I finished my doctorate, I hadn’t been in the classroom in eight years, so I took a dive back in at the middle school level. ... I just wanted to really come to terms with how the profession had changed because my passion is supporting teachers. I went back to the classroom and transitioned to a new setting, and it’s been great. I’ve really learned a lot, and I’m supporting a personal life learning initiative, so I thought if I really

want to support this transition, I would need to experience it firsthand. ... It’s really empowered me. When you take that journey again, you see things differently.

In what way?

The learner has changed. One of the things that is essential is the way teachers have an opportunity to use all this technology at our fingertips. But to use it effectively is a challenge. When you compare when I first jumped out of teaching to now, the amount of resources that are available now is just

mind-boggling. And the extent that you can use that to engage students far outside the school walls is new. Before re-entering into the teaching role, that's something I didn't really think about explicitly.

Do you feel there is an advantage to now being both a coach and a teacher?

It does help me better understand exactly what the challenges are in that classroom setting.

How did you first get into education?

I coached soccer. I really enjoyed it. I had majored in economics in undergrad, and I just thought, "This is really fun." I decided to get my master's degree in teaching, which I did while coaching soccer. I taught abroad in Japan for a year, then I came back, and I moved to Atlanta from New York, and then I started. I loved it right away. You can inspire somebody and provide an experience for a child where they love learning, and it's really what motivates me.

Did you pick up teacher support right away, or did it take time to feel comfortable, despite your classroom experience?

I think over time when you're supporting teachers you get better at it. It's essential to really channel your efforts on their professional goals, not just yours. Where they identify the need to help or to support or need the support. So, it's been goal-oriented ... The isolation, especially for this generation of new teachers, is something that is a huge opportunity to allow collaboration within the classroom setting.

When they get that support, then, you see the appreciation?

It really exhilarates the professional, or it re-energizes. I had a colleague write me an email saying, "Yeah, this has

re-energized me." The ideas that others have either confirm that what you're doing is a good strategy or effective, or they expose you to other ideas, and that dynamic with collaboration is something that can inspire.

What does your work as a Middle Years Program coordinator include?

The Middle Years Program is an International Baccalaureate program, 6th to 10th grade. I worked with a committee of teachers to design and develop four professional learning days. It was focused around the various program initiatives, and then we have a literacy initiative as well. So what that involves is creating a committee to sit down and assess the needs of the staff based on their interests and where they felt they were. ... If people felt they were really skilled in a certain area and that was an area that we needed based on the survey data that we had, we recruited people to present sessions, and then we brought in people.

For example, one of the areas that we needed was to write clear learning targets, so we brought someone in from the district to do that. It was fun, we worked with leadership and a collaborative-type of approach, and then we evaluated the days.

You've been involved in programs and initiatives that focus on teacher empowerment, advocacy, and teacher-led learning — what we might summarize as "teacher agency." How does that manifest itself?

We did a peer-coaching initiative with Learning Forward, and that led to what we're doing now, which is a program that requires we reach out to people and be advocates for the profession. We might post blogs or find other avenues to advocate. That comes more naturally for some than others. But all these different initiatives funnel into the same goal: developing and

retaining quality teachers.

What are the biggest challenges that you face day to day in these professional learning projects?

You know, it's the change itself. A great example is: The current grant we have has given us a hundred professional release days to take time to collaborate in the classroom, classroom observation, to go to other sites and observe. And just the idea of taking a professional day ... It's just not a common part of our culture. We have a reflection in place where the teachers set professional goals. They've identified people to collaborate with. If you look at other professions, people take days, take weekdays to collaborate, but this is something brand new. Teachers aren't used to being allowed out of the classroom to develop professional learning, and they don't want to be out of the classroom, so we take baby steps.

You've also talked about how you believe measuring impact of professional learning is another huge challenge.

That was the goal of the Learning Forward Academy, to measure impact, and one of the goals of the grant we're working with is to measure impact, too. You start by looking at [Thomas] Guskey's five levels of evaluation, and you go through all five, and the last is measuring impact on students' learning. But it may take 2½ years to see those student outcomes. I'm saying 2½ years, but it may be even longer than that because it assumes that your staff is the same, your leadership's complicit, and there's no major changes in the needs of the students during that time. So, yeah, that's been my learning curve, where I'm learning what that looks like and then how to implement measurement that doesn't feel evaluative, and use those tools to help drive the change. ■