



## BEING FORWARD

# Alan Ingram

## Lessons learned in the military apply to education, too

**W**e can learn a lot by being intentional in our efforts to reflect on our work.

I've spent much of my career engaged in professional learning to build the capacity of individuals, learning teams, schools, districts, and a state education agency's impact in the field.

In addition to my experience as a federal programs director, superintendent, and deputy commissioner at a state education agency, I spent almost 22 years serving in arguably the best education and training organization in the world: the United States Air Force.

A large portion of my Air Force career centered on education and training in leadership development through the Enlisted Professional Military Education program for airmen in all stages of their careers. In the Air Force, providing a clear continuum of professional learning is necessary to inspire and develop enlisted leaders with the moral framework of integrity, service, and excellence.

This program differed from the technical training members received for their military job specialties. The lessons I learned from my Air Force leadership development experiences focused on what I would describe as an integrated approach to:

1. Attaining personal mastery for primary duty skills and learning about yourself as a leader and follower while assimilating to the culture and adopting the core



2. Understanding the broader organizational perspective, valuing diversity, understanding team dynamics, and embracing continuous improvement in leadership competencies to strengthen capabilities and execute operations; and
3. Gaining a thorough understanding of how to apply organizational and team dynamics cross-functionally while mastering leadership competencies and leading teams to achieve synergistic results.

Not unlike my Air Force education and training experience, Learning Forward's strategic priorities are tied to improved practice, collective responsibility, and a culture of learning. However, looking back, there are a few things I would tell my younger self about professional learning and continuous improvement.

First, every journey is different, and we all have unique learning needs, interests, and aspirations. As a school, district, or system leader, I would be more intentional about integrating learner choice into personalized

professional learning for teacher leaders and principals while considering the learning needs of the system (e.g. where are the biggest needs/gaps in relation to the student learning needs and educator competencies).

For example, learner choice is not an either-or proposition but rather requires that education leaders find the right balance to ensure adult learners hone skills to succeed at all levels of the organization and achieve their goals.

Second, I would spend more time connecting the dots (alignment), narrowing a system's professional learning focus, and finding the right collaborative structure to minimize random acts of improvement and maximize resources (e.g. high-quality curriculum tied to standards, instructional materials, and assessments).

For example, as a district superintendent, I would expect my team and myself to be more deliberate in assessing impact and refining plans to ensure the intended outcomes for new student learning.

Finally, I would remind myself that, as system leaders, we don't have to know everything. Hire wisely, develop and trust the team, and surround yourself with others who share the vision, passion, and commitment to equity and excellence in public education for all students.

**Alan Ingram is president of Learning Forward's board of trustees. ■**