



COMMUNITY PERSPECTIVE

Audrey Hobbs-Johnson

Circles of gratitude create time and space for learning

Practicing a spirit of gratitude is one of the most profound ways that any of us can enrich our lives. It is an attitude of appreciation and thankfulness for the good that we receive in life. As we honor the past, present, and future, gratitude propels us forward with purpose.

The Learning Forward Foundation board of directors creates gratitude circles by giving back to the community through scholarships and grants. We listen carefully to educators and their current research to guide and co-construct our collective practice.

In May, the foundation awarded grants to seven professional learning individuals and teams. Among the awardees are teachers, instructional coaches, principals, and central office administrators, representing six U.S. states, Bogota, Colombia, and the Learning Forward affiliate leaders from Illinois and Oklahoma.

FROM RESEARCH TO PRACTICE

The awardees' focused work is embedded in their local contexts and problems of practice. At the same time, each project is intentionally aligned to the key elements of Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2011).

In *The State of Educators' Professional Learning in Canada* (Campbell et al., 2017), researchers found that "a focus on student outcomes was considered important in the content and intended benefits



ABOUT THE LEARNING FORWARD FOUNDATION

The Learning Forward Foundation is dedicated to impacting the future of leadership in schools that act on the belief that continuous learning by educators is essential to improving the achievement of all students. Learn more at <https://foundation.learningforward.org>

of professional learning. Professional learning focused on improving student achievement can benefit improved achievement results. ... Generally, professional learning content needed to develop teachers' efficacy, knowledge, and practices in order to support students' efficacy, engagement, learning, and equity of outcomes" (p. 69).

What we know can change what we do. With their collective focus on student and educator outcomes, this year's awardees provide powerful examples of professional learning practices that reflect a strong research foundation and will take us from research to practice with models that can provide authentic impact stories. These stories can spark additional research possibilities.

QUESTIONS FOR EXPLORATION

The following overview of the 2018 awardees' problems of practice illustrates that not only will their learning enrich the school or system where they work, but it will also provide new stories and examples to move our collective learning forward within broader communities. This work



Christina Miller



Tara Dedeaux



Katoria Gaston



Susan Cole



Katherine Cottrell



Kevin Seymour

is grounded in professional learning that reflects continuous improvement across the spectrum.

In **Charles County Public Schools, Maryland**, Christina Miller, working alongside Heather Sauers of the Maryland State Department of Education, asks, “What are the clearly defined steps to support the necessary change in teacher practice of formative assessment?”

In **Harford County, Maryland**, Tara Dedeaux wonders, “How do we find the spark that will make teachers passionate about what they are doing, communicate this passion to students, and, as result, increase student achievement? How do I find and grow that passion in all of my teachers?”

In **Gwinnett County, Georgia**, Katoria Gaston considers, “What impact does a teacher and mentoring framework have on teacher retention?”

In **Leander Independent School District, Texas**, Susan Cole asks, “Is it time to stop tweaking a system we have grown out of and start building one we can grow into? How do we begin to redesign and create a professional learning system that empowers our staff and, in turn, our students?”

Katherine Cottrell at the **Gimnasio La Montaña in Bogota, Colombia**, knows that to be successful she must develop a shared vision among all school leaders and teachers. She is

grappling with what must come next to put this vision in practice, one that will include strategies that will have impact on teacher and student learning as well as the school culture.

Kevin Seymour and Mary Suzanne Smith, **Learning Forward affiliate leaders in Illinois and Oklahoma**, are thinking about how they can create an informed and networked organizational structure that will support educators through the delivery of quality, sustained professional learning.

SHARED PERSPECTIVES

These leaders have identified and articulated their unique focus of exploration into quality professional learning for their own learning communities. While they use different words to express their perspectives, they are all striving toward more aligned professional learning that meets both the individual and collective needs of students and, at the same time, provides learning to individuals and teams of educators to support system coherence and sustainability.

To accomplish these tasks, awardees want to work on these areas:

- Setting goals that include achieving clarity and common understanding on what professional learning can and should be;
- Creating space, structures,

strategies, and tools to attain student success;

- Generating strong connections to work climate and culture;
- Strengthening communication that enables educators and communities to be part of creating student success; and
- Achieving student outcomes that meet the needs of tomorrow, not yesterday.

RESPONSIVE SUPPORT

The Learning Forward Foundation is committed to making a difference for all educators and students in our system. We believe that supporting professional learning to improve practice with a focus on student learning is essential to student success.

We have significant evidence and data to show that the key to increasing student success is for educators to become learners themselves. This happens when educator learning is intentional, focused on student needs, and where teacher voice is heard, valued, and supported.

It takes focused collaboration between the foundation and awardees to achieve this vision. After awardees receive a grant or scholarship, the foundation supports their ongoing learning and implementation of their change projects through a networked system.

A unique feature of this support

system is the Touchpoint, a one-hour conversation that includes the awardee and foundation team members. During the Touchpoint, the awardee reflects on project outcomes to date, activities designed to reach the intended outcomes, and evidence of impact.

This safe, nonevaluative approach creates a powerful community learning space that supports awardees' intentional decision-making toward changes and improvements in their problem of practice.

CELEBRATION AND THANKS

The foundation celebrates the newest awardees and thanks the donors who have made contributions to this work. Learning Forward Foundation awardees, past and present, make the lives of students and educators brighter with their gifts of passion, creativity,

WHAT I'VE LEARNED / Craig Randall

Continued from p. 11

teacher's classroom can be less intimidating than in your office.

- Only offer a suggestion as the last part of the reflective conversation. Offering it earlier can cause teachers to feel anxious or judged, and, as a result, they sometimes don't hear the compliments of strengths that you share.
- Avoid the words "need" and "should." People get defensive with the use of these words.
- Only work on one growth area at a time. When people spread their growth focus on more than one area, efforts are diluted and the growth is minimal. When the focus is on one area, the growth is more substantial.

When done well, the reflective conversation can lead not only to teacher growth, but also whole-school improvement. When you spend a lot of time in classes, you learn about

DONORS MAKE A DIFFERENCE

A broad donor base has enabled the Learning Forward Foundation to advance critical learning projects and achieve success for students and educators.

Donors include educators, researchers, partners, and sponsors in the education community who believe in the work of Learning Forward and the foundation. Their support helps make a difference for awardees and the educators and students they reach.

expertise, and empathy. When teachers, teacher leaders, and other educators carry an attitude of gratitude, the benefits are boundless.

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teachers' expertise and can then empower them by finding ways to have teachers lead professional learning sessions and PLC groups, or pair them up to build on each other's strengths.

In addition, I have found that the thoughts teachers share during reflective conversations often lead to new initiatives that propel the whole school forward. For example, when I praised a teacher for her skill in differentiating instruction for her students, she made helpful suggestions for enhancing differentiation schoolwide.

These ideas led directly to revamping English courses to provide multiple novel choices in each genre studied and to that teacher leading numerous schoolwide professional development sessions. Without the frequent and positive nature of classrooms visits and conversations, these ideas would not have manifested themselves.

Teachers work hard and are proud of the work they do to help students

grow. As school leaders, we support and celebrate teachers' growth. Trust-based observations are the best way I know to understand and build teachers' capacity, and therefore to help all students succeed.

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Craig Randall (craig@trustbased.com), president of Trust Based Enterprises, has used lessons learned from his experiences as a school counselor, college basketball coach, teacher, and principal to create trust-based observations. ■