

MEMBER SPOTLIGHT

Beth Brockman

WHY LEARNING FORWARD IS MY PROFESSIONAL LIFELINE

Position: Assistant superintendent for employee services in the Plano Independent School District in Texas.

In education: 25 years.

Learning Forward milestones: Member since 2008. Academy Class of 2012. Two-time member of Annual Conference Host Committee.

Current role with Learning Forward: Dallas 2018 Host Committee chair.

Why she is looking forward to the 2018 Learning Forward conference:

I'm looking forward to meeting people I haven't met yet so I can hear their stories and learn together. Learning should be a joyous process, but sometimes we lose the joy. The Learning Forward conference is a great time to celebrate learning. It's my favorite of all conferences.

How you can connect with her at the conference in December: Find her on Twitter @BethBrockman.



"I connected with people who were working toward the same goals I was and struggling with the same challenges at the same time."

— Beth Brockman

When Beth Brockman transitioned from being a school leader to a district leader, she had big goals and a small staff. As the new district director of staff development, she was tasked with revamping the district's approach to professional growth, moving it from a focus on compliance and onboarding new teachers to creating a comprehensive and coherent approach to professional learning.

To serve a district with 2,500 teachers and over 45,000 students, she oversaw just two staff members and a secretary. As she faced this exciting

challenge, she reached out to the Texas affiliate of Learning Forward for connection and support. Immediately, she found a group of kindred spirits and says she "saw a lot of alignment between what they were doing and what I wanted to be doing."

Learning Forward Texas and its members quickly became invaluable resources, serving as her professional lifeline. Over time, her engagement grew with what she calls "the mother ship" (Learning Forward's national organization). Brockman has since been selected as an Academy member, served as a Texas affiliate board member, and

helped organize regional and national Learning Forward conferences.

This year, she serves as Host Committee chair for the Learning Forward Annual Conference. She talked with us about her past, present, and future with professional learning.

Q: Why do you describe Learning Forward as your professional lifeline?

A: I'm a big fan of learning from other people's lessons (what worked, what didn't, pitfalls, unanticipated consequences), especially when you are new to a job or a field. But being the district leader for professional learning can be a little lonely because you are often the only one doing this work.

Through Learning Forward Texas, and later Learning Forward, I connected with people who were working toward the same goals I was and struggling with the same challenges at the same time. They became a great source of support.

Not only did we meet every four to six weeks [at affiliate meetings] and talk about all the issues I was struggling with, but the other members become my "phone-a-friends." We were in constant communication.

Learning Forward has also helped me step back so that I can spend time and energy on important problems of practice that could otherwise get lost. When I was selected to be an Academy member, I tackled an issue that doesn't always get enough attention in school districts: professional learning for principals and other campus administrators.

The context for the project was my strong belief that our principals and

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assistant principals need to be engaged in rich, differentiated, student-needs-driven professional learning themselves if they are going to oversee effective professional learning for their teachers. You cannot provide what you haven't experienced yourself.

I focused on creating collaboration opportunities for campus leaders and then widened it out to include other forms of professional learning for them. This involved assessing the needs and interests of principals, students, and the district as a whole.

You have to build a professional learning system that addresses all three levels in a coherent way. It might be that administrators are interested in working on gifted and talented approaches, but our data tell us we need to focus on the needs of low-achieving students. The priority always has to be on the greatest student needs.

Q: You have worn many hats in education. How has professional learning shaped your career?

A: Professional learning is a powerful shaper of thinking. It helps us stay focused on the end goal — student achievement. In schools, you always have to start with the end goal and work backwards.

As a result of my work in this field and the support I've gotten from Learning Forward, I have gotten into an evaluation mindset that shapes

everything I do. I'm always asking what the data say, how we are evaluating whether something is working, and, if not, what decision do we make to fix it? Evaluation is probably some of the hardest but most important work professional learning leaders grapple with.

In my current position, I marry my passion for professional learning with my human resources role, because I believe that strong professional learning is one of the best recruitment and retention strategies we have. I've been a teacher and a principal, so I know it's a big selling point that we are focused on employees' learning and growth.

The next step for me is becoming an advocate for professional learning at the federal level. I feel strongly about the advocacy piece because schools have to change and the lever for change is professional learning.

Q: You are serving as Host Committee chair for Learning Forward's 2018 Annual Conference. Why is the conference important for you and your work?

A: The Annual Conference is my favorite conference because it is one of the only times I can focus on my own learning.

As a teacher and then as a campus principal, I was always focused on learning more and doing better. But when I became a district professional learning leader, I found that I was spending most of my time facilitating other people's professional learning. I went from being a learner to a facilitator.

Even when I went to conferences

with colleagues from my district, I was usually the one facilitating the learning of the team. There were a number of years when the Learning Forward conference was the only time I could focus on areas where I or my department needed to grow. I would often keep two columns of notes from the sessions — one on the content and one on the facilitation strategies, because the presenters were great models for my own facilitation role. If you look at my history of session attendance, it would tell a story of what I was working on at the time, both personally and with my district.

What I value most are the relationships I have formed and sustained at the conference. The sessions and events really emphasize the collaborative and relationship-driven nature of our work. We have round tables and dialogue and meals together

— it's not a sit-and-get.

I volunteer to help with the conference because I value so highly the people who come. I want them to see Learning Forward as a partner, like I do. They are all walking this walk with me.

Q: What are your tips for getting the most out of the conference?

A: Don't miss the opportunity to meet people you don't know. It can be scary to sit down with people you haven't met, but it's worth it. I have stayed in touch for many years with people I met at the conference, people whom I would not have met any other way. Now I look forward to seeing them each year in December.

Another very important piece of advice came to me when I started as an Academy fellow from a wise woman who was an early graduate of

the Learning Forward Academy. She pointed out that it becomes even more difficult to take care of ourselves when we are responsible for professional learning because we are taking care of everyone else.

She advised me to take an extra day every time I went to Academy meetings so that I could be a tourist for the day. I took her advice, and I'm so glad I did. It was a very easy way to invest in myself so that I would be in a better place to be focused and do the hard work.

If you're not careful, the conference can be like standing in front of a fire hose because there is so much good information. So after the conference sessions, even though I'm tired and I have work emails to catch up on, I make sure to go out and do something in the evening, even if it's only once or twice. I always appreciate the time I take to meet new people and connect. ■



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