



## MEMBER SPOTLIGHT

# Olivia Elizondo Zepeda

## Reach out as you navigate transitions

**T**ransitions are familiar to Olivia Zepeda. From immigrating to the U.S. from Mexico at age 14, to serving as the first professional development director for her Arizona school district, to serving as an associate superintendent, Zepeda has navigated multiple changes.

Change is an ongoing and often challenging reality for many educators. We invited Zepeda to share her insights about navigating career changes in education, the value of professional learning across transitions, and Learning Forward's role in her life.

**Current role:** Educational consultant

**Previous positions:** Associate superintendent, curriculum director, professional development director, teacher

**Location:** Yuma, Arizona

**Roles at Learning Forward:** Academy graduate, Learning Forward board of trustees, Learning Forward Foundation board of directors

**How she got into education:** I thought I was going to be a secretary. I didn't like typing, but my counselors were moving me toward that field. Then, in college, I had a work study job as a reading lab aide. I got to work with students and really enjoyed it, so I became a teacher.

### **On her transition into teaching:**

My first year, I walked into an empty classroom and had to go hunt for textbooks and materials. I had to ask other teachers for their leftovers. I was lucky because I had been an aide, so I knew the teachers. From that experience, I learned a lot about how to support new teachers.

### **On her first big career transition:**

When I stepped out of the classroom in 1998 to serve as professional development director, my district had never had anyone in that role before. I didn't know what a professional development director would do.

Going to an NSDC [now Learning Forward] conference gave me a whole new perspective on what professional development is. And it helped me realize how important it is to connect with others in your role, no matter what it is.

### **Her secret to thriving during**

**transitions:** In a new position, it is important to learn from other people who have already done the job and been through the kinds of challenges you'll face. It's also important to connect with people who are in your present role and learn from each other.

### **Her advice about leading transitions**

**and change in schools:** I think the biggest challenge [to making change stick] is follow-through and support. Teachers want to do the work. As leaders, we must provide the necessary

follow-up and support to make sure change is implemented.

It takes so much — new learning for our teachers, supporting them while they practice, allowing them to bend and experience the frustrations that happen with change, monitoring, and looking at data to see if it is making a difference.

When they are going through change, teachers need to feel comfortable going to someone and saying "I don't get it. Can you show me?" That's why professional learning needs to focus on human connections and on networks of support.

### **Why professional learning has been important during her career**

**transitions:** In every position, it is important that you continue to grow. That takes connections with other people you can learn from.

### **Why she has remained a Learning Forward member throughout**

**career transitions:** Professional learning is necessary for good teaching and learning. When I became an administrator, I knew from my previous position how important it was for the professional learning director and curriculum director to work side-by-side and have the same vision. Now that I am retired, I continue to be part of the Learning Forward family to give back to the profession and continue my own learning. ■