



BEING FORWARD

Sue Sarber

LEARNING WITH A PURPOSE, IN PERSON OR ONLINE

Sue Sarber is supervisor of professional learning in the department of teaching and learning for Arlington Public Schools in Arlington, Virginia. She joined the Learning Forward board of trustees in December 2019.

Why have you made professional learning a focus of your career?

Early in my career, I was a part of a two-year program supported by our state department of education in which a math teacher and a science teacher (like me) paired up, attended professional learning, and supported staff with what we learned. I loved seeing effective instruction inspire teachers and students, and I wanted to continue supporting teachers. As my career developed, I continued to support colleagues in their growth as a technology integration specialist at the central office and at the school level, and then I found my way to the professional learning office.

When and how did you first become involved with Learning Forward?

In 2006, I attained my dream job — professional learning supervisor. I was excited to be able to positively impact professional learning for teachers across the district. My colleague, Judy Newhouse, who has been a pivotal part of the Learning Forward Virginia affiliate since it was founded, reached out and said, “You need to be a part of this organization.” I quickly found out that she was right. Being involved with the Virginia affiliate has been invaluable in my work and has brought me lifelong friends.

I have also made so many connections and found a community through the national organization. My first Learning Forward Annual Conference was a whirlwind. Everywhere I went, participants were eager to share ideas and engage in dialogue about what they were working on. I had never experienced the “community” feeling at such a large conference, from hotel lobby conversations to deep learning in all-day sessions. It is amazing to learn about what is working in other districts, because those of us in professional learning positions are often the only ones in our districts.



What are you looking forward to in your role as a Learning Forward board member?

I’m excited to serve Learning Forward with an amazing group of board members to support Learning Forward in being the best it can be. As [the current board] met for the first time, I thought about what I could bring to the group. We all bring different things to the table. To my left was an experienced businessman, to my right were superintendents and university presidents, across the table were university professors. My place at the table is as a K-12 educator and a Learning Forward affiliate member. I look forward to the creative and innovative ways

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these diverse perspectives can support educator learning through this organization.

What do you think will be the most pressing professional learning needs in the coming year or two?

So many things have changed and will continue to change due to COVID-19. I see it as an opportunity to personalize adult learning and meet teachers' needs based on their students' needs. In my district and at Learning Forward Virginia, we've been tossing around ideas about virtual conferences, online fireside chats for small groups to connect, virtual coaching conversations, and brainstorming structures and processes to make learning accessible for all staff.

You were an instructional technology leader for many years. Can you share some wisdom about how to make virtual learning and

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teaching high quality?

I could talk about this all day because it's something I really care about. Online learning is vastly different than in-person instruction, but some of the key ideas hold true for both. That's the case whether we're talking about student learning or professional learning for educators.

Online learning should be purposeful and meaningful (for example, focused on "power standards" or the most important things for students to know and be able to do). It should provide structured opportunities for peer collaboration and sharing of materials, just like in-person learning. It should also take into consideration

the varied range of learner experiences, incorporate feedback, and have varied ways to demonstrate mastery.

In addition, online learning should have visuals and audio options for accessing the content, be organized in small chunks of information, and have clear communication of expectations and directions.

It's important to be kind to yourself and each other in the online learning environment. Online learning can be exhausting. I just read an article that explained that one of the reasons is that we are so used to the physical context that without the usual nonverbal cues, we have to interpret a lot more and fill in lots of information.

Despite these challenges, it is our job as learning professionals to take learners from where they are to where we need them to go. That's what really inspires me to do what I do and to contribute to what Learning Forward does. ■

CALL TO ACTION / Denise Glyn Borders

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for Professional Learning is the strategy to address these challenges. Such professional learning is an equity strategy and an improvement strategy.

When educators have access to professional learning aligned to students' most pressing learning needs, they are better equipped to ensure that *all* of their students experience meaningful learning. High-quality professional learning can help educators use technology to engage students and deliver on the promise of the student standards-aligned materials many systems use. High-quality professional learning also helps educators understand how to support students with diverse needs and backgrounds and how remote learning situations impact those with special needs.

Sustained, collaborative professional

learning isn't just for teachers. As school and district leaders build long-term plans around multiple scenarios for schooling in the coming months, their learning needs are also intense. They must be in a position to not only support their teachers through new environments but also to create new systems to support students, communities, and colleagues.

Our investment in the professionals who make teaching and learning possible has never been more important. Unfortunately, we know that professional learning is often on the chopping block when the economy experiences a downturn. Making such cuts when the need for professional learning remains so high would be disastrous for students.

We owe so much to educators. Let's continue to strengthen the learning

systems that support them and speak up for the investment they deserve. The structural inequities will only deepen and the academic gaps widen if we fail to sufficiently prepare and sustain continuous high-quality learning for educators.

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