

TPOV Collection

Learning Forward Academy Class of 2020



THE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING ASSOCIATION

ACADEMY CLASS OF 2020

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Preface

Academy Class of 2020 Coaches



Nikki Mouton & Joe McFarland

As a group, the Learning Forward Academy Class of 2020 has truly gone “to infinity and beyond” with sharing their “why” in the following TPOVs. Reading each one has given us great insight into what motivates and drives each member’s passions, beliefs, attitudes and values and exemplifies the heart of each Academy member. It gives great hope for the future of public education to know that these individuals, with this level of passion and dedication to the current and future generations of youth, are leading the way in systems and organizations across the country and world. As coaches, we couldn’t be more proud and humbled to have been able to lead and collaborate with the AMAZING Academy Class of 2020! Congratulations and continue to be the strong, courageous leaders that we know you to be!



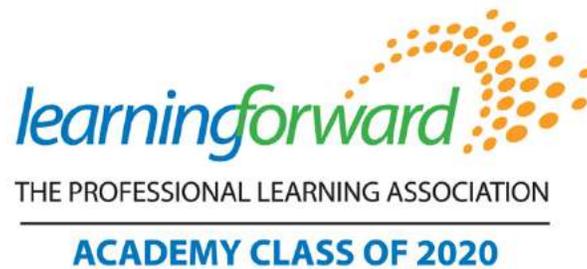
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For the Academy to be successful, it takes a team. These valued Learning Forward colleagues supported the Academy in many ways, some visible and some invisible.

Denise Borders	President/CEO
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LF Foundation Board	Scholarship Awardees Support



Learning Forward Academy Class of 2020



Mind Benders

To do different, think different!



THE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING ASSOCIATION

ACADEMY CLASS OF 2020

Steve T. Brady



Core Values As An Educational Leader

I believe there are four core values that are integral to education. These core values are accountability, innovation, shared responsibility, and learning. In the following sections, I will share my personal beliefs surrounding why I chose these values to be so pertinent.

The first core value that is integral to teaching and learning is accountability. Accountability is so important to teaching, because in education, we are responsible for every student's education. Every administrator, teacher, parent and student is responsible for the educational success or failures. As 21st century educators, we need to hold ourselves responsible for constructing a school system with the aim of making every student college ready. Additionally, accountability is so important to learning, because it makes all invested parties conscientious of the results we achieve.

The second core value that is integral to teaching and learning is innovation. Innovation refers to changes in thinking, processes and how our organization moves forward. In education, we need innovative individuals that are purposeful, courageous and continually improving education through research and action. This core value impacts 21st century learning by introducing new creative ideas.

The third core value that is integral to teaching and learning is shared responsibility. Shared responsibility occurs between students, teachers, and a principal. This value is so important to achieve, as it is in an area that has traditionally been one of isolation and independence. Shared responsibility means working together interdependently and collaboratively to promote student learning. This core value means that as educators we must learn from one another, students, parents, teachers and the administration to improve student learning. Shared responsibility means we need to have transparency and entrust one's self-interest to another. Finally, shared responsibility means taking ownership for our individual and collective actions and decisions.

The final core value that is integral to teaching and learning is learning. This may sound redundant, but it is extremely important to understand that the students' learning is the most important concept in education. Learning should be continuous, meaningful, and a

challenging effort that results in student success of all students. Educators should use evidence-based instructional strategies and data driven decision making to perform student instruction. I believe that personalizing instruction engages all students to make their learning meaningful, and from this more meaningful learning, student achievement will flourish.

Sandy Conklin



Dare to Differentiate

It is imperative as educators that we create and nurture an environment where every child can learn in a way that is personalized and positively impacts their growth. Recently, districts have shifted from a one-size-fits-all model to creating innovative pathways driven by differentiated instruction. From high achieving students to struggling learners, setting individual student goals and building ownership in learning through student voice and choice help create collaborative expectations for student achievement. The power of student ownership, voice, and choice in the classroom naturally leads to differentiated learning. It is essential that this approach becomes a part of the culture in a student-centered classroom.

Expertise in differentiated practices has proven to be even more critical now as we have pivoted in and out of a remote learning environment in 2020. Many discussions have evolved over how we can create this differentiated learning experience through a virtual setting. By using differentiated methods for instruction, teachers are contributing to the development of each child beyond academics through addressing their social, emotional and physical wellbeing, creating well-rounded students who are ready to be successful in college, a career and in life.

Differentiated strategies are effective when planned intentionally to increase the level of cognitive demand for each student and provide experiences that are engaging and relevant. The critical piece of this work includes providing professional learning around differentiation strategies and allowing time for implementation, reflection, and evaluation of the

impact of such strategies. Our work must be focused on student learning, a collaborative culture and collective responsibility, and one that is results-oriented.

Kadesha Dean



Balance: A Necessary Ingredient for Excellence

I recall being given an unfamiliar task by one of my supervisors to complete. Because this was all very new to me, coupled with being new to the department, I must confess that many feelings of anxiety, insecurity, and overwhelm, consumed me. I conveyed these feelings to a confidante and was reminded that I was given the task because everything I needed to be successful, I already possessed it; I just needed to tap into it and “extract the ‘balance’ variable.”

As a professional and a life-long learner, I have always had an appreciation for continuous growth and development and have come to the realization that identifying and prioritizing what is important is essential in being able to experience and accomplish excellence. Operating in a spirit of balance not only ensures that success and excellence are achieved, but aids in maintaining adverse emotions which can at times impede accomplishing tasks.

Employing the “balance” value has also been necessary for me in other areas, including, being a supervisor myself and a parent. It has been crucial to demonstrate the ability to capitalize on balance to be more effective mentally, physically, and emotionally. I have made a conscious and intentional effort in utilizing balance to foster productivity and proficiency in the planning, implementing, monitoring, and evaluating of all assignments-professionally and personally.

In my professional and personal experiences, one of the biggest lessons that I have learned is that whether you are among many or solo, one must use the resource that you currently have to cultivate the outcomes that you desire.

Susan McAdaragh



“The Point Is to Understand.”

-Albert Einstein

Teachers of mathematics need to understand the mathematics they are teaching. While this statement, at first glance, may seem fairly straightforward, the word “understanding” may have conflicting definitions. It is worth taking the time to tease out the variances in the meaning of that word.

I recall a conversation I had with a friend about her son, then a math education major at one of our local universities. Her son had been engaged in a class discussion about the teaching of mathematics when the professor asked the class members to raise their hands if they thought that it was necessary to understand the math, they were going to be teaching in order to be successful in teaching it to students. Sadly, my friend's son was the only one in the class to raise his hand. This is an extreme example of “understanding” when it comes to mathematics teaching as it demonstrates that not only does the level of understanding in a math class differ between classrooms--sometimes it's not there at all!

Richard Skemp, a professor in the Department of Education at the University of Warwick when he wrote about math understanding, differentiated between two types of math understanding: that which is “relational understanding” and that which is “instrumental understanding.” In the 1976 article called *Relational Understanding and Instrumental Understanding*, Skemp writes that relational understanding is what he had always previously thought of as the only definition: “knowing both what to do and why.” “Instrumental understanding,” Skemp writes, “I would until recently not have regarded as understanding at all. It is what I have in the past described as ‘rules without reasons,’ without realizing that for many pupils *and their teachers* the possession of such a rule, and ability to use it, was what they meant by understanding.”

While Skemp wrote these words more than 40 years ago, I still see evidence of the “instrumental” type of understanding being embraced in the elementary classrooms I visit. The reasons for this, I believe, are varied. Some teachers feel that there is not enough time in their day to establish the understanding that students need. Instead, they believe that providing students with the tools (algorithms) to solve the problems and tricks to figure out what tool to use is the best they can do. Other teachers, perhaps, were taught in this way and really do not know of another way to understand mathematics. Still others may wish to use methods that instill relational understanding in their students but feel pressured by colleagues to teach in a more traditional way. Whatever the reason, students who learn math through instrumental understanding will eventually be hindered in their grasp of mathematics. The strategy of using tips and tricks to solve a problem falls apart if and/or when the student forgets one of the tips or mixes up the steps in a procedure. Without relational understanding of the mathematics, the student has nothing to fall back upon.

So, it seems as if the pathway is clear: teachers need to understand the math they are teaching. But how will we get them to understanding? We could provide classes in mathematics content and make it a requirement that all elementary teachers either demonstrate proficiency in each content area or take a mathematics course in that area. But as Seth Godin points out in his blog, ignorance is, actually, rarely the problem. Instead, the problem is that people don't care about what you care about because they don't know what you know. And the reason for that is that they don't believe what you believe.

Instead of focusing on what teachers don't care about, or know, or believe, let's focus on what teachers do bring to the table--no matter where they are in their current understanding of mathematics. Teachers bring an immense amount of background knowledge about their students that are based upon the conversations they have about mathematics in their classrooms.

We can capitalize on teachers' work with students by asking them to notice what their students are bringing to the classroom math discussions. The research that provides the basis for Cognitively Guided Instruction (CGI) a professional development program originated by Carpenter, Fennema, Franke, Levi, and Empson, “focuses on

- (a) the development of students' mathematical thinking;
- (b) instruction that supports that development;
- (c) teachers' knowledge and beliefs that influence their instructional practices;
- (d) the way that teachers' knowledge, beliefs, and practices are influenced by their understanding of students' mathematical thinking; and
- (e) how professional development impacts teachers' knowledge, beliefs, and practices and what they learn from interacting with their students.”

These researchers have found a way to help teachers to recognize what they know about how students learn and to then help them to care about improving their practice.

This is important work. Teachers *do* need to understand the math they are teaching. Let's help them to develop that relational understanding by building on what they know and on what they can learn from their students.

Zipporah Miller



A Letter to My Students *Lessons From My First Days of School*

It was the Friday before Labor Day weekend. That was the day I walked into my first teaching position a High School Biology and Introduction to Chemistry Teacher. I was so excited; my childhood dream had come true. Let me tell you the story.

I interviewed at noon, and by the time I got home, I received a call saying I was hired. I cannot describe the feeling, but it was a great feeling. After letting me know I was hired, the Instructional Coordinator asked if I could report to work the next day which was a Friday.

I woke up early Friday morning, and dressed up in a professional outfit. I found the perfect pair of pants, a blouse, earrings, and a necklace. I was ready to begin my journey as a teacher.

I arrived at the school earlier than the scheduled time, around 8:00 a.m. The Assistant Principal met me in the main office and walked me to my classroom. After making sure they worked, he handed me my keys, informed me there was a staff meeting at 1:00 p.m. and he left.

I paused and looked at the four walls of my classroom. There was a long green chalkboard in the front of the classroom, bulletin boards across one side wall and the back of the classroom. The other side wall was where the natural light came in. A classroom with a wall full

of windows. Desks were in perfect rows and columns and chairs neatly under each desk. The teacher's desk was in the front left of the classroom. I stopped and thought wow, what a nice classroom.

I paced around the room and every so often someone would pop in to say hello and introduce themselves. The staff was so welcoming. I even had a surprise visit from the front office staff with a goodie bag. The bag was filled with supplies like chalk, stapler, paper, post it notes, paper clips, blue, black and red pins, my grade book and much more. At that time, I organized my supplies in my desk drawers.

It was getting closer to one o'clock and the teacher next door walked by and invited me to walk down with her to the staff meeting. As I walked down to the media center, I could not help but notice that all the classrooms looked amazing. Posters on walls, labeled bins in different areas of the class, instructions on the boards and in most cases a "Welcome to my Class" sign. I remember thinking, their classrooms don't look like mine. I panicked, when will I have time to go buy some things to decorate my class. I also noticed that everyone was dressed in casual clothes, real casual, like shorts and t-shirts.

The staff meeting seemed short as the administrative team shared a wealth of important information. They handed out our class rosters, the plan for day one, our duty stations and staff handbook. The part of the meeting that stood out to me was when the Instructional Coordinator reviewed this blue document called "The Dimensions of Learning". I was all ears. I thought to myself, that is how I need to structure my lessons. I was asking question after question making sure I understood each dimension. Then one of the teachers leaned over to me and said, you don't do this on the first day. The only thing you do on the first day is go over rules. I thought, that made sense but how can I review rules for forty-five minutes? At the end of the staff meeting the administrative team announced that the building would be open Saturday for teachers to finish working in their rooms. I breathed a sigh of relief knowing I would have time to set up my room. That moment I also understood why my colleagues were dressed in casual clothes, these are set up days.

That Saturday I spent the entire morning setting up my room. When I left my room looked much better not as amazing as some as my colleagues, but it said welcome. Saturday evening, I prepared my gradebook and wrote my classroom rules. I cannot remember how many rules but there were many.

Tuesday morning was here. I reported to school early, wrote the rules on the board and as the first bell rang, I stood at the door ready to receive my students. I was eager to meet my students but also nervous. As the students entered, I greeted them and many of them asked, if there were assigned seats. I informed them they could sit wherever they wanted.

The second bell rang, and it was time to teach my first lesson. "The Rules for Mrs. Miller's Classroom" I went over each rule one by one. After I explained the rule, students were to copy the rule on their sheet of paper. The students were compliant. They listened and followed my directions. I still remember the look on their faces when I was finished, almost 45 minutes later. A somber look. One student even whispered, "We can't do nothing in this class."

As you can imagine, managing my class that semester was tough. I spent more time dealing with behavior issues, writing referrals with no idea why I could not teach the entire class period. It was a few weeks into the school year, and I was getting worn out. My fifth period class walked in from lunch excited about the conversations that may have occurred during their break. I didn't know what to say. Ok class, was not working, lets focus on today's lesson was not working, so I sat down at my desk and said I will wait until you are ready to learn. The students talked the entire class period. I remember the look on one student's face, she looked at me the entire time almost to say please teach us. The students left class and said we are going to tell the principal Mrs. Miller did not teach today. They did. I was confused at the principal's response, I thought he would say to the students, if you wanted to learn you would have stopped talking, his response was that wasn't a good use of your time.

I don't have to tell you how the rest of the semester went; you can probably imagine. The good news is that it was only one semester, the bad news is that it was one semester too many.

The memory of my first semester living my dream has prompted me to write this letter to my students.

Dear Mrs. Miller's First Year Students,

It is with an apologetic heart that I write this letter.

I had always dreamed of being a teacher. Not just any teacher but a great teacher. However, my first semester with you was a learning experience. What you may not know is that you taught me what it takes to become a great teacher.

I entered teaching with the credentials to teach biology and chemistry, but I did not have any teaching experience. I had no idea of the complexities involved in the teaching profession. I didn't know what I didn't know, and I had no idea what I needed to know. The great news was I was up for the challenge.

I gave you my best my first semester, but I knew I could always do better. I want you know that that first semester, I went to visit numerous classes to watch my colleagues teach. I also asked to go to training sessions to learn how I could be a better teacher. I stayed up late and planned on weekends and it was all worth it. I learned so much that first semester that helped me have a better second half of the year. It has been twenty-seven years and I am still learning.

I also want you know that when I started teaching there was a shortage of science teachers. School districts were looking for individuals with a strong science background and a passion for teaching to step into those roles. While this may make you wonder, I want you to know it is a great idea. Individuals who enter the teaching profession from other careers have a strong background in the subjects they teach, and great real-life examples that they can share with students. Our role, however, is to provide them ongoing support especially during their first year of teaching so they can become great teachers. Right now, we have a teacher shortage, so we are recruiting more and more teacher candidates at every level and in every subject from different majors and profession to join the teaching workforce. My letter to you is to also let you know that I am committed to establishing support programs to ensure any teacher who enters the teaching profession without a traditional education degree will receive the appropriate support.

The lessons I learned from my first semester have helped me shape this program. Here are a few things I learned.

- I learned that that room where learning occurs was not my classroom, but our classroom.
- I learned that I should have spent the first day getting to know you as students and not going over rules.
- I learned I should have spent my weekend calling your parents to introduce myself and letting them know I was looking forward to meeting you.
- I learned the difference between rules, procedures, and routines.
- I learned to invite you in developing the rules and discipline for our class.
- I learned that it should not take 45 minutes to go over the class rules and all students should feel empowered with the discipline plan we developed.
- I learned that no student should ever feel they cannot do anything in my class.
- I learned that in order to maximize time for learning, I need to have procedures and routines in place that we all follow. Yes, the principal was correct, that was not a good use of your time.
- I learned our learning space should be organized in a manner that encourages collaboration.
- I learned the first days of school are critical in establishing a culture in our classroom where we all respect each other, and learning is valued.

I am writing this letter because I need you to know I love teaching and I didn't give up. I want you know that each day we had a challenge I tried to figure out what I could do to make things better. I want you to know that your success was important to me. Finally, I want you to know you are the reason I work every day to ensure every student has the best teacher.

With great appreciation and respect,

Zipporah Miller

Carla Pezzani-Rovira



How Bias in Education Shaped My Teaching

My decision to become a teacher wasn't the result of that one single "ah ha" moment that you sometimes hear about, but rather the culmination of many smaller events that occurred during my own education. As a white, middle-class student, I was taught to believe that a commitment to school would help to change my life, and therefore a teacher's words and actions were of the utmost importance to me. During my time as a student, I had many interactions with educators that forced me to stop and examine my own beliefs, and reflect on the lifelong impact, good and bad, that a teacher can have on a student.

The first real memory that I have from school is from the third grade. I can't recall the teacher's name, but I do remember the powerful feelings that I experienced in her room. This teacher took the time to recognize her students for good behavior, providing us with small tokens such as fun pencils and erasers, and even the occasional candy. She seemed to want the best for all of her students and was always encouraging and kind. I felt safe and respected in her class. However, as a child of 8 or 9, I remember wanting to fit in so badly, and build a friendship with another student, Pam. So, when Pam suggested we sneak into our classroom during recess to steal some of the teacher's prizes, I didn't hesitate. After taking what didn't belong to us, we quickly hid the items in our bags and rejoined the class at recess. It was later that day that I witnessed the result of my actions. Trevor, the only black student in our class, was punished for something he didn't do, and nothing he said, nor lack of any evidence, could keep him from being sent to the principal's office. While I can only guess at why the teacher assumed he was guilty, I was taught a powerful lesson that day: being a white, female afforded me some luxuries that others didn't have. Even today, I often wonder what lesson Trevor learned that day.

In fourth grade, I experienced a more positive lesson. Mrs. Becker was the teacher that showed me how to believe in myself. During this school year, Mrs. Becker created the "Care Bear Club", a class club that you became part of by exhibiting kindness as part of your daily life. One act of caring wouldn't lend itself to admittance into the club, but rather a commitment to kindness.

This was where I realized just how important my treatment of others was, not only for the recipient of kindness, but also for me as an individual. By having a teacher show that she believed that I was a good person, I was also able to develop that belief. It always reminds me of the quote "My teacher believed I could, so I did!"

The first two experiences were during my more formative years; however, I still remember an instance from high school that taught me just how important a teacher's words and actions can be. During my sophomore year, we were reading the novel, The Great Gatsby, and I stayed after class with another student to talk to the teacher about the book. Although there were two of us, the teacher spent the entirety of the conversation positioning her body towards the other student, only occasionally acknowledging me. As we talked about the narrator of the novel, Nick (by all accounts a good and caring man), the teacher said to Nicole "You deserve a Nick". She then paused and looked at me and with a sigh said "Oh, and you too". Such a simple interaction, but one that somehow its impact is still felt by me today.

These specific interactions with educators, along with many more, helped to turn me into the reflective practitioner that I am today. Although a teacher can't always recognize how their words and actions might affect a student, I still make sure to think carefully about how I interact with my students. I pay close attention to their non-verbal cues, and when I notice something out of the ordinary, I make sure to address it. I let students know that I am a human and that I make mistakes, but I am never afraid to apologize or address a situation that might be uncomfortable. The only way that I'm able to do these things is by making sure that I know my students on a personal level. I use check-in circles, conversations, questioning, and lunch with students to help build relationships. I keep track of things that they mention so that I'm able to use those things in lessons and in future conversations.

I also spend a lot of time reflecting on my own biases, and I try to own them, even when they're embarrassing to think about. If I notice that my biases are affecting my interactions with students, I talk to my colleagues, and get their suggestions on ways to improve. I seek out equity training, and I encourage others to do the same. I advocate within my district for more diversity, and sponsor clubs that help to promote healthy self-images when it comes to race, gender, sexuality, etc. I also make sure that I don't isolate students by letting them see only one side of a social justice issue or feel that they can only express a certain belief. I try to help students understand that their opinions are valid, as long as they can support them and speak intelligently about why they believe something.

While I am not naive enough to believe that I've never said or done something that has had a negative impact on my students' belief system, I do know that I work hard to be aware and to try and create as many positive experiences as possible. Long after they're gone from my classroom, they might not remember anything I taught them, but I know from experience that they will remember how I made them feel.

Marie Ratcliffe



COVID Dreams

Spring 2020 brought a world of change to education and our experience of it as leaders.

I am an avid dreamer. I dream when I'm happy. I dream when I am puzzled. I dream when I am struggling. Often, my dreams make me laugh when I wake, and often they have a subtext that helps me to understand a challenge I am facing. The subtext regularly supports increased insight and clarity.

The early days of COVID 19 were personally challenging to me. I found that the prolonged crisis, uncertainty and changeability shone a spotlight on every single one of my own personal insecurities and I had several nights of fretful interrupted and limited sleep. I was fatigued and anxious. One morning I woke, remembering a very brief dream from the early morning. In my dream, I am looking out of my office window on the third floor at the School Board Office, to the parking lot below. I notice a very quickly developing sinkhole in the parking lot that is growing a couple of feet each second. It is suddenly so large that you could drive a full-sized school bus into it. I am panicked and know that I must raise the alarm. But I cannot find my shoes! And my phone isn't charged! I leave my office, shoeless and phoneless, hoping to find someone who can help before the entire building falls into the sinkhole. To my great relief, I see that Frank, the Facilities Manager, is in a meeting in the corner meeting room, and I am instantly calmed. Frank is an engineer! He will know what to do! Thank goodness!

Cue the wake-up alarm.

As I interpreted the dream, it seemed very clear that COVID-19 and the resulting pandemic was the sinkhole threatening to literally collapse the school district, and figuratively, our school system as I know it. My lack of shoes and discharged phone represented the feelings of being unprepared for managing this new normal. And Frank, I think, represented the wholeness of the system – that I alone was not responsible to fix or manage the impact of COVID-19 – that we could do that together as a system.

In the days and months that followed the dream, I worked hard. Long days that suddenly had no formal bookends of arriving at the office and leaving it at the end of the day, since I was working from home. Strangely unfamiliar landscapes as I worked from my familiar kitchen table or from the familiar dining table or from the familiar spare room, noting that what was unfamiliar was doing this work from these spaces on my laptop with the only "in real life" person being my husband. The way of work was unfamiliar – my eyes stung at the end of the day from staring at my laptop screen, and my ears ached from wearing earbuds. Zoom was how we communicated and worked together, and I needed some strategies to manage the physical impact it had. What helped was eye drops every hour and moving spaces so that I could use the computer speakers occasionally to give my ears a rest.

I had trouble remembering my daily schedule, because it was "this zoom meeting", then "that zoom meeting", and then "another zoom meeting", all while never leaving my home. I realized that pre-COVID, I would check my schedule in the morning, and plan the geography of my travels across the city, starting at the office, then going to that school, and then that school and then back to the office, helping me to solidify my day's plan. All of that was gone. Just sit in one space and look and listen and try to contribute.

The Alternative school site where I am principal for part of my time was devoid of life at the start – no teachers or other staff in the building, and most significantly, no students. Empty parking lot, empty classrooms. For a change of pace, I began working from there for a few hours a day, relieved to be going out. It was just me and the rodents, so I was always sure to knock before I entered any room so that they could make a graceful exit! It was cold with no people to trigger the building's heat, and I found a space heater to plug in under the table in the classroom where I worked. Eventually, the Admin Assistant and the Social Worker and the custodian started to come in, and we worked out a merry dance of physical distancing and sanitizing.

While there for this extended time, I noticed that the building was in rough shape. It was old and not well cared for. I asked the custodial staff to support better cleaning.

Teachers dropped in to pick up equipment and resources. Normally loud and boisterous, they were hushed and worried and serious as they quickly came in, picked up some things and left.

Then we began to consider our next steps. Our students were still our students. Prior to COVID, they were the most vulnerable students in our district, and now they were isolated at home some with families who had lost their income and some with mental health challenges and many with food insecurity. When the students were in school, we looked after food for them, making sure they had breakfast and lunch. We worried. How were they coping?

April, May and June became a blur, and reflecting now, I cannot say with any certainty how and when things evolved. But what I know for sure is that by the end of the school year, we had figured out how to support the Emergency Service Workers children full-time, the food security piece was managed, and all of the health and safety measures needed to teach during a pandemic were in place. We had at least 10 weeks of remote learning under our belts with

every student who needed technology being given it, and, in the last month, had welcomed back every student, in real life, for at least eight hours a week, some for more.

I also solved an issue that had bugged me for the last 2 years. The sinks in the student washrooms at the Alternative school looked to me as though they were really dirty (I had complained repeatedly to the custodial staff about them), and I had some time to tackle them myself. I brought rubber gloves and cleaning supplies from home and worked feverishly to show the custodian what a clean sink could look like. It turned out that after a morning of scrubbing, the sinks were just old, so worn out that the enamel finish had worn off. They could never look clean. A plumber arrived one morning to check the fire extinguishers and I asked him what it would take to replace a sink. He told me that we were in an old building, and that it had been rumored to close for many years, and so they would never think of replacing a sink in such circumstances. I commented that I was really sad that our most vulnerable students had to wash their hands at the oldest sinks in the district. I watched the plumber take a step back, exhale, and then look me right in the eye. "Put in a work order", he said. I did. Within a week, all of the sinks and taps were replaced. The washrooms our students returned to were much improved.

One of the highlights was the first day that students came back for in-person instruction. As a group, they are reluctant students. But on that day, as they lined up 6 feet apart outside the school, waiting to declare their good health, every one of them had the nervous excitement of a Kindergartener, ready to enter into a new world, one where they couldn't wait to connect and fall in love with the exact same teacher, who, just 3 months ago, they held in a healthy teenaged cool and mild disinterest.

The teachers had a similar aura: excited to welcome the students, excited to do the work that they remembered they loved, the work that they were called to do. It was as if all of the disconnection had reminded us why we were pulled to our work.

The pandemic has taught me many things. The first is that a crisis shines a flashlight on flaws and illuminates them. I first observed that personally, when my own insecurities rose up and overwhelmed me one morning. Did my colleagues think I wasn't working hard enough? Was I not included in that discussion because they think I'm not capable? Or was I simply not needed? I also watched that same flashlight illuminate the inequities our students faced – inadequate food at home, economic challenges, uneven access to technology, worn out facilities. At the same time, this illumination was happening in our city and province. COVID was infecting the elderly, and service workers who were often recent immigrants and people of colour at a greater rate than the larger population. Across the continent and the world, this pattern repeated endlessly, with, for example, George Floyd and Black Lives Matter.

The second lesson I learned is that our school district is a remarkably creative and resilient entity, and the community of people within it work collaboratively to support action and care that promote positive outcomes for students. After my initial momentary meltdown, I reminded myself that I am a capable and industrious leader who is well positioned to pivot and innovate

as needed. The youth workers at the Alternative program dropped off food hampers every Wednesday to families who needed assistance. Every student was given the technology they needed to learn in a new way. Teachers and educational assistants stretched and learned new skills to support student learning. Bus drivers monitored the safety of playgrounds and delivered food hampers to schools. Every member of the community worked, in a different way than they had in February, towards the same goal, the support of our students and families, of our community.

Most importantly I learned something that I think I always knew but never articulated – something essential and core to my work – that the system in which I have played out my career, public education, is uniquely positioned in our society to move the status quo. It is the one system in our country that can have a significant and profound impact on societal inequities, and COVID has helped me see that the system is ready and surprisingly very able to flex to make equity happen, when you focus on it. I have worked as a teacher, counsellor, school administrator and district administrator for thirty-four years, and I think the time has always been right to move that status quo, but I feel compelled now to ensure that in the final years of my career, I keep equity at the front as my vision and at the base as my driver.

Piggy Bank



THE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING ASSOCIATION

ACADEMY CLASS OF 2020

April Chauvette



I Didn't Know I Was Missing the Flamingo Until I Found It

There's nothing like a cryptically urgent call from your child's school requesting a meeting on a Friday afternoon to get your attention. Apparently, we needed to discuss the most recent results of my youngest's SpEd testing. You know that uneasy, anxious feeling you get in your stomach? Yep, I got to sit with that for a couple of hours until we had this conversation. Granted, this feeling wasn't new when it came to Kamryn.

She'd never been an "easy" kid. The girl literally came out of the womb causing anxiety, with idiopathic neonatal seizures. Idiopathic, as in "no known cause." Not a good answer for a Type-A mama. Living in the hope that maybe she'll outgrow them but finding out the hard way that she has not, has kept us a little uneasy over the years. Given her lively history, I suppose I shouldn't have been surprised when the full battery of cognitive testing done every three years had yielded results that startled even the diagnostician. While things appeared to be going fine in classes, all evaluation data pointed to an intellectual disability, what was formerly called mental retardation. I was left reeling when she spoke those words, hardly able to take it in. And not for the first time was I struck with the thought of "How did we miss this?" We'd entered the early childhood program at 3 years old with a few delays in speech and motor skills, needing a 504 plan. Around her 6th birthday, we (with the help of her teacher) finally recognized her significant ADHD, qualifying her for Special Education services and needing a do over of kindergarten. And now we were jumping directly into the realm of intellectual disability, requiring specialized services and programs that didn't even exist at our home campus.

Leaving the elementary school we'd been a part of for ten years, since my eldest started there, felt weird. Our home campus was never one of the better performing schools in the district, but both of our girls had always been well taken care of there. Would my youngest,

with her newly identified needs, receive the same level of care and connection at this new school that we had never stepped foot in?

Working and living within a school district in which I had full confidence helped, but as a mama, that's not always enough, especially when you have never really felt on level footing with your child's ever-changing challenges. However, nothing prepared me for what awaited us at this new school. Thinking about it even now, brings tears to my eyes.

CC Mason Elementary wrapped their arms around our family the second we crossed the threshold. From the teachers and assistants in the special program's classroom, to her inclusion classroom students and teacher, to the librarian, nurse, receptionist, and campus leadership, their hearts immediately opened up wide to my girl and our family. I had always considered the environment of our neighborhood school positive and supportive, but what I see now is that it was mostly just *comfortable* for us. I truly didn't know the difference until we experienced it first-hand. My fears about these more specialized services at Mason separating and excluding Kamryn from her peers have been met over and over again with open doors and open hearts, welcoming, supporting, including, and loving my daughter. As confident and comfortable as I was in our previous school, I am forever grateful to Mason for truly seeing my daughter. Seeing all of her disparate abilities, the gifts and challenges she brings to the table, and growing her and our family through it all. If "every kid is one caring adult away from being a success story," (Josh Shipp), then Mason Elementary was authoring an anthology for my daughter.

What kind of crazy alchemy created the collective nurturing and inclusive environment at this campus? You'd think this would be hard to pin down, but it isn't. It's the environment we create for the adults. We more easily replicate what we experience. Though this supportive, students-first culture has long been a mainstay of our ever-growing district, it feels just as fresh and sharp at this campus as it did when we were a small rural community. The matriarch, heart, and architect of our district's culture often led through stories and metaphors. One that has stuck with us all these years later is the story of the flamingo. While each of our 44 campuses has its own mascot, the flamingo has since become the unofficial mascot of the entire school district.

What the heck does a flamingo have to do with school culture and learning environments? Well, here's a snippet from the Leander ISD archives:



Did you know that not all flamingos are brightly feathered?

They are not born that way, nor do they just naturally grow up that way. It's not due to genetics, finances, or IQ.

The secret to the difference between brightly colored flamingos and white, gray, and drab pink flamingos is their environment.



These drab flamingos live in an environment where they can survive, while brightly colored flamingos live in an environment where they thrive.

These flamingos live in an environment where the food supply is rich and nourishing, and the surroundings are the best there is for a flamingo to flourish.

Our students will either survive or thrive, based on the environments we create and nourish them with.

(This metaphor is best experienced in skit form with principals both dressed up as dull flamingos entering to the Funeral March and hot pink ones entering to Vengaboy's "We Like To Party," and parallel student groups.)

Each and every day I am thankful to work in a school district that believes in providing a rich and nourishing environment for its adults to flourish, so that they, in turn, can do the same for their students. Both of my daughters and my family are thriving, much in part to the supportive and inclusive environment that we are blessed to be a part of. #Flamazing

Scott D. Eggerding



What Do I Stand For As a Leader of Professional Learning?

I have been at the same school for my entire career. Thankfully, the school and I have both changed since I started in 1992. But the thing that has not changed is the school's motto, *vita plena*, or the quest for a fulfilling life. While motto's can often be trite, I have taken this one to heart since it really encompasses what education is all about. It is not the filling of a vessel. It is the development and the road to independence that is so necessary.

My school, Lyons Township High School, is a high-performing high school that could very easily rest on the performance of 60-75% of its students. Many graduates move back to the area and send their children to the school, and it is not uncommon for there to be 3 or more generations of one family to graduate from LT. The challenge is seeing and meeting the needs of the other 25%, which is what drives me. The research on underperforming students is very clear. While most of our students engage in summer programs, take SAT test prep classes, travel to Chicago to see the museums and theater, we have other students who have never left the neighborhood they grew up in. When I taught American Studies for students who would be defined as "at risk," we had students list the states they had visited, Wisconsin and Indiana were as far as most of them had ever traveled. From that perspective I began to see our school as the haves and the have-nots. About 20% of our students had second homes in Michigan or Wisconsin. Conversely, 20% of our students were living in apartments, mobile homes or public aid housing. For as many parents with advanced degrees who took the train into the city to work in a skyscraper, we also had many parents working in the service industry having never graduated college. The only place where these worlds collided was at school, and even more so at the high school since the elementary districts are very clearly segregated by economic status.

This leads me to my teachable point of view, cultivated from teaching students who came from the “have-nots.” I know as a teacher that I cannot control what happens outside of my classroom, or as an administrator, outside of my school. We cannot control everything in a child’s life. But we also cannot write off a kid because they don’t come in as ready to learn as the student of privilege.

If I am to provide or lead students to *vita plena*, I have to make the time in the classroom as efficient and focused as possible. From the administrative side, I have to make sure access and equity are not just buzzwords. We can control what we do, how we offer curriculum, what we say, and how we say it. As I tell our teachers often, are we removing the barriers to learning that we control, or are we setting up additional barriers based on our assumptions? When I hear the phrase “those kids” or “prep kids” (the preparatory, or “prep” level, is our lowest level and is geared toward college readiness, but there are two levels above prep, “accel” and honors/AP), I know we have set up barriers to learning. When we are OK with 1 in 4 students not meeting standards, I know we have a problem. When teachers complain about the number of asterisks next to student names in their rosters for IEP’s, 504s or medical accommodations, I know we are not working toward equity. And after the summer of 2020, our community has started to question the status quo and has begun to question whether *vita plena* is for everyone or just the privileged few.

For these reasons, I see a guaranteed and viable curriculum as a clear pathway, not an obstacle, to learning. As we have begun to map our courses and then perform vertical alignment (looking at all levels of Algebra 1, for example) our teachers are noticing that the only difference between the lowest level and the highest level is the pace. But when we look at the essentials, they are not different, despite the levels. This summer, our Algebra I team got together and looked at the three maps from prep to honors. The team leader took the maps and ran them through a wordle to find the common words. When he ran the three maps simultaneously through Wordle and limited the output to words mentioned 3+ times, he came up with 12 words that effectively mapped the essentials of Algebra I. And the words were not the content of the course, but the mathematical practices necessary to understand Algebra. For the teachers, this was a revelation. For me, this was affirmation.

So how do we know what to teach and how do students show what they have learned? What is the purpose of learning and how does it apply to the next topic/course/main idea? We have over 300 teachers and they are all very well qualified to teach. Nearly 90% have advanced degrees in pedagogy or their content area. Fewer than 10% are untenured, and of those that do not have tenure in our district, many have taught in other districts before coming to LT. The problem has been trusting that all 300 have the same vision of *vita plena*, that all teachers teaching the same course have the same essential outcomes and ensuring that all students have

the opportunity to demonstrate their learning. While we have spent a great deal of time coordinating our professional development around areas of focus that link the professional learning communities 4 big ideas in conjunction with Hattie's research on student learning, without coordinated and articulated curriculum, we are still allowing for 300 different approaches to learning outcomes.

After spending 6 years improving our professional development, teachers keep coming to the same solution--we can all get better, but if we aren't working on the same outcomes, there is no impact across the system. This led to my problem of practice, since the coordination of a school-wide curriculum review leading to a guaranteed and viable curriculum is not something anyone wants to undertake, and everyone assumes exists. As we have gone through the process of the curriculum review, the professional development matters. When we link outcomes to assessments, assessment practices matter. When we determine essential outcomes, whether or not the grade reflects learning matters. When we link outcomes to standards, the expectations of what students should have learned when they enter a new course matters. And as we embark on a year of implementing an equity and dignity framework, the question of whether or not students are graduating with a shot at a fulfilling life matters.

What we spend time on reveals our priorities. By focusing on developing a guaranteed and viable curriculum, the time spent on "lesson planning" can better be spent on "lesson learning," including what needs to happen to ensure that all students learn the essentials. When Michael Fullan addressed this topic in Dallas, he made the point that change is not rational. Alignment is rational. Coherence is emotional and subjective. The alignment work needs to be completed so that the coherence work can begin. When combined with high quality professional development, the impact on breaking down the institutional barriers to learning has the potential to be profound and is the only way I can see to get to Hattie's holy grail of student-empowered learning.

Emily Fenske



What I'm About

After graduate school, I worked as a data analyst for a network of 32 high-need schools in the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) system. My portfolio of schools included 10 elementary schools and 5 high schools. When I was hired for the role, I was told plainly: "We have a high school problem. We would like you to work on that." I, of course, agreed to do so, as one typically does in a job interview.

Given this broad directive, I zeroed in on Freshman On-Track (FOT), a key metric that combines ninth grade credit accumulation and core course failures and is strongly predictive of high school graduation. It is so predictive that when looked at longitudinally, an FOT rate is almost identical to an eventual graduation rate for that cohort of students. I started hosting network-level collaboration and professional development sessions on FOT for the 5 high schools. This soon led to more in-depth follow-up sessions at each school. I started analyzing and interpreting data for schools weekly. I regularly met with FOT team leaders at each high school and attended ninth grade team meetings to assist and support the team leaders in their work with teachers. My team also collaboratively led the creation of an FOT dashboard to automate the reporting process and to enable schools to have short-cycle protocols to examine and act on data independently. It was demanding work, but we stayed focused on FOT as our primary goal and worked collaboratively across roles to tackle the underlying reasons why students might be struggling and provide appropriate support.

In June after that first year, I have a very distinct memory of standing in my kitchen cooking dinner and seeing my boss calling me on my cell phone. This seemed unusual, so I picked up, and he was practically yelling, "Have you seen it? Have you seen the data? They just released it!" CPS had just published the final FOT numbers for the year, the official calculations that would be a part of each school's rating by the district. I grabbed my laptop and brought it to the kitchen counter so I could keep stirring

whatever I was cooking. Quick searches of the final spreadsheet showed that the network had posted its best FOT rate ever, 82.2%, and had the highest year-over-year growth in FOT of all networks in the city (11.4 percentage points). I remember just standing in my kitchen, crying. We could actually calculate the number of students, real students, who were now going to graduate high school when they might not have before, because we were there. Because of the work that we did.

That memory in my kitchen is so vivid because that moment crystallized my purpose in my work. Doing that work and achieving measurable, impactful results for students, through meaningful relationship building and collaboration with adults, felt like stepping into my purpose in the world. I will be honest and say I have not had many feelings quite like that kitchen moment since then. But I am chasing it. I am chasing that feeling, I am chasing that purpose. I believe that by combining evidence and collaboration, we can improve outcomes for students. That's what I'm about.

Shaunda Garrison



Finding My Purpose

It was May 1996 when I graduated from Longview High School as a National Honor Society member, in the top 10 percent of my class, student council leader, PALs leader and a member of numerous other organizations. My father was an educator, and my mother was a nursing home administrator, and both were very involved in my education. I can remember all the conversations about which college I would go to, because there was no option as to whether or not I was going but rather which one was I thinking of attending. This was an expectation set very early on by my parents. I recall graduating and heading off to college knowing for sure that I would be a pediatrician. If you asked anyone that knew me who/what would capture my heart, they would tell you kids! They were right, it was those babies! So, I set my mark out into this amazing world with intentions on becoming a pediatrician. Have you ever seen a kid that loved going to the doctor? Probably not. Well, I was that kid. I loved my pediatrician as a child, because he always seemed to find a rat in my ear when he would look inside through his ear lens.

I can see his face now as I type. I loved him so much; I can remember his name and not some of my teacher's names. I didn't realize it then, but Dr. O. W. Brown ignited a passion in me to be with children.

The journey began, I went to University of Texas at Arlington and graduated with a Bachelor of Science with a major in biology and minor in chemistry. Yep, I was on my way to medical school, so I thought. I applied for medical school and wasn't accepted. Due to the ridiculous application fees, I only applied to 2 schools. You ask why, well that was all I could afford. Remember I was fresh out of college without a job! I was heartbroken, thought my world was over. I could literally feel it crashing down on me. I can easily relive the experience in this moment because it was that hard of a fall for me. See I was the baby girl in the family, the one who always made straight A's, the one who always followed all the rules, the one who was mild and meek and the one who was determined to persevere. All I could think about was how would I share this news with my family, as I already knew they were expecting the celebratory call. I finally built up the courage to call. My hands were shaking, I could feel my heart beating outside of my chest, the palm of my hands were dripping with sweat, I was crying...basically an emotional mess.

I started with my dad first, because I'm a daddy's girl. Don't get me wrong, I dearly love my momma. It's just that daddy and I hung out more at the schools, you know doing bulletin boards and making copies, in the teacher's work lounge... I felt like I was a teacher. Daddy could relate to anything I would talk about and in fact, he would welcome the conversations, even the ones that most girls would have with their mom.

My daddy was and still is my favorite educator. Now that you have some context about my daddy, you can probably see why I called him first (insert smile emoji). Yep, you've got it...he would listen to his baby girl with no judgment. He did just that. He also shared that I might want to consider applying for pharmacy school since it was closely related to my degree. I thought about it for about 2 weeks, researched it, well the money side of it and thought, oh yeah this will work. So, off I went applying to pharmacy schools. I was accepted! Finally, I felt like my life was coming together. I had several other friends that were in pharmacy school at the time, too. As the date to leave for school grew closer and closer, so did the anxiety. I was grappling with the decision to be a pharmacist. I mean major grappling. I just couldn't see myself in the field, so my dad thought it would be a good idea for me to shadow a pharmacist. Of course, I took his advice and shadowed a retail pharmacist and a clinical pharmacist.

After the shadowing was complete my decision was made, this was NOT for me! Now, how was I going to convey this news? Honestly, at this point in my journey I was gaining a little wisdom and realized that whatever decision I made regarding my career path needed to be one that set my soul on fire. I was convinced that if I didn't get that feeling,

I used to get when walking in to see Dr. Brown, that it was not the right fit for me. I had something to follow, a model if you will follow and I was determined to find that “thing” that made me feel like that again. So, here we go again, trust me I know.

However, here we go again this time with a little girl who was becoming a woman and beginning to think for herself, dream, believe, set goals, recover from being told no... yep this was a different woman now. I had to introduce myself to who she was and introduce her to my family and friends.

It was the weekend of my birthday and I planned a dinner party, inviting all of my close family and friends. I recall getting all dressed up, mainly for two reasons: one because it was my birthday, and the second reason is because I knew I would need every lift available to give me the courage to dare greatly. Let's just say I made it through the evening and the one thing that stuck with me that my daddy said is, “Baby, all we want for you is to be happy and love going to work every day. If being a pharmacist will not do that for you then you should continue pursuing what will.” It was in that moment that I decided to get alternatively certified to become a teacher. I was hired as the third teacher in October as a kindergarten teacher in a very low socioeconomic school, and I loved it! The work was challenging, and the days were long, and I still loved it! I also taught a 3rd and 4th grade bridge class. I was in the classroom for 5 years, transitioned as a district math coach, network specialist, district resource advisor with ORIGO Education, district math coordinator and currently an assistant principal, with this being my 11th year in education.

So, you may wonder why I chose to share this with you? Sometimes people judge a book by its cover without taking the time to truly explore the inner parts of the story. In this case, I often find that I am a representative of that book that looks so well put together on the outside that it appears it all came easily. I say this to say, everyone has a story and if we take the time to know the intrinsic pieces of one's story, we might begin to better understand their why. My own struggles have taught me to persevere, chase my dreams and never settle for anything that does not set my soul on fire. I must tell you that more often than not that means daring greatly and having the courage to be vulnerable, explore spaces within your heart that you would prefer to leave hidden, dance with broken bones and smile when you feel like crying. I have found that “the world is full of difficulties, but even more full of hope”- Bob Goff.

Reach for excellence and remain optimistic in doing so; the best is yet to come!

Jane MacMillan



What's My Why?

A couple of years ago I was in a transition meeting for a student that would be coming into Kindergarten. She was completely dependent in all areas, with additional vision loss, and cognitive assessments put her at an infant level. We had discussed her profile, the supports in place, and how much we were looking forward to welcoming her. Suddenly her father, who had been quite quiet throughout the meeting, asked, very emotionally, "Why should she come to school? What can she learn, given who she is? What is the point?" The room became very quiet. He had been so courageous to share his worries. I answered that she at this point had so much reason to be there. At the age of 4, she was all potential. There was so much to discover about her, what she liked, what she didn't like, and what she didn't even know about yet that could be a source of new interests, preference and learning for her. At such a young age, who could predict with certainty how far she could come – and what a privilege it would be for us to be on that journey with her and be part of building a program to help her develop the potential we knew she had. And she, too, had so much to offer, to us, to the other children who would welcome her to the class and be her classmates and friends.

That's my why. I believe all children are all potential, with so much to experience and so much to offer, and it is a privilege as an educator to be part of that journey. This is just as significant, if not more so, for those students with special needs. Parents entrust us with their children, and if we don't believe they can succeed, that they have a place in the learning community, that they belong just as any other student would, we are failing them. Linda Kaser and Judy Halbert (*Spirals of Inquiry*) talk about the "racism of low expectations". It is my moral imperative to compel others to believe that all students are capable, that we all "presume competence" (Shelley Moore).

As such, it is my moral imperative to inspire educators to see children in this way, to feel compelled to learn about their needs and build educational programs and experiences that let them reach a potential that we don't even know the limits of, and that we don't want to, as we want to support them to reach as far as they can. While my POP hangs on the building of capacity to support educational programs, my why is to move beyond providing what at some places has looked more like a babysitting service, to one that helps children show us their greatness; and they are, indeed, great. We have, as educators, to dig deep into our own beliefs around students with special needs, bring into the light our preconceptions, and replace them with curiosity and the passion to support all learners, regardless of what we may see as a depth of need. Be strengths based, look at that potential, and use this to raise the bar high on the learning we want, and expect not only from our students, but from ourselves as we create the best learning possible for our kids.

Trisha Myers



“It’s in the Blood.”

When I was a child, my Granny, a retired teacher, took care of me during the day while my parents were at work. That’s my Mom’s Mom. Every day, my Dad would plop me in the car and drop me off early in the morning, so they could head off to their jobs. My Dad was what he liked to call a Box Sales-Flunky, which meant that he was the contact for national accounts as well as mom & pop companies to order shipping supplies like corrugated boxes. My Mom was a teacher just like her Mom and her Mom’s Dad, several aunts, and uncles as well. When talking about education, my Granny and Mom would always say, “It’s in the blood.” That phrase was something that I heard over and over again growing up along with...

“Trisha, you should be a teacher. You get the summers off...”

and then Dad would pipe up and say, "and you get to play all day!"

He always said it with a smirk and a laugh. The funny thing is that my Dad was a PE major in college, so he really would have played all day if he didn't go into the exciting world of what we now call paper solutions, but almost 40 years ago, it was cardboard boxes. Then Mom would get mad and tell me that's not true. "You would be sculpting the minds of the future."

My Mom taught 2nd grade since I was born but did start off her career in 3rd grade. She stayed in one school district and retired at 30 years. She is lucky because she gets a great pension from the state of Ohio. She did what she loved, being a teacher. When I've asked her if she ever wanted to do more, she would say, "maybe a college professor", but she enjoyed the classroom and her 2nd graders.

So all my life, I heard "you should be a teacher", "teaching is the best profession", "you would have the same schedule when you have kids". To me that was a NO! I really had no desire whatsoever to even think about being a teacher. I would answer so quickly, "I don't want to do that!" In my head, I wanted to do something different. Not what everyone else had always done because that's what their parents did. I wanted to do something more creative and pave my own way!

Speaking of finding their own path, my Granny's career was different from my Mom's. She taught in several states including Michigan, Kentucky and Ohio. She also taught in a 1 room schoolhouse and opened a school in the district I attended in a suburb of Cincinnati. During her career, she mostly taught elementary, but I believe had experience in elementary, middle and high including teaching my Uncle, but never my Mom.

Hopefully, I'm starting to paint a picture of who was in my life and why running from education was inevitable and impossible.

Since my Mom taught in a neighboring district, sometimes our breaks didn't line up, and I would attend school with her as a participant in class when I was young. When I got older, I would go with her to be a helper. Hot summers were always peppered with going up to school to help her set her room up and talk with her friends about gossip of what was happening in the district and at the school. All of these experiences over the years were great, but was not the push I needed to say, "Yep! I'm going to be a teacher!"

After my freshman year in college as a Dance major, which by the way, I really enjoyed but realized that a career in the Arts would be short lived. I would have to scrape by if I wanted to live my dreams.

So, I came home that summer to transfer colleges and with that came picking a new major. Mom and I talked. It was a long discussion of other possible careers like interior or fashion design, business...I even toyed with computer science, but thought that would probably be a lot of math. I knew math wasn't my strong suit.

Mom went down a list of activities that I had led over the year, and how all contributed to me having attributes of a good teacher. "Remember when you lead the group at church? You were always so bossy too and use to play school with your Barbies?"

With that I said, I would put education as my major, but I knew if something better came along, I would switch. I just had to figure it out.

But over my 4 ½ years in college, I started to see how my personality and "bossiness" really helped with becoming a teacher. I also had a built-in mentor those first few years of teaching and was able to run ideas by my Mom. I took full advantage of calling her when I had bad days and crying on the phone especially that first year.

Over the years, what I now have come to understand is that I didn't have to do education their way. That I was paving my own way as a teacher. I knew I wanted to do things differently and that elementary would never be for me. Snotty noses, kids taking shoes off and crying, definitely didn't and still doesn't sounds like a good time! So I went into middle school. I taught 7th grade Language Arts and Reading in 4 states. Every time, I moved I must have had stamped on my forehead, "put her in 7th grade ELA". I was always thankful because I really liked that grade. During my 5th year teaching in Tennessee, my principal asked me to be on the committee for PLCs and to attend workshops with him facilitated by the DuFours. This was a turning point for me because now I would be asked to do more than just teach students; I would start being seen as a leader in the school. After that Principal retired, the next Principal saw something in me as well and talked me into presenting at AMLE (Association of Middle Level Educators). Luckily, the presentation was accepted, and my career doing professional learning started. All of these things were definitely not the same as my Mom or Granny, and I liked that I was carving out my own path. For many years, I had a quote by Ralph Waldo Emerson as part of my email signature, "*Do not go where the path may lead, go instead where there is no path and leave a trail.*" Now thinking about it, that quote really means so much more.

So over the years, I moved states, districts, and have taken on other positions because I've always felt like I was meant for more than being in the classroom. As I've taken these different positions like Middle School Literacy Coach, Lead Teacher Evaluator, Middle School PD Specialist and now Professional Learning and Leadership Development Program Specialist, I feel I've been able to set my education career apart from my

families and truly believe I've paved my own way and continue to do so. I now can see how "It's in the blood!"

Tyler Nelson



Leadership

At the start of the school year, there will be a lot of excitement and nerves in the air. We get to start our journey with 1800+ students, each with different needs, wants and desires. This year it will be different for all of us. Not only do we get to start our journey together, I also sent my youngest to Kindergarten for the first time. There were some tears, let's be honest, a lot of them, but there was also a whole lot of excitement. That day, September 14th, was a day, where I reminded myself, the same things I want for my kids at school, are the same things I want for each student here. No excuses.

At Westwood and throughout SLP, we strive to be a world class learning environment. To personalize and customize the experience for each of our students. We make decisions based on student need and change our instruction to meet those needs. Our focus continues to move from the teaching that is happening to our students, to the learning that is happening with our students. We have high expectations for each other and a shared responsibility to truly make an impact for each of our students. Our relentless pursuit of excellence takes courage. Courage to hold one another accountable in creating this world class learning environment. Our students and staff make this school great and bring us to do this work each and every day. I want, and we need, for EACH student at Westwood to feel like they have an adult in our system that truly cares about them and that they have a sense of belonging here!

We will focus on not just providing the best academic instruction for the students but truly educating the whole child and foster their love for learning. Giving them a voice and sincerely listening, when they feel like no one else cares. Taking time to find what each students' love is and then *capitalizing on that* to create engaging experiences. We will

encourage them to be better than they ever thought they could be. We will inspire our students to achieve greatness because nothing less will do. We will unite as one building and inspire each other to dream. In order to unite as one, each of us will need to exceed our own expectations. Will we aspire to average or dream for excellence?

How might we take time to ask ourselves "What are the amazing opportunities we want to achieve here at Westwood this year?" Followed by: "How are **WE** going to ensure that it happens?" Not waiting for problems to arise but to invent solutions to problems that don't exist yet. Setting individual and team goals that are going to push our thinking and actions to have students volunteering to participate and pleading for more. Creating a TEAM that students brag to their friends that they get to be a part of and can't wait to come to school each day because of what they get to do.

I will not ask of you what I am not willing to do myself. This work is not easy. There are countless hours spent before and after the bells ring, creating, designing, innovating. There are times where our best idea fails and we have to pick up the pieces, support each other, analyze the results and design again. TOGETHER, we WILL create a world-class learning community where each and every student feels valued, inspired and has a sense of belonging, self-direction and sees no limits to their lives. Because, in the end, what's our alternative? If we don't, will that learning environment be world class?

Abby Smith



The Best Week Ever!

High heels. Panty hose. Briefcase.

Meetings in a giant board room with a wall full of windows. Gathering around an expensive table that fits 24 chairs.

Ohhhhhyeahhh. That was going to be me. That was going to be me as a successful businesswoman working in a fancy marketing office.

You see, my mom was a teacher. She taught high school-accounting, business courses, consumer ed, keyboarding, technology (during the time when the internet was birthed *gasp*). My mom was the hardest working teacher I ever knew. I know that because I was right there alongside her my entire childhood.

I used to looooooove to help my mom grade papers at night! I used to looooooove to get to record grades into the gradebook for her. I used to looooooove going up to her school in the summers to play while she got her classroom ready. (One time, I was explaining directions to my imaginary students while writing their assignment on the chalkboard when I realized the custodian was peering in the door chuckling at me-HA! I wish I could say this was when I was 5 or 6 years old, but I'm pretty sure it was more like 10 or 11!) Oh how I looooooved playing school!!! My Christmas list from ages 5-12 pretty much always included teacher materials- like, the REAL stuff. I actually still have the red, hardback covered gradebook I got one year that was just like the one my mom used! (insert heart emoji)

So my entire childhood I walked the education path; I was going to be a teacher when I grow up. That is, until it was time to apply for college.

My Aunt Susan-my mom's younger sister- was 'the cool' aunt. She lived far away from our small rural farm town and in a major city with what I thought of as a glamorous marketing job. She got married at a young age (too young for me to remember), quickly divorced, and then dated the best-looking guys around throughout her 20s & 30s. When she came into town, she would take my cousins & me to do the coolest things and was always easier to talk to about serious stuff than my mom. She had a degree in marketing and worked for a firm that staged homes for real estate companies. She wore a business suit & heels every day to work. She appeared to make lots of money, and she always had pictures of herself wearing floor-length gowns ("prom dresses" I thought of them) to evening work parties & annual galas. As I grew to become a teenager, I WANTED HER LIFE!! It felt so exciting! Therefore, when it came time to apply for college and think about a major, my 17-year-old self said "Please, I'm not *actually* going to be a teacher (enter eye roll). I'm majoring in marketing and getting a job like Aunt Susan's!"

That's what I did folks! I applied to the College of Business at the University of Illinois, was accepted, and graduated high school that May. Excited to start college in the Fall, but also sad for my last summer at home, I spent my time hanging out with friends, volunteering with my church youth group, and eating up family time while I still

could. During the second week of July that summer, I signed up to help at my church's vacation bible school. Thinking I would be a teen helper that floated around wherever needed, I was assigned as... (drumroll please) ...the music teacher!!! Ummm, okay? I guess I can do that?

I got to work learning songs and choreography and VBS soon began. OH MY GOSH PEOPLE!!!!!! I had never worked so hard in my life!!!!!!!!!! Seriously!!! I came home every single day EXHAUSTED! I would throw myself onto the couch and stay parked there for hours, unable and unmotivated to ever get up! I would crash later that night, sleep like a baby, and have to wake up early just to do it all over again the next morning! Friends- it was so tiring!!! And friends- **it was the best. week. ever!!!!**

There were only 3 weeks between the end of VBS and when I moved into my college dorm room and one thing became clear as day for me during that time- **I was supposed to be a teacher.** I was always supposed to be a teacher. Deep down I knew it, so why had I been fighting it?

I reached out to an advisor during my first week at U of I and transferred to the College of Education with a major in Elementary Education. The rest is history & happiness. And if you ever see pictures of me from my first years of teaching, you will see that I *did* still make some of my marketing dreams come true; 9 out of 10 times I will be seen wearing the one and only skirt/panty hose/high heel combo!!! :)

Radical Change Agents



THE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING ASSOCIATION

ACADEMY CLASS OF 2020

Sheryl Bibby



Him

I see him. Do you? Him, right there. He pushes and shoves as he gets off the bus and enters the school building, angry. The windows on the bus had to remain closed on this muggy, humid morning because the bus driver said so. He sat three to a seat with two older students for 30 minutes this morning. Do you see him in the breakfast line? He is so hungry, and he attempts to choose more than he is allowed, and the lunch lady yells "You are holding up the line! You can't have anything but what I give you!" As he grips the tray tightly and walks to an empty space, he notices that sweet little Jenni from kindergarten was given the opportunity to choose her breakfast slowly, whatever she wanted.

I see him, do you? His uniform shirt is too small, and he doesn't have the required belt. He is called out about his clothing loudly for all his classmates to hear. He stomps out of line and down the hall to the resource officer to receive a belt. He really needed to go to the restroom, and he tried to tell you this, but you pointed without looking at him and said, "Go to get your belt. You know the rules." As he passed the end of the line, he noticed two classmates without the required shirt, but no one else noticed.

I see him. Do you? He listens intently as you discuss compassion for others and how helping one another is how the classroom works. You use Ansley as an example of being a good helper, telling of when she shared her supplies with two of her classmates. As the discussion ends, he sees Dillon struggling to push his chair in properly and jumps up to assist him, but you yell his name and say "What are you doing? Sit down!" He thought helping in this class was a good thing. He sits next to his friend on the carpet while you're reading aloud to the class. They whisper and giggle in between listening to a funny story. You separate the two boys saying this is not a time for giggling and whispering. But then, your best teacher friend stops by your room and whispers something in your ear and you both laugh and giggle in front of the class. He sees you.

I see him. Do you? He is removed from PE to read with you because he needs extra help. His opportunity to play, be loud, and have fun is changed to sitting and reading because he needs reading more than fun. He is made to read about ducks when you know he loves cars. He shows no interest as he hears the kids playing in the gym.

I see him. Do you? When asked if he has the answer to the math problem, he giggles and wiggles then proceeds to give you an amazing response using the math manipulatives his way. You say, "Next time, respond without the wiggles and giggles. I'm not going to write your answer on the board because that is NOT how I taught you to do it." and you quickly move on to the next student.

I see him. Do you? The class is taking some time for movement inside on a rainy day. The music plays and he proceeds to do the coolest dance move anyone has seen. You say that they need to stay in their own space and not move all around. If they move from their space, they will be asked to sit down. He does his dance move again because the class loved it and you say, "Sit down, you are not in your space." He sits and then Billy tries to copy his cool move while falling on two classmates and is never asked to sit down. He sees you.

And finally, he breaks. He will MAKE you see him by DESTROYING everything that he thinks matters to you. He jumps up and hits Billy for stealing his dance move. He picks up the math manipulatives that he used to brilliantly explain his math response and dumps them on the floor. He rips the paper off the bulletin board that never displayed his work. He grabs the classroom supplies and throws them across the room. Then, he runs to your teacher friend's room next door and laughs loudly in her doorway. You will see him NOW, but why didn't you see him BEFORE?

He protested silently by not showing interest in your books, your lessons, your reprimands, your constant watching, but you didn't see him. So now, he protests for everyone to see, tearing up the room that never felt like home as you told him it would. He destroys what matters to you because he feels like HE doesn't matter to you. His needs are not being met and his efforts are not being noticed. He knows it. SEE HIM. LOVE HIM as he is. Acknowledge what he brings to your class. Compliment his uniqueness. Be fair. You see him NOW, but why didn't you see him BEFORE?

Kara Collins



Why Do I Stay?

When graduation day arrived, the principal shared that we were graduating with the same exact group we started high school with. Imagine: the same group of kids that walked into that high school for the first time as freshman graduated together four years later. There have been many losses since that day so long ago, but that day, was something to celebrate. We all went our separate ways, made new friends, perhaps kept some of the old ones.

I spent my entire youth in one state. I moved one time and attended school with the same kids. I didn't really know change; I hadn't experienced change.

I went to military college and met my husband (I didn't like him very much when I first met him, he kind of grew on me.). I joined the Army. I got married. I was thrown into a cycle of moving every 2 years. My adult life consisted of moving, often by myself, with two small children. My husband was deployed a lot. I can recount every address we have lived (all 13 of them) in order.

Why is this important? Why does this matter? Well, with every move has come another state, another school, another licensure process, another hoop to jump through to get the right credentials. It hasn't been easy, it isn't always fun, sometimes you ask is it worth it, but then I think of that one student, you know the one, the one who turned your teaching life upside down in the most incredible way possible. That smack you in the face with a fish kind of kid.

We will get to him, but before we do, I can't help but talk about my favorite movie. I am a huge Tom Hanks fan, HUGE! It was summer right after I graduated from high school. My last hurrah with my crew before leaving for early report at college for the women's soccer team. We went to see A League of Their Own starring the one and only Tom

Hanks. The movie was so many things for me: amazing, funny, sad, dramatic, poetic. At one-point Dottie Hinson (Geena Davis) is faced with a choice, to stay or to go, to continue to play or go back to what women were expected to do back then. She looked Jimmy Dugan (Tom Hanks) straight in the eye and said, "It just got too hard." Without even skipping a beat Jimmy says, "It's supposed to be hard. If it wasn't hard, everyone would do it. The hard is what makes it great."

It was at that moment that I decided that no matter what course my life took, I was NEVER going to quit, no matter how hard it got. It just wasn't an option. I mean, it never really was an option, my dad and mom were my biggest fans and knew that I would do anything I set my mind to, but for me, those words meant something, they changed something in me. Through the years I have become my own worst critic. I never think I am doing enough or working hard enough. I always think I can do more. People say I am too hard on myself, but am I?

Back to teaching.

My classroom motto was "I can do it. I believe in myself. NEVER say I can't!"

I had been a classroom teacher for a couple of years when Wesley came into my first-grade classroom. I had taught his sister and his cousin the two years prior to him passing through my door. I knew him as a sibling but not as a student. His mom approached me at the end of his Kindergarten year and said she didn't know what to do. The teacher wanted to keep him back. Mom didn't want this to happen. I worked with Wes and assessed him to see where he was at. He was behind where "he should be" according to all of those benchmarks but I felt like I could help him "catch up". Wes was sweet and kind and every bit little boy that you could imagine. Wes didn't want to read, he didn't want to write, he didn't want to learn. He didn't believe in my classroom motto. A couple weeks into the school year I knew that this was my Dottie Hinson moment. Flight or Fight? What was it going to be?

Fight it was!

Mom gave me permission to do as I needed with Wes, push him, pull him, slide him, guide him. She trusted me to make professional judgments about her son. Wes and I built a relationship. It was slow, it was painful, there were tears (both of us), there was anger, there was frustration, and then one day he randomly asked to move his desk. He was tired of the girls going behind my desk and he wanted to be the protector, my protector. I knew then that the tide had turned. He moved his desk next to mine, he was the gate guard, he stopped the shenanigans from happening.

One day I slid a book onto his desk and said, "Wes, I think you will really like this book." He said he would give it a try, he asked for help with a couple words and I never once told him the word. I gave him a strategy, I showed him how to "figure" those tricky words out. It was slow, it was steady, it was every day. One sentence, one chapter, one book at a time. When he picked up a book, I stopped teaching, it was instantly reading time. My schedule was on "Wes time". He grew to love reading. At least I thought so even though he never really said it. The proof was in his eyes, his smile, his gestures. He asked for more books. I never said no to reading in class. I always had books on hand. I always had my own book to read too. Wes finished the year reading slightly above grade level. His mom was ecstatic, Wes was proud, and I was exhausted. I was all of those other things too, but I was exhausted. I told Wes and his mom to find me in 11 years because I would be at that graduation.

I had never been more excited in my life. In that moment I knew what I needed to do. I needed to get my literacy degree. I needed to be a reading teacher. I was a reading teacher! Thank you, Wes!

Fast forward 11 years, I was literacy specialist in Virginia, my mom had just passed away and I get a phone call at school. It was his mom. Wes was graduating. Could I come? Yes, absolutely, but I had just missed a few weeks because of my mom's death. Would it be possible to miss more school? My fabulous school secretary who answered the phone heard the conversation and told the principal. There wasn't even a pause, my principal said you absolutely can't miss that. So I went. Five former students were graduating that night. They didn't know I was coming. When I got out of the car and Wes turned around (all 6 foot 1 of him) he bent down, hugged me, and we cried. He promptly said, "Mrs. Collins I need to let you go because I can't cry in front of the guys." And then he whispered, "Thank you for coming."

The next day at Wes' party he stood in front of his family and friends to speak. He thanked everyone for coming. He thanked me for coming. He thanked me for teaching him not just to read, but to love reading. To love books. He told everyone that the only reason he is a reader today is because of me. Without a doubt one of my most defining moments.

He still has all of the books I gave him so many years ago on a shelf in his room. He says he will never get rid of them. He still reads them.

I have had many obstacles in my career. I have moved countless times and had many challenging students.

Has it been hard? Yes!

Have I wanted to throw in the towel? Yes!

Have I doubted my abilities? Yes!

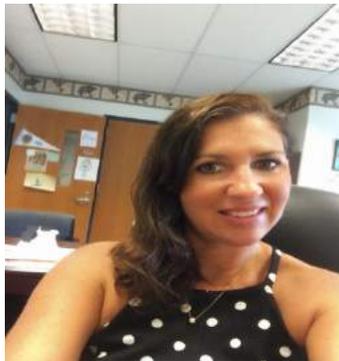
Why do I keep going? Because of all the other Wesleys out there who need me. If you are ever in doubt of yourself, find your Wes.

I could go on and on about sweet Wes, but I will end with this...

You can do it. Believe in yourself! Never say you can't!" because...

"If you accept the expectations of others, especially the negative ones, then you will NEVER change the outcome." ~Michael Jordan

Tara Dedeaux



Be the Teacher You Would Want for Your Own Children

I grew up as an upper middle-class white girl who went to private high school, private college, never really had a job, and lived unknowingly a very sheltered life. This was my reality. I had never really been exposed to a world that included people of color or poverty. At the age of 22, I graduated college and wanted to go out into the world to get my first teaching job. The county I grew up in needed few new teachers and had a plethora of applicants. I needed to look elsewhere. Baltimore City Public Schools was hiring. I applied, interviewed, and was hired.

It was time to set up my classroom and begin my dream career. I entered the school building and was escorted to my classroom. I spent hours decorating, organizing, and creating bulletin boards. The principal handed me a few teacher editions of textbooks and said good luck. On the first day of school, I welcomed 30 new fifth grade students into the room. I quickly realized that the student gifts I received were not like me. My students came from homes where poverty and drug addiction were their norm. Alan stood out from the very first meeting. My year with Alan was a defining moment for me, or should I say defining years.

Alan entered the building with a bang. He was loud. He was disrespectful. He was significantly below grade level in all areas. Alan liked to run around the building and into all the classrooms. Alan was angry. Alan was aggressive. Alan caused me tears almost daily. I worked very hard to get to know Alan. We had good days and bad days. Then I met Alan's mother and sister. Alan's mother was a drug addict and a prostitute. His sister, just a few years older, was following the same path. Alan started to miss a few days of school and then the pattern became more consistent until Alan stopped coming to school. He never returned that year. I lost sleep wondering what happened to him.

Was I happy? Was I sad? I was confused. I continued to think and worry about where did he go and what happened to him. The first day of school the following year started with Alan returning to my classroom to repeat fifth grade. I wish I could say that this year was different, and everything was better. It was not. Alan was still a challenge and his outward behaviors did not significantly change. But what did change was me getting to know him better. Through the drama and chaos, I learned how sad he was, how much he struggled with his life and how much he wanted a mom. I was only 23 and had no idea what it was like to be a mother or how to help him process the craziness he experienced each day. I continued to try to help Alan and work with him until a crazy day mid-way through the year when I received the call from the office that Alan's mother had overdosed and died. WOW! At the funeral, I looked around the room to a culture and world I could not even process. This was their reality. This was Alan's life. That day was the last time I saw Alan, our time ended with a hug and me telling him how much I cared for him and how much I would miss him. I never heard from Alan again.

Alan changed me forever. I needed to be so much more than just a "teacher" to him. Our students often need so much more. They need someone to get to know them, to care about them, to be the person that truly cares when they are at school. As educators, we need to always remember we are that person for so many of our student. Educators are not just teachers. We need to be psychologists, social workers, and moms. Never forget that each student needs us in so many different ways.

Michele Dugan



Best Laid Plans

I never planned to become a teacher. Actually, that is not quite true; my journey to become an educator ebbed and flowed throughout the churning tides of my high school and undergraduate experiences. In high school, I completed a teaching profession pathway and interned at a local middle school. In college, I initially selected a major in music education. Not long after, the oppositional voices became louder than my own. “A teacher?” friends and family would ask, “Don’t you want to be *more* than a teacher?” After a fleeting thought of becoming a counselor, a year-long dedication to the dream of law school, and – finally – figuring out how to “do” college my junior year, I thought I had found my niche in the art of rhetoric. I loved speechwriting, communications, and marketing. I loved my career in a growing industry.

Ignoring the ever-present call to become an educator, I prepared for a lifelong career in the field I studied for years throughout school. After graduating from college, I found myself in a sea of career choices, each one more interesting than the last. I worked in sales, in marketing, and once for a Fortune 500 company. My career was on track, yet a close friend noted a pattern: no matter the role or job, I always found myself teaching and supporting others. Frustrated by a lack of learning opportunities, I turned sales meetings into leadership development training. I tutored interns throughout their candidacy. I sought additional self-improvement through conferences. I volunteered with schools. No matter how I tried to escape it, the tide of education finally swept me away, and I swam willingly into the new journey.

Despite my newfound direction, becoming a teacher was not an easy journey. Options for earning a teaching certificate were limited and expensive. After taking multiple tests and applying to several schools, I chose a local program and started my studies. It wasn’t until entering this program that I realized the *power* and *value* of effective professional

learning. I found myself in awe of the quality learning experiences I encountered - consistently making internal plans to apply these skills in my own future classroom. I felt connected to my cohort, and together we navigated these new waters together. My instructors and cooperating teachers made learning magical, and I am forever grateful for their early influence in shaping who I became as an educator. I made a promise to myself that when I had my own classroom, I would create that same magic for my students. I didn't realize I wouldn't have that opportunity as soon as I planned.

As the stock market crashed in the mid-2000s, businesses and schools alike were forced to make difficult decisions, including reductions in force and closures. The new teaching certificate in my hand felt heavy - more like a burden than a beacon of light I hoped it would be. For two years, I applied to every available position while tutoring and working additional jobs. Eventually, I was blessed with the opportunity of long-term substitute assignments. I worked every day as though it was an eight-hour job interview. The best parts of my days were with students; although I was exhausted, I was also somehow renewed by their presence. I connected with colleagues, students, and the community. I also signed up for every professional learning opportunity available, increasing my skills and abilities as a new educator was paramount. It is due to the professional learning, along with the skilled educators who led the work, that I found success in my first years of teaching. Leaders invested in me, coached me, and celebrated me - even though I was a temporary employee. This difficult time allowed me to be a reflective practitioner, and I sincerely believe it shaped my passion for supporting adult learners, too. When I finally opened the door to *my* classroom, I was ready to change the world.

In the years since that day, I have had opportunities to serve as a passionate teacher, instructional coach, professional learning coordinator, instructional technology specialist, and induction leader. Two years ago, I was honored to be named the new coordinator for our alternative certification and induction programs. Now, I lead a program similar to the one that made it possible for me to become a teacher. I have the opportunity and privilege to invite those with a calling into the challenging yet rewarding world of education. I am dedicated to the art and science of teacher education and feel honored to share my own journey and knowledge with our newest colleagues. After all, teacher education is the first opportunity to model effective professional learning.

Every single day, I am thankful for the ocean of opportunity I have been afforded through my journey into education. I hope to honor those who invested in me by making it possible for more passionate educators to change the world.

Brian Lack



Ignite (Don't Extinguish) Students' Curiosity

Music has always been a big part of my life. From singing nursery rhymes in Pre-K to listening to artists like Jeff Buckley and Whitney Houston, and bands like The Beatles and Queen, I have always possessed a fascination with music that went well beyond simply listening to it. I wanted to play music. Create music. Join a band and perhaps dedicate my life to music. Everyone told me that piano would be the gateway to success with songwriting, as well as playing any other musical instruments. The only problem was that as a young child I did not have a piano. In fact, the only piano I had access to was at my church, and I played it whenever I could (even though I had no idea what I was doing). I loved playing piano so much that my mom surprised me with a Yamaha Clavinova for Christmas when I was 11 years old.

At that time, I was listening to the Beatles a lot, and I got my hands on a Beatles Piano songbook. In no time, I was playing songs like *Let it Be* and *Hey Jude*. I was even beginning to get into jazz music and would often dream about playing the piano like Count Basie. I was in my second year as a student at Davidson Fine Arts Magnet School and had recently decided to switch my fine arts emphasis from visual arts to music. There was a piano class for beginners and I eagerly signed up for it. The teacher, Mr. Macy, was a bit of a curmudgeon, but at the time I guess I just expected piano teachers to be that way. We practiced a very strict set of isolated drills and scales over and over again. I wanted to play popular music so badly, but we were limited to the teacher's curriculum of classics. We played on electric pianos with headphones each day, and Mr. Macy routinely listened in with a monitor. He could also speak through the monitor to give feedback (which was usually a reprimand for making mistakes, or in my case, for going off script and improvising or playing whatever I wanted to play). Each Friday, we'd have an assessment, which consisted of playing a piece on the piano in front of the whole

class, which was made up of about a dozen students. Mr. Macy would often malign my technique and tell me to work harder because I was not putting forth enough effort. He would also grade these performances, and I was consistently making Fs (a grade I had never previously received in any of my classes). I was only 11 years old, but by the end of the first nine weeks, my anxiety about playing piano had skyrocketed, and my interest in the instrument began to diminish. Halfway through the year, I could no longer withstand the drudgery, so I dropped out of the class. Sadly, I never rebounded from this experience, and consequently gave up on piano.

Many years later, as I reflected on things, I realized that aside from Mr. Macy's intimidating and off-putting teaching style, what was missing the most in those piano lessons was *time and space for wondering and wandering*¹. Every single minute of his class was dictated by a strict, highly structured, sequenced and predetermined plan of teaching piano in a monotonous and uninspiring way. As a student, I had no room to take a breath. No space to use my imagination. No time to follow my curiosity. And this is why my innate love for piano was squelched.

It turns out that learning piano for me is a lot like other students' experiences with learning math. Why is it that so many students seem to hate math? We hear these sentiments all the time. *I was never good at math.... Math was always my worst subject.... I never liked math.* (For the record, I do not believe any of these because of the deterministic language as signaled by the words "always" and "never" - rather, I am convinced that children are acculturated to fear and/or dislike math). So, why is it that children learn to hate math?

I will not attempt to answer this extremely complex question. But I will address part of it by drawing on my experience with the piano as a child. In order for students to love math, we have to give them opportunities to just play with it - without boundaries and constraints. This means that we as teachers have to discover the beauty of mathematics first, and then give our students chances to uncover that beauty. What might this look like in a classroom? It could be math puzzles, games, and riddles. It could be projects that stoke creativity through the integration of math and art. It could be challenging math problems that require grit and perseverance, as well as questioning and debate. It means avoiding conveying the myth that math is all about rules, procedures, and formulas that must be passively absorbed and mastered by students in order to do the "harder" math that comes next. This is not the way most of us learned mathematics, which will make this vision challenging to realize. But this is a challenge that is more than worth the trouble.

The implications for my Problem of Practice are clear. The math endorsement program that we are working feverishly to improve must focus on attitudes, aspirations, and beliefs

just as much as knowledge and skills, because kids shouldn't just do math that an adult tells them they have to, like the boring piano drills and songs my teacher limited me to. As Dan Finkel says, math is about "playing, and exploring, and fighting, looking for clues, and sometimes breaking things." All those things I really wish my piano teacher would have allowed me to do. Because if he had, who knows? Maybe I would still be playing piano today.

In the first LFA session, we were told to think of the TPOV as an elevator speech of sorts; one that could be articulated succinctly and robustly. Here's my attempt at expressing my point in no more than twenty words: As educators, we must seek to ignite our students' natural curiosity - not extinguish it the way my piano teacher did.

Edna Phythian



Reflection: A Servant Lens

There is not a day that goes by that I do not feel like I made several mistakes. I know I messed up or misspoke because of body language, faces, and flow of conversation. Those faces sit with me. I go home every night seeing, oh so vividly, the faces of those I may have disappointed or made uncomfortable that day. Now, I know this is just my perspective, so I don't say it to myself as if it is true or a fact; I acknowledge it as possible. I try to reflect on the facts of the situation and the perspectives that might live in those specific circumstances. Then, I think through my intentions, my actions, and how I might better ensure my intentions come out in my actions moving forward, especially future interactions with the individuals from that day. I try to identify the choices I made in each specific instance that might not have been beneficial. Lastly, I try to learn from each step; show myself compassion by forgiving myself for those things that might have been perceived as wrong or not effective; set aside the things I cannot own or control; and then, I pray for guidance to do better tomorrow. Because I go through this process daily, I know that others may as well. And I cannot control whether others reflect in this way, but I can control how I treat others, my actions, and my words. So, that is what I choose, to control the things I can so that my interactions with others are positive and supportive.

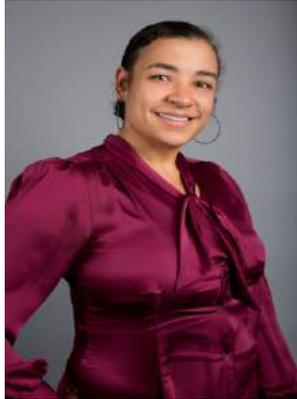
I am so grateful for my wife. She loves me for everything I am and does not hold who I am and who I am not against me. It wasn't until I received this grace each day that I truly understood how important this is. This aligns with what we know from Maslow's hierarchy of needs and other brain research states that basic needs must be met before esteem and self-actualization can take place. Maslow's hierarchy states the physiological needs of air, water, food, and shelter as primary; the need to feel physically safe as secondary; love, belonging, and a sense of connection as tertiary. The idea is that each one of us holds the same needs and human rights as the other and no one person should take those away. The truth is there are things we can do or say that can have a negative impact, ultimately diminishing the rights of others. I'm not proposing that anyone change. I am proposing that we all take the time to consider our impact and be conscious about aligning our actions to our desired impact. We can ask ourselves these questions: "What do I really want? What might others need? Was I kind to everyone I interacted with today? How should I show up? How might they need me to show up? If I want ____, then what should I say, not say, do, and not do?"

I hope people know I care. I see them. I value them. When I show otherwise, I want to know so I can do better. Do you believe that others deserve this from you? You can do a lot of things. The least of them is this; choose to care for each person that crosses your path with the lens that they matter, and they are enough just as they come to you. You are enough just as you are. They are enough just as they are. When we say otherwise to ourselves, whether we do so consciously or unconsciously, we place our own values and beliefs on others which does not allow others to show up as their true selves.

I am an educator, which means I must do this self-work so that nothing I do gets in the way of my work with students, families, and colleagues. And when I make a mistake or misstep, I need to know so I can learn and do better. My students and families, peers, and the organization where I serve deserves this.

I hope you know I care. I see you. I value you, just as you are. When I show otherwise, I want to know so I can do better. You deserve this from me. Everyone deserves this.

Avé Maria Tatum



The Difference Maker

Carolyn McKanders is one of the most inspiring educators you will ever meet. She spent 28 years in the Detroit Public Schools (DPS) as a classroom teacher, counselor, program administrator, staff-development specialist, and about the last 17 into educational consulting in various roles, working with educators worldwide. She has touched countless lives of students and teachers. During her professional development sessions, she sometimes shares stories about students she has worked with and impacted over the years. Her stories, experiences, wisdom, and passion for education make teachers want to be better for their students, to be a difference-maker for children.

One particular story that she shared that had a tremendous impact on me and the way that I teach. While teaching fourth grade in Detroit, Carolyn had a student in her class, who was quiet and shy. She noticed early on that her student had a passion for reading and writing. However, Carolyn could also tell that this little girl had some other difficulties in her life. She would often come to school with dirty clothes that were sometimes too small, and some days she just looked disheveled. Her hair at times was unkempt, and it appeared that she was not regularly bathing. Instead of asking a barrage of questions, Carolyn took a different approach and an interest in her student. She would talk with her, just to find out about her. There would be days during Carolyn's planning time that she would take her into the teacher's area and comb her hair so that other students wouldn't laugh at her.

At the time, she did not know that her student lived in poverty, in a home without water, lights, and heat. Her student's parents had been teenage parents when she was born and were doing the best they could to take care of her and her younger brother. The student's father, a high school dropout, worked in a gas station, and her mother at worked Burger King, just trying to make ends meet. Unfortunately, the

student's father was also an alcoholic and drug addict who was physically and verbally abusive to his family. While Carolyn's student was afraid to share what was going on in her home for fear of what her father would do, Carolyn continued to do things to help her student.

As the school year progressed, she would buy her clothes, shoes, and even Christmas gifts. A few items here and there that Carolyn would discreetly tuck in her students' bag for her to take home without the other students knowing. One thing that her student was immensely grateful for was a pair of Kermit the Frog gym shoes. The shoes the student was wearing had gotten too small and worn out. One afternoon when her student collected her things to go home, she found a bag containing the shoes at her desk. The student cried as she walked home that day because she was finally going to have a pair of shoes that didn't hurt her feet. She was happy that she would be able to play in gym class and on the playground again without being made fun of by the other students. Everything, big and small that Carolyn did for her student, changed her life, even if Carolyn didn't realize it.

Eventually, Carolyn convinced her student's parents to come to her house to spend the weekend from time to time with her three daughters, who were close to her student's age. Going to Carolyn's house allowed her student to see a whole new world, a world she had never experienced or knew existed. Carolyn took her shopping with her daughters, to her first opera, and an amusement park out of state. At ten years old, she had only ever known the neighborhood where she lived. The student realized that there was a different world out there, beyond the blocks of her neighborhood.

Carolyn also recognized how intelligent her student was despite her circumstances. She was a voracious reader and a creative writer. Carolyn decided to discuss double promoting her student from the fourth to sixth grade about midway through the school year because the student needed a challenge. The student's mother needed a little convincing but agreed to let her child move forward. As a bonus in the student's eyes, Carolyn was allowed to move to the sixth grade to be her student's teacher and continue to watch over her.

After the student began sixth-grade, Carolyn received a promotion to the school system's professional learning department. Even though she was promoted to a new job, she did not "leave" her student. She continued to keep in contact with her and took care of her. Carolyn would still buy the things she needed, bring her to her home, and watch over her even from a distance. Even when there were times she could not reach her because the family did not have phone service, she would write to make sure her student was okay and take care of needs. Carolyn stayed with her student through middle school, high school, and college. She was there for all of her student's major celebrations like her wedding and baby shower. During the challenging events,

Carolyn was there like her student's grandmother's funeral, and when someone murdered her student's father. Even though she was no longer her student, she had become like a second mother.

Carolyn's student eventually became a teacher, and ten years into her teaching career, she was named her district's teacher of the year. On the day of the announcement, Carolyn's student called her mother. Her mother was proud, but of course, she knew she would not make it to the ceremony because her mother had to work. Her next call was to her other mother, Carolyn, to share the news. Carolyn told her that she wanted to come to the ceremony but would be doing professional development training in Hawaii and would likely not make it. That night she sent her student roses to congratulate her. About a week before the teacher of the year celebration, Carolyn called to say she had rearranged her flight and would arrive the night of the ceremony. On that night, she was there for her student, as her student shared the story of how Carolyn changed her life, including the Kermit the Frog shoes.

Carolyn's impact on that student is priceless and a reminder of what a teacher can do to change a student's life trajectory. Without Carolyn's care, concern, and influence, that little girl would have never become the educator she is today. How do I know? I know because that little girl in Mrs. Carolyn McKanders' class who just needed someone to care about her was me.

Carolyn is still one of the most influential people in my life. Without her, I would not be the person I am today. When I needed a difference-maker in my life, God blessed me to have her as my teacher. Over the past 36 years, she has remained my role model, mentor, and second mother. When I was growing up, I would have never imagined that I would have walked so closely in her professional footsteps. Her influence on my personal and professional life is one reason I am passionate about making sure our students have the best teachers possible, the difference-maker a child needs. She is the reason I focus my work on our new teachers and mentors. My goal is to cultivate and retain teachers who never lose their passion for helping children become successful despite their circumstances. The world needs difference makers, like Carolyn, for future leaders, like me.

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RIZE UP!



THE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING ASSOCIATION

ACADEMY CLASS OF 2020

Cara Carter



Mastering Technology to Maximize Potential

I've always been a people pleaser by nature and when I started teaching in 2004, it was no different. I immediately fell in love with the classroom and knew I had found my calling. At the time I began teaching, technology was just beginning to transform the education world. It became quite apparent that the district I was employed at had a focus on preparing students to be future-ready and technology was part of that package. As an impressionable new teacher, I wanted to utilize any means available to me in order to be successful for my students, parents, and leaders. When I began taking risks with technology tools, I immediately noticed how impressed and curious everyone was with technology use in my class. This encouraged me to try new things and I even began a district wide summer technology camp called "TechnoCamp". I was soon the Campus Technology Liaison which supports the training of teachers on campus for technology tools. I thrived in this space because technology was fun and engaging for me and I enjoyed sharing that with others.

While all of this sounds promising for a young professional educator, just using technology to engage learners was simply not enough. While I didn't realize it at the time, I was creating a ceiling for my students by not capitalizing on the true value of technology. Fast forwarding a couple years later, I transferred schools and began teaching a group of students that did not have a history of impressive state assessment scores. The year prior to being in my class, 66% of them passed the state math assessment and a mere 13% of those received a commended score. When compared to similar schools on the AEIS report, these scores were simply sub-par. The principal that hired me had high hopes, believed in me, and ended up giving me a heavy load of students. Knowing that the principal had so much faith, I was determined not to let her or the students down.

In order to serve these students to the fullest and close gaps in their learning, I needed the following:

- Consistent, ongoing data that was an accurate reflection of their skills and abilities
- A way to provide immediate feedback
- A mode of providing on level lessons that were personalized for each student needs based on standards
- An engaging environment that allowed me to take full advantage of every minute they were in class

I had been familiar using technology in a way that was fun, but now needed to capitalize on helping me reach each student to give them exactly what they deserved. That year, I quickly jumped in and sought out specific technology tools that allowed me to accomplish the list above. I took advantage of a response system where I could ask both preplanned and impromptu questions as I gauged student understanding. The accountability of all students providing an answer ensured that even the quietest kids and those that “played school well” couldn’t fall through the cracks. The anonymous nature of their responses created a safe environment where students felt comfortable sharing their strategies without fear of embarrassment. This also created an engaging environment which encouraged analytical discourse about each other’s answers. The data this tool provided me was invaluable because I could make in the moment decisions for ALL kids on how they were progressing through the lesson. Without this purposeful technology tool, I simply would not have been able to make these educated and purposeful decisions.

Also that year, I began creating podcasts based on the information I received from the response system. Since I knew exactly how each student was progressing, I was able to make short video podcasts, so each day students were receiving personalized lessons. I even had some of my high achieving students jump in and create some of these podcasts! By making sure students were receiving relevant content based on their needs, I was able to quickly help the students close gaps. Between those strategies and others, I had so many “AHA!” moments that year as to how technology truly transforms learning. I changed from using tools that seemed fun to purposefully integrating at deep levels.

I didn’t need the test scores that year to tell me how my students were progressing. However, when the time came, the class went from 66% to 96% passing and 13% to 64% received a commended score! I was especially proud of the commended levels as many of the kids who didn’t even pass the year before were able to obtain exemplary status. In the end, that year the students were provided with something more significant than high test scores. Together we closed learning gaps and put them back on a road to success. Many of them joined an AP (advanced placement) math class the following year and began to believe in their ability to learn math.

In closing, that year was pivotal for me and my beliefs about technology in education. I truly believe all educators and students should have access to robust technology tools that transforms learning. They also need ongoing professional learning that aligns pedagogy, content, and technology to work cohesively. I believe technology in the hands of a skilled teachers is the key to closing gaps and creating equity in society. It's popular to say the phrase, "Technology is just a tool." Well, I am here to say that when used correctly, technology is so much more than that. It has the ability to change lives, paths, and our future.

Susan Cole



So You Think I Can Lead?

The first time I vividly remember that others saw me as a leader was in middle school, when I was voted the captain of the tennis team. I am not sure exactly what has contributed to my leadership attributes. Maybe these skills started to develop when my mom left my dad when I was five years old? My dad was left to raise four children, and I was a middle child. Maybe these traits were developed through my academic and athletic opportunities in public school. Maybe I was born with these innate personality traits. What I do know, is throughout my life and career, I have been able to use this strength, and yes, I will consider these leadership skills a gift and a strength, to impact others in a positive way.

In college, I earned an athletic scholarship and played tennis for Sam Houston State University. I could not believe that this college was paying for my tuition as long as I played tennis for them! Don't get me wrong, there was much hard work and grit that went into me earning this scholarship which included many hours of practice and traveling to tournaments. My dad was my biggest fan and saw potential in my ability at a young age. When I was a freshman in high school, he gave me the option of getting a job to earn money to pay for college or practicing tennis and play in tournaments so

that I could get a ranking in the state of Texas which could lead to a tennis scholarship for college. Well, that decision was simple...work...or play tennis...???" "I think I will play tennis dad!" I got a full scholarship to Sam Houston State University.

The leadership opportunities and experiences I had in college, in the classroom and on the tennis court, helped prepare me for my first teaching job. I loved those 7th and 8th graders in my Reading Improvement class. Reading did not come easy for them, and I was a first-year teacher. We developed a partnership, and my kids gave me a chance to teach, and I believed in them and pushed them to improve their reading and to be good leaders.

My third year of teaching, my principal asked me to be the team leader. I remember him telling me that not only was I organized, but I really listened to people and I followed through with what I said I would do. He shared that I had gained the respect of the more seasoned teachers on my team and in my school, and he wanted to give me the opportunity to be the team leader. Throughout my ten years of teaching middle schoolers in three different school districts, I found myself taking on the team leader or department head role over and over again. And then one day, my assistant principal said to me, "Susan, you need to go into administration." She told me I have "natural" leadership skills, and I would make a good principal. It is interesting how those words of encouragement were just enough for me to go back to school to get my Masters in Educational Administration.

I soon became an assistant principal and then went on to be a principal, and I even had the amazing opportunity of opening a new middle school in my school district. This is my third year as Executive Director of Instruction and Professional Learning at the district level. It was definitely a transition and change for me after being on a campus for 27 years. What I do know is in every job I have had, I build relationships, listen and learn, work hard and follow through. From my experience, it doesn't take long for others to realize I am a leader they can trust and who truly cares about the individuals in the organization. Webster defines leadership as "the capacity to lead."

One thing I am most proud of in my career is that I have built leadership capacity in others. Many teachers and assistant principals I have worked with are now instructional coaches, assistant principals and principals doing great things for kids! Many of these folks had an internal drive and fostered natural leadership qualities, and I simply provided the opportunities and encouragement for growth. It seemed to be a good combination! I am a collaborative leader and am anxious to continue my journey, to partner with others, and to see what leadership opportunities await. I will end with sharing one of my favorite quotes. "The growth and development of people is the highest calling of leadership." -Harvey S. Firestone

Michael Dittrich



In Good and Bad, They Will Always Be Our Kids

Every year started the same way when I taught middle school. I would tell the students my black lab was the only family I needed. No need to get married, no need to have kids. I would tell students they are my kids, and they are enough work. I didn't have the time or money to have my own. I told the students that this came on the condition that they had to agree that they would always be one of my kids.

I think about one such student who walked into the room, typically late, never with homework, and always a smirk on his face to try to show others that it didn't bother him that he was being spoken to about not meeting expectations. I grew up in the same poor neighborhood as these kids and one side of me wanted to knock the smirk right off his face, but the other half knew that kids in this neighborhood were tough, resilient, and most of the time just needed someone to show they cared. I knew there was much more to this young man since he had been in my student teaching class a few years before in the 4th grade. I knew somewhere deep down there was more. He was too cool to read, even though I knew he was on grade level and was quick to make a smart comment about someone else because I knew his own self-confidence was not where it should be both academically and socially. He could have easily been cast aside and was by some because he was too much trouble or just lazy. But remember, they are my kids and will always be my kids. After his sixth-grade year and he moved to 7th and 8th-grade year I would still keep tabs on the grade level but especially Nick. As I moved to the elementary school as an assistant principal and now had his little sister and brother in my building, I would see his mom and ask how Nick was doing.

Occasionally I would see him when he stopped by to chat. I was sad to hear he had dropped out of high school, but he was doing well, driving a nice car and helping out his mom. On the surface he looked like a hard-working young man who enjoyed a few nicer things. Little did I know, Nick was able to do this under the radar, or so he thought, shipping illegal drugs from Arkansas to Missouri via UPS and FedEx. Little did he know that the driver for FedEx was actually an agent with a drug task force.

Emotions ran wild in my head when I heard he had been arrested on multiple felonies and was facing a lengthy time in prison. During a later conversation when Nick stopped by my office, Nick said one of the lowest moments in his life was sitting in the courtroom looking at pictures of him signing for the packages. Nick was sentenced to federal prison and visited me the week he was to report for prison. My message to Nick was simple. I told Nick I loved him but that I needed to see he was going to make a difference in this world. It was hard for me to tell him and I even doubted my words prior to seeing him. I told him I could not spend any more energy on him if he was not willing to do better. I told him I expected him to come out of prison with a GED and a trade. I feared I was giving an ultimatum, but it was true. The guy who was never getting married and never having kids was short on time for his own family, his own work, and his own education to spend energy on a now-grown man. A grown man who needed to in what I remember telling him, "get your shit together."

Nick did his time and kept his promise. Nick came out of federal prison with his GED and his welding certificate. Nick was placed in a transitional home where they placed him in a welding job about an hour and a half from Saint Louis. I remember driving to see him and seeing the embarrassment on his face when I had to sign him out of the housing so we could head out to lunch. I remember sitting at lunch in a small BBQ place in southern Missouri hearing his story of how he had changed, and he owed it to his mom and siblings to do better. Eventually Nick would move back to Saint Louis and text me when he was arrested on an outstanding warrant for public intoxication. After scolding him for several minutes he promised he was innocent. I sarcastically told Nick everyone who gets arrested is innocent and he should give me one reason why I should believe him. I was hoping that this grown man who was still one of my kids would have a real answer. He did. Nick told me the arrest date and the date coincided when he was in custody of the federal prison system. Someone had been arrested while Nick was in prison and used his identification when a ticket was issued for public intoxication.

Nick was working hard making ends meet and had started dating a girl. Nick didn't have the funds for access to an attorney. I called a friend who worked for the public defender's office who put me in touch with a friend who would provide me with a discount for Nick. The attorney met with Nick and sent me an invoice for the legal services that would keep Nick out of jail. Nick made monthly payments to me until his first kid was born. The second child was born a couple years later, and he reminded me

he still owes me \$74 and he had not forgotten. I hadn't either but secretly I knew Nick was doing well and I feared if he paid me his final payment that somehow somehow we would grow apart. He was one of my kids and I appreciate the connection we have.

Tragedy strikes- Nick had separated from the mother of his two children and for a while the mother kept him from seeing his two boys. When Nick was finally able to reunite with his two boys it was often complicated as some or most custody issues are. A few months ago, the mother was killed in an accident when leaving work. Nick was now the sole provider and caregiver for two boys under the age of five. I reached out to Nick when this happened not knowing what words to say. I didn't understand his pain and in no way could imagine having to raise two boys on my own. Nick messaged me that "I have to do this on my own." I responded that there is power in the word GET. "Nick, you GET to take care of those boys." "You GET to raise them and love them every day." I believe Nick is appreciative of the positive way I look at all things. I cherish the conversations with Nick whether they are good or bad.

Nick will always be my kid. My heart hurts for him the same way a dad would hurt for his own son watching him work long days and raising two young boys on his own. He GETS to do this but I GET to continue being a few words of wisdom each week for my former student, friend, and one of my forever kids. I have no doubt he will do well for his boys and I somehow hope I have a small part of the young men they will become.

You never know where your impact will end. It has been 18 years since Nick walked into my classroom. He is one of the many reasons I try to treat every kid with the same kindness, compassion, and care that I would want for all my kids, biological or not. In return, Nick and many other students have taught me and shown me the power of resilience, perseverance, and love.

Katoria B. Gaston



What About the Social and Emotional Learning for Teachers?

March 13, 2020 is the day things changed for all educators as we knew it. Overnight we abruptly went from traditional teaching and leading to teaching and leading virtually. Teachers were working hard to provide excellent instruction to students digitally and school administrators were busy trying to provide a digital work environment of comfort and grace for teachers, students, and parents, while knowing that everyone was still being held to the same teaching and learning standards as before COVID-19.

Since becoming virtual schools overnight, we have been provided with videos, articles, modules, and podcasts to help us incorporate social and emotional learning in our daily interactions with students. But has anyone stopped to ask or think about how to support the social and emotional learning of teachers? It was personally disheartening to witness a teacher who provides great instruction, has a great rapport with students and parents, and consistently gets students to achieve each year; have a breakdown during a collaborative team meeting. As their supervisor, I had a difficult time trying to find the right words to provide comfort and administrative guidance to ease their burden.

As a school leader, I think about ways that I could offer support, be a listening ear, or take things off teachers' plates. You see, this is because I am a leader whose strength is harmony and relator. I also have a blue personality trait which means that I am sympathetic, communicative, compassionate, and sincere. I strongly believe in creating genuine and authentic relationships with colleagues to get people to produce their best work. However, now as a leader, I need to build my capacity and fill my leader toolbox with knowledge, skills, and dispositions that will be beneficial and timely to support the social and emotional learning of my teachers during our new teaching and learning environment.

I recommend that school districts partner with Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) to offer virtual conferences, webinars, and on-going professional learning that allows school leaders to acquire the necessary learning and expertise to effectively support teachers' social and emotional learning.

It is important that now more than ever that we utilize the concepts of teaching the whole child, to teach the whole teacher in support of nurturing all areas of their development and learning in order to increase their self-efficacy as virtual teachers. Right now, teachers' need empathy, nurturing, appreciation, understanding, and acknowledgement. If we do not do this, teachers may leave the profession in large numbers and we will be asking ourselves, what we could have done differently to support them during one of the most unique times in education. We have a chance to do something extraordinary for all teachers because our students are counting on us to make the right decisions for everyone's success.

Elizabeth Mary Anne Taylor



Unlocking the Soul of a Child

In the middle of grade five, my parents moved my four brothers and I across Canada from our ramshackle house in a poor area of Toronto to a commune on the west coast, where by the end of summer, my non-socialist father had given up on the commune and moved us into a four room shack with a wood burning stove and an outhouse. Suffice to say it was anything but a veritable hotbed of luxury. Life was hard, it was most often violent, and there were many days we went without the basics of life, such as enough food and sufficient clothing.

However, it all melted away for me between the hours of nine and three; particularly starting in my fifth-grade year with a young, involved teacher who helped me believe

I had talents beyond spelling and encouraged me to join a photography club. More importantly, he taught me firsthand lessons in social justice that have stuck with me to this day.

Then in grade six, my west coast principal and teacher, Mr. MacTavish, taught me the value of both my voice and my outside of the box thinking. Most of all, he taught me men could be kind, caring and trusted, and made me feel safe. In high school, Mr. Weir went out of his way to change my Math stream and told me; "I changed it because you're smarter than you think." Then he added; "Don't worry, I'll help you if you need it." He too showed me the power of caring as a human, teacher, and a man, and the positive impact that comes with following through on your word.

All three of these teachers went out of their way to help me believe in myself, to help me feel safe, smart, and capable. They helped me to feel happy, calm, and cared for, even if it was only for those six hours each day.

Prior to meeting these three men, many of my teachers (and a few teachers in between) worked in isolation. They behaved as the classic sage on the stage and claimed their power over me as the keeper of knowledge. They used textbooks, worksheets, multiple choice exams, and processes that ingrained in me, and likely my classmates, a belief that there was one correct answer that only the teacher knew. It often felt out of reach, like an impossible task. This quest for the secret answer the teacher held gave me a sense that if I worked hard enough and kept to the teacher's chosen path, I could find it.

However, I found the path hard, boring, and frustrating. Rarely did I feel excitement in those classes. Sometimes when I did stray, I would have a fleeting sensation of something more exciting, something that filled me with curiosity and questions, but then I would be reminded I was straying from the path and had, literally, lost my senses by not listening to directions.

Other times, I tried so hard to stay on the path only to come up against walls of misunderstanding that if I managed to clear them out of my way, only shame and a deep sense of helplessness was left in its wake. Clearly, I hadn't listened, or asked the right questions, or held the right disposition, or came from the right family. It often felt like I was in a pre-determined treasure hunt, or modern-day escape room, where the clues were set with minor deviations, and once I found the right key, voila – escape. The only problem was, no matter how good I became at the game, I felt trapped even after I escaped, as if the escape room had only led to another, slightly bigger, escape room. For once the answer was given, the puzzle solved, the prize wasn't more knowledge on how to be better, do better, or understand more – the prize was a grade or a mark that simply led to another lackluster task.

That was until grade five and a teacher who appeared to live happily in curiosity and belief in his students, no matter how much they might struggle. Mr. MacTavish, my grade six principal teacher gave me a glimpse into the power of creative thinking and helped me to feel what it feels like when someone truly listens. Mr. Weir, my high school math and computer teacher, lived calmly in a world of diverging ideas and led the Greenpeace Club, which I happily became a member of with a renewed sense of confidence instilled by his belief in me.

How lucky for me to have had those invigorating, trusting, inspiring experiences from grade five onward, that imbued in me the sense and belief of possibilities inherent in my learning. Three very different educators, a young Indo-Canadian fresh out of teacher college in 1970-71, an older Scottish leader from 1971-73, and a middle-aged computer scientist from 1973-77, who all led with social justice, a deep belief in inquiry, a passion for meaningful feedback, and the ability to find value with other colleagues or organizations that took us outside of the classroom and opened my eyes to a bigger world. The dichotomy of my experiences showed me that while there were teachers who stuck to the status quo, there were also those teachers who taught differently. Teachers who saw into my soul, helped me go beyond the text, asked different kinds of questions, accepted different kinds of answers, encouraged me to veer from the path, valued my thinking when I did, and made me feel they truly believed in me, no matter my ability at the time. They helped me set goals I could reach, challenged me with new goals when I reached them, and taught me to set my own goals in the process. The walls in these rooms faded, or even disappeared altogether, and all I saw were the endless possibilities. Possibilities in myself and in those around me. Those were classrooms where I felt free, capable, curious, inspired, cared for, encouraged, and safe, even when I struggled. More importantly, I felt that there was always more to find and know. I never felt trapped.

These are feelings I have never forgotten. These are feelings that all children have the right to feel. I truly believe there is more to school than just ticking a box or getting the answer correct. Children have the right to stretch themselves outside of the confines of the locked/closed box that school can become when the joy of discovery is left out, when care and kindness are ignored, when end results become more important than the process. Children have the right to have their passions stirred, their curiosity sparked, and thirst for knowledge quenched. Surely this is what we want for our students, I know it's what I want for my children.

The question then becomes how do we make it happen? Do we continue to let schooling teach these things right out of children, or do we say now is the time for change? I don't know about you, but it's been almost 50 years since grade five and it's time that all children are able to see their possibilities, to truly dream a future, and to believe in themselves.

Nothing worth doing is ever easy and it often starts small, so if I can start with a small group of teachers willing to teach differently, to teach to the heart of children's strengths and needs, surely you can too. Theory of Change Assumptions (see Theory of Change model on next page)

I truly believe that when teachers are open to learning from and with each other, then great things can happen. I also believe that when teachers approach learning with the notion that each child is unique and arrives with their own gifts, then great things are possible. Furthermore, I believe that with the right kind of professional learning and classroom support, then the goals outlined are possible.

I do know that learning takes time and the support of a team, which can be challenging when teams change, but I am operating under the assumption that the teams I have identified will stay fairly stable.

I also believe that there is always room for adjustments in learning and expectations, which include mine as well as the educators I work with. As such, this overall, positive approach is assumed to be successful.

Daisy Torres



Mindsets Matter

If you're always trying to be normal, you will never know how amazing you can be.
-Maya Angelou

As an urban-school educator for the past 23 years, I've had the privilege of educating thousands of children over the years. In addition to the joys of having a positive impact on my students, my experiences have also highlighted the crucial need to address the inequities in our education system, particularly for students of color.

When I was a little girl, I loved to read and would often lock myself in my bedroom for hours immersed in a good book. I remember reading about the perseverance of Helen Keller, who used her blindness to change the world. Because of my love for reading, by the time I was in 8th grade, I was placed in the “B” classes. My middle school leveled their classes by ability, with A level classes for the highest honors and the E level classes for the most remedial. My two best friends were in the “D” class. I remember walking into my class the first day and immediately locking eyes with a student from elementary school, Milton. Milton was the only student, in a room full of about 25 students, who looked like me. I desperately wanted to be with my friends in the other class, with students who looked like us. I found the same type of practice in high school when I was placed in “College Preparatory” classes as a freshman. This was great for me, but what about all the other students, like my two best friends, who should also be in these classes? Why weren’t more students of color in higher-level and advanced placement classes and more teachers of color teaching them? These experiences fueled my desire to change the outcome for thousands of students just like me.

Research tells us traditionally underserved students, including students of color, attend and complete college at far lower rates than their peers. These students are suspended, expelled, and drop out at higher rates, and are less likely to have access to strong teachers, fewer and lower-quality books, materials, laboratories, and computers; are exposed to significantly larger class sizes; and are given less access to high-quality and challenging curriculum (Shelley, 2018).

Imagine a school where all students are exposed to a rigorous and demanding curriculum regardless of race, language, cultural background, or previous learning experiences and includes a balanced representation of the student body representative of the school. Students performing below grade level have opportunities to work with peers at higher levels in an inclusive classroom where students learn from each other and funds of knowledge are valued. Curriculum is culturally relevant, students of color are taught by teachers who look like them, and standards are taught from a common curriculum. Students are not short-changed in expectations, or support and are given multiple opportunities to demonstrate their learning in a variety of ways. Teachers are respected and supported, regardless of the subject matter they teach, and have a voice in decision-making. School budgets, resources, and staffing are allocated across schools based on students’ individual needs, with students at the center of all decisions. This vision should not remain a dream but realized as our new normal. No more excuses. All students deserve the best we can give them.

It was people like my fifth-grade teacher, Mrs. K, or my high school counselor, Mr. Szymaszek, who believed in my potential when I didn’t believe in myself. These influential people in my life were key to my success as a teacher, administrator, and most recently, a published author.

I chose to be a teacher and administrator to challenge the status quo, to help teachers understand the power of relationships, to help administrators reflect on mindset and expectations for student success, and to advocate for the many students who deserve a high-quality education. I chose to take my passion for equity and social justice and be part of a system that believes every child can grow and learn to their full potential...with teachers who truly believe in their success.

Why? **Because mindset matters.**

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Kristin Trompeter



High Expectations: Gotta Have Them

I remember introducing my son to his kindergarten teacher on that first day of school and prefacing the fact that he had an IEP with the fact that he had a hard time processing and was a struggling student. I knew this because he had been diagnosed with speech issues and though he had received support services, I had made the decision to have him repeat pre-k once his speech came online to provide time for his social skills to develop as well. Since she was the same kindergarten teacher as my older son had had and he had never struggled with anything, I thought I needed to set her expectations appropriately. She just sagely nodded and said thank you. She politely said, "Good- bye, mom" and closed the door to begin her first day of instruction.

In the course of my conversations with my son about how school had gone each day, I noticed a continuing thread. His teacher had changed his seat to the front but off to a side. He had a buddy who often shared his answers for him to the class. He was called on because he had raised his hand, but when he couldn't remember his answer, his

teacher calmly said she would come back to him. Two student responses later, he was able to speak out loud to the class and share his answer. He shared his answer first today and the other students after him all said the same thing.

Then in March, my son brought home a note from his teacher asking to schedule a Parent-Teacher conference. I was devastated. I had thought we (my son and I) were making adequate learning progress so far. What had gone wrong? How had I failed?

When I met with his teacher, she graciously informed me that she loved having my son in her class. She was so proud of him and how he had overcome his shyness to share out in both small and whole group with his classmates and her. The light bulb of my son's social emotional supports from her went on.

She then went on to tell that she wanted to recommend my son for gifted testing and had called me in to have me sign the consent form and explain that this testing would most likely take place over the summer and could I commit to taking him to the district testing site, so this evaluation could be done?

I was flabbergasted. My struggling, real label in my mind--"limited learner" --son was demonstrating gifted tendencies. As his teacher shared the evidence of his need for greater challenge with me, I had seen manifestations of these in our home life as well. But I, unlike her, had discounted them. I had focused on his "issues" only.

In that moment, I realized that I had set low expectations for my son. I had further tried to foist my low expectations onto his teacher. Luckily for all of us, she maintained high expectations. She recognized my son's learning and social emotional needs and supported him. This empowered him to strive productively to meet these high expectations. She set him on the path to lifelong success as she taught him □he could achieve, struggle is productive, perseverance pays off, and asking for help is a positive.

My son's teacher taught me the power of expectations. Mine were a road map for disappointment and limitation with the possibility of demoralization thrown in for my son. Hers were an elevation into joy and engagement with the world. Oh, and what is even scarier is that in addition to being a mom who loves her son, I am a teacher. Now I find my expectations of me are to raise up expectations, most especially mine for growing others.

Jayne Zielinski



Leadership Lesson #1

In the fall of 2000, I was hired as a first-grade teacher at John F. Kennedy Elementary and later transferred, prior to the start of the school year to Garfield Elementary. I believe this transfer positively altered my course as a teacher and now as an instructional leader. My building Principal was Anja Hoekman. Mrs. Hoekman was the highest level of professional. She was always beautifully dressed; almost elegant to a degree, soft spoken with confidence, thoughtful in her words and actions, had a presence when she entered a room, and a genuine love of students. In my first year of teaching, Kyle was one of my students. Kyle was on an IEP and had EA constant EA support. Kyle was oftentimes hard to understand and displayed atypical behaviors in the classroom and with his peers. He had limited communication and his behavior was always trying to communicate something to a peer, me, or any other adult.

He was very endearing, and I was drawn to the complexity of serving him. After several failed plans and implementations of different resources, it was determined that Kyle would be transferred to a more restricted environment for his learning and safety and the safety of others. He would attend Children's Home Society. Kyle's mom was always supportive, and it was very clear she loved him and wanted what was best for him.

On the day of Kyle's meeting to visit and complete the necessary IEP and enrollment paperwork with CHS, the meeting was during the day. Mrs. Hoekman offered to drive me there as well as Kyle's mom. Mrs. Hoekman drove a white van. We picked up Kyle's mom directly down the street from Garfield and drove to Children's Home Society. I was not familiar with the program and did not know what to expect from our visit today. Mrs. Hoekman had prepped me with what I would be asked in re: to Kyle's academics and behaviors, however, I still was nervous to see the school. CHS has day students and residential students. Students are placed at CHS for a variety of reasons.

When we arrived, we were given a brief tour of the building. It was very similar to a regular school. Class sizes were smaller and there was more than one adult in the room. At the conclusion of our tour, we returned to a conference room. Several unfamiliar faces were seated around the table. Introductions were made and the meeting was under way. The IEP team agreed to Kyle's placement at CHS. A start date was determined, and the meeting was concluded. Mrs. Hoekman, Kyle's mom, and I returned to the white van and Mrs. Hoekman dropped Kyle's mom off at her house. She was very appreciative to all we had done to help Kyle.

As we drove off, I was seated in the front seat with Mrs. Hoekman. We pulled into her parking spot (Principal Parking) and there was a pregnant pause. I asked Mrs. Hoekman if she felt this was best for Kyle as I was internally really struggling with the decision to let him go. In her soft-spoken voice, she turned to face me, looked me straight in the eyes, and shared a piece of wisdom I have never forgotten, "Jayne, 99.9% of the time, if you make a decision in the best interest of the kid, you will have made the right decision." She went on to say that this was not always the preferred decision by others, however, she stated this always brought her peace with difficult decisions similar to the decision made in Kyle's best interest.

That statement has been forever at the forefront of every decision I have made as a leader and it has never failed me. It has not always been easy to make the decision I felt was the best decision of kids, however, it almost always has been the right decision. I still occasionally see Mrs. Hoekman and she still is as elegantly dressed and soft spoken as that day in her white van. Thank you, Mrs. Hoekman!

Sidenote: Kyle transitioned to CHS and remained there. I understand he eventually became residential and then I lost track of him. The only thing I can hope and pray for all of the kids I have had the pleasure of working with is that they are safe, doing something they enjoy, and are loved by someone.

Team Slinky

Stretching to Great Lengths



THE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING ASSOCIATION

ACADEMY CLASS OF 2020

Laura Brasses



The Importance of Reflection

What we do not learn from experience...we learn from reflecting on experience.

– John Dewey

As a teacher, reading specialist, and coach, I have participated in many interviews. I have learned some of the best candidates admit human error, reflect, and do better. Reflective teachers are able to see the goal, how it was missed or accomplished and can explain why. Thinking about their reflection makes them change, set higher goals, and achieve more for students. After 18 years in education, anyone that does not present a humble attitude, has not taken the time to reflect. No teacher has done it perfectly for every child, every lesson, every day. After 8 years of being out of the classroom as a reading specialist and coach, here is how I would change as a practitioner of education.

If I went back as a classroom teacher:

- I'd laugh more with children. Laughter is the best medicine! It bonds. It heals. Kids love fun!
- I'd stop and enjoy them more.
- I'd take it a day at a time when it comes to social and emotional individual needs. We all have social and emotional needs, even as adults. Social and emotional needs are a part of being human and it is a process for us all.
- I would not let my problems with a "system" overtake my passion for a child to help her or him succeed.
- I would take the time to use more pre-assessments to guide my work for students' learning.

- In addition to teaching kids to read, I'd enjoy more literature in front of them. I would use this time to let them feel the authors' words and a passion for reading.
- I would sit on the floor in order to be more eye level with children which would hold me accountable for learning with them, not teaching at them.
- I'd use more directive teaching in my phonics approach.
- I'd take more deep breaths.
- I'd set more visible goals with my class in order to help instruction, especially in the area of writing.
- I'd analyze more students' work.
- I'd pray more for us.
- I would capitalize my center routine with more intentionality by using more constructivist-based centers and more academically challenging centers.
- I'd trust them more.
- I'd trust myself more.
- I will do the best I can and so will they.

What I would change as a teacher as collaborator:

- I'd be more positive.
- I'd be an active participant.
- I'd work on being focused.
- I'd use my voice more often. I'd realize the facilitator often has honest intentions.
- I'd realize that the facilitator's job is not to have answers or perform. We are collaborating.
- Collaborating doesn't mean I necessarily mark something off my to-do list.
- Collaborating does mean that I am thinking.

What do I want people to know as a coach:

- I love learning.
- Small systems with great leadership are easier to "solve."
- Small systems without great leadership are doomed to fail.
- I have limited control.
- I am happiest when I am in classrooms working directly with students.
- Big Systems with great leadership are easier to tackle.
- Big Systems without great leadership go nowhere.
- Please communicate respectfully. Without respectful communication, collaboration does not go well.
- It takes three hours to plan for every hour of PD.

- It takes much longer to plan as a coach than as a teacher. We have to provide so much more. It is not as easy as writing a lesson plan.
- Good coaches are always learning. This does not mean they have the answers necessarily. We are problem solvers with you.
- You are in the trenches. Good questions help us.
- Standards are our guide.
- Students are our guide.
- I give grace.
- I struggle most with this job as I don't seem "heard" by teachers, principals, and superintendents.
- Teaching is harder than most professions.
- You are an adult. Be present. We need you.
- I am forever thankful for your hard work.

Jennifer Hix



What is Your COVID SuperPower?

When there is a crisis who do you call? A Superhero of course! Superheroes have the power to fix things and make everything better. During the pandemic school systems are full of superheroes! Collectively everyone's superhero powers make the obstacles manageable to support one another.

The pandemic has caused me to reflect on my "superhero powers" and home in on "superpowers" I would like to continue to develop.

One superhero power I witnessed was being focused on our learners and making student-centered decisions. Listening to what our students need-food, shelter, technology, instructional assistance, a cheerleader. These are some supports that our students and families needed immediately in March when the pandemic hit the United

States. In the Spring, serving as an Associate Principal I was a coach to staff to foster an awareness of student and family needs and assist in connections families with community resources. I believe this student-centered aspect is essential.

We know as educators the work of humanistic psychologist Abraham Maslow and the theory of basic and psychological needs that must be met. If basic needs are not met our students are unable to access learning. Making sure our students' basic needs are met takes precedence over homework completion. The pandemic thrust educators into a new, unknown situation where school was taking place in our students' "homes". Through technology and virtual classrooms, we were able to gain insight into our students' home life. This experience was eye-opening. As educators we were teaching at our students' kitchen table, bedroom, basement - wherever the student was. Technology gave us access to our students' lives and homes. In many aspects, the pandemic allowed us to connect with our students on levels unimaginable. Our students were in school at their teachers' homes. Going to a brick-and-mortar school gives everyone access to a consistent learning environment. The pandemic and schooling exposed educators and students to a remote learning environment. Some students (or staff) may not want to turn their cameras on because their teacher and classmates have direct access to their environment. Students and staff are dealing with challenging circumstances. The Superhero power is staying student-centered to provide basic necessities to allow students to access learning. The student-centered superpower also included assisting students in prioritizing their learning and "letting go" of the nice to know, yet holding accountability for "the need" to know.

Superheroes know the power of their team and trust their team. This is a superhero power that is essential in a crisis. Trusting your team and knowing your role seems to go hand in hand. Being a member of a large system there are many teams. When teams have clarity in their role and know what is in their circle of control the system can support one another and students.

The superpower of communication and connections is vital. A Superhero must relate to others so that they can "read" and respond to situations. A Superhero communicates plans and uses their "radar." The power of communication strengthens the superpower of teams and trusting your teams.

Another superhero power was using the systems and structures in place to support students, families, and one another during this time. School systems are large, complex organizations. School systems have created structures to support learning for all. These systems should continue to serve in a crisis and not be abandoned. A superhero power I witnessed and will continue to build is relying on the developed systems even in a crisis. During the pandemic, there were challenges that tested the systems. By

maintaining our developed systems, we were able to use created communication and problem-solving processes. This was key, as there was a great deal of unknown. My reflection on the Superhero power of using developed systems is that systems provide consistency and comfort during crisis times. A Superhero knows the systems, communicates the systems, and can support colleagues in using the system.

An important superpower of celebrating. The pandemic caused the education system to be flexible, take risk-take, and jump into the unknown. A Superhero recognizes a situation, sees the positives, and takes the time to celebrate others (students, staff, parents, and administration).

As we enter the fall, I am reflecting on how I can support staff, families, and learners in recognizing their "superhero powers". I began my reflection process by creating lessons learned list. Have you recorded your list? (Numbering is not a ranking.)

Lessons learned and questions still in the reflection phase as we are still in the pandemic:

1. Communication is key. What information is vital? Welcome questions. Be consistent with responses. Need to vary communication for different stakeholders. Anticipate questions as communication is crafted. Can you anticipate too much? Develop a communication plan-who receives the information-what time will it be sent, follow up?
2. Take care of one another
3. Appreciate the small things-take nothing for granted
4. What do schools do? Prepare learners for life experiences. What did we teach during the pandemic? Hopefully-flexibility, take a learning risk, communication, things will not be perfect, appreciate different perspectives
5. Appreciate everyone's perspectives
6. Social interactions are important
7. There are things in life we cannot control and do not know the answers too
8. Ask questions:
 - a. What did our students learn during the pandemic?
 - b. What did we learn from our students?
9. How has surviving a pandemic impacted me as a person? As an educator? What did I learn? What were the various obstacles along the way?
10. New experiences yield new words-shelter in place, social distancing
11. Introvert-extrovert learning styles-Do schools meet both? Did remote learning connect with different learners?
12. Appreciate and lean on a professional learning network-Learning Forward and my Academy colleagues
13. Be aware of situations where priorities shift. Recognize that this occurs in others.
14. Systems are valued and stretched.

15. Work-Life balance? How do you manage both?
16. What do you miss about the bricks and mortar school building?
17. What did you take from your classroom when you learned you may not be back to school? Was this an easy decision? Was this a hard decision?
18. What did you miss about the "end of the school year"?
19. If you are a parent, what were you able to do with your children/family that you have never been able to do? Ex. board games, exercise, read together, movie marathons, build a project, cook, craft, garden, etc.
20. What were the struggles you faced personally as a family?
21. What did I wish I knew about my students/staff that would have helped me support them during the pandemic? How can I use this reflection for the fall and launching a school year with new student? New colleagues?

Throughout this experience, I am blessed to have others around me who have amazing Superpowers. I continue to observe and learn from their daily examples. This experience has provided schools with opportunities to stretch and expand our SuperPowers. I am super excited for the school year and embrace the year with a powerful Superhero Team.

Amanda Kraft



The Future is Inclusive: My Commitment to Professional Learning

In education, we hear the word ALL. All students will succeed; ALL students have the opportunity; ALL students are included. ALL our teachers are welcoming; ALL our teachers are capable; ALL our teachers can teach. Do we mean ALL? Are we inclusive?

I believe that EVERY child deserves the opportunity yearly to have an educator who is not only trained in best instructional and social/emotional practices but uses them to ensure achievement and inspires HOPE. I have dedicated my work to ensure that our classroom instructional leaders have the knowledge and skills to address our students and community's ever-evolving needs.

I believe that every child and staff member should feel safe, included, and are free of dominant societal biases. Marginalized groups can find a home in our school district, where they feel warm in arms of hope and love wraps around them as they grow as students and educators.

I believe in my heart that an inclusive environment for ALL people can be a reality through ongoing focused professional learning. Creating authentic relationships that build real connections between humans will change our institutions for the greater good! Providing our educators with relevant culturally responsive teaching strategies, unpacking bias, and building knowledge around equity and social justice work must be at the forefront of all our work as educators.

Paul J. Meyer reminds us, "Communication-The human connection is the key to personal and career success."

Becoming inclusive cannot happen if we do not choose to have relationships with people of different backgrounds, gender identity, race, culture, belief systems, socioeconomic status, etc. Only through human interaction can we begin to understand others. Relationships, mentoring, and support of one another is crucial for an inclusive environment. We no longer live in an era that teaching is done in isolation; we know better. Our teachers' collective knowledge is far greater than any one individual in our institution. Our experiences, our diverse backgrounds, and belief systems are strengths that help us relate and connect not only with our students but to each other.

I believe and know in my heart that through authentic relationships, we will become inclusive for ALL students.

Stephanie Muchow



Inspire to Lead, Lead to Inspire

Throughout my educational career as a classroom teacher, instructional coach, and now an administrative intern, I reflect on those who inspired me to be the educator I am. Who made an impact on me? Inspiring leaders exist in many different forms. They can be friends or colleagues, or maybe even supervisors, they support you and challenge you to grow. My passion is to make an impact on others as a leader. Simon Sinek states in his book *Start with Why*, "There are only two ways to influence human behavior: you can manipulate it or you can inspire it" (2009). I want to inspire!

When I was younger, I loved playing basketball. I would spend hours in my driveway shooting hoops. Sometimes by myself or with anyone else that I could convince to join me. My brother, who is eleven years older than me, was my basketball hero at the time. He brought me to his high school practices while watching me after school and spent many hours playing HORSE or PIG in our driveway. His perseverance and grit inspired me. Even when he was recovering from injuries, he bounced back stronger. His passion on the court carried over to his career in the military.

I grew up in a small town and attended the same high school that my older siblings attended. Many of the teachers I had in high school previously had my siblings. All of our names start with "S," so many times, my name was my sister's name in class. Thankfully not my brothers. During these years, I remember being compared a lot to my siblings. Not that it was a bad thing, but I also was trying to discover myself. Who am I? Then came along my volleyball coach. As a freshman, I didn't have a lot of experience playing volleyball. However, I did grow up playing basketball and was committed to practicing and improving my game. My coach had me spend time in the setter position at practices and challenged me to grow in that position. He had high expectations, and I worked hard to meet them. My coach believed in me.

I remember having opportunities as a freshman to play on the Varsity team. After that, I continued to reach milestones throughout my volleyball career.

Fast forward to my educational career, where I have had the opportunity to work with many colleagues and administrators who have inspired me on my journey to the role of administrative intern. "The role of a leader is not to come up with all the great ideas. The role of a leader is to create an environment in which great ideas can happen," exclaimed Sinek (2009). Because of the leaders I had, I was able to grow professionally. Opportunities to join leadership teams at building and district levels, participation in curriculum studies, and join the Learning Forward Academy Class of 2020. Throughout my academy experience, my passion for professional learning and inspiring others to lead has only strengthened.

Sinek goes on to say, "Leading is not the same as being a leader. Being the leader means you hold the highest rank, either by earning it, good fortune or navigating internal politics. Leading, however, means that others willingly follow you--not because they have to, not because they are paid to, but because they want to" (2009). I want to lead! I want to inspire others to lead!

Kathy Schaefflein



Engaging Students is the KEY to Learning

As educators, our main goal and purpose is for students to learn. We spend hours on clarifying what we want students to learn and planning lesson that include the information we need to share and way we will assess the learning. Educator can continue to work hard and “do” so many things to prepare to teach and yet the students may not learn. How can we ensure learning if teachers are the ones “doing” everything while students are passively listening and expected to learn from taking it all in?

Students must be actively engaged in learning in order to achieve high levels of understanding. As an administrator, I have the privilege of observing many different

classrooms with some fantastic teaching. I have seen some very well managed classrooms with high levels of instruction and not much engagement. The highest levels of learning I have seen, have been in the classrooms where the students are "doing" the learning through conversations, collaboration, trial and error, questioning... All of this is done through the facilitation of a teacher who has spent the time planning lessons that include instructional practices to actively involve the students in structured learning.

It is exciting to walk into a classroom where there are high levels of student engagement. This is not a quiet classroom, nor is it a loud chaotic classroom. These are places where there is a buzz or an energy around the room. This positive environment is created by a caring professional that has taken the time to build a rapport not only between teacher and student but also among the students. Beyond that the teacher is a master at clarity of instructional practices, procedures and policies that encourage students to take ownership and learn from each other.

In order for high levels of achievement and learning to take place, student engagement must be a focus of the teachers planning and preparation. Therefore, engagement strategies must be as much (if not more) of lesson planning as the standards, content and assessment. Teacher training and professional development need to focus what the students are "doing" and not just what the teacher is teaching.

I look forward to the day when every classroom I walk into fills me with a buzz of energy around learning. Instead of observing a teacher sharing knowledge with the students, together the teacher and I can learn from the students. The key to high levels of achievement is opening the door to actively engaged student and classrooms.

Mary Seltzer



Not Going to Lie

Not going to lie - Throughout the process of implementing Response to Intervention at the middle school level, my heart has broken just a bit. Coming from an elementary level, I entered into the implementation wearing rose colored glasses. Our RtI coach and I were meeting with campus administration and teachers to observe in classrooms, provide feedback, survey students and discuss how the new program has been working. One administrator, speaking his truth, said that he believed that RtI is a lot of work that benefits few students. He believes RtI is not worth the work and resources needed for quality implementation.

Not going to lie - Providing the appropriate resources for all students to be successful is difficult.

Not going to lie - Responding to the needs of all students is expensive.

Not going to lie - Intervening to fill student achievement gaps can seem overwhelming.

Not going to lie - Implementing Response to Intervention takes time.

Not going to lie - Collecting data and progress monitoring can be cumbersome.

Not going to lie - This process is going to take time, resources, and a shift in beliefs **AND** it is worth it, because it is what is right for all students.

What comes to mind the most for me when thinking about meeting the needs of all students is the starfish story. I just keep telling myself, it matters to this one - and that should be enough for us to move forward and do what is right for students.



Rachel Ward



Professional Learning and Covid

Professional Learning is at the heart of education. I have always had a passion for learning, growing, changing and challenging myself as do most educators. In fact, educators yearn for professional learning. Without it, they feel lost, defeated, hopeless. This is partly why educators have had such a hard time responding to COVID-19. We don't know the answers, but we want more than anything to answer them all. Teachers are having to rethink the way they do everything. Passionate teachers who are experts in building and maintaining student relationships while also being responsive and observant in the classroom are struggling to replicate that environment virtually. How do we continue to provide engaging, rigorous, student centered, responsive and relevant learning during this time?

My role as the coordinator of assessment, data and accountability shifted last spring when assessments were cancelled, accountability measures were reduced, and virtual learning was implemented district wide. I became one of the district coaches who lead teachers through the challenging task of flipping their classrooms and curriculum-based communities to online learning environments. We all learned together. It was challenging but also extremely fulfilling. I love teaching and this was an opportunity for me to teach and learn alongside some of the best educators around. We tackled problems as they came up and adjusted as needed.

We continue to problem solve, discuss expectations versus realities and struggle with doing what's best for children in a way that is manageable. The hardest part has been that more than ever before, there are pros and cons to every solution, every decision and it seems impossible to meet the needs of all students, families and educators. What works for one grade level, one teacher, one student does not work for the next. Trying to find consistent expectations for all educators became my mission.

First I grounded myself in the components of high quality blended virtual instruction. Based on those components, district wide expectations were developed. We had to address the “what”, the “why” and the “how” for every aspect of the lesson design process. Those three questions now guide most of my interactions with teachers and educators. What are you trying to accomplish? Why is it important? How can we do that? Since we can't do what we've always done or what we were “trained” to do, we have to evaluate almost every decision we make in that way. Essentially, it has shifted educators to work through professional learning experiences on a daily basis. Instead of workshops and after school book studies around topics from experts we are all learning together every minute of every day and applying that learning immediately. We are relying on our previous knowledge to get us through and sometimes it doesn't feel like enough. More than ever, we must stay grounded in our “why” and what we know about good teaching and learning. We all must be open to learn, try new things, fail and grow. We don't have the answers and believe it or not, that is okay.

Tenacious Troopers

No Soldier Left Behind



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Erin Ashcraft



External Service Providers: Roles and Contributions

As too often is the case in education, no matter the wealth of partners, resources, or vision statements, the true goal of improved student learning outcomes is still not impacted in the ways we had intended. And, perhaps worst of all, the piecemeal efforts to enact positive change produce incoherent structures and system barriers instead, ultimately forcing further inequity rather than resolving it.

Educators at all levels claim the value and importance of partnerships and collaboration, from our youngest students to the largest organizations, collaborative partnerships are an expectation and necessity. However, clearly defining the roles of various groups is a critical step in the process to ensure efforts are not being duplicated and all participants are successfully engaged. What are these roles though? Outside organizations require both the experience and knowledge of daily operations at the local education agency (LEA) yet are bound by their current organizational locus of control; they often have greater access and opportunity to the latest research on effective practices than the practitioners themselves yet have limited ways of communicating this for classroom-level impact. As an incredibly broad field, spanning from birth through adulthood, education supports nearly every aspect of society, touches nearly every life, is filled with noble people striving to make a difference, yet has historically struggled for coherent, systematic alignment.

Learning Forward has described these organizations outside the LEA as External Service Providers, including the State Education Agency (SEA), Institutions of Higher Education (IHE), Professional Associations, and External Partners. Each set of External Service Providers has specific areas of expertise and influence, and when these systems are out of sync they are not functioning optimally, thus they are not able to provide relevant and

necessary support to LEAs. Without a common understanding of the ways in which organizations can come together to support student learning, there is increased potential for redundancy, irrelevant or conflicting advice, and a loss of confidence in these External Service Providers by those who they are striving to support. The role-specific Innovation Configuration (IC) Maps for the Learning Forward Professional Learning Standards (2014) are powerful tools for examining the specific ways various groups can be expected to contribute to LEA professional learning efforts.

In examining the standards for my Learning Forward Academy problem of practice, Standard 2: Leadership, Outcome 3: Create Support Systems and Structures, became evident as the area of focus most relevant to my position as SEA staff, removed from the actual planning and enactment of district and school-based professional learning. In the IC Maps for External Roles, three desired outcomes are further detailed within this sub-component of the Professional Learning Standards: 1. Influences systems and structures essential for effective professional learning, 2. Builds capacity for skillful collaboration, and 3. Cultivates and maintains a collaborative culture. To begin the exercise of determining the unique contributions the SEA can provide as compared to other External Service Providers, the table below shows the Level 1 (optimal) indicators for this element for each group for Outcome 2.3.1, influences systems and structures essential for effective professional learning.

Standard 2: Leadership, Outcome 3: Create support systems and structures

Desired Outcome 2.3.1: Influences systems and structures essential for effective professional learning

Desired Outcome 2.3.2: Builds capacity for skillful collaboration

Desired Outcome 2.3.3: Cultivates and maintains a collaborative culture

Education Agency	External Partner	Ins. of Higher Edu.	Professional Association
Uses agency authority through policies and programming to advance effective PL	Contributes to establishing , with staff and clients, systems and school conditions necessary for effective PL	Conducts , with faculty, students, and participants, research on system and school conditions necessary for effective PL	Disseminates research, exemplars, and other information about system and school conditions necessary for effective PL
Contributes to the development of and monitors system and school conditions necessary for effective PL	Supports staff and clients to understand and implement conditions for effective PL		
Assesses and improves with staff, LEAs, and external partners, conditions for effective	Monitors , with staff and clients, conditions for effective PL	Assesses and improves , with faculty, students, and participants, conditions for effective PL	Supports staff, members, and stakeholders to assess and improve conditions for effective internal and external PL

internally and externally sponsored PL			
	Works , with staff and clients, to solve problems related to conditions for effective PL		

PDSA Cycle Phases	Plan
	Do
	Study
	Act

After review of these expectations, distinctions between the action steps identified for each group demonstrated the strengths and limitations of the service providers. While there are ways for all of these External Service Providers to positively influence systems and structures supporting professional learning, they must each work within their space and means. Using the Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) Cycle model for continuous improvement (Shakman, Bailey, & Breslow, 2017), the roles become clearer as the nature of External Service Providers means they are likely removed from the “Do” and “Act” steps of the cycle. The SEA aligns policies and supports understanding of fiscal resources to schools/districts, promotes effective practices, and supports assessment of effectiveness and outcomes. IHEs support the field through research on effectiveness and practices, which are distributed in part by Professional Associations whose mission is to support in-service teachers. While External Partners, a group less specifically defined than the others, may have opportunities for direct support or field work, these groups are all able to best serve the field through “Plan” and “Study” needs for continuous improvement planning.

Through attention to the actionable ways External Service Providers are best situated to influence structures and systems, there can be greater impact on the Leadership professional learning standard for the broader education community. Practitioners are all too aware of the external influences removed from “doing” and “acting” in schools whose voices lead to ongoing programmatic changes, however these groups can best relate to the field through their capacity to support “planning” and “studying” through researching, assessing, and supporting the efforts to improve LEAs and classroom-level student outcomes. By knowing our role, we can ensure the services provided are relevant and helpful to those in need of such support in the field.

Resources

Learning Forward. (2014). Innovation configuration maps for external roles. *The Learning Professional*. <https://learningforward.org/journal/june-2014-issue/ic-maps/>

Shakman, K., Bailey, J., & Breslow, N. (2017). A primer for continuous improvement in schools and districts. *Education Development Center*. https://www.edc.org/sites/default/files/uploads/primer_for_continuous_improvement.pdf

Jessica Santiago Chavez



Pivot

As I start to reflect on the upcoming school year, I tear up. I am no longer “in the trenches” so to speak but have the unique opportunity to truly have an ear to what is going on in the state with educational stakeholders at all levels. We hear the word “pivot” quite a bit, but what are we really asking teachers to do? When we ask educators to pivot, and pivot, and pivot... are we considering the social and emotional health of our faculty members, and this new way of life?

Over the last two weeks I have spent hours on the phone with former colleagues, mentors, and educators, who were once considered seasoned, and a leader at their craft, leveled by the expectations put on them daily. There is no guidebook for what they are doing, at the speed they need to do it, or a more experienced colleague to navigate with.

Hearing the tears and emotion through the phone as I walk them through creating a virtual classroom, hearing how they were sick every morning this week before “coming” into school, hearing about how parents are upset with them and are using the office assistants as tech support are just a couple of the things I have been hearing. Unfortunately, that is not considering the issues they are dealing with beyond the classroom, some dealing with real loss in their own homes.

Many are struggling to also be a “virtual learning parent”, have the same fears for their children’s progress as those not in education, and as much as they love and adore their role in the classroom, are conflicted with coming back in person. We know it’s best for kids, but is it best for all? I go in circles about ways to ensure we are meeting the needs of the whole child and the whole educator but continue to feel like we are falling short.

What will this post- COVID educational world look like? How can we make a shift as leaders, communities, and educational partners to ensure that not only are we providing teachers with the skills, welfare care, and access to resources that are so desperately

needed? How can we ensure that student success is of the utmost importance when there is clearly an access and equity divide? How can we as educators, and Learning Forward members come together to design a way to help this new, unique, problem of practice? How can we Pivot?

As I look to answer these things myself, I look to what my organization is doing, and what I have observe to start happening all around me. The same principles that are happening in our homes, industry, and work as we evolve during this time, can also be applied to our classroom and ourselves.

CONNECT- get out of your comfort level and look to resources that are in your own backyard. Do you have a state affiliation to Learning Forward you can join and get resources from? Can you work with educators that have a different skill than you to divide and conquer? Can you find positive, constructive work groups to help you during this time? Can you look to external providers to support you and your students?

LISTEN- Listen to your gut. The world is something we could have never imagined. Listen to that, it's ok to try things you have never done before. You can do hard things. Listen to what people are really saying, listen to learn, not just to respond. Listen to relate.

PERSPECTIVE- Everyone has their own unique circumstance, but you are not alone. We often have to get out of our own head, how we think things should be done, and look at the perspective of our parents, other educators, and students, to truly do what is best for them, not just what we believe to be so, from our perspective.

FIND JOY- Find joy in the small things, take time to recharge. I know it seems impossible. But if we are asking to fill other's cups, we must find time to fill our own. Give yourself grace if you miss posting something at 11:59pm. You are human, it is ok to act like it.

The world and education may look different, and quite possibly never be the same again. I hoped by the end of this, as it has taken me weeks of putting this off in hopes of finding the right answer, formula, or cure to all of this, but I don't. I am human and trying to hold onto the same things you are as well. However, I am making a daily effort to connect, listen, gain perspective, and find joy whenever I can. Through this I have gained so much and learned about how resilient we can be. I know with the dedication and work educators provide to the profession; student success will always be at the forefront. You are champions, and the world needs you.

Cindy D'Ambrosio



The Power of Professional Learning

When I became a special education teacher, I merged two passions: my love of learning, and my love of connecting with those individual's society has disconnected or marginalized. My first year of teaching, I made the decision to go back to grad school as I felt strongly that I had much more to learn and it seemed logical to me that college was my answer. I decided to enroll in a program for aspiring administrators...not because I ever wanted to be one, but because I thought it would give me a more well-rounded view of the school community. I would become a better teacher for students that could not access the general education since I would know how the school system "worked." Thus, I'd able better guide my students in navigating this complex environment and help them make a positive connection to the community.

After spending six years in my teacher's sphere of influence, I realized that the roadblocks my students faced were embedded in the very foundation the system was built on. I started to realize that if the system was not designed to promote access and opportunity for ALL students, then my sphere of influence was very small. When another school leader asked me to take an assistant principal position, I decided to accept the challenge.

Was I ready? No. Did my university program and my administrative license prepare me for the hurdles to come? No. I quickly became aware of what I didn't know. As a result, ongoing professional learning became a more active and daily part of my career. I learned right away that a textbook program would not help me learn what I needed to know about my unique and culturally diverse students and the school community. This type of learning needed the collective efficacy and expertise of the professionals around me for not only my growth but theirs as well. So, we began to learn from each other.

Over the years, I have learned that in order to truly embrace learning, I have needed to become accustomed to being vulnerable in not knowing everything despite my given

title. I have learned that everyone in a system can hold the key to positive changes. That those closest to the source of the conflict are often those with the most insight as to how to solve the problem. I have learned that taking the time to fully listen, engage and ask questions will help be a better leader. Instead of looking at the surface to solve a problem, I need to dig into the roots and learn the "why" behind it. This approach has allowed me to step out of the "box" of public schools and be more open minded about what is possible in educating all students...no matter the hardships they begin with or the disability that handicaps them.

Kenya Pitts Elder



We Need Each Other!

The field of education can be compared to a walk, because you don't just sit still in your knowledge. We are certainly on a journey! Throughout our career paths as educators, we learn how to navigate from being the first-year teacher to fifteen, twenty or thirty years of experience. We walk in various seasons and different levels of exposure. All the while connecting thoughts and gaining knowledge. Connecting and collaborating with each other on professional levels that pave the way of our journey. Friday, March 13, 2020 at 5 pm, in my district, we turned the lights off in our offices and locked the doors. We had a meeting earlier that day that lasted 7 hours straight. The superintendent's cabinet and executive leadership team made tentative decisions about everything from proms to pizza. All of this with the backdrop of a country fighting a virus that, as of today, has claimed the lives of 214k Americans. We were sent home as our state and local school boards made the tough decision to close public schools. In the journey of life, we need each other yet we were forced to isolate.

Better together is a motivating belief for me. When gathering my thoughts to write my teachable point of view, I asked myself what gives me passion, meaning and purpose in my life? In my notes, I wrote these comments: connecting people to their next, helping

people realize that there is a next, and helping people win. Oh and the last thing that I wrote was that I am most comfortable when leading from my heart and considering the hearts of others. As educators, I feel that we were never meant to walk this journey alone. This has nothing to do with whether you're a single content area or if you team teach in the elementary setting. This is about community. Working in isolation, trying to figure it all out on your own, drowning in thought spirals about how to teach synchronous and asynchronous lessons, does not solve our problems; community does. If anything, living and working through pandemic has taught me to find community. That is my essential message to all of us. Find the authentic relationships that are your safety net on this journey.

You may like walking, traveling or just being alone, but you need others to walk with you through life. Here are my three reasons.

1. It's safer. Just like going on a trip alone or walking through an empty parking lot. You feel a little more secure when you are not alone. Even if you have someone on the phone. In my opinion, it's safer to walk through life with others. Having a safety net of professionals to bounce ideas off of and share concerns minimizes your stress levels.

2. It's supportive. Just like a parent safeguards a home so that children can safely roam and learn in a loving environment, having a community of professionals who support you is similar. There's an old Zambian proverb that says, "When you run alone, you run fast. But when you run together, you run far." Having other people to support you is the only way to grow and learn and not burn out. I should insert my story here, of feeling the onset of a panic attack but receiving a text from a friend, asking how she could help, at the same time. Her message literally felt supportive and safe.

3. It's smarter. Who doesn't want to be smarter? My grandmother, in her southern vernacular and tone, used to say "all of the sense is not in one head..." Collaborative think tanks, brainstorming, collective efficacy all terms for community. These are all ways that we are stronger and smarter together.

Life, for me, is about relationships. I am better when I help people win. You are better when you have people around you that stretch your thinking and help you to grow into the person that you were meant to be. Please remember to find your community or communities and remember to be community for others. This will empower the next generation of learners and leaders.

Jassmon Fan



Great Expectations

Expectations - we all have them. Some are from our own design, other expectations come from the people around us. They impact what we do, how we behave. As educators, it's imperative for us to understand that the expectations we have for students has a significant role in shaping who they will or won't become. I didn't grow up knowing there were expectations for being black, more specifically how to behave or not to behave as a black person. I didn't learn these lessons that there were certain behaviors I was supposed to have as a person of color until early adolescence.

My first lesson came at a MADD contest - Mothers Against Drunk Drivers. We wrote persuasive essays for this organization to encourage adults not to drink and drive. Our teacher submitted our essays to be judged and out of all the 6th graders, yours truly won! There wasn't a parade thrown in my honor and there weren't any holidays generated in my name, but I did get a certificate with a fancy gold seal - times were good. So my essay travelled along to regionals to be judged against essays produced by other 6th graders from surrounding counties. To add a little drama and suspense to this round of judging, the results were to be announced at a mall and each participant was required to read their essay before the winner was announced.

So on a Saturday morning, my family and I loaded into our cars to caravan to the mall and I was looking fly. In true 80's style I had on my sailor dress; you know the one - it's pleated with white trim along the hem about an inch thick. It had the strings that hung in the front to get tied in a knot, or a bow if you're being really fancy. And my favorite part: the flap in the back. The essential piece of this outfit that allows for movement for all those times we went yachting - in Texas. Needless to say, I was looking and feeling great headed to claim my 1st place prize.

In the mall, they had built a stage - a podium and microphone placed on top, and there were six seats for the judges - three on each side of the centered podium. Our work was displayed all around so that mall walkers, family members, and whoever else could read the work that'd been produced. After each participant read their essay for our group, they announced the winner annnnndddd I got second - losing to a boy named Travis who earned the 1st place trophy. Still, times were good as I was awarded a beautiful red ribbon of homecoming mum's proportion. There weren't any teddy bears or megaphones on it or anything like that, but those crimson tails were glorious.

As my family and I were gathered around my displayed work taking pictures, them telling me how wonderful I was, one of the judges came over to our congregation. She was a Caucasian woman about my grandmother's age. She extended her hand to me, introduced herself, and told us proud peacocks that she was one of the judges. While still holding my hand she asked, in voice dipped in honey, "You wrote that?"

However, her face. Her *FACE*. Her face didn't reconcile with her voice. It was quizzical, she was perplexed. My family exchanged glances, there was talking under breaths. The energy changed; the air shifted. Although at that time I didn't fully understand then, what her face meant, I did register that something was off. I didn't learn the "face" lesson until later. That was another lesson learned in a course I didn't sign up for - Faces. Learning how to control my face as I see the confusion that washes over theirs; turmoil etched in their furrowed brows. Me recognizing that they are surprised from the slight expansion in their eyes yet keeping my face neutral and pretending not to notice. The look on their face as they're trying to reconcile the dichotomy between the well-articulated sentence spoken with the brown mouth from which it came. Faces - coupled with statements like "You know you're smart for a ..." or "wow, I didn't expect you to know that and speak like..." Expect. Expectations...

I replied with "Yes ma'am, I did". "Huh," she said, "Well I enjoyed it". I thanked her and she moved on. I was given hugs that were tighter than usual and kisses that lingered a little long. I mean we were in the middle of the mall for Pete's sake. We gathered our things and left after that. During the ride home, I too was perplexed. I didn't understand how my beautiful glorious crimson homecoming mum, that just hours before was as big as the state I lived in, could now fit within the palm of my hand - diminished somehow.

It wasn't fully formed then, but I was learning about expectations that were meant for me. Expectations from the world: what was, and sometimes what wasn't expected of me. For one sole reason... because I am black.

My most significant lesson about expectations came once again in middle school. I worked on a project with Jessica Sweeny. A Caucasian girl who I'd 'known' for three

years. We'd had a few classes together, perhaps even sat next to one another a time or two in class but had never really talked or swapped stories. Our project was to get to know one another and create a biography about the other person to be present to the class. After a couple of weeks of work, we were at the part of the project where we had to share our draft with another duo, and they were to give us feedback. This was the first time anyone would hear what we had been working on. Julie read her report about me.

Now, I don't recall all of what she shared as what happened next permanently etched itself on this memory, but there were two points I wanted her to remedy. 1) I wasn't raised by a single mother and 2) I didn't have a lot of siblings. I corrected her, which seemed like the appropriate thing to do as the information was inaccurate and I wanted to help her get a good grade. Julie smiled and said, "Stupid nigger". She then laughed, flipped her hair and asked our group who wanted to go next. She smiled. She laughed. But her F A C E.

I reported this to two teachers: The first replied with oh I'm sure she didn't mean it. Did you hear her correctly? You're a good student - no need to make a big deal of this and get everyone in trouble. The expectation was for me stay quiet and know my place. Somehow the burden was placed on me, for if I did say something, then I would be in trouble?

The 2nd teacher noticed that I'd become withdrawn and asked me to talk about it. I shared what happened and we looked up the word together. He asked if I were any of the adjectives listed (dirty, untrustworthy, etc. - I said that I wasn't. And his remark began to heal me, gave me hope. He said, "Don't allow other people's ignorant judgments about you, dictate who you will be."

His words allowed me to have high expectations for myself - no matter what boxes other people tried to place me in. He planted a seed that day. He assured me that I didn't have to succumb to what others thought of me or perceived me to be.

Being black or brown isn't a disability; they are not determinants of success. But what is powerful - EXPECTATIONS. Children and people will either live up to them or go down by them. Race, money, area codes will not ensure that our students will become who they are meant to be. It starts with the belief that ALL students have the ability to achieve greatness. One teacher's lesson set this expectation with me and I've been blessed to have many others build upon it throughout my educational journey.

So I ask: what will our system teach the kids that enter our building? What expectations will they meet?

Angela Walker



Rituals, Routines and Relationships

I have personally experienced feelings of isolation, fear, frustration and anxiety related to the Covid outbreak. Many things that I counted on for security and sanity like going to work every day, attending church, meeting friends, spending time with my family all changed or disappeared in a matter of days. I taught the importance of the rituals, routines and relationships for years related to trauma informed practices, but experienced first-hand the life changing importance of routines, rituals and relationships the moment I lost them myself.

As educators, we know that consistency in education is critical to students feeling secure and comfortable so that they can engage in learning. We understand and appreciate the role of consistency in classroom management and developing student self-discipline. We know from the latest brain research that consistency can actually grow connections in the brain and help students recover from trauma. For many students, school is the most stable and predictable part of their life.

Rituals like back-to-school shopping, "Meet the Teacher", football games and school functions are changing. Routines like getting up for school each day, eating lunch with friends and riding the bus or walking to and from each day are disappearing in many instances. Relationships are being impacted by the constraints of virtual communication. What impact will this have on the academic and social, emotional development of our students and us? At what point, does the interference of Covid 19 in the lives of our students and teachers become trauma? I think for many, this may be the best way to describe what is happening.

So what can we do?

We can be intentional about providing rituals, routines and relationships, even if they look different or have to be reinvented altogether. Rituals can be established by using classroom structures like welcome, engage and closure found in the SEL 3 Signature Practices Playbook, so that students can understand and expect a certain format for virtual classes. One day a week, an SEL activity like dialogue circles can be implemented to provide a safe space for open discussion and sharing. “Meet the Teacher” can be scheduled virtually along with periodic student-led conferences. Teachers could have lunch meetings regularly where students could join virtually during their meal just to chat. These activities provide the comfort that consistent connection offers.

Routines, even within a virtual setting, are important. Expectations for when work will be posted, how and when it will be graded and how feedback will be given should be clearly defined and communicated ahead of time. This reduces fear and builds trust. A certain day and time for students to seek help and support, as well as avenues for student enrichment should be easily accessible to students and parents along with any virtual class schedules. Clarity and consistency are key in communicating virtual expectations and routines during a transition from in person to virtual because you are beginning at a disadvantage with students and parents already disoriented and fearful about the change of format. Routines need to be even more consistent and clear than ever before.

Relationships are influenced by how effectively we handle the rituals and routines. Trust is created by consistently and intentionally communicating needed information before anxiety has an opportunity to get a foothold. We need to find ways to connect individually with students through feedback, dialogue circles, “get to know each other” activities and accessibility on our part. Students and parents must feel that they have someone they can call with questions, and more importantly, someone who cares deeply and specifically about their child.

Being intentional about nurturing relationships is more critical now than ever. Write a note and mail it to your students, share the struggles you are having when appropriate and make time for students to talk and for you to listen. Including students in the planning and creation of rituals, routines and relationship activities will improve the quality of support and provide a platform for collaboration.

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Sheila Arad



Naomi

My mother exclaimed, "Your Uncle Art and Auntie Jeanne are finally going to have a baby!" I was only 4 years old, but I remember it well. The excitement in my family was overwhelming. For years, my aunt and uncle swore they weren't the "parent types". They enjoyed their freedom and didn't want anything to hold them back from their adventures. The entire family was overwhelmed to hear about their change of heart and that they would be welcoming home a baby in September. Naomi was born on September 2. She was a beautiful baby girl with enormous blue eyes and stick straight strawberry-blonde hair. It was love at first sight for the whole family. We heard there were some delivery complications, but she was home safe and sound. I was so excited to have a baby cousin.

As time went on, I remember overhearing some "hush-hush" conversations. Something was wrong. Nobody ever had a conversation with me about anything but at my ripe old age of 7, it was clear that Naomi wasn't like other 3-year-olds I knew. She didn't talk at all but I remember the bite marks on her hand and those piercing screams. I had heard she was going to Keshet, a school for kids with special needs. The joy that my family once felt was now clouded by confusion and worry.

It was a long road ahead. Years went by but by the time of she was about 7 or 8, Naomi had begun to speak. I remember my aunt and uncle's smiles as they spoke about Jenny, the wonderful Speech Pathologist that Naomi had been working with. I remember the relief the whole family felt that Naomi could now ask for what she needed and how those deep wounds on her hand had healed. As the years went on, Naomi continued to make gains, small but important. The family learned to celebrate together each step of the way, always remembering it started with the work that began with the beloved Jenny. What an impact that person had on so many people.

This was the foundation that inspired me to embark on a career as a Speech Pathologist. My uncle introduced me to the good people at Keshet and after a summer working at their teen camp, I knew it was I was destined to do with my life. I completed a Bachelors in Speech and Hearing Science at the University of Iowa and continued on to get my Masters degree at the University of Illinois. Upon graduation in 2004, I landed my dream job as a Speech Pathologist in my hometown of Skokie, IL at the cooperative Niles Township District for Special Education (NTDSE).

Like all educators in Special Education, I jumped into the pool and it was sink or swim. I gave 100% to that job. I worked long hours- laminating, creating fun, dynamic activities to do with my students. I worked hard. I worked so hard that in my first year being an SLP out of grad school, I obtained a rating of "Excellent" by my evaluator. Her report was glowing and I was extremely proud. My hard work was paying off. Despite my pride, however, something didn't sit right with me. If I was so "excellent" then why wasn't I seeing much change in my students. Surely if I was such a rock star, I would notice more, right? How could I measure the effectiveness of my "excellence"? I yearned for some constructive criticism to help me grow but I received nothing but praise.

After working for 2 years, I deflected my insecurity and frustration and decided to quit my job and travel abroad. I spent a glorious 2 years living in the Middle East and traveling around Europe. As the global economy started to tank, I received an email from NTDSE that my position was open again and was happy to be recruited back. I returned to my previous position, still working hard spinning my wheels, still feeling insecure and frustrated, yet still getting outstanding reviews from my superiors. It was time to do something about it. I went back to school and received my Type 75 and just as I was graduating, my supervisor decided to begin a new career. Thus, I was offered her job. I would now be "Program Supervisor". I would oversee the related service teams and coordinate Professional Learning for the Township. The ball was now in my court to help ensure that a) my colleagues did not share in the same insecurities and frustrations as I felt and b) they were given the tools and a system where they could truly "Empower All to Achieve" as the NTDSE Mission states.

Goodness knows that I was not fully equipped to tackle these hurdles. However, through the collaboration with an amazing leadership team, colleagues in and out of our organization and professional resources, I have done a lot of growing. Nonetheless, I am well aware that I still have a lot of growing to do and a chance to refine and elevate the NTDSE professional learning system to a new level. I reflect upon 14 years I've been with NTDSE and I see how the field of special education has improved. I can see the road ahead and I know there is an immense amount of work that has yet to be done. I feel that it is my moral imperative to do my part in ensuring that all educators have the knowledge, skills and resources to support all students to maximize their potential and are part of a system that increases their efficiency and effectiveness. Thich Nhat Hanh said,

“When you plant lettuce, if it does not grow well, you don't blame the lettuce. You look for reasons it is not doing well. It may need fertilizer, or more water, or less sun. You never blame the lettuce.” This quote can be applied to students from a teacher's perspective, but it also can be applied to educators from the perspective of the Leadership team. It is my role to help educators succeed in helping their students succeed. Educators should work smarter, not harder. They should be able to confidently show that students are growing and if they aren't, they should have the tools to change the game plan before it's too late. It is not only my job; it is my responsibility and passion.

As I look into the eyes of my two boys, I now see things from the perspective of a parent. I think back to my childhood and all the emotion that having a child with a disability brought to my aunt, uncle and the importance of that a high-quality education brought to Naomi and the whole family. I hope that I can do my part in ensuring that our families and students at NTDSE know that the system and every educator on their child's team is, too, a shining star and is fulfilling their mission to help each and every child grow.

Michelle Cossette



Building a Culture of Collective Teacher Efficacy

Do you believe that all students can learn and have the potential to be successful in anything they choose? If a child told you they were going to be the star quarterback for the Atlanta Falcons, how would you respond? Are you a realist or a dreamer? I'm a dreamer. I will reach for the stars and inspire my teachers to take the journey with me. As a leader, I aim to create a culture and climate that is supportive, collaborative, and embraces reflective learning. I aim to create a building full of dreamers.

I challenge and inspire teachers to believe that every student that enters their classroom year after year has the same potential, ability to learn, and will be successful. We have

to empower, motivate, and inspire teachers to believe that together they can make a difference. True collaboration will only occur when we come together under the same beliefs and goals. Do you remember why you became a teacher? Have you asked others why they became a teacher? Everyone has a story. We can use our stories to help cultivate collective teacher efficacy. It reminds us of why we are here every day. It reminds us that we have the power collectively to make a difference.

The foundation of collective teacher efficacy is collaboration that is deliberate, intentional, and purposeful. It must involve shared leadership, teacher decision making, learning with purpose, willingness to take action, and most importantly a deep level of trust and respect among the group. No teacher is on an island nor should any teacher have to carry the burden alone. We are a village. Together, we are better and together, our dreams will turn into reality.

Travis Davio



Moving Forward During Coronavirus

As I was trying to understand how to move forward last spring as the entire state of Washington went into remote teaching for the remainder of the year, I listened to a conversation between Jim Knight and Michael Fullan who were discussing coronavirus and its implications for the system of education moving forward. Fullan posited that the field of education would never return to the status quo and that we could benefit from studying systems that were seeing success during this time. He argued that districts that had been focused on three key initiatives- developing collaborative capacity of educators, using pedagogical approaches that deeply engage students, and effectively integrating technology into all facets of learning - were faring better than others.

I have used this conversation as both a reflective frame to help me stay focused on meaningful instructional coaching and as a source of optimism and hope as I navigate the challenges of teaching and learning during the pandemic. Thankfully, my work in the Academy focused on what is arguably the most critical of the three initiatives, building collaborative capacity of educators.

The systems for collaboration our leadership team had been building over the prior two years were critical as teachers and students were sent home. Teachers knew they needed each other, had developed relationships and systems for collaboration, and accelerated their collaborative work to support each other right away. They were crowd sourcing issues, sharing ideas, and lifting each other emotionally. It was a thing of beauty to witness and was one of the rare times in this field where one can see the fruit of labor manifest in such a concrete way.

To manage the crisis of the pandemic's onset last spring, my district made the decision that students would be awarded a grade of an A, B or a C, effectively rendering grades irrelevant. Teachers were left to focus on student learning for the sake of learning, a concept that was, sadly, difficult for many teachers to wrap their heads around. I encouraged teachers to lean into this, to treat the situation as a gift, because we could learn so much about what drives intrinsic motivation for our diverse student body. Some teachers were excited by the prospect, others terrified, but everyone had to wrestle with difficult questions of why their content mattered, what practices supported students in pursuing learning, and what technological tools were most effective in providing opportunities for students to engage deeply and meaningfully.

These questions drove the collaborative work of teachers and many creative solutions arose. Our building entered a deeper realm of collegial inquiry because students' needs had to be met differently than prior to the pandemic. Not everyone had major breakthroughs in their pedagogical approaches but existential questions of what effective 21st century pedagogy remain, and they continue to drive the work forward. While teachers are working together more than ever, I continue to see gaps in the pedagogical approaches and levels of student engagement in various virtual classrooms in my high school. Teachers who were successful prior to the pandemic are demonstrating the highest levels of success during the pandemic. They are responsive in new ways and teach from a place of vulnerability. They try new pedagogical methods and deeply reflect on responses and outcomes of students.

Many teachers who struggled in deeply engaging students prior to the pandemic are seeing similar struggles now, but for different reasons. Some teachers' technological skill set is the major barrier to engaging students remotely. Many others struggle with creating opportunities for exploration and meaning-making that provides relevance and

choice. They have relied too long on methods that are compliance-based and have lost students who are not right in front of them. The continued collaboration is providing opportunities to explore new pedagogical approaches, but it is clear that we need to keep refining our collaborative systems and supports so all teachers are working toward developing and using approaches that deeply engage students.

As a result of the pandemic, the role of technology is now inextricably woven into questions of pedagogy. My district, the second largest in Washington state, was not on the fast track of 1:1 technology until the spring. Teachers were not asked, nor were they able, to design instruction using technology because student access was spotty, at best. In a matter of months, all secondary students now have laptops and teachers need to be designing instruction that integrates the use of technology. This is our biggest area of growth as a district and my biggest area of growth as a coach and educator. I was a teacher for 10 years and have been a coach for 4 in this system, so I am a product of this environment. I am the point person for supporting teachers in learning the new Learning Management System and every coaching conversation involves the role of technology. I've had to embrace the fact that I'm not an expert, I've had to lean on my own collaborative networks, and develop the capacity of teachers to solve their own problems.

While this is undoubtedly the most challenging time I have had in my 15 years in the field, the challenges I face are shared by the system at large and reflect shortcomings and inequities that have long existed. We need to lean in on these issues, reflect on our roles in perpetuating them, and use our collaborative capacity to provide equitable learning experiences for all the students we serve. We need new pedagogical approaches that provide meaningful ways for students to engage with real world problems, develop collaborative and critical thinking skills that will help them face and solve the challenges in American society, and empower them to envision a future where all members of our society have equitable opportunities to lead a meaningful and healthy life. Technology integration is an essential component of these new pedagogical approaches, supporting students in connecting to people and communities well beyond the classroom and helping them develop skills essential for contributing to a 21st century economy.

None of that can happen without educators working together to develop pedagogy that reflects the needs of students living in a time of great upheaval and necessary change. My individual charge is to keep learning, deeply reflect on my role in interrupting and not perpetuating inequity and take every opportunity the pandemic has provided me to improve what is clearly a broken but not unsalvageable system of public education. We can't do it alone.

Tara L. Isaacs



Cannonball!

During this phase of my Learning Forward Academy experience, I am reminded of a quote by Dean Hughes, in which he says, "Sometimes when you're looking for an answer, you search everywhere else before you take a look at what's right in front of you." The education profession often struggles within a cycle of activity and busyness and claims they are trying to reach students without studying what it takes to improve student learning. Until those driving policy within the education sector fully comprehend and advocate for shifts to adult learning practice, student learning experiences will likely remain stagnant.

In general, adult professional learning goals often do not go deep enough. They are without evidence that educators and leaders need to understand how to methodically approach and tackle problems of practice faced in classrooms, departments, and schools. Typically, each school year begins with educators pulled towards different priorities but not readily accomplishing anything. Even with volumes of research available, today's education leaders remain ignorant of the goldmine within arm's reach. The education field is racing to achieve things without really tackling root cause analysis and systematic problem-solving. Our learning culture frequently gets caught up in busy work and devotion of time to a series of disconnected activities hoping that we are making a difference in the lives of students and those that serve in education. However, on some level, I think educators know we are not reaching all students, and no matter the measure, the learning observed is not improving practice. Educators face the reality that maybe they do not know how to help students anymore. Those in our governmental systems that determine many of the funding and regulation decisions do not understand or value professional learning to impact student learning. Education would shift, and student learning would be more prevalent if we did.

With this inventory and new-found knowledge from my training inside Learning Forward's prestigious Academy model, I imagine what many other hundreds of graduates discovered. We are all one drop in a broad education body of needs. To make a more significant impact on educator practice and student learning moving forward, maybe I need to step away from the small drops and ripples made to the body of water, and with this new-found knowledge, jump in the deep end. It's time to bring the "Cannonball."

Courtney McKinney



Coaching

Every player is a coach, every coach is a player. This is the theme for my school this year. As my leadership team began to brainstorm ideas for pre planning last spring, we were amid the pandemic and virtual learning. Each day we all learned new skills from how to facilitate a Microsoft teams meeting, how to implement new technology, how to conduct a virtual assessment, and how to lead virtual IEP meetings, just to name a few! Everyone on my staff had opportunities to coach and be coached. It was truly amazing to be part of such a collaborative team. It was as if my staff was living the PLC model of asking the following four questions:

- What do we want students to learn?
- How will we know they learned it?
- What will we do when they don't learn the material?
- What will we do when they already know the material?

These are questions we usually ask in regard to students, but we were now asking these questions about staff and providing supports as needed. High functioning teams make

my heart happy, so I wanted to continue this level of collaboration into the new school year, thus the theme of coaching was born for my school.

Pre-planning for teachers is what an open house is for students, at least to me. It is a time to create excitement, share celebrations, and embark on a new journey and who doesn't love a theme each year. We began our first faculty meeting by introducing our administrative team as coaches, music was playing, our cafeteria was like a sports arena! The windows were blacked out, we had a spotlight, and awesome staff shirts wrapped up ready for everyone. The feeling of excitement was in the air and of course we still maintained social distance and wore our masks. We threw out shirts to our staff like you see at ball games, we called out each team and introduced each member as a coach and then we led the staff in a dance. Each member of our administrative team shared how we could also coach each other throughout the year. It leveled the playing field as we had not been together as a staff for five long months. It was important that our teachers felt valued and part of a team.

My administrative team, my leadership team, and I have worked diligently to carry out this idea of coaching each other. We have set up peer observations that allow staff members to go observe and learn from their colleagues, collaborative planning meetings occur two to three times a week for all teams, and we have continued to send out a weekly newsletter, the Wolf Pack Weekly, that includes shout outs to staff. In my building I have about 800 students in a face-to-face setting and 600 students in a virtual setting. On average I have nine teachers per grade level and of those nine three are virtual teachers and six are face to face. This could lead to two teams in my building: a virtual staff and a face-to-face staff. However, the exact opposite has occurred, my teams are more collaborative now than ever. They are intentional about ensuring that face to face and virtual teachers are following the same pacing guides for curriculum and there is fidelity regarding academic rigor whether a student is learning virtually or face to face. My teachers are working harder and longer than they ever have but they are positive, helpful, and focused on the needs of our students! It is truly heartwarming to see. So, as the year moves along as they always do, my staff will continue to focus on students, coaching and learning! Every player is a coach, every coach is a player.

Pamela M. Radford



The Impossible is Possible

I truly believe **the impossible is possible**. This motto has been with me for many years and drives my work as an educator and a parent. When I was about 6 years old, I had this beach towel with a girl on it that read "*Girls can do anything boys can do.*" The towel was a thin (almost see through) white towel with frayed edges, a blurred picture of a girl doing some sport action (maybe playing baseball?) and the words printed at the bottom. I am not sure if the towel was a gift from someone or my mother bought it, but I know after the first time I used that beach towel, it was my favorite. At the time, I did not realize why I liked it so much, as the towel was not plush, soft or warm to use. Yet, I knew that something about that statement printed on the towel resonated with me, as it made me feel strong and powerful--like I could accomplish anything, even when others did not think it was possible. As a kid, I was a short, shy girl. Others often judged me that I would not be able to do something. I learned to fight back and push through what others thought was not possible to prove them wrong. When someone said it was not possible, I often pictured that towel in my head to inspire me not to give up and be creative in thinking on how it could be done. Throughout the rest of my school years, I would find moments that this motto would empower me to overcome obstacles. Despite many financial and personal challenges, I continued to persevere through college and graduate school successfully, earning my doctorate in School Psychology.

That feeling of empowerment inspired me and has guided my actions as an educator and parent. As an educator and school administrator, when staff indicate "it is not possible", my response is to ask questions and uncover what are ways to make it possible. It may not be in the same format but can be done. It requires thinking outside the box and instead of focusing on barriers, think about how to bring those barriers

down. As a result, staff often come to me to problem solve difficult situations. As a parent, I embody this same belief. My kids know when they say “I can’t”, my response is let’s change that to “How can I?” In fact, my kids will remind me that there is no such thing as “I can’t”, only “How can I?”.

Today, I am impressed by the things I have accomplished despite hardships and when most others would have given up. I don’t know what ever happened to that towel, but years later I finally made the connection to why it was important to me. It brought out a side of me that others never believed in or saw. But with the right support, guidance, coaching and believing that the impossible is indeed possible, we can accomplish great things!

Holly Tate



Perception

Perception is powerful. It is how one sees the world: a lens formed by experiences, background, values, and beliefs. My background is not one that I share often and is hidden behind my optimism and excited demeanor.

I will never forget the day I found out that my father is an alcoholic. A sophomore in high school, I was so excited to spend the day with him and go to see a matinee of a movie that we had highly anticipated. It was chilly out, and I had bundled myself in a jacket. He picked me up at my mom’s house, and we began to drive to the theater. Along the way, blue lights came on behind the car, and my heart stopped. I, having just gotten my license myself, had a naive question of “why?” I knew my dad wasn’t speeding. We were on a slow corner of our town, near a popular gas station that my friends and I frequented for snacks. The police officer came around the side of the car, telling my dad that he had been weaving as he was driving, crossing over the yellow line some.

“Have you been drinking?”

"No, sir, maybe it is because my car is older and has a bit of musky smell to it."

"Please step out of the vehicle."

Blood rushing to my face. What is happening? Why would my dad be drunk in the middle of the day? Will one of my friends see us?

My dad in the back of the police car. "Do you have your license, ma'am? Can you drive your father's car home?"

I did, of course. My dad's DUI led to a spiraling of events' out of control spiraling. Over a decade later and my father continues to drink. I maintained my support of him, trying to get him help over the years. When I was pregnant with my first daughter seven years ago, my relationship with my father took an immediate turn for the worse when he told me that I was having a "nigger baby." I have not spoken to him since that moment. Having biracial children of color reminds me of my whiteness and the prominent privilege that I have, and they do not. My race is at the forefront of many of the experiences that I try to provide for my daughters as I teach them about race, oppression, privilege, and valuing all walks of life. Others race is at the forefront as I try to help them understand the abstractness of being ill-perceived, doubted, oppressed, because of something that makes them so beautiful and tells their story.

Unpacking my background and thinking of the chain of events that is my life, particularly the monumental ones listed above, I can make a clear connection to my life as an educator. How can someone be so cruel to another because of their skin color? How can an entire system be designed against a group of people because of their skin color? How can we move beyond systems of inequities to make education a more just place for every student that walks through the doors of our schools? So far, my work has included researching and advocating for equitable mathematics education experiences, particularly for students of color. I am incredibly passionate about student mathematical identity and how each student's cultural background plays into their sense of belonging in a mathematical community. I consider myself a champion for students in my role as a mathematics coach and work alongside teachers to learn ways to improve instruction, allowing all students to be mathematicians.

Experiences with racism have not only shaped my identity but have also grounded my passions for advocacy for students of color, chiefly in mathematics education. I know I will stay the course of this work, persisting in making the world a better place, especially for my daughters, as they face the countless challenges, ill-conceived perceptions that subsist because of their skin color.

T-Rx+

Transformation Relies on Excellence



THE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING ASSOCIATION

ACADEMY CLASS OF 2020

Jennifer Colley



The Power of New Teacher Induction

There is no mistaking the power and necessity of having a strong, focused, well-planned and intentional induction program for new teachers. New educators shape the core of our system and are the future of our schools and learning organizations. The future of student learning is dependent upon the recruitment and development of our new hires. I believe that it is imperative to devote time, energy and fiscal resources to developing our new teachers and building their potential skills in content, pedagogy, equity and culture to make them better teachers for our students.

Corporate America is committed to welcoming and training their new employees. New hires participate in an induction period in which they learn about the company, their mission and vision and the benefits of being a company employee. They are immediately paired with another employee who shows them the ropes. This mentor explains the company's work, answers questions, and supports the new hire with the daily responsibilities.

Knowing all of this, why aren't all district and school leaders totally committed to the development and implementation of quality induction programs for new teachers? Why is it not the goal of federal and state governments to ensure educational funding for the full implementation of such programs? Why have some states with induction programs enacted into law, rescinded the funding for implementation or the program in its entirety?

Quality induction programs focus on the needs of our new teachers. They are the support system that supports new teachers, gives them purpose and gives them the strength and confidence that they can be the excellent change makers for student learning that they want to be.

The goal is to offer a district and school program to support this role group through:

- A focused, comprehensive new teacher orientation session
- High-quality professional learning sessions aligned with the learning strands and on topics important to new teacher success in the classroom
- Leveled professional learning sessions for mentors designed to build skills to help mentors support new teachers with pedagogy, culture and climate, and content so they have a positive impact on student achievement.

If we can accomplish this task, we can have a strong, positive impact on student academic progress.

Induction should encompass a period of time that extends through the third year of teaching. First year teachers are not the only group in need of support. Teachers in their second and third years also need support and guidance and a forum in which to bounce off ideas and receive feedback. If we are to retain quality teachers, the investment of time must become a priority.

First year teachers need intensive support. Even those teachers who are well prepared for the job need to feel supported and not isolated and assurance that what they are doing is on the right path. This support comes in the form of mentors. Effective educational organizations select their best and brightest for this important role and provide training for the identified mentors. Trained mentors understand that their role as mentors is to:

1. **Build Trust** - The relationship between mentor and mentee is necessary in order to make the experience positive and productive. Trust is a necessity if mentees are expected to be open and honest about their needs, concerns and frustrations.
2. **Guide** - Mentors do not direct new teachers but guide them to resources that will help teachers build their craft. They have a long-range view of the growth and development of their new mentee. (vision)
3. **Teach** - Mentors are teacher leaders. They share their expertise with others to build a strong professional learning community which will improve the culture for learning in schools.
4. **Influence** - Mentors have credibility within the school with colleagues, administrators, students and the community. Effective mentors have a record of success with teaching students and are excited to share strategies with other professionals. They also know where to find resources to share with their mentees.
5. **Support** - The primary goal of the mentor is to support new teachers and help them become confident, competent, successful educators. They offer encouragement rather than step-by-step directions on what to do and how to do it.

Offering professional development sessions for new teachers that is aligned with the specific needs of new teachers is imperative. New teachers surveyed indicate that they

need extended support in the areas of content, classroom environment/ management, student engagement, and working with students from diverse populations. Teachers also stated that they need to know more about working with students with special needs, communicating with parents/guardians, and how to differentiate instruction for students who do not master standards. Scheduling a series of sessions on the topics listed above gives new teachers several opportunities to learn strategies to help them throughout the school year.

In order to meet the needs of teachers, sessions should be offered in a variety of ways. Flipped sessions that combine videos of best practices, followed by a face-to-face session with peers respects teacher's time and affords opportunities to discuss ideas with others. Webinars are a way to learn new information and can be viewed at a convenient time for the new teacher. Book studies and amplified workshops (virtual and face-to-face) are sources of offering multiple sessions on a common topic for a group of teachers with common needs (PLCs).

I have found that the best way to approach quality learning is to have a variety of experiences. New teachers need the socialization that they get from being part of a PLC or small group, just as they need personal, scheduled and spontaneous conversations with mentors. These interactions alleviate their feelings of loneliness and isolation.

Years two and three of new teacher induction continues this support at a less intensive rate. The second-year teacher has had their first full experience with the work of teaching. With the help of the mentor, they have begun to reflect upon that first year and how he/she might improve upon their craft. Keeping that relationship with the same mentor (provided it was a good match) will enhance the induction process. Continuing with professional learning designed to support teachers in the previously identified areas and adding in-depth sessions on personalizing academic feedback and leveling instruction for students will help with teacher growth.

By year three, teachers should explore ways that they can demonstrate leadership in their buildings. I also recommend looking into the National Board Certified Teacher process and researching whether or not their state/district offers support for participation. In year four, NBCT is a wonderful opportunity for teachers to polish their craft.

Teaching offers a vast variety of opportunities to grow as a professional. The key to building our workforce is to keep our future super stars - our new teachers!

Katharine Naylor Cottrell



Leadership is Valuing Self-care and Connection

Educating is hard work. We enter into teaching because we know that education is the solution to the endless list of problems in today's world. We want to be a part of that solution, to make a difference. But where do we begin? How do we keep up our momentum? And, at the end of the day, is it worth the struggle? Teachers wrestle with these and many more questions regularly; some give up along the way and others find the inner strength and inspiration to keep on fighting the good fight despite the odds and despite feeling quite alone. There is another group, however, that are a part of a community of educators who have clear goals, reflect on their progress, support each other by being there when things get tough, and celebrating the wins (both big and small) along the way. These folks continue to encounter the challenges and roadblocks that come with the job, and certainly have days when they want to throw their hands up, but they have much clearer answers to the questions posed previously.

So why aren't all educators part of a community? Why are there so many of us that find ourselves working in isolation and feeling overwhelmed by the daily demands of our students and our school? Certainly, teachers have the license to self-organize and seek their tribe, however, recognizing the power a strong, supportive community can have on the motivation and effectiveness of a teacher, school and district leaders should take steps to make this support available to all educators and not simply a nice-to-have. This means focusing on the well-being of everyone in the school, not just the children, and creating frequent opportunities for connection and support.

Well-being

I love Tina Boogren's (2018) book *Take Time For You: Self-care action plans for educators*. It validates teachers everywhere and provides some clear action steps for putting oneself

first, recognizing that before assisting others with their oxygen masks, one must be sure his or her oxygen mask is in place and functioning. I have found, however, that in education the martyr syndrome is all too common. As educators we love to talk about how little sleep we got because we were grading papers, perfecting a lesson, or going above and beyond to make a difference; the teachers' room is full of conversations where we compare war stories and try to one-up each other, with the "oh, that's nothing, did I tell you about...?". There is nothing good about this. Pulling all-nighters and 80-hour work weeks leads to burnout. Period.

Leaders can change this culture by outlining what self-care is and modeling it. Self-care includes making time for your basic needs: sleep, a balanced diet, exercise... peeing when you need to, instead of holding it through your next math block (for God's sake!). It also means having time for relationships, for exploring personal interests outside of work, and for growing continuously. Modeling self-care means taking care of yourself and encouraging others to do the same. One opportunity for modeling this is when you are sick. Have you ever had a terrible cold, the type of cold that called for a day in bed with maybe some chicken soup, but instead dragged yourself into work? When colleagues commented, "Man, you really should go home and get some rest", did you respond: "There's just so much to do, I don't have time to be sick"? This is the antithesis of modeling self-care. This communicates to teachers in your school that being sick is for wusses; it further promulgates the martyrdom of educators, the pressure to sacrifice health and wellness for the sake of our students and their learning.

Leaders, instead, can start by taking days off when they are sick. They can share stories about how they spent the weekend with their family or friends. They can share information about a new class they are trying out (yoga or woodworking or Chinese - whatever!). A colleague of mine, who runs an educational non-profit, sends out a monthly newsletter with updates (the good, the bad and the ugly) of the organization and always includes a section on his own personal growth or interests; one month he talked about his trail running and another month about his attempt to go vegan, for example. Every month this newsletter reminds me that while the work we do is important, taking time to disconnect is key to coming back to the table with a fresh set of eyes and a clear head.

In this time of COVID-19, self-care is more challenging, making it that much more important. Many educators now find themselves working from home, making meals, managing their children's online class schedule. Others are figuring out what going back to the classroom looks like with masks, social distancing, and the like. The stress can be overwhelming, debilitating. For leaders, there is the additional pressure of staying calm, having answers, and responding to all the biosecurity requirements as they are invented. At our school, we have chosen to talk openly about the importance of self-care, of the well-being of everyone, and we have looked at how we can simplify and

scale back to reduce some of the workload. These open conversations have resulted in us reducing or eliminating meetings where possible, we've changed professional learning priorities, we've lengthened the lunch hour, we've pushed back the start of the day so that everyone has time in the morning to get in a workout, write in their journal, and maybe get their own kids organized and working before beginning their own classes, just to name a few. We also started the teacher induction (this is a two-week time for all teachers to attend training and workshops, to meet with their teams, and to plan) with a workshop dedicated to self-care that allowed teachers and leaders to identify some key self-care habits and create a plan for implementing them into their daily routine.

Connection

Relationships are a key piece of self-care. Schools and leaders can help teachers and themselves by creating spaces for connection that can generate a strong sense of community and support for its members. We talk about doing this for our students and expect teachers to make space for social emotional learning in the classroom, so this should also be modelled in staff meetings and professional learning. The expectation needs to be set that before getting down to business, there is always space for each other.

The other day a member of my team told me of a department meeting she was in. A person, new to the team, arrived late. The meeting had already begun, and the department head said, "you're late, we're talking about...". Thankfully, my teammate felt comfortable interrupting, "one moment, good morning. Welcome to the team. How are you?" She also later spoke to the department head about the dangers of tunnel vision. The teacher who was late had an error in her schedule and she found out about the meeting through another colleague and rushed to attend to not miss it. Certainly, she was feeling a bit overwhelmed and frustrated and worried about making a good impression with her team. When it's all about the work, we forget to check in on our teammates. Assumptions can be made that isolate individuals.

One of the most common openings for a meeting that I have seen is the whip around. The leader or another member of the team presents a question or prompt and each person on the team takes 30 seconds to a minute to respond. This can be a great way to get to know the others better and to give everyone a chance to share, maybe decompress from wherever they were before the current meeting, and to remind everyone that you are a team, a group of people first and foremost. Other openings are the thorn and the rose (something you are struggling with and something you are celebrating) or a quick temperature check (fist to five, 1 to 10, etc.). It's even fine to just leave a few minutes at the beginning of the minute for people to share what's going on in their lives. Some people feel uncomfortable leading "cheesy" activities, but connection is something we all need.

Another key element of connection is celebration. Just as it is important to support those who have lost a loved one, are sick, or are having some struggles, we must celebrate the good stuff. In my first touchpoint conversation with the Learning Forward Foundation, one of the questions posed was “What are you celebrating?” My initial reaction was “Celebrating?! Nothing! There is so much work to do and nothing that I’ve done up to this point seems to be making an ounce of difference!” Pause. Deep breath. Think. It turned out that I had quite a lot to celebrate. And you know what? It felt good to reflect on those things a bit. We do not celebrate enough in education. Johnny turned in a homework assignment on time and all the requirements were met. The presentation of the Professional Learning Standards was well received, and the teachers are asking questions and wanting to do more work with these standards. There was a 5% improvement in vocabulary in the 3rd grade between the last two benchmark tests. The community cut 45 seconds off its time during the latest fire drill. Recognizing and celebrating even the smallest of accomplishments builds community, gives community members the impetus to keep working hard and also motivates others to share and celebrate successes as well. It should not be a secret when your 3rd grade science teacher completes her Masters degree or when Mr. Smith gets an article published in *The Learning Professional*. When we as leaders make it our duty to model connection - supporting those in their worst times and celebrating those in their best times - this becomes the norm. Teachers will know that they can share what is going on and that the community is there for them.

Educating is hard work. However, when we are a part of a team of educators who are taking care of each other but promoting self-care and showing concern for one another, teaching becomes the best job in the world. Leaders must recognize and model the power of well-being and connection.

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Angie Frankenfield



An Effective Learning Environment Begins with Respect!

The other day, I asked a colleague of mine, "How do we create an environment where our leaders and educators foster student agency?" It had me pondering what it would look like for our students to hold these characteristics. What visible actions, behaviors, and attitudes would our students demonstrate? As I continued to process this thinking and visualize the change needed, I began to backwards map my theory of what our leaders and educators would need to put into place to achieve this outcome. I came to the realization that what we are desiring, asking, and expecting of educators in creating this type of effective learning environment- where our students are critical thinkers and problem solvers, where they are self-aware and emotionally competent, and where our students drive their learning and in return surpass the desired achievement- are the same desires that we hold for our educators, right?

Do we though? Do we hold these expectations and desires for our professionals? Do we provide an environment where our leaders and educators can flourish and drive their learning and in return surpass our desired outcomes? Do we trust the professionalism of our educated, well-practiced, dedicated educators?

I am not always sure our actions exhibit this respect for the professionalism our educators deserve. Educator choice, voice and ownership should be prevalent in all areas of professional learning, educator evaluation systems, and instructional and systematic decision-making.

As I type this, I am quickly reminded of a time in my own educational career as a teacher.

A time where not only did I not feel trusted as a professional, but where I was constantly filled with anxiety and the fear of judgement that came anytime site or district

leadership entered my classroom, either physically or ideologically. Every time the door opened, I quickly felt overwhelmed, my heart would race, my words would jumble, and my instruction would fall far from the intended targets. I was definitely not at my best in these moments. I felt the need to quickly rationalize and justify the instructional decisions I was making. This was a time where test scores were the only true measure of success and where I felt that I did not measure up. This was a dark time in my educational career. And while these types of extremes exist in many districts, there are far more subtle forms of mistrust that weaken the efficacy of our educational professionals.

Most educators these days hold multiple degrees, attend countless hours of required professional development, and delve into professional readings, networks, and additional professional learning opportunities on their own time. Our educators are open and willing to learn and try new strategies. They engage in deep discussions with colleagues where they reflect and refine their practice. Our educators are determined to see their students succeed, and I am so honored to be an educator amongst these phenomenal change agents.

This is long overdue. It is time to view the field of education as the valued and impactful profession it is. It is time to hold our educators with the utmost respect and trust they deserve.

Let's provide our educators a space where their voice is valued. Let's invite our educators to the table where instructional and systematic decisions are made. Let's distinguish our educators as the professionals they are. Once we allow our educators to thrive, we will finally see these desired characteristics flourish in our students.

Ben Jones



Harold: The Power and Importance of Relationships

We've all had a Harold in our class. You do not forget your Harold. Harold changed my professional life forever.

Harold was a year older than everyone in seventh grade, six inches taller, and had a miniscule amount of motivation. In Harold's educational career, he had learned many things. For example, if he stayed quiet and smiled teachers would leave him alone, his parents did not care about his education, and school was just a place he had to be until his parents got home. Harold was my greatest challenge that year. He struggled with classwork, homework, and tests. He disengaged in conversations, did not make friends easily, and would only smile when asked questions about any content areas. After attempting the usual tactics that had been tried on Harold for years (positive reinforcement, negative reinforcement, parent conferences, parent-student conferences, SST interventions, etc.), I decided to give him something he may have never been given before, the gift of time.

At the end of class one day, I was monitoring the students' progress on a task, when I noticed Harold, who was sitting and waiting for the bell to ring with his one notebook stuffed with papers. At that moment, I decided that something must be done. I proceeded to sit with Harold through the end of class and 20 minutes into the next class to help him organize his notebook. Harold always had a nonchalant look on his face, but as this 30-minutes progressed, his look changed. Spending 30 minutes with Harold, one on one, focusing on his needs, was probably a first for this young man. From that day forward, I held Harold accountable for his work, praised him when he did well, and spent time with him whenever I could. As the year progressed, teachers would send

Harold to me for help because I had managed to build a relationship with Harold by giving him the one thing he needed most; a positive relationship with a caring adult.

I'm not sure what became of Harold. I'm not sure if I had a lasting impact on Harold, but I do know that he changed me in three amazing ways. First, he showed me that investing a small amount of time in a student can accrue amazing returns. Second, he showed me that no one is past saving. Many adults in his life had decided that Harold was just Harold, and he would always be like that. Harold taught me to look for the best in everyone. Lastly, Harold made me believe in life changing moments. Harold made me believe that I could make a difference.

Marcus Miller



Professional Learning Is for ALL Employees

Start with WHY: We believe that every employee in the Plano ISD is equally important and valuable. We believe that investing in all employees is a moral requirement. We are committed to breaking down the implicit and explicit systems that contribute to a hierarchical mindset or an educational caste system. We invest in and value our non-instructional employees by providing them with PD that builds capacity, equity, and empowers our employees to improve our school systems for all students.

In a school system where every dollar is precious, investing in non-instructional employees is easy to overlook. The focus of district resources, both in terms of time and money is rightfully directed to students and their classroom teachers. It is important that all district employees are able to articulate a direct connection between their work and student success. Many district employees, including transportation, food and nutrition, technology, office support staff, and facility services struggle to make that connection clear. However, non-instructional services form the foundational bedrock of our school

system. Students cannot learn when they arrive at school late because of a transportation issue. They cannot learn if they are hungry because they missed lunch. They can't focus on learning when their classroom is too hot or cold. Our non-instructional teams make learning possible.

Additionally, we must consider the inequity of how we systematically build capacity for our instructional leaders. If you are a classroom teacher, and you are interested in district or campus leadership there is a very clear path to follow. Teachers can become instructional coaches, or they can get their administrator certification and become an assistant principal and eventually a principal. In Plano, we have specific programs that you can apply for to prepare you for that transition. We will teach you about campus leadership, appraisals, discipline, and how to be an instructional leader on your campus. This kind of clear pathway doesn't exist in many non-instructional departments. Most cafeteria Managers were simply good specialists who applied for the job. How do we teach them about leading a team? How do we teach them about setting standards, and growing their employees? For most of our departments those answers were unclear. As a result, these non-instructional roles often felt like dead-end jobs. In reality, we need our employees to know that we will invest in them, build their capacity, and prepare them systematically for future roles.

Virginia I. Senande



Instructional Leadership

21st Century school leaders are faced with things that would have been deemed science fiction in the eyes of their predecessors. The topic of school security alone has a new definition after the Columbine school shooting in 1999, and sadly the many others that have followed. This is just one of many new concerns that occupy the minds and agendas of leaders today. While the safety and wellbeing of students must *always* come

first, the need for instructional leadership which supports best practices in the classroom is critical for student achievement, as well as wellness.

I was fortunate to have Mr. Al Baffa as my teacher in 8th grade. Mr. Baffa, while still in his 20s, had just beat leukemia, and returned to my classroom after a year spent battling the disease and undergoing a bone marrow transplant on the other side of the country. But one would never have known this by the way that Mr. Baffa taught his students. Mr. Baffa, among other things, was a master of student engagement and cooperative learning strategies, as well as restorative justice for students. He taught Life Skills in the classroom decades before it was a NJ state mandate. He also believed in the value of failure, one of the most important lessons that I personally took away from his class before going on to high school. I will never forget his voice saying to me, "Congratulations, Miss Gray, you finally learned how to fail." You see, all of these 21st-century "buzz words" or new ideas in education were present in Mr. Baffa's classroom back in the 20th century.

Fast forward to the 21st century and I met up with Al in the Northern Valley region where I had been hired as an educator at the high school and he was now a veteran principal at one of the feeder middle and then elementary schools. After 10 years in the HS Spanish classroom, I began working at our regional curriculum center in the areas of professional learning and began attending monthly NVPA meetings with the 11 building principals from our region. Al, as the most veteran of the attendees, often asked his colleagues and our office for advice on how to handle a certain situation or for others' views on touchy topics, while quickly offering his advice to others when asked. Last summer during our annual regional administrative retreat I was paired with Al for some activities during Jennifer Abrams' session on Hard Conversations. Al was completely engaged and per the protocol asked me for input on a difficult conversation he needed to have. Later he asked me (I still felt like his student in many ways) for some information on another topic. You see, a veteran in the education world, asking to learn from his student, is a quintessential life-long learner.

Sadly, we lost Mr. Al Baffa suddenly this past January 8, 2019. He was only 61 but his impact on students like me, as well as his faculty and staff, and peers in the region was great. For me, it was the way he taught, as well as the way he made people feel which was so impactful. Also, the fact that he never stopped learning. He always wanted to know more about best practices and how to improve the student experience in his building.

It is this connection with the student experience and continual learning to improve student achievement through best practices in the classroom that all school leaders need to aspire to. While each new state mandate needs to be addressed, we cannot forget the reason we do what we do - to facilitate learning for our students. We should

always be learning, and encourage and support learning for our teachers, including the implementation of what is learned.

Alena Zink



The Necessity for Instructional Coaches

My son has a brilliant mind: creative, grasps complex concepts in seconds, and can quickly learn anything he finds interesting. He is a senior in high school, has a 4.3 GPA, and sails through the dual enrollment program with ease. He is also the laziest student one can imagine. Last time he did homework was in 5th grade, and I time and again debate if he is extremely capable or the expectations have been set too low for a long time. He hates school with passion, dreads every morning for many years now, and has no desire to go to college... He cuts himself, feels worthless, and believes teachers worship content and grading policies, effortlessly discarding the minds and hearts of their students. When asked to name one teacher he respects, he gives an answer that always tugs at my heartstrings, "Mrs. L... at least she knows my name."

Last week in his AP Lit class, he was required to take notes in his dialectical journal on the book they read. He was also to type the same notes and submit them electronically so the teacher could scan the work for plagiarism. He wrote the notes, typed them up, but failed to submit them by 7 AM through the online platform. The realization hit him in first period, when the teacher ordered him to leave the class - he was not allowed to participate in a Socratic seminar without submitted notes. He showed her the handwritten notes; he pulled his Google doc to show they were typed up electronically with a timestamp of the night before, but the grading policy ruled a zero for his achievement anyway. After that, he did not only lose the privilege to participate in the seminar (not even to listen to the conversation) but got another zero for participation. My son, who does not usually care about school games, as he calls them, came home and was crying...while getting out a new razor. When caught doing so, he screamed, "Why

do we mean so little to her? What grading policy makes it fair to get a zero for something I am not even allowed to do?"

My heart was broken... For the longest time, educational world has been talking about professional development versus professional learning and the importance of the latter being relevant, job-embedded, and student-centered. As a professional learning specialist in the district, I wonder what causes teachers make choices like that. What makes them forget they work with kids? Is any professional learning even an option for professional growth of such educators?

Rita Pierson advocated in her Ted Talk that every kid needs a champion. I say every teacher deserves one, too! I deeply believe that instructional coaches are the missing gears in the complicated machine called a school system. No workshop or outstanding conference will ever change instructional practices in our classrooms, but a coach can encourage teachers to take a step towards more effective pedagogy and powerful relationships with students. No organizational change or evaluation system will help teachers empathize with their learners, but a coach can be a mirror that reflects the true state of the learning environment in a classroom. No money will ever buy passion for teaching and learning, but a coach can help rediscover it through ongoing support, inspiration, and reflection. Instructional coaching is a remedy for factory-like schooling, burnt-out teachers, and broken kids.

As we build a new instructional coaching program in our district and prototype its practices in twelve schools this year, my hope is to shift our focus from what teachers teach to what students learn and to plant seeds for professional learning practices that influence learning culture, establish conditions for collective teacher efficacy, and bring passion back into teaching and learning. Teachers must quit playing school and preparing kids for "real life" and finally realize that real life is happening now, and they are empowered to make it better or worse for students in their classrooms today. With all my heart, I advocate for instructional coaches in every building as the synergists who can unite often standalone worlds of administrators, teachers, and students and transform schools into places where students choose to be.