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Wendy Robinson is president of the Learning Forward board of trustees.

BEING FORWARD

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'YOU CAN'T STAY IN THE NOW'

Wendy Robinson was superintendent of Fort Wayne Community Schools in Indiana from 2003 to 2020 and worked in that district for 47 years. She became president of the Learning Forward board of trustees in December 2020.

How did you initially get involved with Learning Forward?

At the beginning of my superintendency, I was meeting with a group of district administrators, and one shared that elementary schools in a region he oversaw were showing strong gains. When we dug into why, one of the things that came out was that he was working with Kay Psencik from Learning Forward. They were working with teachers to help them understand student data and learn from it. I asked, "So why aren't the rest of us doing that, too?"

I always said that it's nice to have a school show progress, but what are we going to do to have consistent growth across the district? Everything pointed to the need for system leadership in order to do capacity building. Learning Forward helped us build that. It was a gradual process of becoming more and more involved with Learning Forward over the years.

How did professional learning evolve in your district?

When I was starting out in education, most professional learning was sit-and-get style. Early on in my administrative positions, I did have informal learning communities. I had a group of five or six fellow principals I would call when I had questions. We'd do an emergency conversation to solve an issue, but half the time we were just putting a bandage on it. We weren't looking at the outcome. What was lacking every single time was the "so what?"

As the state became focused on accountability [in the early 2000s], it mandated professional development, but it wasn't based on any problem or research. We were complying, but nothing was happening. We had pockets of excellence. A downfall of compliance is that the target keeps changing. A lot of our early professional learning was around how to get ready for the test. But every week, the target we were supposed to focus on changed.

About 10 or 12 years ago, through our work with Learning Forward, we said professional learning needs to be linked to everything, not just be an addendum to the [district] plan. We knew we needed a system approach.

How did you build that system approach?

We had 50 schools, and we knew we couldn't start off with all 50. So we worked on first having consistency across 10 schools. We focused on the teacher quality piece. We made sure the teachers in these high-needs schools wanted to be there, and they made certain commitments. One was to engage in schoolwide professional learning. This was a turning point away from pockets of excellence [and toward systemwide improvement].

Also, for all schools, we moved away from "flavor of the day" professional development. Everybody in the district had the same planning template that helped them find the issues we needed to deal with and then say what capacity building was needed. That drove the professional learning, and it was the beginning of professional learning communities (PLCs).

What have been some of the most valuable things you've learned from Learning Forward?

Learning Forward has been a big part of our learning. Every time we went to an academy or a conference, we learned something new from other districts. The concept of PLCs is the

nugget that has been most consistent. Over time, we started turning over the learning to administrators and teachers.

Also, the Standards for Professional Learning have been very valuable. They became one focus of our planning, and people came to internalize them. It became second nature that any time you planned anything, you would tie it into that.

[Over time], it became evident to us that there is no such thing as mass professional learning. It has to be about systems, but it happens on the group or school or district level. And you have to have your central office embedded in professional learning because they're the ones developing curriculum. For example, the budget person needs to understand why schools need the funding for professional learning. We have to become an entire learning community.

What do you see as the most pressing needs in the field right now?

Before the pandemic, people had to collaborate; they had no choice. But now we're all isolated, and none of us has figured out how to get people closer together. After this dark period, we're going to have to rely on professional learning to help bring us back together. We'll have to think about what role professional learning plays for the collective and for the individual, including the emotional and spiritual.

There are people who will never get over the fear of coming to work. We'll have to ask ourselves: How do you get individuals whole again? Because adults have to be whole themselves before they can help kids.

Then we've got to focus on building teams. A year is a long time for people



not to have the structures that have been built. Leaders are going to have to be responsible for looking at how you bring your team together again. How do we understand and try to process what we've been through — there has to be an entry plan for bringing everyone back — understanding the obligation of systems and teams.

That's a lot to do. How do you not get overwhelmed?

Personally, I have such abiding faith in people who go into education. In our profession, it's a moral obligation to focus on doing the right thing. You can't stay in the now — ever. People in my district used to say, "You're five years ahead of us." Well, someone has to be, because if someone's not, then you'll just focus on the problems you don't know how to solve today.

What are you looking forward to in your work with Learning Forward

over the next year?

The wonderful thing about professional learning is that somebody somewhere has researched it, done it — whatever it is. One of the powerful things about Learning Forward is it opens you up to national and international connections and people who have solved problems.

It's absolutely exciting for me [to be in this role as president of the board] because we have a very strong board with a high value for this work, and the board members have diverse backgrounds but a like-minded commitment to professional learning.

People often say they are lifelong learners, but you can't say that without demonstrating it. I love learning from Learning Forward's journals, conferences, emails, and all of it. As a board member, I have an obligation to stay connected and continue learning. ■