



ADVISOR SPOTLIGHT

Barbara Patterson Oden

'YOU HAVE TO CAPTURE PEOPLE'S HEARTS BEFORE THEIR MINDS'

Barbara Patterson Oden is assistant principal at Truitt Intermediate School in Chesapeake, Virginia, the president of Learning Forward Virginia, and a member of the advisory board of *The Learning Professional*.

Professional learning has played a central role in your career. Why is it important to you?

Early in my career, I served as a gifted resource teacher because I wanted to work with talented, underserved kids. Over time, I realized I wanted my work to impact far more students than I would have the ability to teach myself. And I learned that I loved helping teachers grow their capacity, so I became an instructional coach. After three years in that role, I became supervisor of professional learning for a district in southeast Virginia.

Through those experiences, I found that teacher capacity is the thing most capable of changing the lives of students for the better. I believe that every teacher has the capacity to grow into the teacher their students need, under the right conditions. Those conditions are created through powerful professional learning.

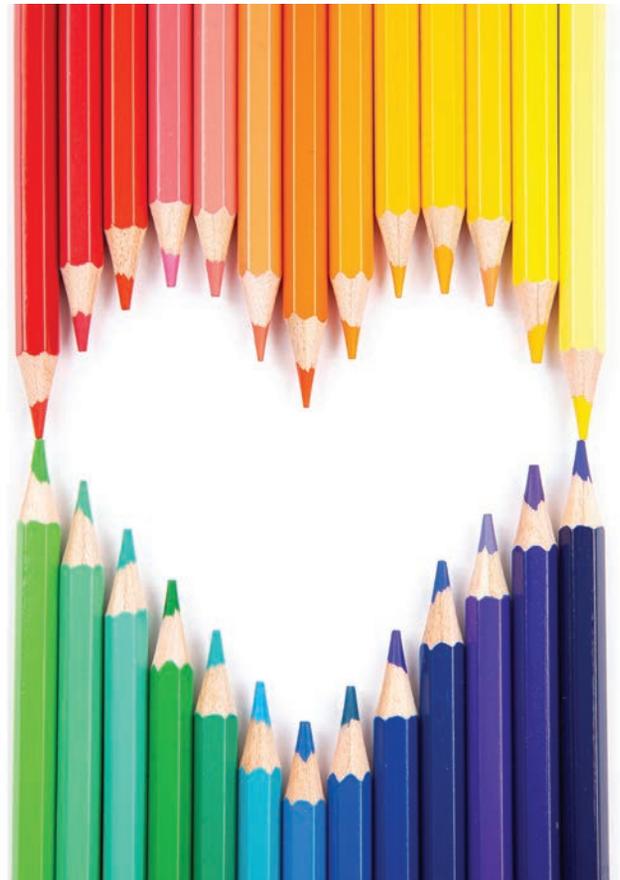
You made an unusual career transition — at an unusual time — last year. What was that like?

After I got my degree in school administration in 2007, I was sure I didn't want to be a school administrator. But during seven years supervising professional learning, I worked with some of the most amazing school leaders, and I realized the deep impact school leadership has.

They made me see that the work could be done with passion, integrity, and a commitment to learning for students and teachers. Plus, after seven years at central office, I missed kids! They are my "why." That's why I decided to become an assistant principal. Now I'm bringing my love of professional learning to this new role — and I need it more now than ever.

I walked into my first year as a school leader in a pandemic, so it was a rigorous year both emotionally and logistically. We were basically running two schools — one for in-person students

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and one for remote students.

Our district was one of the only ones in our state to have students in the building five days a week as early as mid-September 2020, and at multiple times during the year, we had well over a 20% COVID positivity rate. Luckily, the safety mitigations did keep in-school spread to a minimum.

The hardest part is that our school community has experienced so much loss. I had kids whose parents died of COVID in the home with them, and another child who lost a parent to domestic violence. Then there were the losses that my staff faced in their own lives, and yet they bravely came into our building day after day to be there for our students. I am still in awe of them.

What were some of your and your colleagues' biggest learning needs last year?

COVID has laid bare the need for districts to develop and provide more robust, systematic social supports to staff and students. I have done so much professional learning on leadership and school improvement, but nothing I have learned prepared me for consoling staff members and students who lost family members to COVID, week after week. The emotional toll was greater than I could have ever imagined.

In addition to my faith and my supportive family, what helped me get through this was my professional coach. She helped me to reflect and keep things in perspective so I could sharpen my emotional fortitude and be who my staff and students needed.

All educators need to have an intentional support system to help them

develop their emotional resilience. The “heart” work of being an educator is far more important than the “head” work we do. I hope this realization is one of the good things that comes of this pandemic.

What do you see as the biggest professional learning needs for next year?

The main needs for teachers are twofold: understanding trauma-informed practices and applying equitable practices. Those are hugely important for meeting kids' needs. And they are very philosophical for people. People tend to see one as fluff and the other as political.

In order to change that, I've learned, you have to capture people's hearts before their minds. We've been talking about diversity and inclusion for a while now, but have hearts moved? As I look at the equity pushback among some teachers and parents across the country, it is clear the answer is no for too many.

We have talked about the whole child forever. That means it is my responsibility as a leader to do what's best for all the kids who come into our building. If I learn Spanish for my students' parents, it has nothing to do with how American I am. It's not about me. It's about them. It's about asking, “What are their needs, and how can I help them?”

What are some Learning Forward experiences that stand out to you?

I did not know about Learning Forward until I became supervisor of professional learning and was looking for an organization for support in my

work. Little did I know how much it would impact the entire course of my career.

I began as a member of the Virginia affiliate, and, among those amazing professional learning leaders, I found my squad. I started as a regional representative and am now serving as president.

I was afforded the opportunity to be part of the Class of 2016 Academy cohort, and that experience was nothing less than transformational. I credit it for much of the impact I had as supervisor of professional learning. Now I am serving as an Academy coach, one of the greatest joys of my professional career.

I was also honored to be involved in Learning Forward's advocacy work on Capitol Hill in support of Title IIA funding. I even got to meet then-senator and now Vice President Kamala Harris, and I proudly display a picture with her in my office.

Additionally, I serve on the journal's advisory board. I appreciate *The Learning Professional* because it's nice to see the work in action and learn from the experiences of people I don't know who are doing the work in other places. I appreciate seeing how the research meets the reality, as well as the tools, which I can put into practice immediately to elevate any professional learning I might be leading.

I have found the topics of the journal over the past year have profoundly resonated with my real-time experiences as assistant principal. It is simply impressive. I am so looking forward to October's school leadership issue. ■