

THE LEARNING PROFESSIONAL

THE LEARNING FORWARD JOURNAL

IN A
DIVIDED
WORLD

Building community

Overcome collaboration pitfalls p. 20

Rethink group norms p. 30

**Tackle problems in communities
of practice** p. 24

**Make professional learning
a bipartisan issue** p. 8

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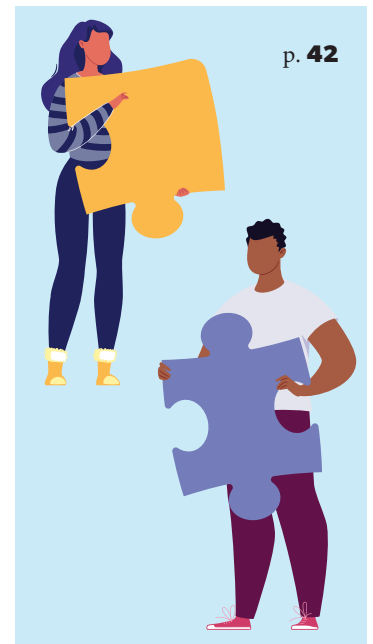
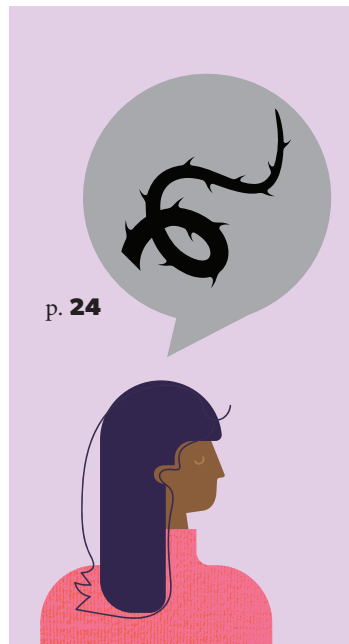
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"Caring for ourselves is vitally important, but we should work to redefine self-care. We should focus on finding meaning and real satisfaction in our work and personal lives instead of covering up our stress and discontent. Although it might sound counterintuitive, one way to do that is giving yourself time and space to engage in professional learning."

— From "Professional learning is self-care," a post on Learning Forward's blog, November 23, 2021. Read the full post at learningforward.org/2021/11/23/professional-learning-is-self-care/



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HERE WE GO

Suzanne Bouffard

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING CAN LEAD US TO COMMON GROUND

When learning partners respect, trust, and care about one another, they are more likely to listen to and share multiple viewpoints, and, ultimately, stretch and grow. But what happens when we are fractured by political and ideological division?

Suzanne Bouffard (suzanne.bouffard@learningforward.org) is editor of *The Learning Professional*.

If I did a search of the most frequent words used in Learning Forward’s resources, “community” and “collaboration” would surely appear in the top five. Collaborative relationships are at the core of learning. When learning partners respect, trust, and care about one another, they are more likely to listen to and share multiple viewpoints, and, ultimately, stretch and grow.

But what happens when we are fractured by political and ideological division? How do you build community when people are afraid that speaking up for their beliefs will result in verbal attacks? How do you learn and grow when your convictions and emotions keep you from considering other perspectives? How do you take collective action when disagreement and tensions are entrenched? These questions drive this month’s issue. Some of the themes in this set of articles are familiar, but we locate those themes in the current reality of division we’re all experiencing.

Recent studies by the Pew Research Center have shown that Americans are starkly divided along political lines over many issues affecting society and, therefore, affecting schools (Dimock & Wike, 2021). And polarization is hardly unique to the U.S. According to Pew, though, “What’s unique about this moment — and particularly acute in America — is that these divisions have collapsed onto a singular axis where we find no toehold for common cause.”

That doesn’t mean things are hopeless. A 2021 trend report from the American Psychological Association (APA) reported that “psychological science suggests that it is both possible and imperative for members of our society to find common ground” (Waldroff, 2021). The articles in this issue of *The Learning Professional* give us reasons to believe that schools can be a place for finding that common ground and taking collective action on behalf of all students.

Authors advise us to ask good questions and engage in true listening, follow protocols to keep discussions productive, make sure that group norms meet the needs of marginalized people, empower teachers’ inquiry, and engage in many other strategies for collaboration that are consistent with the Standards for Professional Learning.

Our new slate of guest columnists address these themes as well, and will continue to do so throughout 2022. Baruti Kafele writes the Learning Leaders column about school leadership and equity. Nader Twal contributes the District Perspective column, focused on how central offices and professional learning leaders can support high-quality, equity-focused professional learning. And Jennifer Abrams shares strategies and insights for stretching your learning edges in the Growth & Change column.

One thing all the authors have in common is a commitment to reflection and intentional action. The importance of those habits is acknowledged well beyond the field of professional learning. In its report about political division, APA recommended that we all pause and “identify the psychological factors at play ... to reflect on what we are experiencing and help us to understand and shape our actions.” The report further encourages curiosity and respect for other viewpoints, warning against “fear of the other.”

This issue’s authors show us a path to those mindsets and actions, and they embody the collaboration and openness to learning that are at the heart of high-quality professional learning.

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THE LEARNING PROFESSIONAL

THE LEARNING FORWARD JOURNAL

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Telephone: 800-727-7288, 513-523-6029

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VOICES



PROFESSIONAL LEARNING IS KEY TO THRIVING, CARDONA SAYS

U.S. Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona, at left, offered closing remarks at the Learning Forward Annual Conference in December.

Professional learning “is really close to my heart,” said Cardona, who was assistant superintendent for teaching and learning in Meriden, Connecticut, before being named Connecticut’s State Commissioner of Education and then U.S. Secretary of Education. He added, “I know firsthand the pivotal role that effective professional learning plays in not only helping educators achieve their goals but helping agencies grow and thrive to meet their goals.”

Acknowledging how difficult the past two school years have been, Secretary Cardona reminded conference attendees that professional learning “will continue to be key to helping educators address challenges that your school communities face, [and] it also will be key to helping you address challenges that you face, as professionals who are trying to balance love for your students and your work with your own well-being.”



Educators know that what they are doing makes a difference, but knowing is not the same as showing. Data is what can win supporters from across the arena. Now is the time to gather baseline measures and build measurement instruments that track progress over time.

Melinda George is chief policy officer at Learning Forward.

CALL TO ACTION

Melinda George

REACH ACROSS THE DIVIDE FOR PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

One recent early morning, I walked from my home near Washington, D.C., to the National Mall to see the U.S. Capitol. After such a tumultuous year, when divisive politics was at its worst, I was surprised at the sense of quiet in the air — almost somber. In that quiet space, I took a few moments to reflect on what has happened in the past few years and focus on what I hope will be different in the coming year.

More than anything, I hope we can leave behind the fighting, anger, and resulting stagnation and instead forge a shared path toward progress. Despite the U.S.’s recent history of making every issue a battleground, I believe there must be some places where we can all agree.

Support for educators, including high-quality professional learning, can be one of those issues. Every parent, grandparent, aunt, uncle, friend, and good citizen wants children to succeed, and we can all agree that for this to happen, every child must have access to an excellent education led by strong educators.

With that commitment as a starting place, we all need to be on Team Education — one where winning means that all students are successful — and, therefore, on Team Educators. Of course, “team” is the operative word, and the most effective teams are built with intentionality and support.

We need to first identify as many allies as we can, not just among our education colleagues but also among parents, businesses, health care professionals, civil rights leaders, and other communities and sectors that value a highly skilled workforce and an informed citizenry. Then we need to make the value proposition simple and clear and make it easy for our allies to share those messages in their advocacy.

We also need to focus on data, data, data. It is hard to garner support for a team that can’t show that it is banking some wins, or at least improving toward its goals. Educators know that what they are doing makes a difference, but knowing is not the same as showing. Data is what can win supporters from across the arena. Now is the time to gather baseline measures and build measurement instruments that track progress over time.

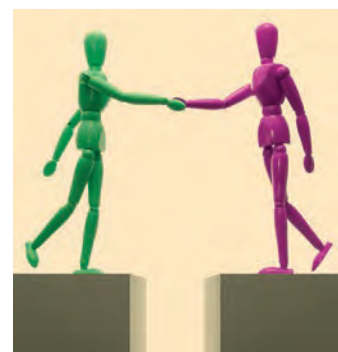
With that data in hand, we can build and tell stories that compel action. Storytelling is crucial, because professional learning that aligns with the definition of quality in the Every Student Succeeds Act can be hard to explain.

We need the public and policymakers to understand that high-quality professional learning is not about quick and easy workshops and courses. It’s about coaching and mentoring and collaboration — approaches that take more investments of time and resource but result in better outcomes.

For noneducators to understand that, we need to use storytelling skills to paint pictures of our effective professional learning experiences, the problems they are helping to solve, and how we know they are making an impact.

Learning Forward is ready to support you in these efforts. You can find ways to get involved in advocacy and tips for getting started by visiting the new Powered by Title II website (poweredbytitleII.com). And you can dive right in by inviting your policymakers to your classroom or school building, calling, emailing, or visiting your legislators locally or in D.C., speaking to your local PTA or school board, or reaching out to businesses in your community.

Join us on Team Education. Together, we can do this. ■





LEARNING LEADERS

Baruti K. Kafele

LEADERS CAN BUILD COMMUNITY, EVEN IN A DIVIDED SCHOOL

Building a school family takes intentionality from leaders and staff — intentionality on day one and every day after.

When I was a principal, I regularly referred to my school community as a family. When I delivered my morning message, I would say, “Good morning to my Newark Tech family.” I used the words “family” and “community” intentionally because I wanted my students to see the school as more than the facility where they were being educated. I wanted them to feel a sense of belonging, respect, and appreciation. I wanted them to feel safe to be themselves so they could take academic risks without fear of ridicule.

A school family does not occur organically, particularly in a diverse school like the one I led, or in a divided community. Building a school family takes intentionality from leaders and staff — intentionality on day one and every day after.

On my first day as principal, I saw my Black students sitting on one side of the cafeteria and my Latino students sitting on the opposite side. Although I understood why the students gravitated toward familiar people, I wanted them to see themselves as one school community.

To build that community, I knew I had to establish credibility right away. In my opening day message, I shared who I am as a person and a leader, and where we were headed collectively as a school. I told them that, although we were currently a low-performing school, we’d be a national force to be reckoned with academically within the next three to four years. I could tell they heard me loud and clear.

With that credibility, I entered the cafeteria and requested that everyone stand, face the other side of the cafeteria, go introduce themselves to someone they didn’t know, and then dare to sit with the new acquaintance and have a conversation. I stayed consistent with this approach until the culture of the cafeteria shifted and the two groups of students became one community.

Building community among students is actually the easy part because children are still impressionable and flexible. The heavy lifting in building community is with adults.

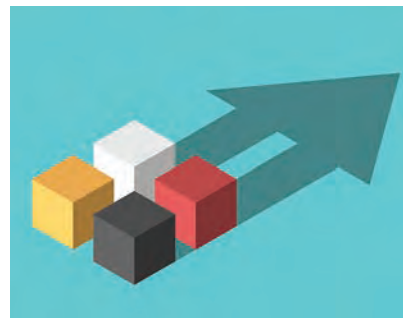
A school staff can be comprised of a wide array of people with different political beliefs as well as perspectives on students’ needs and potential and beliefs about what the school should be striving to achieve and for whom. I learned early in my career that those divides can be hard to bridge.

When I was a 5th-grade teacher in a classroom of Black students, I wanted my students to be conversant in the history of Black people in America and familiar with African culture. I was intentional about building pride in being Black along with the responsibilities that must accompany their pride and responsibilities to fight injustice.

The students became highly focused, and their academic results became exemplary. But several colleagues opposed what and how I taught. Throughout the school year, the faculty engaged in intense debates over how to educate Black children. The division was typically along racial lines, predicated upon our different experiences and the different “bubbles” we grew up in. Because we, the adults, were not as open and adaptable as children are, we never resolved our differences.

As the reflective practitioner that I pride myself to be, I look back on that experience frequently to this day. If I had it to do over again, with the skills I possess now, I’d focus more on building community. I’d be less combative with colleagues who saw the world differently from me, recognizing that they were shaped by their own life experiences, beliefs, and values. I

Continued on p. 11



Baruti K. Kafele
(principalkafele@gmail.com) is
an education
consultant,
author, and retired
principal.



Schools need an equity-focused professional learning plan that will center social, emotional, and mental health needs of students and staff as an essential part of learning.

Nader I. Twal is a program administrator in the Long Beach Unified School District's Office of Curriculum, Instruction, and Professional Development. He is also a member of Learning Forward's Standards Advisory Council.

DISTRICT PERSPECTIVE

Nader I. Twal

LEADING AND LEARNING FOR EQUITY IS A COLLECTIVE JOURNEY

I never wanted to be a teacher when I was growing up, let alone a district-level professional learning administrator. I certainly never expected to be writing a column for this magazine about how to support the professional growth of equity-centered school leaders. But I always knew education was central to my path.

As Jordanian immigrants to the United States, my parents ingrained in me the belief that education is a key lever for change and the seed of all opportunity. In the Middle East, education is a currency, especially in countries like Jordan, where limited natural resources slow economic development. In these environments, investing in human capital becomes integral to national modernization and international competitiveness, so pursuing postsecondary education was never in question for us.

Then, between my junior and senior years in college, I had a life-changing experience that opened my eyes and heart to the power of education in empowering communities. I took part in a summer immersion program in an under-resourced and underserved part of San Jose, California, teaching summer school to elementary aged students, who were voluntarily enrolled in an academic remediation program hosted by a local church group. The philosophy of the group was that you can't *understand* a need until you *live* that need, so we lived near and among the community that we served.

We saw firsthand the impact of social and economic disparities on the community, yet we were always surrounded by laughter, joy, and hospitality. The students and their families were not victims of circumstance that needed saving or fixing; rather, they were testaments to courage and persistence in spite of circumstance.

They leaned into one another and accessed education as an investment in their own neighborhood. Every day that they came to school was an act of resistance and hope — it testified to their aspiration and focus to not let broader systems of advantage and disadvantage define their opportunities.

The lessons I learned have served as the backbone of my work ever since and continue to resonate in my work today as a professional learning leader. They shape my approach to equity-centered teaching and leadership, which I will explore in this ongoing column. Here are a few of the most central lessons that will underscore my upcoming thoughts and recommendations.

Lead with empathy: Listen first, design second.

I remember going into the classroom and seeing students in the same clothes multiple days in a row. The traditional narrative about students in this neighborhood would have led us to believe



FOR MORE INFORMATION

To learn more about the concepts in this column, listen to myPD Unplugged, the podcast about equity-centered professional learning hosted by Twal and his colleagues in Long Beach Unified School District in California. Each episode is accompanied by a discussion guide, which can be accessed by clicking on the episode's webpage. The podcast is available on all major podcast streaming services.

that it was because their families couldn't afford any others.

But I quickly came to understand a different story: that, for some, those were the students' best clothes, and their parents would not send them to school in anything less, such was their level of respect for education. I came to realize that many of the students and families saw school as a community anchor that served more than an academic purpose. It symbolized possibility, opportunity, and, in some cases, safety.

To this day, I encourage the educators with whom I work to reframe how they diagnose needs by taking time to learn the stories of students, colleagues, and community to gather empathy data. This data will center the humanity of the communities you serve and guide the professional learning that will help you to better meet their real needs.

Measure what you treasure.

If we want data to inform our professional learning, then we need to reframe it to challenge deficit-thinking about our students and communities. As Gholdy Muhammad (author of *Cultivating Genius*) challenges us: Rather than saying that 40% of our students are proficient on a specific metric and 60% are not, consider what happens when we say that our current system, curriculum, instruction, and professional learning are responsive to

only 40% of our students' needs. How might that change our response to and posture toward the data?

Serve the kids you have, not the ones you wish you had.

Our kids come to us with rich cultural and linguistic assets, and it is our job to mine those assets, center them, and learn from them. It is our job to draw out of the students the giftedness that every single one of them has and make sure that our curriculum, instruction, and professional learning support that effort.

Be a catalyst to help kids realize their potential.

Catalysts spark a reaction between two elements that would otherwise not interact to create a stable compound without leaving any traces of itself. True change does not always come with recognition. That can be tiring and frustrating. But we know we have made systemic change when equity-mindedness becomes an integral part of how we and our colleagues do our work. When the work is happening but we can't attribute it to a specific leader or initiative, that's a sign of success.

What really matters

Above all, the lesson that sticks with me from my first teaching experience is the feeling that this is what matters: to invest my life in others and amplify the assets that our kids and communities

bring into our classrooms. As a teacher, it was my responsibility to learn how to mine the students' talents so that each one of them achieved to their potential and education delivered on its promise of hope and opportunity. Now that I am a professional learning leader, I have an additional responsibility to help other educators make that investment and do that work.

Leading and learning for equity is a collective journey. We all have to take our own individual steps on that journey, but we also have to support and draw inspiration from one another. In the words of Robert F. Kennedy (1966): "Each time a [person] stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, [he/she/they] sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring, those ripples build a current that can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance."

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LEARNING LEADERS / Baruti K. Kafele

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would use a conversational, teaching-focused approach because all of the disagreements and debates were actually teachable moments.

It takes skill to deal with people who see the world differently. When I was a young teacher, those skills were just beginning to form — they were raw and undeveloped. But over time, I learned that there will be individuals on my staff who are just as passionate

about their beliefs and values as I am about mine. I learned how to disagree without being disagreeable. I became more strategic about the way I approach my staff on issues of race.

Those skills are imperative to be a leader who builds a school family. A school can't be a functioning community if its people are not mindful of how others see the world. The leadership lays the foundation for listening and looking through other lenses.

Leaders set the tone and inspire the courage for difficult, uncomfortable conversations. They set an expectation and establish a space for staff to think deeply and critically about their own beliefs and values relative to others'. With intentionality, leaders can build community, even in a divided school. They can bring people together as one school — one that serves every child. ■



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For more information, contact Sharron Helmke, acting vice president, professional services, at sharron.helmke@learningforward.org. | services.learningforward.org



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instructional
effectiveness



Creating a culture
of collective
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Developing and
supporting coherent
systems of curriculum,
instruction, and
assessment



Developing
coaching and
mentoring skills



Developing skills to
lead high-achieving
professional learning
communities



Observing lessons and
providing feedback
to increase teaching
effectiveness



GROWTH & CHANGE

Jennifer Abrams

YOU'VE REACHED YOUR LIMIT. HERE'S HOW YOU CAN STRETCH IT

Asking one another to be even more resilient and simply hang in there pushes many of us right to the edge. But stretching at our edges doesn't have to be a burden. In fact, it can help us get through this time.

Collaboration is one of the most frequently used words in education and, in some ways, the least taught. Over two decades as a teacher, coach, and professional development facilitator in a California school district, I learned that I had a credential in my subject, but I didn't have a credential in how to collaborate and work with other adults.

During the last decade, my consulting work has focused on filling that gap by supporting adult-to-adult communication in schools. I constantly ask myself and the educators with whom I work: How do we stretch ourselves at our learning edges to become our best adult selves at school? And how do we communicate well with one another in service of our students (Abrams, 2021)? This ongoing column for *The Learning Professional* will respond to that inquiry in ways that are designed to be actionable and helpful across the pre-K-12 continuum and beyond.

Stretching is surely a familiar concept to readers. Stretching ourselves is what we have been doing now for months. With educators navigating hybrid and modified in-person teaching, student mental health concerns, discipline challenges, teacher and substitute shortages, and political discussions about what to teach and how, asking one another to be even more resilient and simply hang in there pushes many of us right to the edge. But stretching at our edges doesn't have to be a burden. In fact, it can help us get through this time.

In particular, we can all benefit from building our adult-to-adult communication skills. Our ability to collaborate and our willingness to engage respectfully with one

another matters for the health of the school and the collective well-being of all within it, especially as the demands on us keep increasing and the challenges facing our schools intensify.

We can and must intentionally ask ourselves how to live respectfully and for the good of the whole community, even in the midst of the challenges we are facing. The following are important steps on that journey.

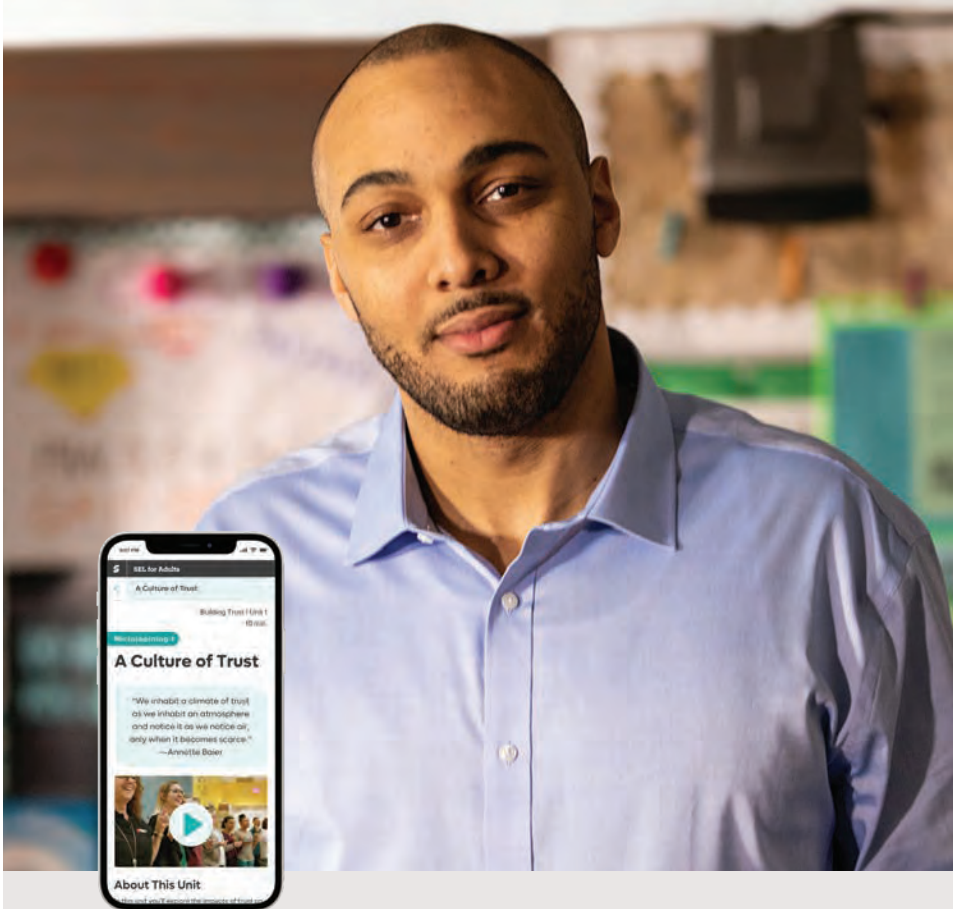
Do inner work to contribute to the whole. We all want to be a value add to our teams, and that means doing the work to become more humane and effective team members. We all must do the inner work of managing emotions and energy and the outer work of using our body language mindfully and choosing respectful wording. We also need to build our skills to do active listening, learn how to apologize, and make space for all voices.

Learn to effectively work with cognitive conflict. Listening to a variety of perspectives is a good thing, because it asks us to be open to complexity and listen with an open mind. But when we are stressed, we may not engage in challenging conversations in the best of ways. Learning to navigate conflict effectively is essential. As Timothy J. Clark states in *The 4 Stages of Psychological Safety: Defining the Path to Inclusion and Innovation* (2020), a team needs to work with more intellectual friction and less social friction to innovate and solve challenges.

Be responsible for your responses. All 100% of what you say is your responsibility — your questions, comments, concerns, reactions. You have agency over how you communicate about



Jennifer Abrams (jennifer@jenniferabrams.com) is an independent communications consultant and leadership coach.



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We need to create environments in which everyone is acknowledged, feels a sense of belonging, and is treated justly.

emotional topics, even if you aren't the person setting the agenda or starting the conversation. "How might I communicate my perspective humanely in a kind, supportive, and nonaggressive manner?" is a question we all need to be asking ourselves, especially in these divisive times.

Speak up, thoughtfully. When you see a change that could be helpful, share it — with respect, tact, and consideration. Make your words productive, solution-oriented, and humane. If you notice the group isn't hearing from everyone, create openings for others to contribute. If you recognize that you might have overstepped, apologize. If you offer feedback, make it actionable and constructive.

In this current climate of tension and fear, we need to create environments in which everyone is acknowledged, feels a sense of belonging, and is treated justly, starting with our colleagues and collaborators. Our students look to us to see what being an adult looks like. Let's show them our best selves.

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EXAMINE. STUDY. UNDERSTAND.

RESEARCH

EVALUATION SHOWS NETWORK'S IMPACT

An independent evaluation of Learning Forward's What Matters Now Network looked at the ways in which a structured, facilitated network provided support for state-level coalitions working with districts, schools, and educators to improve instruction and make progress toward achieving content standards. The network, which operated from 2016 to 2021 and included multirole coalitions from three states, used and taught the principles of improvement science.

The evaluation found that engaging in the coalition and network activities resulted in more focused and productive discussions among educators, as well as more teacher engagement in the processes of implementing the curriculum. The evaluation also found that educators' capacity to effectively use student data increased, and classroom practice and student outcomes improved.

Read more on p. **16**.



RESEARCH REVIEW

Elizabeth Foster

EVALUATION SHOWS THE IMPACT OF A PROFESSIONAL LEARNING NETWORK

► THE STUDY

Morgan, C. (2021, March).
Learning Forward What Matters Now Network: Year two formative evaluation report. WestEd.
learningforward.org/networks/what-matters-now-network/

Elizabeth Foster (elizabeth.foster@learningforward.org) is vice president, research & standards at Learning Forward. In each issue of *The Learning Professional*, Foster explores recent research to help practitioners understand the impact of particular learning practices on student outcomes.

In the spirit of self-reflection for the purposes of improvement, Learning Forward often engages with evaluation partners to look closely at its own efforts to strengthen professional learning through networks and communities of practice. A recent independent evaluation by WestEd of Learning Forward's What Matters Now Network looked at the ways in which a structured, facilitated network provided support for state-level coalitions working with districts, schools, and educators to improve instruction and make progress toward achieving content standards.

The What Matters Now Network was based on a research report by the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (NCTAF, 2016) that explored the conditions needed to support great teaching and learning. The network was facilitated by Learning Forward, used and taught the principles of improvement science, and was funded by the Carnegie Corporation of New York and the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation.

The network operated from 2016 to 2021 and included multirole coalitions from three states: Maryland, Ohio, and Rhode Island. WestEd, an independent research firm, conducted a three-year evaluation of the What Matters Now Network to examine the impact of the network's design and facilitation as well as the results of data-informed improvement cycles focused on increasing teacher and student learning.



METHODOLOGY

WestEd grounded its evaluation in the network's driver diagram, which identified intermediate and long-term aims as well as the drivers that would move the coalitions to improved teacher and student outcomes: effective job-embedded professional development; identification and implementation of high-quality curriculum and instructional materials; and leadership, policy, and resources for sustaining and scaling continuous improvement in these areas.

WestEd collected and synthesized information to assess the impact of the network on professional learning and teacher practice as well as successes and challenges related to three levels: network support, progress against goals or aims, and participant results. The evaluation team observed and gathered data at the convenings, conducted role-alike focus groups, surveyed participants, and looked at artifacts from teacher collaborative meetings and student work.

WestEd researchers also conducted two rounds of interviews with network members, including state department of education staff and district and school administrators and teachers. In addition to questions related to the specifics of the project (such as about the use of improvement science strategies and the structure of the state coalitions), some of the main research questions included:

- To what extent and in what ways does the network leadership foster shared purpose, collaboration, capacity-building, and common language and inquiry approaches?
- To what extent and in what ways is the network progressing toward its aim of teachers accessing and engaging in effective job-embedded professional learning grounded in the use of high-quality curriculum and instructional materials?
- What are the successes and challenges encountered by state coalitions in pursuing their aims?

The evaluation also looked at the goals and outcomes for each state, within that state's area of focus: Maryland focused on increasing teacher capacity to identify and implement Next Generation Science Standards-aligned professional learning and instructional resources; Ohio focused on using collaborative learning teams to strengthen teacher practices for pre-K-3 literacy outcomes; and Rhode Island focused on increasing teacher engagement in examining student data and reflective instructional practice to meet identified student needs.

Because the network operations were impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and school closings, additional questions were added to interview protocols in winter 2021 to gather information about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the group's work in the states.

FINDINGS

The evaluation found that the participants valued the network's design and facilitation and that the focused, data-informed improvement cycles increased teacher and student learning. Engaging in the coalition and network activities resulted in more focused and productive discussions among educators, as well as more teacher engagement in the processes of implementing the curriculum.

The evaluation also found that educators' capacity to effectively use student data increased, and classroom practice and student outcomes improved. Educators used collaborative planning time more effectively and targeted interventions more effectively than before the network engagement. According to one participant, "Teacher professional learning time has moved beyond compliance to become efficient and purposeful — focused on looking at data, reflecting on practice, and observing and supporting peers."

Coalitions were able to identify and institute new professional learning

TO LEARN MORE

For more detail about how improvement science structures and processes help states set goals, then make and measure progress, read "Network uses improvement science to scale up change" from the February 2019 issue of *The Learning Professional*, available at learningforward.org/journal/february-2019-vol-40-no-1/network-uses-improvement-science-to-scale-up-change/

strategies in response to the needs surfaced in the collaborative discussions. For instance, one coalition began principal walk-throughs to observe whether professional learning was addressing the priorities identified by teachers' analyses, while another coalition began peer observations and supportive discussions about how to discuss feedback with fellow educators.

Participating in the network had a positive impact on educators, in general, according to the evaluation findings. One principal reported, "Teacher practice is more intentional and purposeful. I see them reflecting and discussing, 'How do we make this fit the need of this kid and also this kid?' It is way more explicit and systematic than it has been in the past."

Engaging in the network and coalition activities also improved teachers' knowledge and skills, including how to identify what lessons and materials were aligned to content standards and on grade level, and provided opportunities to ensure consistency of content across school teams. A new teacher from the Maryland coalition noted, "It really helps a lot because I had never heard of the Next Generation Science Standards. Now I know how to do data analysis to find out how to fill gaps for children."

The final, post-COVID pandemic shutdown interviews found that the structures, protocols, and relationships developed during the What Matters Now Network supported educators during the sudden transition to online learning. According to one participant from a state department of education,

"Districts are collaborating and having PLCs, and data is rolling in like we're not in a pandemic."

IMPLICATIONS

The What Matters Now Network was an initiative that incorporated the Standards for Professional Learning as a framework alongside the principles of improvement science. The careful, collaborative analysis of student and educator data informed the tailoring of professional learning content and pacing, demonstrating some of the key elements of the **Learning Designs** standard. In addition, the way in which participants and stakeholders advocated for and provided resources for the support teachers said they needed is a strong example of the **Implementation** standard.

The What Matters Now Network has concluded, but the network's structure, protocols, and evaluation design continue to be helpful to other Learning Forward networks and communities. There is also the potential to develop a toolkit to leverage the tools developed and tested by the three coalitions, since they successfully strengthened professional learning communities and curriculum-based professional learning.

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DATA POINTS

ZERO EFFECT OF TEACHER EVALUATION REFORM

A major study of teacher evaluation reform initiatives between 2009 and 2017 found that those efforts had no effect on student achievement or educational attainment. Furthermore, the evaluation efforts decreased job satisfaction among new teachers and added heavily to the workload of administrators. The study looked at 44 U.S. states and the District of Columbia, using the timing of when states adopted their reforms and comparing them with district-level student achievement data as well as the American Community Survey. bit.ly/3nExmWG

34% OF TEACHERS CONSIDERING LEAVING THE FIELD

In the latest of a growing number of pandemic-era studies on teachers' career plans, Teachers Pay Teachers surveyed 6,000 teachers in November 2021 and found that nearly half (48%) were considering changing jobs, and 34% were considering changing careers. An additional 11% said they were considering taking a leave of absence. bit.ly/3nBih8j

13% OF COMMERCIALY AVAILABLE POSTERS ARE RACIALLY INCLUSIVE

A report from New America reviewed 160 studies to synthesize the literature on the representation of different racial, ethnic, and social groups in educational materials. The report paints a troubling picture of how infrequently people of color are presented in books, textbooks, posters, and other educational content. For example, one study examined a website where educators can order posters for school walls



and found that only 13% of them were racially inclusive. Other studies find that 50% to 80% of images of people in U.S. history textbooks are white people. The report looks in depth at the portrayals of males and females from specific backgrounds. It has implications for how educators select curricular materials and how professional learning prepares them to do so. bit.ly/3nBhV1t

7 DOMAINS OF LEADERSHIP IN VIRTUAL LEARNING

A report commissioned by The Wallace Foundation examined what high-quality, equitable learning looks like in a virtual environment and how district leaders can prepare and support principals to lead it. It asked what a principal needs to know and be able to do to lead in a virtual environment, what on-the-job supports principals need, and what conditions promote the development of a large cohort of principals effective in this setting. Drawing on previous research as well as interviews with district and school leaders from five districts, the report identifies actions districts can take within each of the seven domains

of principal pipelines identified in Wallace's previous leadership work. <https://bit.ly/3liDKLd>

P < .05 FOR UDL INSTITUTE

An evaluation of a professional learning initiative to support teachers' use of the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) Framework found that a weeklong summer institute resulted in higher implementation of the framework in their classrooms. The quasi-experimental study compared 73 teachers who had attended the institute with 70 who had not. Administrators' ratings on a UDL-focused teacher assessment rubric were significantly higher ($p < .05$) for those who had participated. bit.ly/3fBArmF

14 COMPONENTS OF EFFECTIVE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

In a report published by the London-based Centre for Education Policy and Equalising Opportunities, a group of researchers tested a theory of 14 effective professional development components based on prior research. The researchers proposed a set of indicators — the In-Service Teacher Training Survey Instrument — to standardize reporting on professional learning programs and applied the instrument to 33 rigorously evaluated professional learning initiatives. They found that each of the 14 components was associated with a .01 standard deviation increase in student test scores, and that four components had an even larger effect: linking participation to career incentives, having a specific subject focus, incorporating lesson enactment in the professional learning, and including initial face-to-face meetings. bit.ly/3ljJEfb

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BUILDING COMMUNITY IN A DIVIDED WORLD



THE PATH TO MEANINGFUL COLLABORATION

This issue's authors illustrate the many ways to build community in a divided world. In describing some of the pitfalls of collaboration, Steven Katz and Jenni Donohoo cite Adam Grant's book *Think Again*, which lists four roles we fall into as we engage others: preacher, prosecutor, politician, and scientist. "In the first three roles, the truth takes a back seat to being right, defending beliefs, and gaining favor," they write. It is the scientist role, searching for truth and revising our thinking as new information becomes available, that offers a path to achieving quality implementation.

"Collective work must be coordinated in a way that brings out our scientists and dials down the preacher, prosecutor, and politician — roles we tend to retreat toward when engaging in contentious contexts," they write. "As psychologist Peter Coleman has found during studies in his Difficult Conversations Lab, the best phrase we can start with in these spaces is, 'It's complicated.'"

Their article begins on p. **20**.



How to achieve collective efficacy in a time of division

BY STEVEN KATZ AND JENNI DONOHOO

Although there is a wealth of research about what works in schools for both teachers and leaders, it has been an ongoing challenge to ensure quality implementation of those practices.

We might know what these practices are, but how do we make sure they get established and maintained

as intended when schools are full of changing conditions and unexpected challenges — especially in our current, unpredictable times?

We define quality implementation as a process through which the promise of evidence-based practices is realized in real-world settings. The process involves a critical mass of people applying the practice, assessing impact relative to the

intended outcome, and then learning about what did or didn't work and why. The school or organization can then make necessary modifications to the practices (Donohoo & Katz, 2020).

In this article, the evidence-based practices that we are concerned with relate to school leadership, not least of which involves the work that school leaders do to improve the

instructional program in schools while simultaneously managing a whirlwind of operational demands (see Katz et al., 2018).

Collaboration is an essential ingredient of quality implementation, as it is for most high-quality professional learning. But while collaboration sounds easy, it is anything but. It's not difficult to put a group of people together, but how do you ensure that being together adds value? And how do you avoid getting mired in conflicts and contradictions?

These are the questions we have faced in our recent work with school leaders. No matter the situations they are facing, we find that an intentional mindset and defined collaboration protocols are key to addressing them.

COLLABORATION AND ITS PITFALLS

When leaders are not intentional about group relationships and processes, there are several potential pitfalls to collaboration, including contrived collegiality (Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012), the potential for diffusion of responsibility, and challenges with ideas that get automatically shared before their quality can be assessed (Katz et al., 2009).

An additional potential pitfall to collaboration is what Sunstein and Hastie (2015) refer to as “happy talk” — those polite conversations that remain superficially focused on sharing stories of practice rather than probing more deeply into issues related to learning, teaching, and impact.

ABOUT THE CONSULTANCY PROTOCOL

The consultancy protocol was adapted from the National School Reform Faculty consultancy protocol, which can be found at:

www.nsrffharmony.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/consultancy_0.pdf

Subconscious cognitive biases can also derail the process of achieving quality implementation, and they have been amplified by the current climate of political and personal tensions in schools. Central among these is what psychologists call the binary bias — the tendency to reduce complex issues into either/or polemics. Should we focus on student well-being or on identifying academic skill gaps? Should we champion online learning or in-class learning going forward? Do we focus on building equity consciousness or on school improvement? And so on.

Yet complex problems are best understood as continua. For example, equity work should be school improvement work, not an alternative. There is no one right strategy to dealing with entrenched challenges, and furthermore, focusing on being right isn't a strategy (Pascal, 2020).

RETHINKING HOW WE ENGAGE IN COLLABORATION

In his book *Think Again*, Adam Grant (2021) tells us that regardless of what work we do, we routinely fall into four specific roles as we engage with others:

- While in *preacher* mode, individuals are set on promoting

their ideas, at the expense of listening carefully to others.

- While in the *prosecutor* role, individuals actively attack the ideas of others to succeed at winning an argument.
- The *politician* in us seeks the approval of others and has little concern for the truth.
- The *scientist* in us is on a search for truth through hypothesis testing. In trying new things in practice and assessing outcomes, scientists are constantly revising their thinking as new information becomes available.

In the first three roles, the truth takes a back seat to being right, defending beliefs, and gaining favor. Grant's argument is that taking the scientist role offers a superior path to improved thinking and lifelong learning — and we would add that the scientific mind offers a superior path to achieving quality implementation as well. It's important to note that you don't have to be a scientist by profession to think this way. Anyone can take on this role by being intentional about it.

Collective work must be coordinated in a way that brings out our scientists and dials down the preacher, prosecutor, and politician —

roles we tend to retreat toward when engaging in contentious contexts. As psychologist Peter Coleman has found during studies in his Difficult Conversations Lab, the best phrase we can start with in these spaces is, “It’s complicated.”

THE POWER OF PROTOCOLS

One of the tools for professional learning that we have found useful for leaning into the requisite complexity is the use of protocols (Katz & Dack, 2013). Through protocols — structured sets of guidelines to promote effective and efficient communication and problem-solving — leaders can facilitate keeping team members in the scientist mode and away from acting like a preacher, prosecutor, or politician. They can intentionally interrupt the shortcomings of collaborative spaces, including the binary bias.

We witnessed the power of protocols recently as we facilitated a consultancy protocol with a cohort of newly appointed school leaders participating in a yearlong leadership development opportunity.

We began by asking them to think of an adaptive challenge related to their current leadership practice, explaining that their adaptive challenge should be an issue that raises questions, an idea that seems to have conceptual gaps, or something they just can’t figure out.

We asked them to consider: Was this issue bothering them enough that it kept them up at night? Was it important to them and something they were willing to work on? And, most importantly, was it something they could affect directly by changing their practice?

Next, we provided some time for reflective writing and offered the following prompts:

- Why is this an adaptive challenge for you?
- What or where is the tension in your challenge?
- If you could take a snapshot of the challenge, what would you/we see?

- What have you already done to try to remedy or manage the dilemma?
- What have been the results of those attempts?
- Who needs to change? Who needs to take action to resolve this adaptive challenge?
- What do you assume to be true related to the adaptive challenge?
- How have these assumptions influenced your thinking about the challenge?

Then we asked them to create a focus question that summarized their dilemma and that would help to focus feedback. For example: How do I find time to focus on improving the instructional program by observing classroom practice and providing constructive feedback to teachers (a key evidence-based leadership practice), while the operational demands of the job right now make this feel impossible?

The next step was introducing the consultancy protocol and explaining that its purpose was to help them think more expansively about their adaptive challenge. We outlined the roles of presenter, facilitator, and participants.

Once divided into diverse smaller teams of six, the school leaders determined who would present and who would facilitate. These roles rotated over the course of the sessions.

Next, we provided the steps of the protocol:

1. The presenter gives an overview of the adaptive challenge and frames a question for the consultancy group to consider. (5-7 minutes)
2. The consultancy group asks clarifying questions, which are focused on facts, to the presenter. (5 minutes)
3. The consultancy group asks probing questions to help the presenter think more deeply about the adaptive challenge. Examples of probing questions include: “What would have to change for you to successfully

address the challenge?” and “What are you most afraid will happen?” Probing questions do not include advice or “should.”

4. Members of the consultancy group talk with each other about the adaptive challenge while the presenter stays silent and takes notes. (10 minutes)
They consider:
 - What did we hear? What didn’t we hear?
 - What assumptions seem to be operating?
 - What questions does the adaptive challenge raise for us?
 - What have we done in similar situations?
5. The presenter reflects on what he/she heard and on what he/she is now thinking, sharing with the group anything that resonated with him/her during the consultancy. (5 minutes)

Following these steps, we debriefed the protocol with the larger group by asking them how the protocol worked for them and when and how they might use it in their own work. As we listened to the teams engage in their conversations, it verified for us how the consultancy protocol helped to interrupt the binary bias.

In one example, while sharing an overview of her adaptive challenge (step 1), the school leader who volunteered to present expressed her frustrations of dealing with the day-to-day demands of crisis management and mounting regulations.

She spoke of the evolving role of additional duties and said that there was little margin for anything other than the management aspect of an administrator’s job today. She longed to return to the days where she was an instructional leader.

“How can I focus on instructional leadership given the amount of time that is required to deal with managerial issues in my school?” she asked the team. It was clear that she viewed the managerial and instructional

aspects of her practice as an either/or polemic.

As the protocol continued to unfold, the consultancy team posed clarifying and probing questions (steps 2 and 3) and then during step 4, the presenter listened in as her team talked about her dilemma.

In the final step of the protocol, the presenter had tangible ideas about how she could enact both aspects of her leadership position. For example, rather than thinking about management and instructional leadership as the properties of a single individual leader with positional authority (her), what if management and instructional leadership were defined as functions with associated behaviors, and these were distributed across multiple people within the school in a way that was aligned with their respective expertise?

SEEING SHADES OF GRAY

For school systems to meet the needs of all students, school leaders will need to find ways to support teachers' quality implementation of evidence-based strategies, regardless of the challenges posed by the current climate of political and personal tensions.

Such tensions have the propensity to reduce complex issues to either/or polemics and set up an oppositional dynamic that is the stuff of preachers, prosecutors, and politicians. Intentionally interrupting this binary bias in collective spaces means engaging

as scientists would. It means relocating polar thinking onto a continuum.

As Grant (2021) stated, "Instead of treating polarizing issues like two sides of a coin, look at them through the many lenses of a prism. Seeing shades of gray can make us more open" (p. 255).

Using protocols as an intentional interruption strategy (Katz & Dack, 2013) can force us into a space that allows us to practice "integrative thinking." In his book *The Opposable Mind*, Roger Martin (2007), the architect of integrative thinking, helps us understand that the tension between opposing ideas is never considered a bad thing because there are likely valid perspectives in both of the either/or positions.

Our task as scientists is to use protocols to dive into these opposing positions by articulating what each means, examining their similarities and differences, identifying assumptions that may exist around each of them, and exploring all possibilities in a positive way (Katz et al., 2018).

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Steven Katz (steven.katz@utoronto.ca) is a consultant, author, speaker, and professor in the Department of Applied Psychology & Human Development at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. Jenni Donohoo (jenni.donohoo@praxis-engage.com) is an educational consultant, author, and keynote speaker at Praxis Engaging Ideas. ■



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Communities of practice empower teachers to tackle thorny problems

BY THOMAS R. FELLER JR., ELIZABETH MYERS, AND ASHLEY SMITH

One of the most effective forms of professional learning happens when teachers conduct collaborative inquiry in their own classrooms around difficult and challenging topics — even topics that are potentially divisive.

We've seen this powerful process at work in our district in Pitt County, North Carolina, where teachers became collaborative researchers and addressed instructional problems of practice in

their own classrooms. They developed and used skills to better understand diverse perspectives, analyzed data to efficiently examine possible causes, and engaged in a collaborative cycle of inquiry to investigate and address the underlying issues.

We found that this process leads to positive changes, even in areas that are complex and sometimes conflictual. Problems of practice are, by definition, persistent and not easy to solve, and many of them hold the potential to

challenge teachers' underlying beliefs and assumptions around teaching and learning. This can often lead to conflict and disagreement.

We have found, though, that the structure of our communities of practice empowers educators to come together to address these difficult, even potentially divisive, problems in ways that result in improved student learning and increased teacher efficacy, understanding, and collaboration. According to facilitating teacher Leia

Grigg, working in a community of practice was “very empowering and shifted the joy in teaching to where you felt like you were actually making a difference ... with your colleagues.”

BUILDING EFFECTIVE COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

In Pitt County Schools, all teachers serve as members of a professional learning community (PLC) to work on and examine progress toward instructional objectives and measure student learning aligned to district pacing guides. As a complement to PLCs, our community of practice model affords teacher leaders an opportunity to deeply investigate specific problems of practice impacting student learning.

Teachers interested in serving on a community of practice can apply for the position of facilitating teacher (the one who leads the group) or collaborating teacher (a group member). Applicants are screened at the district level and hired by individual school principals, and the roles both require meeting differentiated criteria in order to qualify.

We define a community of practice as a team of teachers who engage in a collaborative inquiry cycle leading to both student and teacher learning. In the cycle, members:

- Use data to identify a common problem of practice;
- Theorize potential reasons for the data they observe;

Effective communities of practice are characterized by how teachers work together and the inquiry they engage in.

- Research possible strategies to address the problem;
- Decide on and implement strategies;
- Measure evidence-based outcomes and adjust their instruction accordingly; and
- Share the results of their learning with colleagues within the school and across the district.

In communities of practice, teacher leaders work “beyond the scope of their normal classroom practice,” said principal Sara English. “They have training that prepares them to facilitate excellent meetings and problem-solve with their colleagues around a research-based and evidence-based problem of practice [and] ... then apply what they learned together in their classrooms with their students.”

Effective communities of practice are characterized both by the “how” and the “what” — that is, how teachers work together *and* the inquiry they engage in. Humility, trust, and mutual respect defined *how* teachers collaborated in the communities of practice in our district. A consistent, identified cycle of inquiry defined *what* their work was.

Humble inquiry is the “how.”

We describe the process of implementing a culture of humility, trust, and mutual respect as humble inquiry. Having humility gave teachers the ability to own their learning and connect it to the learning of other professionals and the students they served.

We saw teachers shift from talking about “me” and “my students” to “we” and “our students.” They listened to understand and learn from each other, rather than to respond and insert their own narrative. The community of practice process “taught me to sit back and listen, and process everything before I just jumped in and tried to fix it,” said facilitating teacher Nicole Leary. “As a teacher [I was used to] saying, ‘Let me fix your problems.’ Now it’s everybody listening and coming together.” This helped teachers avoid the groupthink and toxic passive-aggressive environment prevalent in American culture.

A critical aspect of trusting and respecting others involved learning to focus on the ideas rather than the people who brought them. In communities of practice, teachers developed skills to engage in cognitive conflict. In these robust dialogues, all voices were heard and respected and all questions honored. Teachers “presum[ed] positive intentions and knew we were all there to support one another — it was all about growth,” said facilitating teacher Cassie Creech.

Teachers identified several key skills that helped them develop as humble collaborators. The first was to focus on their own listening skills, particularly listening without passing judgment. Group members had to focus on “listening to understand and not just respond,” said facilitating teacher Elizabeth Burch-Patterson, which allowed them to examine “issues from various perspectives [and be] clear in our understanding of what [others] are saying.”

Facilitating teacher Shani Smith-Amplify said she would regularly remind members, “We’ll be listening [and] presuming positive intent.” One of her goals was to “[make] sure that everyone [knew] that they [were] free to speak. And that what they [said would not] be taken maliciously, but in a vein of we’re all trying to learn.”

Two skills that supported them in doing this were to pause before offering their own thoughts and paraphrase what others were saying to ensure everyone understood and felt heard.

Data-driven problems of practice are the “what.”

Establishing a humble, trusting, and respectful culture enabled teachers to engage in the substance of collaborative inquiry. After analyzing data and clarifying the focus of their research, teachers examined possible factors contributing to observed gaps and designed strategies to try. Upon implementation, teachers recorded progress and modified strategies based on their results. Ultimately, teachers reported their results so others could learn as well.

For example, based on low

9th-grade academic performance and attendance, one middle school community of practice researched strategies to prepare students to more successfully transition into high school. By analyzing their survey and discipline data, they discovered that students experienced a lack of connection with their middle school teachers, leading to disengagement that persisted into 9th grade. As a result, the teachers researched and applied strategies to get to know their students better and develop positive relationships with them.

Through this process, they also uncovered some of their own internal biases that kept them from developing these pivotal relationships. For example, one teacher held a perspective that she would call students “sir” and “ma’am,” with the intention of showing respect to them, but students felt disconnected

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because they believed the teacher didn't know their names.

During a community of practice meeting, as the members challenged and listened to each other's perspectives, she came to realize the need to communicate respect in a different way and began calling students by their names, even though it was uncomfortable for her. Moreover, every teacher in the room that day made a commitment to intentionally use students' given names.

After making this change, the teachers noted that student engagement increased in their classes, and district administrators have seen significant changes in that middle school's culture as a whole (Pitt County Schools, 2020). (Long-term impact data on 9th-grade achievement and attendance are not yet available.)

SUPPORT FOR COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

Changes like these did not happen immediately or accidentally. They required intentional support and training. On both the school and district level, we were intentional about establishing supports for our teachers in communities of practice.

At the district level, community of practice facilitators engaged in professional learning to help them fully understand the collaborative style of leadership their role required, including strategies for intentionally developing trust, effective communication, and collaboration. Participants focused on topics such as listening to understand, paraphrasing, and different dialogue protocols to use when emotions might be running high.

Internal coaches facilitated both

custom-designed and off-the-shelf professional learning. The time spent building those relationships was integral to the capacity of the team to delve into difficult topics.

We then worked with each team facilitator to develop his or her ability to lead colleagues through a defined data process.

Every facilitator also received ongoing support from a district coach, who provided targeted coaching, process modeling, and one-on-one support tailored to specific needs in areas such as modeling the inquiry cycle or planning with the facilitator before a meeting.

At the school level, principals and other administrators committed to the discovery process and demonstrated their investment in the success of the communities of practice. Principal Sara

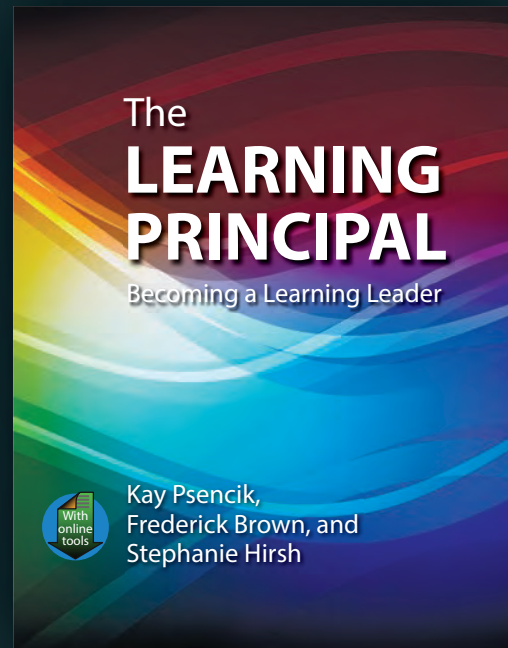
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English emphasized the importance of creating dedicated time, saying that her role involved “giving them time, making sure that the culture of the school recognizes that the time they set aside to meet is sacred, and working very hard not to schedule anything that would interfere.”

Both teachers and principals embraced the philosophy “go slow to go fast” (Bach, 2017), and they recognized that the hard work of transforming schools required time and dedication.

IMPACT OF COLLABORATIVE INQUIRY

The work of communities of practice in our district has contributed to increased student learning, improved teacher practice, and transformed school culture, according to a third-party evaluation and teachers’ own research. (Findings from the latter can be found at the website www.successforeverychild.com.)

The external evaluation showed that teachers who participated in communities of practice showed a statistically significant increase in student achievement scores as compared to their peers. The average value-added score for teachers in communities of practice rose over 300% more than for nonparticipants when comparing results from one year to the next.

In one school, the number of 2nd-

and 3rd-grade students in community of practice members’ classrooms who were proficient in reading increased 168% over the course of one year, suggesting a significant link between the work of the community of practice members and student learning (Measurement Incorporated, 2018, 2019).

Looking at state ratings of schools based on student performance, our district saw the number of schools with a D grade drop by half and the percentage of schools rated A, B, or C rise from 57% to 78% (Measurement Incorporated, 2020). Communities of practice were one initiative among several that may have contributed to these improvements, and we therefore cannot quantify a direct link. However, we did notice an apparent connection between schools with high-quality community of practice implementation and increased school grades.

Teachers and administrators also documented improvements on student learning. According to principal Janarde Cannon, his school’s Math I scores were the highest they’ve been in eight years, something he directly attributed to the work the Math I teachers completed as part of their community of practice. In that same school, where another group of teachers focused on aligning work across content areas to improve ACT scores, student performance on the test exceeded what

we expected based on their pre-ACT test results. Typically, students score similarly on the pre-test and the ACT, but in this cohort, proficiency jumped from 29% on the pretest to 44% on the ACT, which equated to about 55 more students being proficient than expected (Measurement Incorporated, 2018).

There were also strong impacts on teachers. Participating teachers reported they felt more empowered and respected and that the ability to work on a problem of practice transformed how they viewed their roles as teachers. This was encouraging because, too often, educators view research as something that happens elsewhere, with little relevance to their day-to-day lives.

“I felt stagnant in my teaching career,” facilitating teacher Amanda Davis said. “Once I began collaborating with colleagues in efforts to solve a specific problem using research and data analysis, my passion for teaching was reignited. I felt that I was not only growing as a teacher but evolving into a teacher leader.”

Similarly, Cassie Creech, a 3rd-grade facilitating teacher, said the work they did “has really changed what it means to be a teacher and made us get out of our four walls and realize our impact beyond classroom, beyond grade level, to whole-school.”

We also observed transformation at the school level. Elementary principal

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Sara English told us that she doesn't have to micromanage her teachers because "the skills and capabilities and leadership development is there. In a lot of cases, I just get to be a fly on the wall. And I'm excited about it happening."

Other principals reported that teachers engaged in collaborative inquiry were sharing their results with peers and conducting school-level professional learning based on their work. Kim Smith, an elementary instructional coach, said the learning experienced by teachers in communities of practice is having "a trickle-down effect."

LESSONS LEARNED

Reflecting on four years of developing and working with communities of practice, several lessons rise to the top for others seeking to develop teacher leaders into collaborative teacher researchers.

First, developing safety and trust is critical to creating a collaborative learning culture, and it takes deliberate, intentional professional learning and continual reinforcement. Investing the time to establish protocols creates a psychologically safe environment, which is crucial to the deep thinking and risk-taking in which communities of practice engage, especially around sensitive topics. As facilitating teacher Nicole Telson said, "No matter what, if you don't have trust, you're not going to get anywhere."

Second, when preparing teachers for collaborative work, focusing on communication skills is important. While most training in communication skills focuses on how to effectively deliver a message, our participants reported over and over that it was their development of listening skills that made the most impact on their work.

Third, as a natural outgrowth of listening and creating safe spaces, teacher leaders must reframe cognitive conflict as a tool for growth. Our most successful communities of practice found their work to be more robust when they broke "the culture of nice"

(MacDonald, 2011) and found room for different perspectives. "Even if we disagree," said Nicole Leary, "we disagree professionally."

Fourth, communities of practice need to commit to both a structured procedure for examining data and a structured process for conducting those meetings and talking with each other. This is the heart of the work, and as groups become fluent in the language of the procedure and process, their work becomes more meaningful and has more capacity to influence others.

SMALL CHANGES THAT LEAD TO BIG RESULTS

An adage we live by in our district is that small changes hold the potential to result in large-scale transformation, and the work of communities of practice serves as a perfect example of this. When given the tools and support to research an identified problem of practice, teachers can speak with a collective voice and address problems in real time, leading to a sense of teacher efficacy.

"A lot of the teachers were super excited to see, OK, somebody's finally trying to figure out something about [this problem]," Kim Smith said. "We're not just talking about a problem, we're not just saying it's a problem — we actually have a group of teachers that are trying out things."

This process enables teachers to discuss difficult, divisive topics in productive and meaningful ways. Even when they couldn't resolve issues, they were able to come away with deeper understanding and respect of different opinions and perspectives.

Shani Smith-Ampley said that "it might kick up some feelings. But remember, everyone, we're all right — it's OK. And we want a difference of opinion. Because how am I going to understand something? Because you don't know what you don't know. So I need you to bring your point of view to this conversation so we can meet and have common ground."

When teachers are willing to engage

in research around difficult, potentially divisive topics, and they have the skills to do so with grace, humility, and confidence, they can make progress. When they are able to base their decisions on data, consider contributing factors, develop a plan of action to implement specific strategies, and measure progress, change can happen.

Teachers are realizing, through their own collaborative research, what works and doesn't work with their students. As they share their lessons with others, students and teachers learn together.

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Should groups set their own norms? *Maybe not*



BY JOYCE LIN AND AYANNA PERRY

When a new community forms, whether it's an elementary school class or a teacher inquiry group, co-constructing norms or community expectations is often one of the members' first tasks. The common rationale for this approach is that it builds community and creates buy-in (Allen & Blythe, 2015; Lakey, 2010).

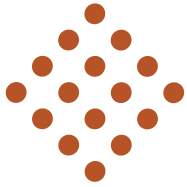
Although we don't disagree with the value of those benefits, our work in cultivating learning communities of beginning high school math and science teachers has shown us that

the co-construction approach can also be challenging and problematic because it typically generates norms consistent with dominant perspectives and cultures. We advocate that norms should be given to (rather than created by) a newly formed community to elevate the different needs, goals, and perspectives of all team members, including those who feel marginalized.

This is the approach we take in the Knowles Teacher Initiative, where we work with beginning high school math and science teachers to examine their teaching practices. Our teaching fellows, who participate in a

five-year program of mentoring and coaching plus financial support and membership in our national network, come to us with a range of educational backgrounds and varied beliefs, values, and expectations about teaching and learning.

With such diverse perspectives, we believe it is important to provide a set of consistent norms at the beginning of their fellowship experience and then help the fellows understand what these norms mean and look like in action, and how they build, support, and protect an inclusive learning community for the whole cohort. In



The process through which a group establishes its norms has a large impact on the content of the norms. It also determines who the norms protect and serve, and who they don't. Unexamined assumptions about the group's work and its membership operate under the surface and can skew the norms toward the needs and interests of some members more than others.

this article, we explain our rationale behind our approach and present the norms we've given our fellows.

WHY COLLABORATIVE NORMS CAN BE PROBLEMATIC

Norms are a set of assumptions or guidelines that define what constitutes appropriate or inappropriate behavior and that explain what actions are helpful or detrimental (National School Reform Faculty, 2014; Allen & Blythe, 2015). Norms can help create consistency, foster trust, and lead to openness and collaboration (Breidenstein et al., 2012).

The process through which a group establishes its norms has a large impact on the content of the norms. It also determines — often subconsciously — who the norms protect and serve, and who they don't. Unexamined assumptions about the group's work and its membership operate under the surface and can skew the norms toward the needs and interests of some members more than others.

There are two major assumptions implied when a group collaboratively sets norms before its members have done significant work together. The first assumption is that the definition of appropriate or inappropriate ways of working together accurately reflects the backgrounds and learning needs of all members. But, in truth, how someone acts and what is considered appropriate behavior for a particular setting is determined by social norms and rules that often serve to maintain the comfort

of those who have membership in dominant groups.

A group that hasn't spent time interrogating these underlying social and cultural norms together and getting to know who is in their group (i.e. their identities and experiences) will usually assume community norms that are reflective of dominant culture. Those norms will therefore inherently, if unintentionally, reflect racist, classist, sexist, and ableist ways of existing.

For example, *be respectful* is a common norm that may be well-intentioned. But what does it mean to be respectful, and who gets to decide what is respectful? Without careful interrogation, this norm likely includes "be polite," "don't show emotion," and "avoid conflict," all assumptions of dominant culture's expectations around communication. Therefore, setting norms without an explicit understanding of who its members are (and the goals of the group) will invariably neglect the preferred modes of expression of those who are most disenfranchised.

The second assumption, closely related to the first, is that the norms the group creates will equally protect and support each member. But this is unlikely to be the case if members have different beliefs, values, and ways of interacting with each other. If group members don't know each other, it will be particularly risky for those who have a different perspective from the dominant one and those who don't feel supported to speak up and advocate for themselves.

The most vulnerable members will end up feeling the least protected and their voices will be the least represented in group discussions going forward. This process happens quietly, so the common perception that a lack of dissent when establishing norms means all members feel represented and protected might be far from the truth for some members.

These assumptions are reinforced and perpetuated by the unrealistic timelines groups are often given for setting norms. For example, in the Protocol for Setting Norms (McDonald et al., 2013, p. 22), which asks participants to brainstorm norms and then negotiate the final set as a group, the authors indicate that norm-setting can take "10 minutes or much longer" — a guideline that is vague, at best, and massively underestimated, at worst. A different protocol, Setting Agreements Activity, which asks groups to select and negotiate from a list of 25 norms, allots only 40 minutes for a group of 16 people.

In both protocols, the deceptively simple directions for norm setting coupled with the unrealistic suggestions for how long the process will take imply that norms are quick and easy to form and that members will all have similar understandings. In our experience, this is seldom the case, especially when groups are diverse and members are new to each other. In fact, accepting the assumptions and following these protocol guidelines can potentially harm the group by preventing them

from building a cohesive community for the long term.

OUR EXPERIENCE WITH NORMS AT KNOWLES

In the last four years, as part of our commitment to equity, Knowles Teacher Initiative has shifted away from asking fellows to create their own norms to using preset norms. To improve math and science education for *all* students, much of our work together requires fellows to raise their critical consciousness by exploring how their identity, power, and privilege intersect with larger societal structures and how oppression is enacted in classrooms.

These conversations are emotional and vulnerable, and they must all be guided by norms that create a safe and respectful space for all. Even conversations that seem less risky and difficult (such as what it means for students to engage in Common Core math practices) benefit from these shared norms, as fellows quickly understand that all of our perspectives, even the “objective” ones, are shaped by our identities and the invisible social standards and expectations that uphold the dominant culture.

We do not ask our fellows to construct their own norms because participants begin their fellowship experience with a wide range of awareness, understanding, and language about race, identity, power, and related issues. Many do not know how to engage in these conversations with others in productive ways.

Without this understanding, it is impossible for them to agree on behaviors that lead to productive conversations on these difficult topics. In fact, we have found that, oftentimes, norms that are created by groups without a critical awareness of the ideas that will be discussed and of who is in their group can further marginalize and silence those who are already typically silenced and marginalized in our society.

Instead, we developed norms that could be established with intentionality around race and equity and that can be

more permanent, exist for our fellows outside of specific types of activities, be culture building and setting, project a picture of our/their best selves (as imagined by the facilitators), and allow for inclusive participation in the community.

The norms that we developed are:

1. Impact is greater than intent, so own your impact and examine, investigate, and interrogate your intent.
2. Ask for what you need and tell what you can give.
3. Ask for what others need and what others can give.

Our first community norm about focusing on impact pushes against the commonly adopted norm “assume positive intentions.” Assuming positive intent allows those who have offended to avoid responsibility for inflicting hurt while doing little to absolve the hurt or confusion of the offended (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2014). Further, this norm assumes that the people involved have already built a relationship with enough trust and positive interactions to make it easy for the offended to assume that the intention of the speaker was honest and good.

In contrast, “own your impact” positions the offender as the person with the burden of learning in moments where ignorance has led to offense. The speaker must learn from the exchange that, regardless of the intent, the words he or she spoke or the action/inaction he or she took were hurtful and then examine his or her own identity and culture to find the source of the statement.

Our norm asks speakers to think deeply about the basis of their beliefs and thoughts and recognize that our culture’s social constructs color our language and interactions. Furthermore, it asks speakers to scrutinize their intentions to determine whether they were actually good.

Our second and third norms, “Ask for what you need and tell what you can give” and “Ask what others need and what others can give,” each push

against our societal tendency to be fiercely independent. Instead, these two norms promote a more compassionate and humanistic approach toward connecting with each other, which can create greater community and depth in relationships.

The second norm asks fellows to consider their needs as a part of a group that has the same goals — to improve their teaching practice and support their students — and simultaneously think about what they can contribute to that community. The third norm invites our teachers to ask about the needs and contributions of others as another way to build community.

While it takes time to learn enough about a person to understand or contemplate their needs, asking about the contributions of others requires listening intently to others with a desire to learn from their perspectives and reconsider or augment your worldview, taking into consideration what they have shared. As fellows become more aware of what they and others need and learn to express these needs and requests clearly, we hope that their compassion, empathy, and respect for each other grows.

REACTIONS TO THE NORMS

So far, we have used these norms with three cohorts of fellows. (We’ll call them cohort A, B, and C.) We’ve experienced two different reactions to these norms. Fellows in cohort A and in cohort C have reacted positively. In a recent survey, when fellows from cohort C were asked how the norms helped their group, the most common responses focused on the following:

- **Norms made space for others.**

For example: “I think that we were all able to give each other space and ask for what we needed because we established these norms. A lot of us are ‘shy helpers’ and don’t like asking for what we need, but the ground rules that this is something we must do allowed us to feel less guilty about stepping away or being stricter

about time so that we all had a chance to speak.”

- **Norms allowed fellows to be more vulnerable with each other.** For example: “The norms helped encourage us to be more vulnerable and share our understandings and experiences with each other.”
- **This, in turn, allowed for more open and honest conversations.** For example: “I think having the norms in place has helped us have more honest conversations, which leads to an increase of trust among group members, which leads to richer discussions.”

In a different survey, the vast majority of cohort A fellows agreed that the norms hold them accountable to building an inclusive cohort community individually (93%) and collectively (90%).

In contrast, cohort B members have struggled with the idea of being given a set of norms rather than developing their own. In a recent survey, only a small portion of fellows agreed that the norms hold them accountable to building an inclusive cohort community individually (15%) and collectively (8%).

And surprisingly, only 23% reported understanding how following the norms contributes to the development of an inclusive cohort community. Anecdotally, we have received requests from multiple fellows in cohort B asking why they couldn’t develop their own cohort norms instead.

We have a few hypotheses about what led to these differences. First, because of the pandemic, cohort B has mostly had to build community and work together through a virtual platform. Because patterns of interaction are so different and points of human connection are much fewer in virtual spaces than in-person ones, it is likely that the virtual platform hindered fellows from using the norms to develop a rich community. Looking back, we believe we should

have adapted the norms for virtual collaboration.

Second, when these norms were introduced to cohorts A and C, they were contextualized in identity work. With cohort A, fellows shared aspects of their identity through the different names they have been given or called across their lifetime before the norms were introduced. With cohort C, fellows reflected on differences between how they identified themselves and how others perceived them before discussing how the norms interact with these identities.

Cohort B, in contrast, did not do any identity work before being introduced to the norms. They were asked to share reflections of what the norms meant before being given a norm to specifically model to the cohort. Had we prefaced the introduction of the norms in identity work, we might have been better able to build understanding and buy-in, or at least to address the lack of buy-in. This slight change in design is an interesting, if not completely intentional, way to consider variations in how we introduce the norms.

FURTHER REFLECTION

Cohort B’s data is pushing us to continue reflecting on our approach to providing norms and examining our own assumptions. In the past, when we have asked cohorts to create their own norms, we’ve seen traumatizing impacts on our most vulnerable fellows — a situation we want to avoid at all costs moving forward.

But is there a way to better prepare and support fellows to create their own norms? Should we invite another cohort to try, and, if so, when is the right time? What knowledge does the group need to have (for example, about each other, their strengths and limitations as a group, and the marginalizing experiences colleagues in their group have experienced)? What kind of scaffolds and supports might we need to offer to the process?

These are difficult questions, and we don’t have firm answers. As we continue

to grapple with them, the Knowles staff is using the preset norms ourselves so that we can fully understand how they support collaboration and whether they are inclusive of everyone, not just the majority.

If we desire to build a community where members deeply listen to each other, even though their perspectives are in conflict, we have to ensure that the norms that buttress our community interrupt and question the most privileged perspectives while simultaneously protecting the most vulnerable and marginalized.

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- Joyce Lin (joyce.lin@knowlesteachers.org) is senior program officer for teacher development and Ayanna Perry (ayanna.perry@knowlesteachers.org) is associate director of teaching fellows programs at Knowles Teacher Initiative. ■**

In times of division, strategic communication matters



BY ASHLEY BURNS AND MANNY RIVERA

As advocacy communications professionals who work with educators, one truth is constant in our current conversations with superintendents, principals, teachers, parents, and youth advocates: Education conversations today are riddled with more land mines than ever before.

Only 18 months ago, our most common communications challenge was helping education leaders and policymakers understand the concept and value of systemic change. Today, simply mentioning race or inequity can become kindling in a flammable context. It may ignite a parent group, unravel a school board meeting, or spark a community protest.

Words have power. Fortunately,

this means that intentional messaging — coupled with curiosity and a willingness to learn — has the power to change hearts and minds for the benefit of students. So what messages are effective in advocating for inclusive, equitable learning environments without sowing deeper divisions in our communities or feeding the conflict-hungry news cycle?

In our work at RALLY, an issue-focused communications firm, we attend focus groups, analyze quantitative messaging research, and engage with different audiences online to help us look across the U.S. and across communication channels to identify patterns and strategies that work.

We find that four communications principles consistently help education

and equity advocates navigate challenging waters, whether you are trying to de-escalate a situation with a concerned parent or convince your colleagues to hold fast to their equity commitments. These principles transcend regional and political differences as well as urban, rural, and suburban contexts:

- Ask thoughtful questions.
- Lead with your values.
- Seek common ground.
- Consider the context and choose the right messenger.

ASK THOUGHTFUL QUESTIONS TO OPEN THE DOOR FOR ASPIRATION.

As the racial reckoning of 2020 and the subsequent backlash continue to reverberate in and outside of schools,



discourse around race, identity, and equity is front and center. Although this can create an opportunity for positive change, coupled with the evolving pandemic challenges, tough conversations become increasingly emotional and, in some cases, irrational.

This isn't helpful for anyone. Think about your dinner table as a metaphor: In an emotionally charged conversation, being defensive, argumentative, or preachy does not typically yield the most productive conversation. The same is true in schools.

Assuming you are in a conversation with someone who has an earnest concern, you can head off or decrease that defensiveness by addressing their concern with a clarifying question. Asking questions can lower the temperature, help preserve your energy, and also help guide the conversation so you can better understand the root of

their concern. A question you might consider is, "I can tell you're concerned, so what is it that you truly want for your child?" More often than not, their answer will open the door for you to share how you want the same thing for students and how the steps you are taking will help achieve that for all children.

If a parent lobbies an accusation about something happening in the school, seek clarity by asking, "Where are you seeing that [accusation] happening in our school? Your child's classroom?" Often, people are parroting what they heard on TV or read in a Facebook group even though it's not actually happening (or at least not in their child's school).

This question is also an opening for you to share what you are aspiring to create for all young people: a classroom environment where everyone feels

welcome, inspired, and able to learn life skills like critical thinking and empathy.

LEAD WITH VALUES SO YOU DON'T GET TRAPPED IN A FUTILE DEBATE.

While it might be tempting to get into debates about what Critical Race Theory is or isn't — and to offer reassurance about what is and isn't taught in your school — it is much more important to communicate the values of inclusive, equitable education. Rather than getting sucked into a debate where you may end up beyond your depth or giving further airtime to unhelpful attacks, focus on what you know. Share why you believe an inclusive, culturally affirming, honest education is so valuable. For example, you might share messages like the following.

Every student should feel

welcome in the classroom. Children need a high-trust, low-stress environment to learn. And they deserve it. Students deserve to feel safe asking questions, contributing to discussions, and trying new skills. Seeing themselves and their experiences reflected in what they're learning and reading bolsters engagement and confidence that the classroom is an open, supportive space.

Many scholars have researched neuroscience and other developmental studies that underpin the critical value of belonging and other psychological needs for young people to thrive in school (e.g., Gonzales et al., 2021; Hammond, 2014).

Every student should be prepared for success beyond high school. In a 2021 poll about race-related issues in K-12 education conducted by Echelon Insights, 82% of respondents indicated they want schools to focus more on “preparing students for success beyond high school.”

Today's students will enter an increasingly diverse and globally interconnected workforce, and, for them to succeed, it's incumbent on schools to prepare them to be culturally literate, empathic leaders. Employers value communication, collaboration, critical thinking, and integrity — skills that young people will only develop in open and inclusive learning environments (Yoder et al., 2020).

Every school should prepare students to help create a better future. Honest engagement with history helps students think critically about the world they live in so they can build a better future for us all. The poll mentioned above found that 95% of respondents were interested in seeing schools emphasize empathy and curiosity as much as or more than they currently do.

Curious and empathic thinkers can recognize inequality or prejudice, address it, and ultimately help prevent it. It's nearly impossible to encourage and sharpen this kind of thinking when accurate but uncomfortable topics are censored and banned from K-12

curriculum. Grappling with America's history is one important way students learn to navigate difficult conversations and uncomfortable experiences like those they will inevitably face once they leave the classroom.

SEEK COMMON GROUND — THERE IS MORE OF IT THAN YOU THINK.

Despite the loud volume of a coordinated few, there actually remains a large vast middle. The vast middle are the persuadable folks between those who advocate for equity intentionally and often publicly and those who oppose it. What we often find in our work is that the persuadable vast middle rarely identifies with educational jargon, but they often agree with the concept of equity when it's framed in a resonant way.

It turns out that when the jargon and hot-button language are removed, and people understand what is actually being taught in classrooms, there tends to be strong consensus: Honest conversations in the classroom are essential to children's development.

According to the Echelon Insights (2021) survey, a majority of Americans across party lines agree that schools should celebrate the diversity among students and teach the full history of our country — including the things of which we aren't proud. Most people are proud to be Americans and value instilling in our children a love for their country.

At the same time, many Americans acknowledge that racism still exists today and that, in many ways, race relations are worsening. How do you resolve that tension? One way is to talk about America as a work in progress. We have tested messaging acknowledging how America's complicated past informs the future — by both celebrating the good and confronting the bad, we can best equip the next generation to make our country better — and found that very few people disagree with that framing.

Perhaps it is because progress

is a part of the American identity. Former President Barack Obama often described progressive change as a testament to America, not a repudiation of it. We are great because we have the capacity to change and right wrongs, and we are made greater when we do.

CONSIDER THE CONTEXT AND REMEMBER THAT THE MESSENGER MATTERS AS MUCH AS THE MESSAGE.

Although the messages we recommended above tend to resonate with many people, there is no magic phrase to use in every situation or with every audience. When you're engaging on these topics, ask yourself: What does my audience care most about? What are their fears or concerns? Do they know a lot about what is happening in schools or do they only think they know based on the most recent headlines?

It's also important to ask yourself if you are the right person to deliver the message. Consider who your audience will most relate to and trust. Is it a parent, a mental health professional, a student, a teacher, a school counselor? You can ask these people to join the conversations, perhaps to elevate a personal experience to underpin your message.

The voices of parents and students — particularly students and parents of color who want to share their stories — are especially powerful. Of course, be sure to support and encourage students who are actively engaging in these conversations so that they do not feel vulnerable or become targets of verbal attacks.

BRAVE CONVERSATIONS IN ACTION

While headlines and social media spotlight division, remember that there is much common ground to be found. When it comes to supporting equity, many citizens haven't yet made up their minds. Engaging in brave conversations, approaching them with curiosity, and elevating shared values will help turn the tide and help people

see themselves and their communities in the promise of equity.

Brave conversations have already helped inform and persuade the undecided and drive positive steps toward change. For example, a multiracial student group at Central York High School in Pennsylvania organized and reversed a book ban by elevating their truth and values. A suburban parent coalition studied the anti-Critical Race Theory rhetoric across the region so that when it surfaced in their Newtown, Ohio, school board meetings, they were ready to give speeches in support of equity that were so compelling the opposition stopped showing up. School leaders around the country are increasingly naming their desire to focus more on solving inequities and less on politics.

Now is the time to step into such brave conversations — or to start them, when necessary. If you haven't yet, proactively make a public statement,

starting with your values and centering your aspirations for young people. Keep an open and evolving conversation going with your leadership, staff, and service providers so you can learn from one another and work from an informed, unified foundation. Find allies and lift each other up.

When you feel overwhelmed or frustrated, remember the stakes for students. And remember that the concept of equity resonates with most people when they hear it in a relatable and jargon-free way from a trusted source. You can be that source, and this moment needs your voice.

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Ashley Burns (aburns@wearerally.com) and Manny Rivera (mrivera@wearerally.com) are principals at RALLY. ■

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Asking good questions is a leader's superpower

BY CHARLES MASON

It's pretty amazing that one of the most powerful tools you have as a leader is something you've been doing since you first started talking. By now, you're probably good at it, it doesn't cost a thing, and you can start using it more effectively by the time you finish reading this article: asking questions.

Asking questions is essential for building empathy, understanding, and trust — all of which are necessary for group success but are sorely lacking in today's divided political climate. In a time of immense stress among and unusual hostility toward educators, listening and learning are among leaders' most important responsibilities.

And asking good questions is a leader's superpower.

As I once heard education author Phillip Schlechty say, it's not the leader's role to have the answer to every question. It **is** the leader's role to be sure that all the right questions get asked and answered. I would add that it is also the leader's role to listen to a

Asking questions is essential for building empathy, understanding, and trust — all of which are necessary for group success but are sorely lacking in today’s divided political climate. In a time of immense stress among and unusual hostility toward educators, listening and learning are among leaders’ most important responsibilities.

variety of perspectives and consider a wide range of suggested answers.

That sounds easier than it is. Look around at contentious school board meetings, angry social media posts, and staff meetings driven by an administrator’s long to-do list. How often are we really trying to understand one another? How curious and interested are we in those whose opinions differ from our own? Now look at the results. We haven’t been very successful in bridging our divides.

Fortunately, you can greatly elevate your listening skills — and your overall effectiveness as a leader — by simply being more intentional about how and when you ask questions. Here are six ways to do that. They can be useful to leaders of all levels and at all times — not just when there’s a conflict or a global crisis.

1 Recognize that asking questions of others builds your own knowledge.

If you or I think we bring more individually to a given problem, plan, or decision than our team does collectively, one of two things is probably true: either we’re dangerously delusional or we have an historically weak team — and the former is much more likely to be true.

I very rarely know more about a given subject than the combined wisdom of all of the people around me. Learning from them is an efficient

way to broaden my knowledge of whatever the task is we’re working on because each of them has specific technical knowledge related to their primary responsibilities that I don’t have, and they also have a wealth of practical experience that can inform our decisions.

To tap team members’ vast trove of knowledge and experience, ask questions like:

- Who among us has had personal experience with an issue like this?
- Are you aware of another organization that has navigated this issue, and what can we learn from them?
- Who else can inform our decision?
- Are there differences in how various demographic, religious, and political groups in our organization/community will see this issue?
- Is there history in the community/organization that will be an important factor in the context in which we’re working?

2 Create an open, safe space for people to respond honestly and insightfully to your questions.

Looking for a surefire way to avoid hearing alternative perspectives to your own? Start a team discussion with a

lengthy, passionate exposition of your current thinking and your probable position, and then ask your team members what they think. You might get some head nods, but you probably won’t hear any new ideas.

As leaders, when we start with our own conclusions, we’re basically putting team members in a position to either agree or disagree. Some may feel secure enough to disagree, but others will not. Instead of sharing what they really think, people will probably hold their ideas and discuss them in conversations after the meeting — and you won’t be invited to them.

How much easier and more productive it is to lead by simply asking the questions that will draw out the best, most relevant thinking of your team members. Those questions include:

- What values should drive our decision?
- What is at stake as a result of this decision?
- What are the potential courses of action, and what are the pros and cons of each one?
- What stakeholder groups will be affected by this decision, and what are likely to be their biggest concerns?

It’s important to note that how we react to team members’ responses is as important as how we ask the questions. It’s critical that we value all responses as

the team works through an issue. This can be especially difficult when you and some (or all) of your colleagues start out with very different opinions. But it's worth the effort.

You'll not only be getting your team's best thinking and advice, you'll also be establishing your expectations of how they'll lead their own teams. To that end, make sure to set clear norms for discussions and encourage your team members to use them with those they lead.

3 Involve others in the process of formulating and asking questions.

As leaders, we may have a perfectly logical path that we've followed to get to a decision. But if we communicate our final answer without taking others through our thought process, our team members may end up feeling uncommitted or even unsupportive of the decision.

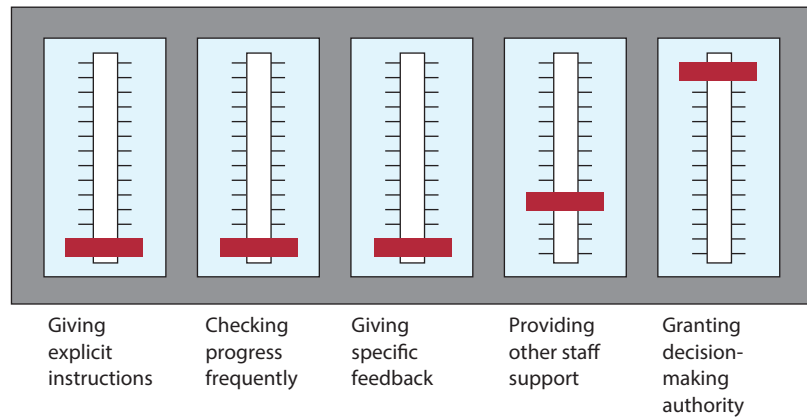
Telling them how we got there is better than just announcing that we've got the answer, but taking them along on the journey is even better.

One of the best ways to include them on that journey is by engaging them in formulating the questions that need to be asked of the team and inviting them to help find the answers. When you include your team in this process, they'll be in a position to say, "We asked important questions, looked at a lot of evidence, and listened to diverse viewpoints, and this decision seems to be the best one going forward." That can make a big difference when those team members in turn share the decision with the people they lead.

An added benefit of this collaborative process is that you'll be able to anticipate the questions, fears, and conflicting values that the larger community will have as they give input on the decision or react to the decision. Surprises are not a leader's friend, and they can be minimized by engaging a diverse group to work with you through the analysis and decision-making processes.

LEADERSHIP STYLE FOR EXPERIENCED TEAM MEMBER

Desired outcome: Successful execution of a delegated task



4 Communicate that you value your team members as individuals by asking them questions and truly listening.

How does it make you feel when someone asks for your opinion or input? Smart? Informed? Respected as a good thinker? I feel all of that. I believe we assess our worth in the eyes of others with the messages they send about how they see us. And one of the strongest ways we can tell people how we see them is to ask questions and listen to them in ways that tell them we value what they have to say.

If, over time, you ask and truly listen, then those you are leading will start any interaction with you from a basic belief that you value them as a person — even when they disagree with you. That's a powerful force for eliciting their thinking and ideas and for continuing collaboration.

It's important to note that an effective and ethical leader doesn't just ask questions to make people feel valued. That's manipulation. But if you sincerely want to know what they think and you make it clear that you have heard them and thought about their responses, then they rightly conclude that you value them.

5 Ask questions at the front end of a process so you have the answers when you need them.

With most decisions we make as

leaders, there's a clock ticking in the background. That's never been truer than today, with virus variants evolving by the day, political firestorms erupting overnight, and urgent social issues pressing on our collective consciousness. It's helpful to know how much time is on that ticking clock because, as a decision countdown nears zero, there's less and less time to look into relevant data, research, and other considerations — and if you haven't gathered the relevant information, you're more likely to make a poor decision that could have been easily avoided.

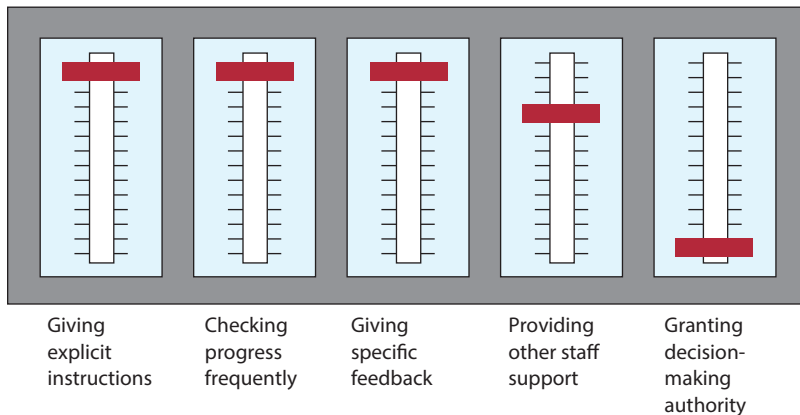
Try to anticipate the most relevant information you're likely to need as you work through an issue or process. By doing so, you'll have that information ready when it's needed and avoid scrambling to get it when time is running out. Along the way, additional questions may come up that you didn't foresee, but they are likely to be few and shouldn't stall the decision-making process.

Too often, leaders try to collect information as the need arises rather than foreseeing what will be needed and doing that research at the beginning of the process. Consider what happens when you're painting a room: If you don't prepare the surfaces, you'll pay for it later when your paint job comes out patchy and uneven.

Another benefit of this proactive approach to identifying essential

LEADERSHIP STYLE FOR NEW TEAM MEMBER

Desired outcome: Successful execution of a delegated task



research questions is that often the questions can be ordered in a way that suggests a logical path for the decision-making process. In other words, what's the first thing we need to know? Then what's next? And so on. This can help you and your team develop an orderly plan for how to proceed.

6 Use questions to enable others to develop themselves as leaders.

One way to measure a leader's legacy is to take stock of how much they have enabled others to develop themselves as leaders. Note that I didn't say "how they develop others as leaders." The distinction is important.

Think of a physical fitness trainer you may have worked with. Was that trainer able to "develop" your physical condition with no effort of your own? Of course not. You were successful to the degree that you learned and applied what the trainer made available to you. I'm with Kouzes and Posner (2006), who, in their book *The Leadership Challenge*, observed that "ultimately leadership development is self-development."

Skillful use of questions is one of the most powerful ways leaders can create an environment and opportunities for others to learn and develop themselves — and, at the same time, grow a pool of leadership that will have impact long after you're around to see its results.

As leader, you might ask questions such as these that challenge others to reflect on their leadership and find their own answers to challenges they face:

- What knowledge and skills do you lack or need to refine to be successful in the challenge you're facing?
- What resources or individuals can you tap into that will be helpful?
- Whom do you need to recruit as team members and perhaps allies?
- Where do you anticipate support for change?
- Where do you anticipate resistance?
- Who are the key individuals and groups that you'll need to communicate with early and often?

I see the role of a leader in enabling others to develop themselves as a matter of calibration. My mental image of this calibration is a sound mixing board with knobs or slides for different frequencies or, in this case, leadership behaviors. Just as the sound board operator can adjust various factors to get the right mix for the music, so can you calibrate your work with individuals to lead them in the way that is uniquely tailored for them.

In planning that calibration, you can consider where a person is in terms of his skills, experience, self-confidence,

and the risk involved if the task is not accomplished at a high level. Then you as the leader can decide what that means for your interactions with the team member — for example, whether you'll need to provide more or less specific direction and feedback, engage in more or fewer frequent progress checks, and delegate more or less decision-making authority. This kind of calibration is especially valuable now, as staffing patterns and needs change rapidly and mounting student needs call for new supports and resources.

As an example of calibration, let's say someone is leaving your team for a promotion after managing a complicated, important process for several years. The person to whom you'll now be delegating this process has very little relevant experience, only a subset of the necessary skills, and shaky confidence in his own ability to accomplish this important task that must be executed extremely well.

Clearly, you will not be having the same conversations with this new person that you did in the most recent years with the former team member. The sound boards of your leadership style will look different for these two people. (See figures above and on p. 40.)

One of the key elements of this metaphor is that there are multiple factors to calibrate. Often, leaders think they have only two choices in their delegation style: either micromanage every aspect of the person's work or leave the person alone.

Calibration is much more nuanced. And it starts with asking questions of yourself and the person you'll be leading about the nature of the task, his or her current level of preparedness, and how the two of you will communicate along the way.

BUILDING GOOD QUESTION-ASKING HABITS

Asking purposeful, productive questions can become a habit. Like building any habit, it takes consistent

Continued on p. 46

Building relationships, one practice at a time



BY KENDALL ZOLLER AND ANTONIA ISSA LAHERA

As leadership coaches, our work in schools has taken us to many places over many years. We have worked with some of the most marginalized groups of students and some of the most privileged. As we have pursued a path of equity for all students, teachers, families, and communities, we have developed a framework to develop, nurture, and grow collaborative relationships. We call it HeartSpace (Lahera & Zoller, 2021).

There is ample evidence that the quality of relationships has a major

impact on how much learning will occur in any school setting. But, in our experience, most schools do not spend enough time on cultivating relationships in a way that is deep, meaningful, or sustained. Our approach addresses that gap by focusing on a deepening of identities and ways we relate with each other.

We believe that a focus on the knowledge and skills around teaching and learning, although vital, is not sufficient. We need new systems that embed the continuous building and developing of relationships to help educators address the many adaptive

challenges we're facing today.

This focus on relationships can lead to more energy, greater synergy, and a space for creativity and innovation. We also find that the shift in the dynamics of relationships creates more time for teaching and learning and greater productivity because less time is wasted on unproductive or even toxic relationships.

THE FOUNDATIONS

HeartSpace is a structured set of practices designed to maximize interaction and community to bring meaning, connection, growth, and

fulfillment as groups work together. We created these practices using research on equity, relationships, community building, group development, and participatory action (including Freire, 2000; Duncan-Andrade & Morell, 2008; Heifetz & Linsky, 2009; Banks, 2006, 2015; Block, 2018; Bolman & Deal, 2017). As a result, the practices honor social justice, equity, and individual culture while fostering agency and leadership, and providing a space for people to grow together.

In these relationship-building practices, everyone has a voice. Identities are honored, and there is no power structure. The space is a fair and just one that elevates all perspectives, all cultures, and all identities and is grounded in four ideas:

- People need ways to know themselves.
- People need opportunities to get to know others.
- People need to know how to collaborate.
- People need to be focused on things that are bigger than themselves.

A set of foundational principles supports these ideas, gives the practices focus, and serves as a series of checkpoints or diagnostic tools. These principles are necessary for any group to be successful with the practices. (See box at right.)

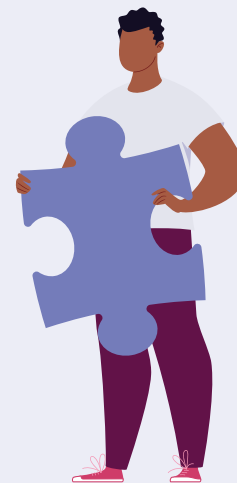
EXAMPLE PRACTICES

The following examples from our work in schools illustrate how leaders and staff can use the practices. In each case, we worked with leaders to identify HeartSpace practices that could help them tackle pressing issues in ways that deepened relationships and established a stronger foundation for moving forward.

4 DIRECTIONS

At a school we'll call Pace Elementary (a pseudonym), the opening of the 2021-22 school year was full of transitions. Not only were staff and students moving back to in-person learning after more than a year of remote learning caused by the pandemic, but the community was navigating a change in leadership and a restructuring of many staff roles.

A former leader moved from a co-principal role to a special education role, the school had a new principal and assistant principal, and a longtime leader had left the site. All of this change needed to be acknowledged and honored so that the community could forge a way forward. The new principal recognized the need to create an intentional space and time for this work, knowing that, if the space was not created, the staff would continue to be in disarray and student learning would be negatively impacted.



FOUNDATIONAL PRINCIPLES OF HEARTSPACE PRACTICES

1. **Service:** Give to others, especially those in need.
2. **Relational living:** Be mindful of ourselves and others to build healthy, sustainable connections, communities, workplaces, and cultures.
3. **Responsibility:** Take ownership of our actions and those of our communities and cultures.
4. **Hope:** Expect and work toward positive outcomes.
5. **Persistence:** Learn from setbacks; reflect and reiterate.
6. **Gratefulness:** Feel and show kindness and thankfulness.
7. **Curiosity:** Approach the world with wonder and discover its delights.
8. **Vulnerability:** Share authentically and connect meaningfully.
9. **Humility:** Be open to learning from anyone.
10. **Creativity:** Express yourself!
11. **Joy:** Have fun!

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Understanding mentor roles, responsibilities, and expectations



Applying a three-phase mentoring cycle



Establishing and maintaining trust with beginning teachers



Conducting classroom observations



Mentoring for classroom management



Analyzing observation data

Under the principal's guidance, the leadership team started with a practice called 4 Directions. This practice helps groups pause and assess the moment when changes happen. It asks participants to identify a shift they are trying to make in their work and explore its impact with colleagues.

The practice draws on the symbolic importance of the four cardinal directions (east, west, north, and south) in many Indigenous cultures, creating four spaces in the room that represent four approaches to dealing with change: illumination, the future, lessons learned, and our survival. Participants choose one of these approaches and discuss it with other participants who also gravitated to that part of the room, reflecting together on where they are now, where they need to go, and how they will get there.

Pace leaders rehearsed this process as a team and posted the direction signs at the four corners of a large meeting room. To kick things off, the principal asked a warm-up question: When you think about taking the perfect vacation, what direction is the place you want to go? As the teachers, with surprised looks, turned and talked with each other, their nervous tension shifted to listening, laughter, rapport, and interest. The principal then transitioned the group to the 4 Directions activity, explaining that "today, you will have an opportunity to consider where you are and how you want to shift to where you want to go."

After participants selected a corner and shared their thinking with a small group, the principal honored each corner by acknowledging the chosen shifts, the commitment to find ways to make those shifts, and the power of choice in doing so.

This HeartSpace practice took only 20 minutes, but the impact lasted well beyond any expectation of the leadership team. In staff interviews and surveys after one session, every person reported a renewed sense of connection with others. They were energized and more hopeful than before the meeting.

This HeartSpace practice took only 20 minutes, but the impact lasted well beyond any expectation of the leadership team. In staff interviews and surveys after one session, every person reported a renewed sense of connection with others. They were energized and more hopeful than before the meeting.

We spoke to staff members about a week after this session and asked how they were doing. There was a continued sense of connection and empathy. One teacher said that there was a renewed sense of the power of the collective — her feeling that together they had the energy, spirit, and hope to make a shift that matters.

DUCT TAPE

At another school, which we'll call Ellison, the school culture had gone from tense to toxic. Staff bickered constantly and blamed families, students, and each other for their increasing challenges and stresses. Misunderstandings and hostilities mushroomed.

In our leadership coaching sessions, the principal said she knew her staff needed a space where empathy and understanding could flourish. One of her goals was to provide a place for people to express what they were feeling, how they had been impacted by the recent tension, and how they could move beyond it. She chose to try a practice we call Duct Tape.

This practice, which is designed to prevent and fix misunderstandings, is based on the fact that duct tape can hold almost anything together. In small groups, participants discuss ways they have addressed misunderstandings outside of work and identify how they can apply some of the most constructive

strategies to their current context.

Ellison's principal began by asking her staff to identify their current emotions. She then asked table groups to discuss this question: How much time and energy do misunderstandings take up, and what gets left behind? This was followed by a conversation on how people fix misunderstandings in life.

Each table group generated a list of ideas and chose one to write on a piece of duct tape. Each group posted its duct tape on a chart, and groups considered and discussed all of the ideas posted. The next step was to see what solutions on the list might be helpful for the current misunderstandings they were navigating together.

As soon as the collective began to focus on actions they could take, the mood and energy in the room shifted. There was positive talk, solutions were identified, and people were connected. Everyone had a chance to share both grievances and solutions. Hearing other ideas from staff members opened the door for even more expansive thinking.

The principal was both excited and relieved about the potential to move this group forward. She attributed much of the success to the power of giving space for all voices to be heard without judgment.

HOW TO USE THE PRACTICES

HeartSpace practices can be used separately or in combination. Each practice is structured the same way so that the leader or facilitator can read and easily follow the script. The practices (which can be found in Lahera & Zoller, 2021) include the following components:

- The intention: Sets a mindset for facilitating.
- The why: Establishes the foundation for the deeper purpose from the relationship and organizational perspectives.
- The principles: Provides a broader perspective in thinking about how to navigate the complexity of human relationships.

- Preparation and duration: Explains what participants need to do the practice and how long it might take.
- Community builder: Establishes the concept of community first in the work of schools.
- Ways of being: Identifies the mental preparation and mindsets that best support the practice.
- Impact statement: Sets the tone of the moment.
- Outline: Defines the framework of the experience.
- Action: Details the script of the practice to follow.
- Closure: Anchors the learning from the experience.

The HeartSpace practices are designed for full faculty gatherings, leadership teams, and departments. We recommend starting by embedding practices into meetings or times together. This will help people become accustomed to the structure and begin the shift in culture. Forming a new habit takes intention and regular use,

and the repeated use of these practices will embed a space and place for relationship-building in your culture.

When building a collective culture, rituals and ongoing practices are important for nurturing meaningful time together and growing a group's connection and efficacy. That investment in relationship-building is essential for schools to become places of equity and excellence where identity, voice, and agency flourish as we prepare the next generation of learners and leaders.

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Kendall Zoller (kvzoller@sierra-training.com) is a global consultant, president of Sierra Training Associates, and associate professor of educational leadership. Antonia Issa Lahera (aissalahera@gmail.com) is an emeritus professor and independent consultant. ■

Asking good questions is a leader's superpower

Continued from p. 41

effort over time. It's up to you how to start, but for most of us, success is incremental rather than sudden.

I recommend starting with one aspect of questioning, such as one of the six I've described here, and practice it, giving yourself some time to get better at it until it starts to feel somewhat natural. Continue to practice until you don't have to think about it. Then you'll be ready to focus on another aspect.

Learning to ask good questions and truly listen to the answers is an ongoing

process that challenges us to continually look inward to ourselves and outward to others. We are never finished with that growth, just as we are never finished developing relationships.

Over the years, I've often found that just when I think I've figured out what makes another person tick, an action or a response takes me by surprise and I'm reminded that I'm not a watchmaker. But I don't have to be a watchmaker to keep asking good questions and letting the other person tell me what they think, what they need, and how I can help them become

the best leader they can be for their colleagues and students.

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Charles Mason (cmason.557@gmail.com) is retired superintendent of Mountain Brook City Schools in Alabama and a former president of the board of trustees at NSDC (now Learning Forward). ■

REACH. INVESTIGATE. DISCOVER.

IDEAS

INVESTIGATION THROUGH INQUIRY

Authors Stephanie L. Dodman, Nancy Holincheck, and Rebecca K. Fox see an opportunity for change amid the current tumult in schools and society — and they see teacher-driven inquiry as a driver of that change. “Inquiry structures — which follow a series of steps such as question, seek literature, plan actions, monitor actions, draw conclusions, and identify new questions — offer space for valuing teacher questioning and opening a door to engaging in inquiry that can interrogate racist and classist policies and practices,” they write.

The authors outline an inquiry process that offers teachers a reflective space to acknowledge and examine culture and identify equity-oriented actions for change.

Their article begins on p. **58**.



Continuous improvement is a powerful engine for equity

BY KAREN ZERIBI, SHAY BLUEMER MIROITE, CORI DAVIS, THERESA TODD, ERIN MOORE, VIVIAN MIHALAKIS, AND TANYA JOHNSON

Inequities in education, health care, and other social services are often rooted in systemic challenges that organizations must work together to address. Working together requires accessible methods for organizations — including schools and school districts — to collaborate, develop shared goals, and coordinate efforts to drive systemic change.

Continuous improvement offers a tried-and-true framework

for organizational change and transformation. When paired with the power of networks to distribute leadership and spread change throughout and among organizations, continuous improvement becomes a powerful engine to drive systems improvement at scale.

Yet, if not done with a focus on advancing equity, improvement efforts risk reproducing or exacerbating inequities instead of eliminating them.

In response to this need, Shift, an organization committed to addressing society's most pressing inequities through continuous improvement, partnered with equity leaders, educational experts, and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to design an improvement course, Improvement Methods for Equity (IM4E).

IM4E is designed to help education organizations create more equitable outcomes in their education

systems while learning and practicing foundational continuous improvement skills. In this article, we share important lessons and public resources to design programs that center on equity while building capacity for ongoing learning and improvement.

IM4E COURSE DESIGN

The Shift team designed IM4E as a team-based course for school districts and education intermediary organizations that provide direct support to schools. Our goal was for participants to learn valuable continuous improvement skills that they can apply in their organizations and networks to further educational equity.

We also wanted teams to explore examples of how these skills and capacities can be implemented in networks and develop the diverse leaders needed for improvement to continue long after course completion.

In December 2019, we selected 14 organizations to participate in the course based on several criteria, including the strength of their equity imperative or goal, their direct connection to middle and high school classrooms, their team members' roles and proximity to the work, and their vision for developing and using continuous improvement in their organizations. (See the list of organizations in the box at right.)

Organizational equity imperatives focused on improving the quality of education, especially for Black, Latinx, and low-income students. Imperatives ranged from important topics such as equitable enrollment in postsecondary programs, access to advanced and STEM programs, and student belonging and experience in class.

Like most programs in 2020, we took the original in-person design for IM4E and developed a fully virtual experience due to the ongoing uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic. We leaned into Shift's conviction to design *with* people, not *for* people, and convened the selected organizations to weigh options for this virtual experience.

We agreed that skills would be segmented into short, monthly workshops to minimize virtual time over the course of four months from October 2020 to January 2021. One of our biggest virtual design decisions was implementing a flipped classroom approach with brief asynchronous teaching before the synchronous interactions. This allowed us to shorten and focus workshops on application of new skills and discussion.

Shift developed eight videos — now available to the public on Shift's website — to teach core skills before workshops. A “challenge by choice” structure allowed teams to opt in to the skills most aligned and relevant to their

PARTICIPATING ORGANIZATIONS IN IM4E

- Newark Trust
- National 4-H Council
- Mid-Atlantic Equity Consortium
- Student Leadership Network
- Philadelphia Academies
- Internationals Network for Public Schools
- Broward School District
- Replications
- Communities in Schools – Eastern Pennsylvania
- Philadelphia Education Fund
- Pasco School District
- Educate Tomorrow
- TNTP: Denver
- Teaching Residents @Teaching College

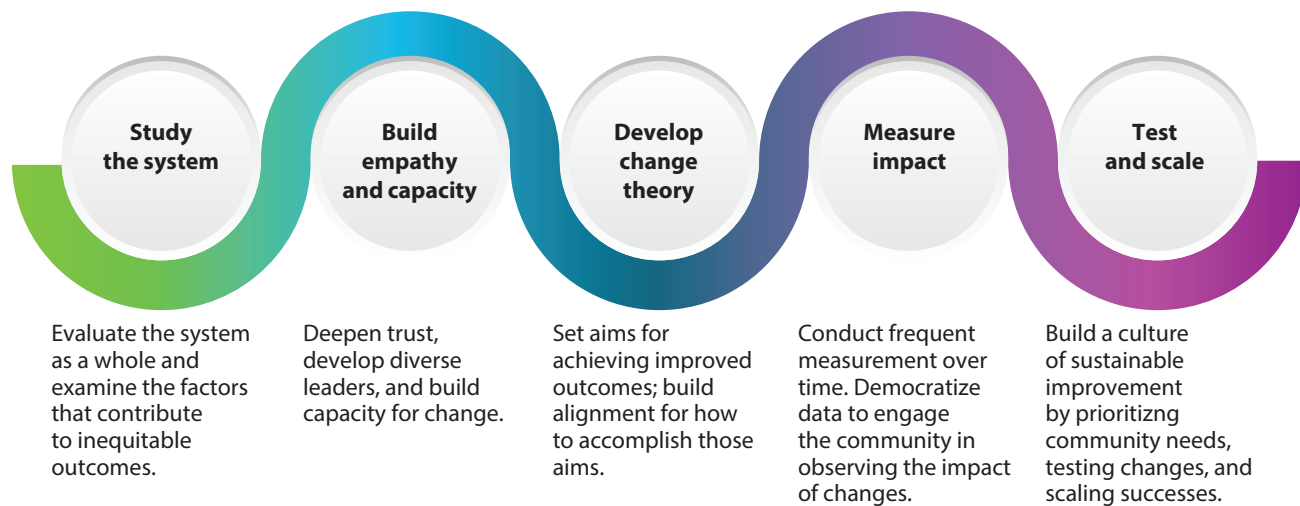
needs during the pandemic rather than being obligated to attend all workshops.

In addition to supporting application of continuous improvement skills, Shift coaches supported teams with optional one-to-one coaching outside of workshops to adapt to the new priorities born from remote and hybrid teaching structures. Shift created templates for each skill for teams to apply to their own projects with support from coaches.

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SHIFT APPROACH TO IMPROVEMENT:

How diverse teams with a shared purpose can accelerate learning and improve outcomes



SHIFT'S APPROACH TO IMPROVEMENT

We used Shift's approach to improvement (see figure above) to guide course content and help participants develop a balanced, introductory set of continuous improvement skills. This included a set of tools that can be used throughout the continuous improvement process (see table at right).

Shift believes that continuous improvement is nonlinear — meaning that organizations can start anywhere within the process to work toward change. This course reflects our commitment to finding the relevant entry points to build on organizational strengths while developing common language for improvement across teams. Building diverse approaches and deepening specific skills creates capacity for teams to draw on the right improvement skill at the right time.

To illustrate and practice the continuous improvement practices, we created a fictional case study — Shift Academy — that the participants discussed throughout the course. Since participating organizations had unique aims for improving educational equity, this provided a shared context and allowed for deep dialogues about how

IMPROVEMENT SKILLS AND RELATED TOOLS	
Improvement skills built in IM4E create capacity for teams to engage in the following processes and use the following tools. All of the tools can be found on Shift's website at www.shift-results.com/resources/tools	
Process	Tools
Study the system	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Explore disaggregated data to identify high-impact root causes of system problems with a root cause analysis. Analyze and redesign inequitable systems and processes using process maps.
Build capacity and empathy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Unearth complexity by viewing an issue through the lens of multiple perspectives with Shift's perspective prism.
Develop change theory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop shared goals by establishing scaffolded aims, linked to long-term equity imperatives. Co-design change theory with a key driver diagram to coordinate and communicate change efforts.
Measure impact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Design a portfolio of accessible measures for learning and improvement. Learn from and interpret continuous data on run charts.
Test and scale	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Run rapid cycles to test, adapt and implement changes with PDSA (plan, do, study, act) cycles.

to make systems-level changes without bringing in the unique complexity of each individual context.

The case centers on a well-documented and long-standing injustice in education: racial and gender inequities in discipline practices that

lead to Black, female students receiving disciplinary referrals at disproportionate rates compared to other student groups (BELE Network, 2020; Loubriel, 2016; Green, 2020).

Throughout the course, participants follow Shift Academy's journey and

apply each continuous improvement skill in their efforts to dismantle complex factors leading to inequitable practice and reduce the number of discipline referrals for Black female students.

RESULTS

One key principle of continuous improvement is that measurement is used for learning, not judgment. Accordingly, the Shift team tracked metrics from various data sources that were integrated into the IM4E course structure and that we will apply to future iterations of the course.

The most extensive data came from the pre- and post-course participant self-assessment of participants' continuous improvement knowledge and their organizations' continuous improvement infrastructure and capability.

We gave each organization a summary report that included the aggregate data across their team members. The findings from these reports continue to serve as a valuable tool for leaders aiming to build organizational improvement capacity.

Pre- and post-data, however, do not provide timely information to make course adjustments and improvements. Therefore, we supplemented this data with checks for understanding for each continuous improvement skill and polls to gauge participant satisfaction at the end of each workshop. We also tracked participation in each IM4E offering to assess interest in specific topics and accessibility of the course (e.g. timing, length, use of recordings).

The first finding was that attendance was high throughout the course, despite the challenges of the pandemic and the opt-in choice for each workshop. Two organizations decided to opt out of the virtual course because the pandemic caused too many staffing changes. Of the remaining 12 teams, 10 participated in every workshop while the other two missed one each but later accessed recordings.

High participation translated into

“This project deepened the connection between equity and continuous improvement,” said Rebecca Kelley, director of development, National 4-H Council.

growth in knowledge of continuous improvement skills. The pre- and post-course self-assessments showed statistically significant growth in eight of nine skill areas: Build empathy, set aims, create key driver diagrams, run PDSA cycles, track data, interpret variation, map processes, and analyze root causes with Pareto charts.

Participants also shared their qualitative feedback on the IM4E training, what skills they gained, and what sparked an aha moment. Garner Andrews, a former social studies teacher and team leader with Internationals Network who now teaches in Virginia, recalled a specific tool: the key driver diagram.

“When I learned about this tool, it just opened my eyes to what I felt was missing in past years of attempting to do student growth goals ... and what we’ve been doing slightly wrong,” he said. “We applied [the key driver diagram] at the end of the past school year, and it was one of the most productive conversations that we had as a leadership team.”

“I felt like I had a hammer, nail, and a couple of screwdrivers ... then, coming into IM4E, all the tools, templates, and videos, I felt like I walked into Home Depot,” said Jon Roure, executive VP & chief innovation officer at Student Leadership Network, an organization that supports young people growing up in diverse underserved communities to gain access to higher education and fulfill their dreams. “There were just so many more tools, so many more avenues available to me and my staff to figure out how we take this concept and put it into practice.”

We also found that IM4E created more consistent knowledge about continuous improvement across team members — an important step toward building organizational capacity.

Our biggest question was whether participants would apply newly developed continuous improvement skill sets to building equitable outcomes in their educational systems. We were excited to see that 81% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that their team strengthened the integration of equity and continuous improvement in their work.

At the conclusion of IM4E — 10 months later — 84% of participants reported that they had already applied skills from IM4E to their work in other parts of their organizations. Participants shared specific examples of how continuous improvement practices are being used in service of equity.

“This project deepened the connection between equity and continuous improvement,” said Rebecca Kelley, director of development, National 4-H Council. “As an organization that was already committed to data-driven improvement, the team experience connected our way of doing continuous improvement to new partners at the school and district levels. This project is a model that has advanced our equity commitment.”

Other participants recognized the value of weaving equity and continuous improvement together in Shift’s approach to improvement. “While we have been able to boast strong program outcomes for nearly two decades, this year is the first opportunity that we have had to receive technical assistance support in continuous improvement, conduct a root cause analysis, and develop equity-centered program interventions directly informed by our stakeholders’ voices,” said Roure. “Often, diversity, equity, and inclusion are considered separately from continuous improvement, and we are motivated to learn more about IM4E’s approach as we strengthen our

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organizational capacity in these areas.”

Finally, the importance of learning how to select the right tool from the toolbox was highlighted by Tonia Shook, a secondary program coordinator for the Office for Leading and Learning at Pasco County Schools, as the district worked to improve equitable access to 6th-grade advanced mathematics.

“We piloted our project at one school. In doing so, we were able to put 33 additional students — a whole class of students — in advanced mathematics,” Shook said. “What made us successful in getting those students in the courses — opening up a lifetime of opportunity — was that we began with the root cause analysis and figuring out why there is a lack of diversity in 8th grade, and it starts in 6th grade.”

WHAT WE LEARNED FROM IM4E

The participating school and organization leaders were not the only ones who learned from the IM4E experience. Our team from Shift and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation learned valuable lessons about designing a virtual course to build capacity to address the complexity of educational equity through continuous improvement.

First, high participation in IM4E — despite adverse conditions created by the pandemic — signals that there is strong demand among educational leaders for learning equity-centered improvement skills. Based on this learning, we will continue to grow and strengthen IM4E to provide more organizations and networks an opportunity to build equity-centered continuous improvement skills.

Second, the flipped classroom approach created an accessible entry point for participants, allowing participants to learn at their own pace and benefit from shorter, more applied synchronous sessions. Eight-minute videos provided introductory-level content to introduce the continuous improvement concept followed by a real-world example. We believe this

The challenge-by-choice and opt-in coaching structures allowed participants to select the topics and support most relevant and critical to their needs.

approach helped build shared language across teams and greatly contributed to the reduced variation in continuous improvement knowledge across team members.

IM4E participants said that these videos also reduced the translational burden of sharing their learning with others in their organizations. Given the utility of these videos, Shift received funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to create eight more videos focused on more advanced continuous improvement skills.

Third, a case study of a pressing equity problem provided a powerful bridge to develop and then apply skills. The design of IM4E created an intentional bridge to facilitate the transfer of learning to application. Participants learned continuous improvement skills with simple and accessible examples, then practiced through the complex and realistic Shift Academy case study, and finally applied the skills in their own complex contexts.

This intentional design helped span the gulf between simple learning examples and participant reality. We believe that this was a strong contributor to the majority of participants applying continuous improvement skills to areas of their organization by the end of IM4E.

Fourth, choice was a powerful motivator of and accelerant for learning. The challenge-by-choice and opt-in coaching structures allowed participants to select the topics and support most relevant and critical to their needs. While choice in learning is always a valuable approach to professional learning, it was especially

critical to the success of IM4E during the stress of the pandemic.

Working for justice and equity is complex and requires a commitment to deeper learning and reflection. We thank the IM4E community for going on this journey with us, especially during a pandemic. Their contributions and dedication will be vital to transforming learning experiences for young people.

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Karen Zeribi (karen@shift-results.com) is founder and CEO, Shay Bluemer Miroite (shay@shift-results.com) is director of improvement advising, Cori Davis (cori@shift-results.com) is an improvement advisor, Erin Moore (erin@shift-results.com) is director of operations, and Theresa Todd (theresa@shift-results.com) is an improvement advisor at Shift. Vivian Mihalakis (vivian.mihalakis@gatesfoundation.org) is senior program officer at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Tanya Johnson (tjohnson@impactstrategygroup.org) is founder & CEO of Impact Strategy Group. ■

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International collaboration powers teachers' STEM learning

BY LINDA ROST, MELISSA OLSON, SHAZIA IQBAL, ROBYN EMBRY, AND WALTER SMITH

Teachers are uniquely situated to enact best practices for the direct benefit of student learning. However, teachers often lack opportunities to exercise agency, the capacity to “make an impact or exert power” (Gourd, 2015, p. 12). When teachers develop agency, they are better able to implement place-based, relevant lessons for their students.

Developing agency was one of the primary goals of an international project we led to explore how to bridge

the gap between the ways teachers in different cultures and countries teach STEM — science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. In this global collaboration, American and Pakistani educators worked together to implement teacher-centered professional learning about how to design lessons and curriculum that are standards-based, contextualized, and engaging for their students.

We created a cooperative community of professionals in which teachers from different cultures could

learn from one another, developing agency and improving practice to make STEM relevant and applicable to their students.

This project took place over a four-month period in spring 2021 in the United States and Pakistan. It was led by three American classroom teachers (Robyn Embry, a high school teacher in Indiana; Melissa Olson, a high school science teacher in Minnesota; and Linda Rost, a high school science teacher in Montana), and an international educator (Shazia

Iqbal, from Pakistan and Texas). We conducted the project as part of a global STEM course at Texas Tech University, where we are all doctoral students, under the mentorship of professor Walter Smith.

The project was divided into four phases. In the first phase, we, the American and international teachers, explored the professional learning needs of Pakistani teachers in a private school nestled in a rural village of Punjab. Next, we conducted online professional learning in the form of an “unconference” (or teacher-driven session where teachers teach each other) to address their needs.

In the third phase, the Pakistani teachers incorporated the strategies and tools they learned to facilitate STEM-based student projects linked to the local community, and then they shared their projects, teaching us. Finally, in the fourth phase, the Pakistani teachers created similar professional development for other teachers at their school.

PHASE 1: MEET AND GREET

We organized a meet-and-greet via web conference to introduce ourselves and get to know the Pakistani teachers with whom we would be collaborating. This step is vital for strengthening relationships, developing trust, and listening to the needs of the teachers and what they would like to gain from this experience to enhance student learning.

The online meet-and-greet began with us introducing ourselves, providing our background experience, and reviewing the overall goals of the project. We stressed a two-way street of professional development in which everyone would be sharing and learning from each other, rather than one group teaching the other. Then Pakistani teachers introduced themselves and shared their ideas and thoughts about the professional development.

Next, we moved into four breakout rooms, at which point we introduced the instructional technology of using Google Jamboards. In the breakout

rooms, teachers answered questions using Jamboard’s sticky note feature. The discussion questions focused on identifying an area of pedagogy on which they would like to work and local STEM topics they would like to highlight. They also examined the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals and explored which ones could be incorporated into their students’ STEM projects.

The United Nations General Assembly adopted the 17 goals (see below) in 2015 as a core component of its 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The aim of the goals is to direct humanity toward sustainable economic growth by addressing global economic, environmental, and social issues and to “secure a sustainable, peaceful, prosperous and equitable life on earth for everyone now and in the future” (UNESCO, 2017, p. 11). We believe in the importance of incorporating these goals into student projects so that students learn about real-world issues, solutions, and impact.

UNITED NATIONS SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS (UNESCO, 2017)



PHASE 2: UNCONFERENCE

To prepare for the unconference meeting, an open format conference where individuals share and participants can move freely between sessions, we debriefed about the topics addressed in the breakout rooms during the introductory session. In addition, Shazia Iqbal, who was living in Pakistan, traveled to the school in Punjab to meet with the teachers in person and tour their classrooms.

This face-to-face meeting allowed her to explain the collaboration in greater detail without the barrier of technology and the internet. As Iqbal guided them in cross-curriculum mapping, the Pakistani teachers formed groups based on their subject-specific learning objectives and interests, aligning the United Nations goals to each of their topics.

Through this process, we learned that teachers wanted to learn more about instructional technologies. The Pakistani teachers said that they had many professional development opportunities focused on specific content knowledge but limited opportunities to learn innovative strategies to teach online. The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic made it imperative that teachers keep students engaged with online instructional technology.

Since the majority of reputable schools in Pakistan are privately owned with the emphasis placed on profits, technology equipment is not always provided, and, if the equipment is present, the teachers are not trained to use it. Fortunately, this school did have the equipment and the support of the administration to incorporate the strategies within their lessons.

The teachers were eager to enhance their competency, and they planned to build their online instructional proficiency to keep the learning process ongoing during forced school closures due to the pandemic.

Once we had organized the unconference, we shared a one-page flyer with details so the teachers would know what to expect. We intended this

unconference to introduce instructional technologies that the Pakistani teachers could use for online, hybrid, and in-person teaching. We devised a “sandbox” time for teachers to move through various breakout rooms and explore the different technologies and discuss ways to use them in their classrooms.

During the conference, our leadership team facilitated discussions and shared information. Melissa Olson explained how she used Google Classroom to facilitate communication, lead asynchronous discussions, provide comprehensive feedback, and assessment.

Robyn Embry described how she used Google Slides to create digital interactive notebooks, in which students can move through prepared slides and interact with the main topics through activities such as posting selfies and captions to demonstrate different concepts, importing photos or diagrams, creating comic strips, and matching text boxes and diagrams with topics.

Linda Rost explained how she used Google Slides to design experiments, collect data, create graphs, and assign essays with directions and rubric embedded in the template. She demonstrated using Google Slides for group projects and Jamboards for critical annotated reading, using the highlighter and sticky note features.

After the sandbox time, Rost shared how she uses pinwheel discussions to teach about controversial or provocative topics in science. Specifically, she used these interactive conversations to provide a culturally responsive lens to four place-based topics: managing and delisting the grizzly bear in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem, climate change with cultural perspective, the introduction of invasive species in Flathead Lake in Montana, and using genetic testing for tribal enrollment. These lessons involve the intersection of Indigenous ways of knowing and Western science. In each of the four units, students explore and analyze data, then collaborate on conclusions.

Finally, the American and Pakistani teachers moved into breakout rooms based on four timely and engaging topics they had identified from their own local context: salt mines, climate change, industry and energy, and agriculture. After the in-person meeting in Pakistan with Iqbal, teachers had already formed some ideas about the lessons they planned to develop for their students.

Now, during the unconference, they explained how they planned to incorporate one of the United Nations goals and an instructional technology within their lesson. They summarized their ideas on Google slide templates to reinforce the technology skills they were learning.

Following the breakout rooms, we reviewed how the Pakistani teachers would be presenting the results of their lessons at the next meeting.

PHASE 3: SHARE

The final meeting for this collaboration involved the Pakistani teachers showcasing their work. Each of the four groups gave presentations on the collaborative units they had designed with their colleagues and how their students engaged in the content.

The units aligned with their curriculum and included one of the United Nations goals, a new instructional technology, and a new teaching method. Some of the collaborations included science, math, computer science, and English language teachers working together on the same unit.

Following each presentation, the other team members asked questions and provided feedback for each group. At the end of the meeting, the group collaborated on a Google Jamboard to share the main takeaways from the collaboration.

This phase demonstrated the value of the two-way street approach to collaboration. The teachers learned from each other and we, the leaders, also learned things we can use in our own classrooms. We found that the

Pakistani teachers were already using sustainability goals in their curriculum and recognized our own deficiency in this area.

In addition, the Pakistani teachers used many techniques to initiate discussion with their students with which we had little or no experience and provided models for how we might teach about science topics in our own classrooms. For example, a chemistry teacher who used the local salt mine crystals as a phenomenon to explore the rate of crystal growth in the lab sparked ideas for how we could use similar local phenomena in our own classrooms.

PHASE 4: TEACHING OTHERS

Finally, the Pakistani teachers took what they learned and created professional learning for other teachers in their school who did not take part in the initial program. This collaboration started a chain of sharing that moved down grade levels, providing many teachers with professional learning as well as a rare opportunity for teachers to share their knowledge with others, which facilitates teacher agency.

WHAT WE'VE LEARNED

Teachers' feedback and the depth of their final products suggested that the project was successful in reaching its goal of establishing a collaborative community, building knowledge, and building teacher agency so that teachers can apply their knowledge of local context to teach STEM in ways that are engaging, relevant, and applicable for students.

During our follow-up discussions and debriefing meeting, we, the leadership team, identified several possible factors in the success of the project. First, we honored the needs, desires, and knowledge of the teachers. Often with professional learning, there is a top-down decision of need. This was particularly a risk in this project because we entered into the professional collaboration with little knowledge of the current working of the school and country.

Though we came from two different countries, we were all able to understand and relate to one another.

We could have slipped in trying to “fix” a school in a country that is vastly different from our own, but we knew it was crucial that we honor the prior success of the Pakistani teachers and assist them in growing in areas that they were passionate about, while we ourselves were also growing.

Second, we emphasized the relationship of the curriculum to the local environment, culture, and economy because learning can be more powerful and effective if it connects to prior knowledge and real-life experiences (Bretz, 2001). Having teachers incorporate a local phenomenon into lessons not only makes lessons more engaging for students but also creates connections between school and community.

By focusing on the local salt mines, agriculture, industry, and climate change, the teachers began to see their curriculum in a new light. Though the local environment can create constraints to teacher agency (Gourd, 2015), it can also create opportunities for teachers to be agents of change in the community.

Third, administrators' support for the Pakistani teachers to participate in this professional learning was important. The support from multiple levels — from the owner of the school to the lead teachers — allowed teachers to take agency in improving instruction in their classrooms and also provided structure to enable that agency.

Fourth, although administrative support was important, the fact that the project was created by teachers for teachers was powerful. Since we also experienced teaching online and have worked to incorporate local phenomena in our own teaching, we empathized to some extent with the realities of the Pakistanis' situation. Though we came from two different countries, we were

all able to understand and relate to one another.

Finally, the tools and guidance we all shared were highly valuable. As past experiences with teacher self-directed professional learning show (Rose, 2020), teachers greatly appreciate an opportunity to exercise their agency, but having guidelines in place is important for efficient use of the professional development time.

Throughout our project, the teachers had many opportunities to make choices, use creativity, and explore interests; yet there were clear expectations for the outcomes. The clear expectations throughout the project furnished teachers with opportunities to act within the constraints provided and also maintained the structure to enable agency by affording opportunities and resources to improve (Gourd, 2015).

How the teachers used the resources presented during the lesson was up to them, but they needed to try at least one new pedagogy and one new instructional technology when instructing about a local phenomenon.

FINAL THOUGHTS

This professional learning collaboration was as valuable a learning experience for us as it was for the Pakistani teachers. It illustrates the benefits of intercultural collaboration for everyone involved and inspires us to continue such collaborations.

There are many ways collaboration on the current project could continue. For example, the teachers and students in Pakistan and the U.S. could continue to communicate to compare how each group contextualizes its learning within its environment and community.

In addition, we are pursuing other collaborations. Iqbal is working with the University of Chakwal to develop a pilot for an educational partnership with the Engineering Projects in Community Service department at Purdue University.

The EPICS projects will promote STEM learning and contextualization

Continued on p. 62

How a cultural lens can help teachers disrupt inequity

BY STEPHANIE L. DODMAN,
NANCY HOLINCHECK,
AND REBECCA K. FOX



Viewing classrooms as apolitical, race-neutral environments isn't working — and never has. In promoting color blindness, educators have denied student racial identities. In using the broad language of multicultural education, schools have maintained a strict adherence to white, middle class, heteronormative definitions of success. As a result, students from minoritized populations have been asked to adopt

the norms of either school or home. Unsurprisingly, school has become a place of dissonance for too many.

It is past time to change that pattern, and education leaders have a clear opportunity for change right now. The confluence of racial justice movements and COVID-19 school shutdowns have forced long-existing inequities into the spotlight. Now there is an opening to shift the structures and culture of schools.

We see teacher learning via inquiry

as a major lever for this change. Working with teachers, we have found that the cultural inquiry process is a valuable tool for critical reflection and equity-oriented action consistent with Learning Forward's (2020) equity position statement and the equity-focused Standards for Professional Learning (Ward, 2021).

BENEFITS OF TEACHER INQUIRY

Teacher inquiry is a learning process driven by teachers themselves

THE CULTURAL INQUIRY PROCESS	
Step 1	What puzzles you?
Step 2	What do you already know? What do you assume?
Step 3	<p>What cultural influences might help you understand your puzzlement?</p> <p>3.1. How might your beliefs or values, or those of other educators, be contributing to the puzzling situation?</p> <p>3.2. How might aspects of the school’s culture(s) be contributing to the puzzling situation?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3.2.1. How might competition be contributing? • 3.2.2. How might tracking or ability-grouping be contributing? • 3.2.3. How might instructional programs for multilingual learners be contributing? <p>3.3. How might cultural mismatches be contributing to the puzzling situation?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3.3.1. How might mismatches between a student’s or group’s interaction patterns and those of the school be contributing? • 3.3.2. How might mismatches between a student’s or group’s home culture(s) and the school curriculum content be contributing? • 3.3.3. How might mismatches between a student’s or group’s preferred learning approaches and classroom processes be contributing? <p>3.4. How might students’ experiences and meanings be contributing to the puzzling situation?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3.4.1. How might influences on students from outside school be contributing? • 3.4.2. How might imbalances in power or economic opportunities, and peer group response to those imbalances, be contributing? <p>3.5. How might individual students’ cultural “negotiations” be contributing to the puzzling situation?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3.5.1. How might individual students’ negotiations of home, peer, and school cultures be contributing? • 3.5.2. How might individual students’ negotiations of their cultural identities be contributing?
Step 4	What information can help you understand your puzzlement and potential direction?
Step 5	What actions for change can you take?
Step 6	How are your actions going? What effects are coming about?
Step 7	What did you learn? With whom can you share?

(Dana & Yendol-Hoppey, 2019). Teacher inquiry enables research at the hyperlocal level in ways that uplift the undeniable influence of context on teaching and learning (Caro-Bruce et al., 2007). Inquiry structures — which

follow a series of steps such as question, seek literature, plan actions, monitor actions, draw conclusions, and identify new questions — offer space for valuing teacher questioning and opening a door to engaging in inquiry that can

interrogate racist and classist policies and practices.

The cultural inquiry process (Jacob, 1995; Jacob et al., 1996) expands teacher inquiry by ensuring critically reflective space for acknowledging and

examining culture as central to teaching and learning. Within this is an essential exploration of one's own positionality and its influences on instructional decisions and adherence to school policies and expectations.

This enables teachers to engage in intentional and systematic investigation of the relationships among self, students, families, and school, and their equity implications — an important process because no sustainable change for equity can occur without teachers “learning, relearning, and unlearning” the ways their past experiences have shaped their frames of reference (Wink, 2010).

In the cultural inquiry process, teachers engage in a seven-part cycle in which they consider “puzzlements” that they identify in their schools and classrooms. The process focuses on understanding rather than seeking immediate, short-term fixes to problems or reacting in a routine way. The seven steps in the process (see p. 59) are each driven by one or more reflection questions. While the steps are sequential, the process is recursive as teachers gather information, reflect on their learning, and return to previous ideas and research as new insights occur.

CULTURAL INQUIRY PROCESS

The following questions characterize each step of the cultural inquiry process. They can be used as an individual inquirer or as part of an inquiry collective.

1. What puzzles you?

In this step, participants consider the following: What questions keep you up at night? What questions or confusions have recently arisen for you related to your students, teaching, or school? Because culture is influential to all aspects of schooling, educators can start with any question from their practice.

2. What do you already know? What do you assume?

In this step, teachers begin to

explore their puzzlement and consider: What do you know? What do you assume? We all have assumptions about students, families, self, and school. Those assumptions must be identified and interrogated early and continually during the cultural inquiry process.

3. What cultural influences might help you understand your puzzlement?

Here, teachers select strand(s) of inquiry as potential avenues for exploring the puzzlement with a lens intentionally focused on culture. This is the beginning of the recognition that what puzzles us is deeply embedded both in how students and families engage with teaching and school and in our perceptions of that engagement. The table on p. 59 shows several subquestions that serve as a starting point for this part of the process. To avoid a tendency to locate problems in students or families, we strongly encourage all inquirers to begin with question 3.1.

4. What information can help you understand your puzzlement and potential direction?

This information-gathering stage is crucial. It reaffirms examination of assumptions and offers space for learning more before attempting short-term fixes. More specifically, it asks: What additional information can help you to explore your puzzlement through the lens you identified in step 3? Data sources might include reflective journaling, observations, interviews, and assessment data such as student work/writings.

5. What actions for change can you take?

After gathering and analyzing the preliminary data of step 4, educators consider specific actions they can take to address the puzzlement (related to instructional moves, curriculum, classroom culture, home/school connections, peer interactions, etc.). Actions should be directly related to

what was learned in step 4, which was influenced by the cultural questions selected in step 3.

6. How are your actions going? What effects are emerging from your actions?

In this step, educators enact the actions planned in step 5 and monitor the outcomes with data. One of the main questions to consider is: How do you know how your inquiry is going?

7. What did you learn? With whom can you share?

After engaging iteratively in the process, educators reflect on what they learned about themselves and their students, families, or schools. They consider: What were the outcomes for students? How will what you learned influence your future teaching? Sharing that learning is an important part of the process as well, so educators consider the question: How can your learning inform others?

CULTURAL INQUIRY IN ACTION

In our work with practicing teachers pursuing their master's degrees in the Advanced Studies in Teaching and Learning program at George Mason University, we regularly use the cultural inquiry process. It helps teachers recognize that their practices are not apolitical or neutral — recognition that contributes to disrupting the perpetuation of systemic inequity.

Some examples of powerful outcomes from teachers with whom we have worked include: recognizing and addressing the effects of previously unexamined teacher language; disrupting elective tracking in middle school; interrupting deficit assumptions of student effort and care; expanding notions related to the significance of family trust; and reorienting expectations of participation to accommodate for how teachers' and students' identities affect their assumptions related to class participation. Here are two cases

of teachers' cultural inquiry process engagements.

Middle school math

A middle school teacher was puzzled by differential participation between her English learners and native English-speaking students in math class (step 1). To begin exploring this puzzlement, she surfaced what she already knew about her students, her teaching, and her assumptions. This included assumptions about participation, language development, and the nature of mathematics as universal (step 2).

Using guiding questions 3.1 and 3.4.1 (step 3), she examined her beliefs about the relationship between mathematics and language and the influences inside and outside of school that were potentially contributing to her puzzlement, such as the school culture and the supporting English programs (step 4).

She used previous knowledge and sought out new knowledge about second language acquisition, culturally sustaining pedagogies, and funds of knowledge (Gonzalez et al., 1995) to more meaningfully engage her English learner students in mathematics. She learned about the students' cultural and educational backgrounds by reaching out to their parents, interviewing former teachers, interviewing the students, and collecting samples of written work (steps 5 and 6).

The process challenged her assumptions regarding the relationship between mathematics, language, and culture, and she committed to sharing her findings that mathematics pedagogy is not culture-neutral, nor language-neutral, with her colleagues (step 7).

Elementary special education

An elementary special education teacher wondered about her colleagues' beliefs and resistance to inclusive practices for students with disabilities (step 1). After reflecting on situations when she experienced pushback, examining what she knew about her

students and school, and interrogating her own values and assumptions about inclusion (including recognizing her confusion as to how colleagues could still have negative attitudes about inclusion), she selected guiding cultural inquiry process question 3.1 and 3.3 (step 3).

After reviewing literature on inclusion, collecting data related to colleagues' apprehensions, and exploring students' preferences and perspectives on their educational placements (step 4), she learned that her general education colleagues' reticence stemmed from feeling unprepared. Their feelings of inadequacy led them to advocate for more restrictive educational environments for students with disabilities. This finding proved powerful by challenging her assumptions regarding why her colleagues were pushing back on inclusion.

As a result, she developed professional learning within her school to strengthen knowledge regarding disabilities, differentiation, and representation, and to create a greater sense of communication and collaboration between special and general education teachers (steps 5 and 6). She shared her findings with school administrators to encourage the continuation of such professional learning to disrupt the trend of exclusion of students with disabilities (step 7).

GUIDING TEACHERS THROUGH THE PROCESS

When facilitating the cultural inquiry process, learning leaders should consider both the emotional nature of critical inquiry and the importance of creating trusted, accountable space. This deep work requires strong facilitation. Here are several important considerations to both engaging in and guiding teachers through the process.

Create inquiry groups where members can dialogue regularly. Success with the cultural inquiry process demands protected time to

debrief, reflect, question, and engage with uncertainty.

Prioritize the recognition of assumptions and the related uncertainty. The cultural inquiry process constructively embraces confusion. Rather than relying on certainty through approaches such as color blindness, dilemmas and associated assumptions are treated as important to learning and change. Consistently and regularly focus conversation and resources to enable examination.

Emphasize self-examination. Like any learning endeavor, participants must pay attention to the role of self in learning: *What do I think I know? Why do I think that? Why did I make that decision? What are my biases here? Why?* Questioning of self requires a confidence that uncertainty can bring about positive change.

Be vigilant in noticing deficit perspectives. The cultural inquiry process demands one's engagement in critical reflection. Without it, the learning gained from the process could act as mis-educative (Dewey, 1938) and promote, rather than reshape, deficit perspectives of students and families. The cultural questions of step 3 guard against this, but they are neither fail-safes nor exhaustive.

Embrace intersectionality. We must take care that we do not use the term *culture* as a way of ignoring or essentializing race. Engaging in the cultural inquiry process means applying a nuanced lens to culture and race and recognizing that we are all cultural beings made up of intersecting identities.

Value multiple and varied types of data. Data are not only numbers. Various sources and types of both quantitative and qualitative data are important to understanding puzzlements and monitoring actions.

A VITAL COMPONENT OF EQUITY

Multicultural education (Nieto, 2018), culturally relevant teaching (Ladson-Billings, 2014), culturally

IDEAS

responsive pedagogy (Gay, 2018), and culturally sustaining pedagogies (Paris & Alim, 2012) matter to the success of minoritized students. But they cannot be adopted and enacted without critical exploration of self, context, and systems of racism, classism, sexism, xenophobia, homophobia, and transphobia that permeate our educational landscape.

The cultural inquiry process is one way to engage educators' learning in ways that prime them to notice the cultural influences on inequities, reflect on their existence and maintenance, and act in ways that can address the conditions of inequity inside their classrooms and beyond. It must be noted that, while powerful, any inquiry process cannot be the only means of systemic change. However, because of teachers' direct connection to students, teacher learning through cultural inquiry is a vital component of equity efforts in education.

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Stephanie L. Dodman (sdodman@gmu.edu) and **Nancy Holincheck** (nholinch@gmu.edu) are assistant professors of education and **Rebecca K. Fox** (rfox@gmu.edu) is professor of education at George Mason University. ■

International collaboration powers teachers' STEM learning

Continued from p. 57
for students before joining the university and encourage students to enter the engineering field as they gain experience in seeking solutions to real-world problems and enhancing their quality of life.

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- **Linda Rost** (linda.rost@ttu.edu) is a science teacher at Baker High School in Baker, Montana, and a doctoral student at Texas Tech University. Melissa Olson (missie.olson@ttu.edu) is a science teacher at Becker High School in Becker, Minnesota, and a doctoral student at Texas Tech University. Shazia Iqbal (shazia.iqbal@ttu.edu) is a global educator and a doctoral student at Texas Tech University. Robyn Embry (robyn.embry@ttu.edu) is a science teacher at Mitchell High School in Mitchell, Indiana, and a doctoral student at Texas Tech University. Walter Smith (walter.smith@ttu.edu) is a retired professor of STEM curriculum and instruction at Texas Tech University. ■

DISCUSS. COLLABORATE. FACILITATE.

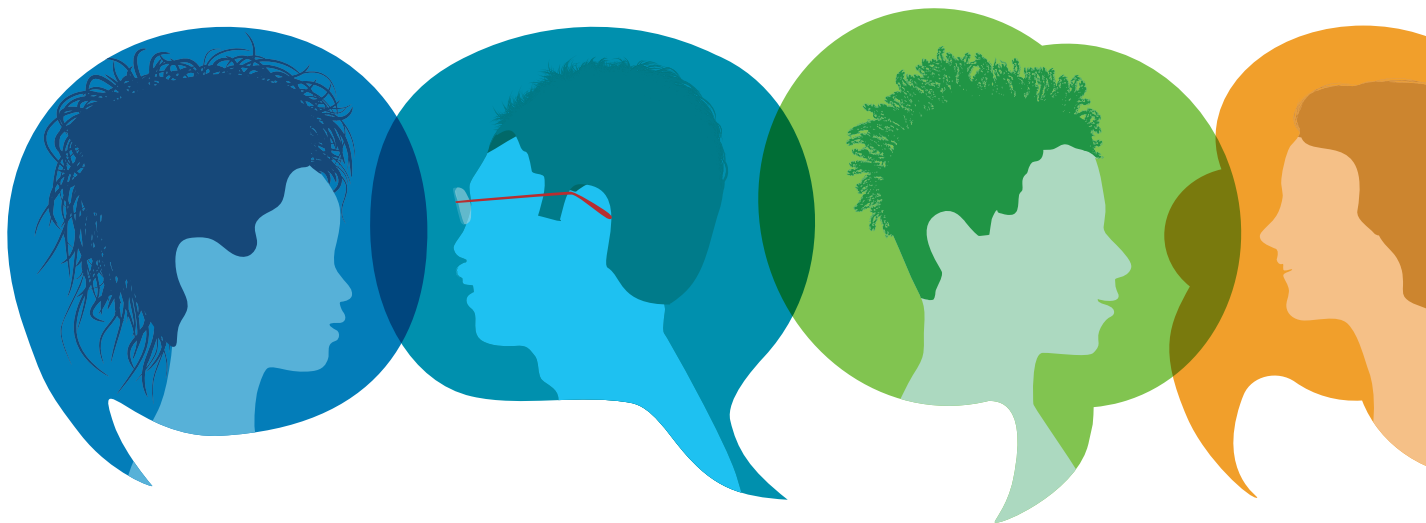
TOOLS

FIND MORE STRATEGIES TO SURVIVE AND THRIVE

There's no doubt about it: These are stressful times for educators. Learning Forward is committed to providing tools and strategies for educators at all levels to support their colleagues and work collectively for the benefit of all students. In addition to this issue's tool, which helps coaches help teachers reframe their frustrations and move forward, check out the archive of Learning Forward's recent webinars, which include a wealth of suggestions and related resources from field leaders.

Find the archive at learningforward.org/webinars/

learningforward.org/webinars/



Conversation starters help teachers get unstuck

BY KRISTINE JAMES

Coaches are expert listeners, and we're well-positioned to hear about teachers' concerns and needs. Lately, we're hearing one particular message loud and clear: Teachers are tired and stressed. Teaching and learning conditions are changing by the week, pressure to close learning gaps is mounting, and political tensions are weighing on everyone.

Given the high levels of stress and burnout, it's understandable that teachers are expressing a lot of frustrations and sharing that they aren't sure how to deal with them. My colleagues and I have been hearing a lot of overwhelmed statements like, "The kids don't know how to be at school anymore" and "The students are so far behind that I don't know where to begin."

Teachers who are usually optimistic and solution-oriented are saying things like, "I'll never get all these assessments

done" and "How am I supposed to get through the curriculum?"

As a coach, I try to help teachers get unstuck and move through these understandable frustrations. One of the ways I do that is through conversation starters that help teachers look under the surface and identify positive action steps. I create these reflection questions based on concerns that are coming up frequently so that I'm prepared to respond helpfully.

For example, when a teacher tells me her students don't know how to be at school, I can ask, "What's the biggest change you're seeing in your students? And how have you tried to address it so far?" Other times, when a teacher says she's overwhelmed by responsibilities, I

can offer to help by saying, "What feels heaviest right now? I have some time tomorrow afternoon. Can we meet to look at ways I can support you?"

The following tool shares some examples of conversation starters I use, along with prompts to create your own. These can be used to initiate a coaching cycle or find out how to support a teacher this week. They can also be used by administrators, teacher leaders, and anyone else who wants to help teacher colleagues succeed in these stressful times.

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Kristine James (kristine.james@hesperiausd.org) is an elementary instructional coach at Mission Crest Elementary in Hesperia, California.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

This tool was inspired by Kristine James' presentation during Learning Forward's webinar on "Coaching during 'other duties as assigned'" on Dec. 16, 2021. To listen to the archived webinar and see related resources, visit learningforward.org/webinar/coaching-during-other-duties-as-assigned/



CREATE YOUR OWN CONVERSATION STARTERS

DIRECTIONS

List teachers' current concerns and frustrations in the left column. In the middle column, set goals for your work with teachers based on those concerns. In the right column, identify one or more questions you can use to start a productive conversation with teachers to work toward the goals.

In this table, the rows below are filled in as examples. On the following page, the next three rows include a common teacher concern but leave space for you to set the goals and create the questions. At the end are rows for you to fill in additional concerns, goals, and questions you wish to work on with teachers.

Teacher concern	Coaching goal(s)	Conversation starter(s)
<i>Filled in as examples</i>		
The students don't know how to be at school anymore.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help teachers build on student assets. • Build teachers' efficacy. 	What is the biggest change you are seeing? How have you addressed this already?
The students are so far behind I don't know where to begin.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Address teachers' sense of overwhelm. • Help teachers identify most immediate student needs. 	What are the strengths you are seeing in your students this year?
I'll never be able to finish these assessments without subs.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support teachers to use data effectively. 	Can I help assess the students and then meet with you to share results and discuss next steps?

TOOLS

CREATE YOUR OWN CONVERSATION STARTERS CONTINUED		
Teacher concern	Coaching goal(s)	Conversation starter(s)
<i>Common teacher concerns with space for you to set the goals and create the questions</i>		
I don't know how I'm supposed to get all of this done.		
Students' skills and needs vary widely in the same class.		
I'm spending so much time keeping up with changing COVID-19 protocols that I'm not getting my grading done.		
<i>Rows for you to fill in additional concerns, goals, and questions</i>		

CONNECT. BELONG. SUPPORT.

UPDATES



Frederick Brown, Learning Forward chief learning officer/deputy, and Denise Glyn Borders, Learning Forward president/CEO, introduce a keynote session via livestream at the Learning Forward 2021 Virtual Annual Conference.

GET MORE FROM THE ANNUAL CONFERENCE

If you wished you could attend more than one Learning Forward Annual Conference session at the same time, now's your chance. One of the benefits of going virtual for our 2021 conference was the opportunity to record and archive all of the sessions. If you registered for the conference, you have until March 31, 2022, to access the recording of every session held on the day or days for which you registered.

Access the virtual conference platform using the personalized access link you used during the conference. If you need assistance locating your link, contact the Learning Forward business office at 800-727-7288.

UPDATES



ANNUAL CONFERENCE 2022

The 2022 Annual Conference will mark our return to an in-person conference, to be held Dec. 4-7 at the Gaylord Opryland Resort and Convention Center in Nashville, Tennessee. The theme for 2022 is REIMAGINE. Be sure to mark your calendars and plan to join us live and in-person.

LEARNING FORWARD WELCOMES NEW STAFF MEMBER

Shannon Bogle has joined Learning Forward as director for networks and the Learning Forward Academy. She will design content and network structures, coach network members, and manage strategy and operations for the Academy.

Bogle has a long history with Learning Forward, as a member of the original Redesign Professional Development Community and a 2019 Learning Forward Academy graduate. She has more than 20 years of experience in K-12 education as a teacher, instructional coach, and supervisor in Hillsborough County Public Schools in Florida.



Shannon Bogle

Most recently, she was a professional development supervisor for the Transformation Network. She is a Lastinger Center Certified Instructional Coach and holds a specialist degree in educational leadership from Nova Southeastern University.



Register for online courses

Advance your knowledge, skills, and practices with guidance from Learning Forward's top practitioners and the highest quality online learning experience available. Our online courses bring learners together for live, facilitated sessions; asynchronous learning experiences; and group collaboration.

NOW ACCEPTING REGISTRATIONS FOR:

8 Dimensions of Educator Wellness

Teacher wellness contributes to a stable, positive, and equitable school culture. Led by Laura Lee Summers, this seven-week course explores strategies for wellness through the lens of eight dimensions of personal well-being. Participants will investigate each of these dimensions through live sessions, reflective discussions, and self-selected activities, and will take steps toward implementing self-care practices that will support their own well-being for the rest of year and beyond. Strategies from this course can be adapted to share within schools to support colleagues' and students' well-being. *Course begins Feb. 18.*

Virtual Coaches Academy

This 12-session course, led by Learning Forward expert coaches Heather Clifton and Andy Mendelsberg, offers campus and district instructional coaches, coach advocates, and those who support coaches an opportunity to deepen their understanding and application of critical coaching skills that support teachers' individual and team learning. Learning sessions feature instruction and practice opportunities designed to enhance the effectiveness of coaching conversations and strengthen professional learning design and facilitation skills. Both new and experienced coaches will benefit from this deep dive into instructional coaching. *Course begins Feb. 23.*

Learn more about these courses at learningforward.org/online-courses-2

Additional courses and cohorts coming soon:

- Powerful Communication Skills for Coaches
- Building a Trusting and Positive School Culture
- Designing and Delivering Powerful Professional Learning



Annual Conference 2021 wrap-up

Learning Forward's 2021 Virtual Annual Conference, held in December, was a success, thanks to all of the presenters, hosts, staff, volunteers, and participants. Nearly all (96%) of the attendees who completed a conference evaluation reported that they learned ideas they will implement

or apply in their work, and 99% reported that the full-day preconference sessions they attended will be useful in their practice.

One of the unique features of Learning Forward's conferences is the free Transformation Toolkit that participants can use before, during, and

after the conference to organize, reflect, and follow up on conference learning. More than two-thirds of conference survey respondents said they plan to use the toolkit. Access the toolkit at conference.learningforward.org/conference-action-toolkit

HOST COMMITTEE RAISES \$1K FOR SUICIDE PREVENTION



Each year, the Learning Forward Annual Conference Host Committee selects a philanthropic project and invites conference participants as well as other friends and supporters to contribute. The 2021 Virtual Annual Conference Host Committee

selected and raised almost \$1,000 for the Second Wind Fund.

The Colorado organization is devoted to decreasing the incidence of suicide in children and youth by removing financial and social barriers to treatment. Second Wind Fund matches children and youth at risk for suicide with licensed therapists in their communities. If a financial or social barrier is present, the organization pays for up to 12 sessions of therapy from one of its specialized network providers.

ADVOCACY WEBSITE LAUNCHES

Learning Forward has launched a new website called Powered by Title II to support your advocacy efforts. Background facts and data on Title II, tools to support your advocacy efforts, the latest federal updates, and links to research supporting the impact of high-quality professional learning can be found on the website at poweredbytitleii.com/

This website will be a powerful tool for the current federal appropriations process as well as an ongoing tool to support advocacy efforts through the coming months and years. We encourage all Learning Forward stakeholders to check out the "Share Your Story" tool on the website to help us build the case about the impact of high-quality professional learning. For more information, contact Melinda George at melinda.george@learningforward.org.



UPDATES



ACADEMY CLASS OF 2024 APPLICATIONS AVAILABLE

We are recruiting members for the 2024 Academy cohort. Apply now for Learning Forward's flagship professional learning experience, which provides educators the opportunity to collaborate on problems of practice with colleagues from around the world. Academy will return to in-person learning July 15-17 in Minneapolis, Minnesota. We are recruiting members for the Class of 2024 to join us in Minneapolis. This new class will be on the ground floor of diving into the newly revised Standards for Professional Learning.

Applications are due March 15 and can be found at learningforward.org/academy/

For more information, email shannon.bogle@learningforward.org.

DISTRICT MEMBERS

Learning Forward welcomes new district members Teton County School District #1 in Jackson, Wyoming, and Richmond County School District in Augusta, Georgia.

We are also pleased to continue our relationship with renewing district member Griffin-Spalding Board of Education in Griffin, Georgia, and Norman Public Schools in Norman, Oklahoma.

In addition to other benefits, district members receive an exclusive supplemental guide for each issue of *The Learning Professional*. The short, practice-focused guides include discussion questions and professional learning activities that incorporate and build on articles from each issue. To find out more about the district membership, visit learningforward.org/membership/ or contact office@learningforward.org.

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SOCIAL MEDIA
POSTS

Follow us on social media. Share your insights and feedback about *The Learning Professional* by using [#TheLearningPro](https://twitter.com/TheLearningPro).

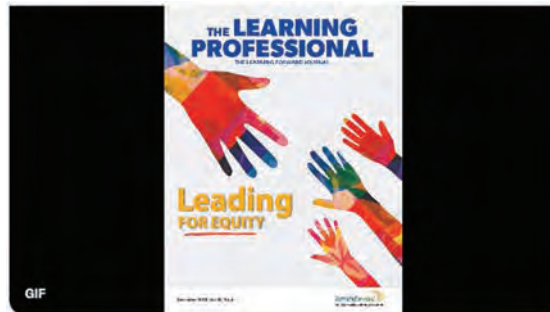


Learning Forward @LearningForward Dec 21, 2021

#TheLearningPro Dec. issue is now available! ow.ly/E5XW50HgE1z

This issue focuses on leadership, examining how everyone can lead for #equity whether at the classroom, school, district, or another level.

Feat. voices: @GholdyM @PrincipalKafele @karinchenoweth @Teachers_Lead



Maurice R. Swinney, EdD @docswin

I've been w/ @LearningForward since my teacher coach days - 15+ years ago. To write a piece about the @ChiPubSchools's equity office & share space w/ equity champions like @TauheedahBaker @nancybgutierrez @PrincipalKafele & @GholdyM makes this pretty special! #TheLearningPro



Nancy B. Gutierrez @nancybgutierrez

Dope issue! Honored to be featured alongside @TauheedahBaker @docswin @karinchenoweth @PrincipalKafele and so many other amazing ed equity influencers. My piece: Walking a tightrope or catapulting from a cannon? @LeadershipAcad_ @LearningForward

ABOUT LEARNING FORWARD

Learning Forward shows you how to plan, implement, and measure high-quality professional learning so you and your team can achieve success with your system, your school, and your students.

We are the only professional association devoted exclusively to those who work in educator professional learning. We help our members effect positive and lasting change to achieve equity and excellence in teaching and learning.



LEARNING FORWARD STAFF

Denise Glyn Borders

President/CEO
denise.borders@learningforward.org

Frederick Brown

Chief learning officer/deputy
frederick.brown@learningforward.org

Anthony Armstrong

Senior vice president,
marketing & communications
anthony.armstrong@learningforward.org

Ashley Barros

Associate, consulting
ashley.barros@learningforward.org

Shannon Bogle

Director, networks & academy
shannon.bogle@learningforward.org

Suzanne Bouffard

Vice president, publications
suzanne.bouffard@learningforward.org

Michelle Bowman

Vice president,
networks & content design
michelle.bowman@learningforward.org

Kristin Buehrig

Vice president, conference programs
kristin.buehrig@learningforward.org

Ariel Cain

Program manager, digital marketing
ariel.cain@learningforward.org

Christy Colclasure

Senior associate, member services
christy.colclasure@learningforward.org

Chelsea Collins

Project manager, Wallace ECPI Program
chelsea.collins@learningforward.org

Tracy Crow

Chief strategy officer
tracy.crow@learningforward.org

Anne Feaster-Smith

Director, accounting
anne.feaster-smith@learningforward.org

Paul Fleming

Senior vice president,
states, standards, & equity
paul.fleming@learningforward.org

Elizabeth Foster

Vice president, research & standards
elizabeth.foster@learningforward.org

Carrie Freundlich

Vice president, conference operations,
program management
carrie.freundlich@learningforward.org

Niki Gamble

Director, partnerships & products
niki.gamble@learningforward.org

Melinda George

Chief policy officer
melinda.george@learningforward.org

Stephen Helgeson

Vice president, content architecture
stephen.helgeson@learningforward.org

Sharron Helmke

Acting vice president,
professional services
sharron.helmke@learningforward.org

Michael Lanham

COO/CFO
michael.lanham@learningforward.org

Tom Manning

Senior vice president,
professional services
tom.manning@learningforward.org

Machel Mills-Miles

Vice president, standards
implementation & outreach
machel.mills-miles@learningforward.org

Joel Reynolds

Board administrator,
senior executive assistant
joel.reynolds@learningforward.org

Nancy Sims

Associate, member support
nancy.sims@learningforward.org

Tim Taylor

Director of professional services
operations
tim.taylor@learningforward.org

Renee Taylor-Johnson

Vice president, business services
renee.taylor-johnson@learningforward.org

Joellen Killion

Senior advisor
joellen.killion@learningforward.org

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Ash Vasudeva, president-elect

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THROUGH THE LENS

OF LEARNING FORWARD'S STANDARDS FOR PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

LEARNING FORWARD'S STANDARDS FOR PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Professional learning that increases educator effectiveness and results for all students ...

Learning Communities

... occurs within learning communities committed to continuous improvement, collective responsibility, and goal alignment.

Leadership

... requires skillful leaders who develop capacity, advocate, and create support systems for professional learning.

Resources

... requires prioritizing, monitoring, and coordinating resources for educator learning.

Data

... uses a variety of sources and types of student, educator, and system data to plan, assess, and evaluate professional learning.

Learning Designs

... integrates theories, research, and models of human learning to achieve its intended outcomes.

Implementation

... applies research on change and sustains support for implementation of professional learning for long-term change.

Outcomes

... aligns its outcomes with educator performance and student curriculum standards.

Many of the articles in this issue of *The Learning Professional* demonstrate Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning in action. Use this tool to deepen your understanding of the standards and strategies for implementing them.

Ways you might use this tool include:

- Discuss the questions in a professional learning community;
- Share one or more articles from the issue with your staff and facilitate a conversation; and
- Do a self-assessment of what you have learned from this issue.

<p>STANDARD: LEARNING COMMUNITIES IN ACTION</p> <p>Establishing norms for communication is an important part of building a learning community because norms can help build consistency and trust and lead to respectful and productive collaboration. Facilitators commonly ask groups to establish their own norms to foster ownership. But Joyce Lin and Ayanna Perry (p. 30) argue that this practice is problematic, especially with newly formed groups, because it “typically generates norms consistent with dominant perspectives and cultures,” and members from marginalized communities may not feel comfortable disagreeing with those dominant perspectives.</p>	<p>TO CONSIDER</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do you establish and use norms in your learning communities? What assumptions are embedded in these processes? <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do you think about Lin and Perry's recommendation of providing norms for new groups? What do you see as the pros and cons of that approach? <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>
<p>STANDARD: IMPLEMENTATION IN ACTION</p> <p>Steven Katz and Jenni Donohoo (p. 20) recommend using protocols as a tool to guide quality implementation because protocols can help facilitators and groups avoid common pitfalls to collaboration. They also point out that protocols are “useful for leaning into the requisite complexity” of professional learning in a way that keeps the group focused on identifying problems, trying solutions, and assessing outcomes.</p>	<p>TO CONSIDER</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do you use protocols in your professional learning (or, if you don't, how might you start)? <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is one new area or topic for which you'd like to have a protocol? What steps will you take to identify or create it? <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>

Learn more about Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning at www.learningforward.org/standards-for-professional-learning.

HOW COACHES JUGGLE IT ALL



As educators navigate the stress of pandemic-era schooling, coaches find themselves juggling even more roles and responsibilities than usual. Coaches are being asked to cover classrooms in the face of teacher shortages and absences, help with lunch and recess duty, support COVID-19 protocols, and more.

In December 2021, Learning Forward hosted a webinar with master coaches about coaching during “other duties as assigned.” In the chat box, coaches from around the world shared strategies and support for thriving in these stressful times. Here are some of the themes we heard and examples of how coaches are putting them into practice.



TIME MANAGEMENT

“Two weeks ahead, I schedule time for the coaching things I want to do. I schedule learning, I schedule meeting with other teachers, etc., so then when principals look at my schedule, they don’t book me then.”



CLEAR COMMUNICATION WITH ADMINISTRATORS

“I use what I call an X-Y approach: ‘I can do X, or I can do Y. Either will take time away from the other. Which would you like me to do first?’”



REGULAR CHECK-INS WITH TEACHERS AND ADMINISTRATORS

“I keep a coaching log, making sure I get into the classroom with teachers once a week.”



PEER CONNECTIONS

“I created a cohort of coaches to connect and talk about best practices and needs across the county.”



PRIORITIZATION

“Setting priorities is oh-so-important. If everything is a priority, then nothing is.”



SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL SUPPORT

“I send out a weekly self-care email to teachers.”



PERSPECTIVE

“I try to remember the value of incremental improvement. Even the smallest steps forward have critical value.”

To watch the archived webinar and access related resources, go to learningforward.org/webinar/coaching-during-other-duties-as-assigned/



THE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING ASSOCIATION

504 S. Locust Street
Oxford, OH 45056



THE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING ASSOCIATION

PROFESSIONAL SERVICES



LEARNING FORWARD'S

Professional Learning Planning

WHAT WE DO. We customize support to meet your district's needs by facilitating the visioning and development of a systemwide approach to professional learning focused on 22 essential components.



A systemwide vision, mission, and beliefs for professional learning



Professional learning governance, roles, and responsibilities



A vision for using student, educator, and system data to guide decision making



Ensuring time and resources for collaborative professional learning



Mentoring and induction



Evaluation of professional learning

Set a systemwide vision for adult learning

Systems achieve their greatest potential when they create, scale, sustain, and advocate for coherent systems that connect adult learning and equitable student outcomes.

Contact us to learn how we support system leaders in conceptualizing, designing, and scaling professional learning plans that:

- Develop a systemwide vision for professional learning;
- Set clear roles and responsibilities;
- Build structures to ensure job-embedded collaboration;
- Define key components of a learning system; and
- Change teacher practice and student outcomes.

For more information, contact Sharron Helmke, acting vice president, professional services, at sharron.helmke@learningforward.org | services.learningforward.org