



MEMBER SPOTLIGHT

Mary Decker

WHY I MAKE LEARNING FORWARD'S CONFERENCE A PRIORITY

Mary Decker is associate director of schools for teaching and learning at Franklin Special School District in Franklin, Tennessee. She is also the host committee chair for the 2022 Learning Forward Annual Conference Dec. 4-7 in Nashville, Tennessee. Her previous roles include curriculum and professional learning supervisor, principal, assistant principal, and teacher.



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How she got involved with Learning Forward: Around 2008, when I was a principal in northern California, a mentor introduced me and several of our colleagues to Shirley Hord's work about professional learning communities. It was the first time I realized how impactful professional learning can be. Before that, most of my professional learning experiences were one-size-fits-all, and I realized there's a better way to do it. Then I delved more deeply into the work of [Rebecca and Richard] DuFour. The turning point was when I realized that the best professional learning is directly connected to student outcomes.

How she became a professional learning leader: In 2010, my school's team received the inaugural Shirley Hord Learning Team Award from Learning Forward. We attended Learning Forward's Annual Conference in Atlanta, and that's when it became part of my mission to ensure that everyone I work with has access to high-quality professional learning. When I was a principal, I made sure that any time we got the staff together, we treated it as a professional learning opportunity. The teachers understood that the nuts-and-bolts information would be covered in email so that faculty meetings could be time for learning. I wanted them to walk out saying, "That was worth my time."

Why she joined the 2022 conference host committee: Being on the host committee has been exciting and fun, and it's been an honor to have some input into how this conference will unfold. We had a hand in everything from the conference theme to the proposal scoring process to the conference logistics. I've been gratified and grateful to see how Learning Forward staff have listened to our suggestions.

What she's learned from serving on the host committee: One thing I didn't know is how much Learning Forward likes to highlight the educators in the state in which the conference is being held. Having a little part in that is very affirming. I have also learned a lot from the proposal scoring process, and I've appreciated the chance to have discussions and interactions with thought leaders from around the country. As someone who is responsible for the professional learning of other educators, it's really important to me to have that opportunity to learn.

Advice for conference attendees: After your days of learning, I hope you will spend at least one evening exploring a part of Nashville. Consider branching out from Broadway [entertainment district] — it definitely has incredible live music, but there are so many other cute neighborhoods, incredible restaurants, and things to do. The host committee will give you lots of suggestions of places to go.

Why she encourages learning professionals to attend the conference: So much thought and reflection have gone into ensuring the conference sessions are top-notch. We really want everyone to walk away with a memorable, useful, and actionable experience. ■