



**Practitioners are the experts to whom policymakers listen most. That is where Learning Forward members and stakeholders come in.**

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## **POLICY PERSPECTIVE**

Melinda George

# **EVERY EDUCATOR CAN BE AN ADVOCATE. HERE'S HOW**

**F**or five years, Learning Forward has led the “Every Educator Is an Advocate” campaign to encourage all educators to use their voices and expertise to make an impact on policy at all levels of the education system. Advocacy is using an opportunity to share a story or compelling reasons that a decision should be made, resources or funding should be allocated, or a path forward should be shaped in a particular way. While the job description for an educator is already complex, adding advocacy to your toolbox is important because it enables educators to be a part of the decision-making process rather than having decisions made for them.



To support our campaign, Learning Forward hosted Virtual Advocacy Day in September. The daylong event brought together more than 100 educators to build purpose and excitement for advocacy, share tips and strategies, and prepare for virtual Congressional visits to support funding for Title IIA, the main federal source of funding for professional learning in the U.S. Learning Forward stakeholders participated in virtual visits with U.S. House of Representatives and Senate staff representing 35 states.

Virtual Advocacy Day began with a panel of Learning Forward members and stakeholders who are longtime advocacy leaders: Segun Eubanks, director of the Center for Education Innovation and Improvement at the University of Maryland; Paul Katnik, assistant commissioner in the Office of Educator Quality at the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education; and Barbara Patterson Oden, manager of educational partnerships at the Center for the Collaborative Classroom. These leaders have been on both sides of advocacy conversations, as advocates and as decision-makers. They talked about how they got involved and what strategies worked for them and offered recommendations for other educators.

They highlighted three critical roles in advocacy — lobbyists, education policy advisors, and practitioners — explaining that each brings a different and critical component to making the case for effective education policy.

Lobbyists are professionals whose job is to know and understand the systems of government and how governing proposals are developed. Lobbyists also develop a network of policymakers and their staff members, with whom they connect regularly. The primary job of lobbyists is talking to policymakers to influence policy.

But, as Eubanks noted, “Those lobbyists cannot close the deal on their own.” They need educational policy advisors who understand the research and evidence about the initiatives and changes posed in the policy proposals, including data on whether and how these initiatives have been shown to affect teachers and students. These are researchers, thought leaders, and those who study policy.

Practitioners are the experts to whom policymakers listen most. Educators are leaders in the

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## MEMBER SPOTLIGHT

Betty Wilson-McSwain

### 'WHEN WE LEARN BETTER, WE DO BETTER'

*Betty Wilson-McSwain is assistant superintendent for federal programs and testing for McComb (Mississippi) School District and president of Learning Forward Mississippi.*

**The standards create a universal language for best practices and help us set criteria to ensure we are all learning in ways that really make a difference for students.**

**Why she is invested in professional learning:** I became a Learning Forward member in 2006, but I can't remember a time when I didn't have professional learning. Professional learning can't be separated from anything I do. When I became a vocational director (what would now be called a career and technical education director), my staff and I started doing book studies together and then going to conferences together so that I would know how to support what they learned. I also lead our Early Learning Collaborative funded by the state legislature. The accompanying Collaborative Act of 2013 requires that we have professional learning communities that meet once a month. But in our district, we meet twice a month, and sometimes more, because we want continuous learning. When we learn better, we do better.

**How professional learning is embedded in her current role:** A big part of my job is managing federal programs, so part of what I do is look for available professional development dollars. That includes Title IIA, but Title I and Title V also have professional learning components. We use all of these resources to build the capacity of the people who are working with our scholars. We want to be sure that we use them in ways that make a difference. So, for example, when schools submit Title IIA proposals, we review them to make sure they follow Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning.

**Why she relies on Standards for Professional Learning:** The standards create a universal language for best practices and help us set criteria to ensure we are all learning in ways that really make a difference for students. Otherwise, we could say we were doing professional learning, but it might not be high-quality. That's why the Mississippi Public Schools Accountability Standards, which establish school accreditation policies and procedures, have Process Standard 15, which says that districts must base their professional learning efforts on Learning Forward's standards.

**How Learning Forward Mississippi is building knowledge about the standards:** Our affiliate just partnered with Learning Forward and the Mississippi Department of Education to do a deep dive into the standards because it's important for us to understand the standards to help others apply them. My favorite part was when the Learning Forward facilitators asked us to draw visual analogies of the standards. Each group went about it a different way, but everyone developed a deeper understanding (see p. 77). One thing we're learning is that we use a lot of practices that are consistent with the standards, but we weren't categorizing them this way or using the language of the standards. It's important to become more intentional about that.

**Why Learning Forward Mississippi embodies the Culture of Collaborative Inquiry standard:** Collaboration is essential for spreading best practices. We have a close relationship with the state department of education, including having board members who work in the department. That helped us get involved in writing the standards into the state accreditation standards and designing processes to monitor their implementation. We also have representatives on our board from higher education institutions. Collaboration helps us highlight best practices across the state. For example, in 2010, we decided to begin the Spotlight Schools award to highlight schools that are making growth and how professional learning is part of that. Another way we are building collaboration is through a preconference we organized at the largest state education conference last summer. We're trying to impact all entities to spread the importance of professional learning. ■



**Not being racist is good but assumes a passive posture to a dynamic threat. Being anti-racist is active and recognizes that a knot cannot undo itself.**

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## DISTRICT PERSPECTIVE

Nader I. Twal

# IT'S NOT ENOUGH TO NOT BE RACIST

**W**hen I taught high school, I always started my days early. I was usually in my classroom by 6 a.m. to prepare for the students who arrived at 7:30 a.m. for our first-period class. It was a routine that I grew to cherish because I was able to ease into my day and bring the best version of myself to the students.

But, on Sept. 11, 2001, that routine came to a grinding halt as I walked down the hall to my classroom. A colleague of mine, who taught a few doors down and was already in his classroom, glanced at me with horror in his eyes and said, "A plane just went into one of the Twin Towers." I didn't know what to do with the information but knew that it was significant. I rushed to my classroom and turned on CNN, fully expecting to see a propeller plane that had gone off course or lost control lodged in the side of the building. What I found was far more horrific. And as I watched and tried to make sense of it all, the second plane crashed into the second tower.



As the day unfolded, and it became apparent that the terrorists were of Middle Eastern descent, I knew that life would not look the same moving forward. This moment affirmed every representation that I had ever seen of Middle Eastern men on film and in print.

Though born in the United States and raised in the Middle East, I was deeply ashamed of my Middle Eastern descent because representations of my culture seemed riddled with threat and horror. And this moment sealed that shame for me. I felt a need and sometimes a pressure to explain that "not all of us are like this." Then I felt tides of guilt as I considered any potential racism directed at me as insignificant in light of the horror gripping those trapped in the building and their families awaiting any news. That inner conflict riddled my heart and mind for years to come, so I stayed quiet.

When I think back on the significance of that moment in my identity development, what I have come to realize is that it had the profound effect that it did (well into my adulthood) because it confirmed years of imagery and narratives that I had internalized about myself and my culture. Rather than being portrayed as family-centered, joyful, resilient, artistic, and cultured, Middle Easterners were often memorialized as primitive, aggressive, abusive, and hostile.

In *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* (2017), Beverly Daniel Tatum likens such cultural racism that assumes the inferiority of Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) to smog. There are times when the smog is thick and obvious, like the haze that often befalls the Los Angeles skyline; that kind of pollution is easy to name and avoid. But, at other times, pollution takes a more subtle and invisible form; we inhale it unknowingly. This tainted air infects our lungs and affects our constitution. She argues that though "we may not have polluted the air, ... we need to take responsibility, along with others, for cleaning it up" (Tatum, 2017, p. 66). It is not enough to point out or name the pollution. It is not even enough to avoid it. Instead, she argues that we must actively engage in the process of making the air breathable and

healthy again. Left unexamined, we poison ourselves and others.

Therein lies the heart of anti-racism — an active and intentional effort to name, redress, and reconcile issues of racism that have become covertly accepted as the norm.

Never did this idea make more sense to me than when I realized how much pollution I had imbibed about my own culture. As a Middle Eastern man, I have been inundated with messages and representations of my culture as threatening, primitive, and violent. I had internalized it so deeply that I developed subtle behaviors that would cue others to the fact that I was “safe” or to make them comfortable with my Middle Eastern-ness — because my implicit assumption was that they would not be.

Until one or two years ago, I cannot think of one positive representation of someone who looks like me in film or print media. I am sure that they exist, but they have not historically been centered, so finding them comes as the result of an exhausting search. The question I ask myself frequently

is: Should it be that hard? The answer should be no, of course. But we must also acknowledge the reality that if we are to reframe many of the dominant, negative narratives about BIPOC communities that have saturated our culture, we will need to devote substantial energy and intention to the effort.

That’s why it is not enough to “not be racist.” Not being racist is good but assumes a passive posture to a dynamic threat. On the other hand, being anti-racist is active and recognizes that a knot cannot undo itself. We are knotted up in years of history and years of misrepresentation, so undoing the knot will take work and effort. It will not happen without our concerted focus and intentional investment to right wrongs, redress bias, amplify counternarratives, and, to follow Tatum’s analogy, clean the air.

We need to personally and collectively reclaim the narratives that shape people’s perceptions of our cultures. The stories are ours to tell. The culture is ours to share. To do the real work of anti-racism, we need to

dig into our own histories and critically reflect on how they shaped us, our perceptions of others, and our place in the world. We need to actively learn about other cultures, naming those attributes of culture that challenge our preconceived notions. Most importantly, we need to engage in meaningful dialogue and learning with people who are different from us. This is the type of soul-based professional learning that undergirds the process of rewriting false narratives.

Ultimately, it is up to each of us to assume an active anti-racist stand, as ambassadors of reconciliation, in a world fraught with hurt and division. And my hope in this final installment of my District Perspective column is that we would have the constitution to take that stand. Our students, our community, and our world need it. May we have the personal and collective courage to step into it.

## REFERENCE

**Tatum, B.D. (2017).** *Why are all the Black kids sitting together in the cafeteria?* Basic Books. ■

## POLICY PERSPECTIVE

 / Melinda George

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field who will be impacted directly by the policies. Importantly, they are also constituents and voters to whom policymakers are committed to listening. That is where Learning Forward members and stakeholders come in.

After the panelists spoke, Learning Forward staff shared tips and strategies for advocates to consider in meeting with policymakers. For many Learning Forward stakeholders who participated in individual and small group meetings with Capitol Hill staffers, this was their first such meeting, so Learning Forward shared a virtual meeting protocol. We discussed how to kick off a meeting, make specific asks, follow up with a thank-you, and keep in touch. As a result, advocates were prepared to

share stories and data and discuss the importance of high-quality professional learning and specific asks in support of Title IIA.

Feedback from the meetings was exciting and encouraging. Several Congressional staffers said they have family or friends who are educators, so they understand the need for high-quality professional learning. This helped one staffer and advocate engage in a productive discussion about job-embedded professional learning, instructional coaching on high-quality curriculum materials, the science of reading, new teacher induction support, and National Board teaching initiatives.

Another advocate said that the staffer she met with “expressed her commitment to educators and

education and shared her belief in the impact of high-quality professional learning. She also asked to connect further to learn more about the impact of professional learning.”

However, not all the staff reported support for Title IIA. One staffer said that, even though the senator she works for supported the legislation and increased funding, the senator was unwilling to vote for it because it was viewed as politically polarizing.

Many of the advocates told us that they valued the experience and would do it again. They and all Learning Forward stakeholders will get the chance when we host another Virtual Advocacy Day in spring 2023. Stay tuned for details, and keep up the great advocacy work. ■