



# TPOV Collection

## Learning Forward Academy Class of 2021



# Preface

## Academy Class of 2021 Coaches



## Ramona Coleman & Stacy Winslow

The Learning Forward Academy Class of 2021, graduation in December 2022, has faced difficulties that no other Academy Class had previously faced. As a nation, when we closed schools in March of 2020, educators were called upon to innovate and learn at lightning speeds. When we began our journey together with the 2019 theme of CSI - Commitment Sparks Inspiration - we had no idea the ways in which we would be tested in our commitments to not only this Academy work but to education as a whole.

As coaches, there were times when we had to dig deep to stay committed to implementing the Academy agenda. While it was sometimes difficult to make space for this work, each and every time we gathered, we were reminded of the power of the tools we were learning and how the critical skills of collaboration, critical thinking, communication, and creativity would push us through our productive struggle.

More importantly, we were both comforted and inspired to know that we were in the midst of supporting highly effective leaders that were addressing challenges and learning opportunities across the country to educate ALL students in the learning environment of what many educators referred to as our “new normal.” Our 2021 Academy team members were committed and immersed in the work of problem-solving for impactful student outcomes.

This Academy group has had to consciously and unconsciously revisit their “why” over and over again, and these TPoVs are a testament to what we have learned, endured, and overcome. We stand in humble admiration of this group of educators and congratulate each of you on this accomplishment with the knowledge that we have learned as much from you as you have from us! Congratulations, and know that your continued leadership and courage in the face of challenges and barriers is the very thing that the field of education continues to need as we head into the uncharted waters of the future

# Acknowledgements

For the Academy to be successful, it takes a team. These valued Learning Forward colleagues supported the Academy in many ways, some visible and some invisible.

Frederick Brown	President/CEO
Melinda George	Chief Policy Officer
Michelle Bowman	Vice President, Networks & Continuous Improvement
Kristin Buehrig	Vice President, Conference Programs
Shannon Bogle	Director, Networks & Academy
Ramona Coleman	Academy Coach 2021
Stacy Winslow	Academy Coach 2021
Joellen Killion	Senior Advisor
Carrie Freundlich	VP Conference Operations
LF Foundation Board	Scholarship Awardees Support



Diana Alt  
Executive Director of Talent Development  
Rockford Public Schools #205

### **The Value of Being an Adult Learner and the Psychology of Success**

How many times do we reflect on our success in our job and career? Some of those reflective questions may be: Have I made a difference in my work? Have I achieved any of my vision or goals? Did I have a vision and goals? Do I achieve the results I intend? Am I satisfied with my performance? Do I receive the feedback that I need to improve? It seems we may need to have a critical conversation with ourselves to glean some answers to these questions. Once we determine potential answers, we can then decide on what to do next in helping ourselves move forward.

The truth is that we spend time suffering existentially as we contemplate what we need to overcome and become better in our craft. How can I invest in my education and career growth? What else can I do? Am I doing enough? What is enough? Whatever your questions are, you owe it to yourself to nurture your passion and turn it into a vision. Identify four key concepts: need, knowledge, skill and results. Identifying what you need to attain your vision and goals will be your starting point. Then, you have to determine what you need to know in order to reach your goals. Practical application of the knowledge and skills you learned is the most important in this process. Finally, reviewing and reflecting on your results will show you the path to success.

Considering these key concepts, as a learner we must take chances and risks for the sake of our professional growth. We should consider that nothing in life is worthwhile unless you take risks. I am sure your experiences and parts of your life journey would indicate that risk-taking is an unpredictable and scary action. However, we have to not be fearful of failure. Failure is the greatest teacher; failure is the most humbling experience; failure is most frustrating and disappointing; failure is expected. If you don't fail you have not tried. In order to attain something, you have never achieved, you have to do something you have never done. This risk takes faith in your abilities and capabilities. You have to leave your comfort zone and learn the most during this time. Every failure is one step closer to success. Your career may never be a straight path. Becoming that life-time learner will help you accept and face the cycle of instability that will lead to your success.

Our students in the classroom need us, as adult learners, to risk, fail and succeed. We have to learn how to invest in ourselves so that we can support others. During these most challenging times, our students expect us to become the leaders, role models and teachers that can provide them with the psychology of success; showing them what it means to be successful. The chances we take, the learning we impose, and the embrace of failure will breed the path to success. Help them be determined to find their way by being the role model they so much deserve. Build the foundation of learning by showing the results of growth. Be disciplined to build the foundations for success for every student. Show them and speak to them about how to be prideful, confident, resilient, and relentless in their work. Teach them that we need to believe in and recognize success in order to achieve success.

In order to help improve other's lives, you first must improve your own life. Get to know and understand yourself. We have to learn how to invest in ourselves so that we can support others.

Let's look first at the difference between talent and excelling. Talent is naturally obtained, an inherited capacity or an innate capability. Excelling is much more of an actionable learning experience. Developing your skill takes hours of learning your craft on a much deeper level. Without ongoing skill training and/or career development believe that talent will fail you at some point. Be determined to learn all you can. Be tactical about the type of support you need or request within your own professional growth. Identify and be explicit about your goals and aspirations for success. Be true to yourself. Reflect and focus on your specific needs. Be vulnerable. Learning is an intended action for improvement, not your destiny.

Those who are successful understand, value and appreciate learning. They take control over their own learning trajectory and seek out how to relate their learning to their work. They anticipate the need to make their learning relevant to their performance competencies. Learners are self-aware and recognize the cycle of success: the need to fail, analyze, reorganize and plan. Failure should be the motivator to learn what it is you need and what things you should abandon. In conclusion, the choice is yours. Michael Jordan once said:

*"I've missed more than 9,000 shots in my career. I've lost almost 300 games. Twenty-six times, I've been trusted to take the game-winning shot and missed. I've failed over and over and over again in my life. And that is why I succeed."*



Kim Becan  
Executive Director for Elementary Education  
Northwest ISD

Fair and equal are not the same thing. This is something I hear often when it comes to discipline in schools, and I believe it 110%. The problem is that while I hear it often, I do not see discipline approaches that support it. We are not walking the talk. When analyzing discipline data, it doesn't take long to realize that there is a disproportionate number of discipline referrals for students with special needs, males and students of color.

I believe this is a systemic problem. It all starts with relationships and getting to know each and every child. When speaking with administrators at the end of the 21-22 school year, many noted that behavior was the number one challenge for the school year and that teachers needed more tools for their tool chest. However, I do not feel that additional tools or programs are the answer.

The work of Dan St. Romain has had a profound influence on me. Dan is an educational consultant and national speaker who is "passionate about helping individuals shift their perspective on discipline, understanding the best ways to provide support given the challenges posed in today's society".

In his book, *Teach Skills and Break Habits*, Dan dives into the connections between educator practices and student behavior. As Dan states in his letter to the reader: "Behavior is complicated. And when we try to simplify it, we often miss the mark. I believe this is the frustration of many teachers who have been given simple strategies for complex behaviors."

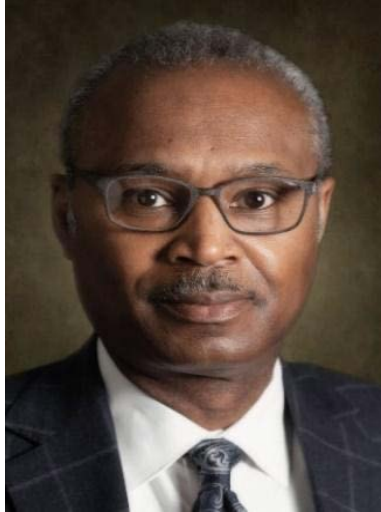
We can spend a fortune on the newest system, but to effectively promote change we all need devoted time to connect with and truly get to know each child and determine which skills must be explicitly taught to help them succeed in school and life. These skills include academic skills, as well as social and behavioral skills. If we continue doing what we have always done, we will continue to struggle with increased behaviors, disruptions to the classroom and learning as well as stressed out teachers who are leaving the profession.

This is one of many areas we must go slow to go fast. There is no quick fix, no revolutionary program for overnight success. But, with intentional time spent on getting to know students and teaching high impact social/behavioral skills, we can change the perspective of teachers

when it comes to discipline and change behaviors in our students and classrooms. Additionally, if we know that student-teacher relationships have an effect size of .52 (Hattie, 2012) on student achievement, our time would be well spent on forming better relationships.

Hattie, J. (2012). *Visible learning for teachers: Maximizing impact on learning*. London, UK: Routledge.

Romain, S. D. (2018). *Teach skills and break habits: Growth mindsets for better behavior in the classroom*. National Center for Youth Issues.



Charles Cammack, Jr.  
Chief Operations Officer, Fort Wayne Community Schools

Friday, March 13, 2020, I learned that my wife Michelle and I had possibly been exposed to the COVID-19 virus and immediately placed in quarantine. Wednesday, March 11, 2020 I had to go on television to announce to the community that Fort Wayne Community Schools would be closing with no idea of whether or not school would reopen. Needless to say, the last 63 days have been a very trying time.

The transition from driving to work to walking downstairs to my basement office has been in some ways familiar and in some ways unsettling. The familiar, well, most days I get dressed as if I am going to the office and do not see Michelle, who is also working from home, until I immerse from the “luxury level 8 to 10 hours later”. The unsettling? I did not know what zoom was but now it has become an invaluable lifeline. Allowing the business of the district to continue on into the uncertain future.

When I started working for Fort Wayne Community Schools as Human Resources Director, I told my staff I only had three rules they had to comply with to be successful. They seem even more important now than 12 years ago. As we cannot be together in the workplace, working side by side or face to face, I must:

1. Keep people informed, it avoids irritation and mistakes

Information is power or that is what insecure people believe. The problem with that is more things get done, when more things are shared. Very few things are confidential, or at least as confidential as you might think.

2. Treat people the way you want to be treated.



“Even when I am right in my opinion, I can be wrong in my approach.” (Jen Weaver)

The golden rule has a way of curing all of that.

3. Always do the right thing, not the convenient thing. Not the expediate thing. The right thing.

“To know what is right and not do it is the worse cowardness” (Confucius)

Honesty and integrity, never go outside of style. They are not always convenient; at times they can be interpreted as bold. At the end of the day when you look into the mirror, before you lay your head down on your pillow, you may sleep in peace, no matter the outcome.

I tell managers and other employees, if they follow these rules, they will not get into trouble with me. These are very simple guidelines, but they come as a result of 44 years of workplace experience.



Julie Cantillon  
Associate Director of Schools  
Diocese of San Diego

### **Leveraging Teacher Leadership in Catholic School Systems**

The growing interest in teacher leadership suggests that systematic support of teacher leadership initiatives is both valuable and necessary. Teacher leaders positively impact school decision-making, improve student and teacher learning, and increase teacher retention. A 2017 study conducted by the New Teacher Center and the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education analyzed a variety of instructional leadership strategies and concluded that effective school leadership actively involves teachers in decision-making, and that doing so is directly tied to higher student achievement (New Teacher Center, 2017). The development of teacher leadership opportunities creates a much-needed career pathway for high-quality teachers. Teachers currently leaving the profession cite “a lack of career growth opportunities as a motivating factor due to the fact that teaching does not typically allow for leadership advancement opportunities through career lattices” (Teachers United, 2018). Teacher leader roles help address these concerns because they give effective teacher leaders the opportunity to continue teaching while also having significant leadership roles and developing new skill sets.

A systematic process to develop teacher leaders would support the current Catholic school parish school governance model. Catholic school principals in parish schools currently have an overwhelming number of responsibilities, including instructional leader, faith leader, and director of operations. A distributed leadership model enables the school to capitalize on the skills of others and supports teachers who seek out more formal leadership responsibilities to maximize the impact on students (Boyle, Sullivan, Huizar, Lia, Morten, Pena, 2018). Furthermore, since teachers who are leaving the teaching profession cite a lack of career growth opportunities (Teachers United, 2018), this issue may be exacerbated in the Catholic school context as there are even fewer pathways for leadership advancement.

In the Diocese of San Diego, teacher leadership is central to strengthening instruction, facilitating collaboration between schools, and improving student learning. At the diocesan level, one of the roles teachers have the opportunity to serve in is a member of the *Teacher Liaison Team*. This team works to improve learning for all students by increasing educator capacity throughout the diocese through the facilitation of professional learning aligned to our

diocesan professional learning plan. Teachers who serve at the diocesan level go through an application and interview process and they receive stipends for their work. Since teachers are employees of each school, and not the diocese, teachers also have to have principal support in order to participate in diocesan leadership opportunities. This can sometimes be a barrier to participation, depending on many factors, including a principal's relationship with the diocesan central office and the value they place on collaborative leadership opportunities.

Leadership in Catholic education should be more broadly understood to include systematic leadership development at all levels. The complexities inherent in Catholic school leadership require a strategic application of the distributive leadership approach to support the long-term sustainability and stability of Catholic schools. Identifying competencies and developing a common framework for Catholic school teacher leaders would help to provide guidance and structure to diocesan offices as they seek to promote distributive leadership models in Catholic schools.



Joe Clark, Ed.D.  
Director of Performing and Visual Arts  
Spring Independent School District

### **Professional/Personal Growth Plan**

I have a confession. I've been stealing at work. I've been stealing at work during the entire pandemic shut down and to this day, no one has caught me. To be fair, I only just now caught myself as I began writing this.

As our district began closing schools during the pandemic, my team and I went into a frenzy of productivity. We developed safety plans, created virtual learning options, and practically reinvented the wheel overnight for our students and families. We found ways to feed them, give them supplies, and check out computers all while 6 feet apart. This work was incredibly important, but this is not our work. This "reactionary productivity" feels great because you can immediately see the positive impact, however, this work alone will not get our students where they need to be. It's time for our reset.

Clayton Christensen said "One or two actions become a behavior. Left unchecked, they become the culture." Put more bluntly, Christensen also said "The road to Hell is a gradual one."

#### **Pay Yourself First**

Personal finance teaches us to pay ourselves first and invest a portion of our income first before any spending. Those funds then quickly grow through the power of compounding interest. These numbers are real, and we can visually see the rewards of our efforts.

The same disciplined routine works in our professional growth. The work that will grow us professionally is the work we do at 5:00am, in the still quiet of our mind and self-reflections. This investment is much harder to track and always the first to be abandoned in times of crises.

**“You can only produce at the highest level you consume”**

Consistently producing at the highest quality level requires an equal or higher level of quality consumption. This can be applied to a diet, exercise, professional conversations/collaborations, the level of literature that you’re reading, or the relationships you have. Investing in your professional growth first is not enough. The quality of the investment determines the outcome.

Just as money grows quicker with the magic of compounding interest, the same is true for both good deeds as well as bad.

During the pandemic, I had been stealing time, focus and opportunity from the deep work in my personal learning plan for reactionary productivity. We must evaluate what we are consuming for our bodies and our minds and ensure that it aligns with our professional/personal learning plan. There must be a balance of investing in ourselves first and raising the quality of our consumptions.



*Austin Couch  
Compliance Officer  
Fort Wayne Community Schools*

**Wisdom, There at the Core  
My Personal Point of View / Core Value**

Everything I have ever attempted, and ultimately whether I failed or succeeded, is a direct result of lessons from my dad. The lessons are at the core of my belief system as a person and now as a leader. I lost my dad too early for him to fully share his wisdom and to show me how it is all connected as an adult. Because of my proclivity for seeing the connections in life through analogies, I am able to reflect on these lessons from my dad rather simplistically through the one thing we both shared passionately- the game of baseball. It is the single most important connection in my life to my dad. Within it exists the far more intricate details of the lessons that make them so powerful in terms of teachable moments.

I do not remember when the lessons truly began but it is clear to me now that it was more than teaching a young boy how to catch, throw, and hit a baseball. I have spectacularly vivid memories of those things. I can hear the ball slapping against leather; the crisp crack of a bat meeting the ball; I feel the seams, stitches, and sweat. When I concentrate on all of these together, I can relive the moments playing the game as a child or a younger man. However, what I have come to realize about these memories is that they actually represent everything I have ever needed to know in terms of being an adult and the idea of leadership. In a profound way, I think it is what my dad intended.

Arguably, the game focuses predominantly on a ball. In much the same way that critical eyes are on a leader of an organization, all eyes are on the ball. The same ball is seen through everyone's eyes differently and each is as important and pivotal to the outcome as the next. A player's interaction with a ball is taken with such care but is seemingly oversimplified and overlooked by spectators. Behind the players' eyes and through their lens there is a keen focus and intense concentration unique to their position as they play out every scenario and possible outcome of the next play. A constant reflection of experiences exists in an endless cycle of tiny, purposeful assessments. Everyone watches the ball and awaits a decision. Implementation begins and, in an instant, everything is in motion. There is always second-guessing but the

anticipation is overwhelming. This begins to exemplify just a few of the lessons that my dad taught me without saying a word about leadership.

Firstly, there is the sacrifice that my father exemplified throughout my childhood. He spent hours with me seemingly every night of my childhood. He sacrificed his time and gave to me selfishly. Without saying a word, he demonstrated that giving of yourself is rewarding if you are patient enough to see how it pays off in the end. A leader sacrifices.

The game of baseball is a model in patience. My dad was patient through every failed curveball, every missed groundball, or every pitch that missed its mark causing my dad to retrieve yet another errant throw. He knew what I wanted to do, and he let me fail and fail again. As a leader, coaching me, guiding me with reflective questions until I truly felt that moment when it all came together. Patience exemplified as it is in leadership not only in our own development but also in the work, we do with others is essential. I have never forgotten that. A leader is patient.

My dad taught me that it was good to have appropriate vision. Seeing the entire field is a critical skill but it is equally important to know where to focus more narrowly. Things creep into the periphery and having the ability to see things in their entirety can be tricky. As my dad taught, he relayed how important it is to see myself from within and as a part of the big picture. With this vision, I needed to be able to have confidence in my thoughts and actions. He shared what it meant to have this true vision. He always wanted me to understand the importance of seeing myself where I am, where I wanted to be, or how I planned to get there. Leaders need to see themselves in this manner too. Leaders have vision.

There was humility in these lessons as well. It is easy to forget that you are not just playing a game inside your head but rather, you are performing on full display; exposed with every mistake you make for all to see. Even after enduring that, you have to get back out there and do it again and again, exposed with a little less confidence in your ability. Even as leaders on our best days, we are exposed for our every action, word, or thought and if there is no humility in this, there may be even less understanding of the big picture. Leaders are humble.

Every game of catch was a cycle of assessment, feedback, and coaching. It happened over and over again. It never ended. Every swing of a bat was the same process. Positioning and repositioning. Year after year self-analyzing and tweaking. Talking and listening, but most importantly it was asking questions that he would never answer for me. As an adult, there is value in this same cycle. Those who perform without reflection are doomed to repeat mistakes and stifle growth. Leaders are learners.

There were things in these lessons that many do not expect to find in the early years of acquiring a talent. There was accountability to yourself and to others. The game is played psychologically and with your individual achievements. You are accountable to your own actions. You are also accountable to a team where people count on one another. You are judged by your wins and your losses both individually and as a team. It could not connect any

more clearly to life and leadership no matter which segment you cut from a memory. Leaders are accountable.

The lessons are endless. The give and take of every action within the game. The pride you take in a job well done is important and it is equally important to let others, the fans, and coworkers, share in that. The game lets you experience the tears that accompany defeat and loss. There is an emotional sting that comes from losing and failing. Loss and failure are present to show you how to learn from it and that helps shape who you are and what you do next. Leaders are unflappable.

Baseball is an exquisite metaphor for life and the complexity of the lessons taken from it are as easily shared with a child as they are with an adult. When I can look in the mirror, I see years replayed in sun blotched skin, deep lines, and scars; it is there too in this perfect baseball analogy that represents so much more. Yes, the leathery cowhide surface bears the scars of foul balls, scratches from fences, and scuffs from each bounce in the dirt. It is visibly worn and tattered as the seams come loose at the stitches. Nevertheless, at the core, there is a constant that is hidden but ever-present. That core is there surrounded by events and decisions that have affected its trajectory. With every toss or beating the ball took, the core withstood. That core carries the wisdom of every experience. It is what my dad shared with me, and it is what guides me even today. My dad taught me that there is wisdom in the game, and it is forever, symbolically, etched in my mind as an adult and the perfect metaphor for my core value...Wisdom.





Kevin Dick  
Principal  
R.F. Pettigrew Elementary School

### **What's Best for Kids?**

As I am drawing toward the end of my educational career, I often stop and reflect back on specific incidents or issues that I addressed, that seemed ALL-INCLUSIVE and ALL-ENCOMPASSING at the time, but as time goes on, they pale by the light of what is relevant in this time and place, the present. Many of these issues involved conflict and attempts to remedy this conflict. Many of them involved emotions, often emotions that were elicited from an action or a response to something else and attempts to move away from emotional reactions and responses, to finding a more balanced and regulated approach to open dialogue and discussion. In the present time and place, many begin with an electronic form of communication (e-mail, written communication, text), but are addressed much better when two parties meet, either face to face, or at the least, with direct phone contact.

In the course of these actions, reactions, communication, responses and discussions, one mantra has come forward in my life, and it is one that I continue to hold myself to, as I hold the others whom I lead to it as well. In schools, my belief is that all our actions should be directed and related to one statement of purpose and intent, that is, all we do should be aimed at "WHAT'S BEST FOR KIDS".

By no means is this saying a unique one to me, nor is it particularly insightful or inspiring. However, if we wake up each morning with this thought, plan each day at school, and deal with all individuals at school in such a way that this becomes our motivating factor and our directing purpose, to intently focus our actions, words, thoughts and intentions on this simple phrase, we will make a concerted effort at doing our best to impact our students lives in the most positive manner possible. We will strive to collaborate together, to work hard as individuals and groups, to communicate clearly and accurately so others will understand our

intentions and actions, and to seek to address and remedy issues that arise with a common theme, that being -- our focus is to think, plan, analyze and act within the context of doing everything with our eyes on , “What’s best for kids?” If the response to that questions says that what we are contemplating to embark on, or what we are currently engaged with, answers the question that what we do and are doing is “best for kids”, then we let nothing stand in our way to accomplish our tasks. It can be a real unifying message, while simple, yet clarifying and raising all expectations of ourselves and our colleagues, to keep the important things in our work, the important things.

A recent conflict in my school setting brings to mind this focus, and a practical sense of its application. This conflict began in a single classroom, when the primary teacher was absent for a few days due to a personal medical emergency, and the students involved became embroiled in an intense recess activity that led to poor choices, inappropriate communication and hard feelings between the parties. When the teacher returned, all the issues came to light, which involved some inaccurate reporting of incidents by some students, as well as inappropriate communication in person, in writing, and on social media platforms. This was all taken home, so parents became involved and became polarized toward what had happened and who had done what. There were inaccuracies in what was reported, and parents began reaching out to other parents, other staff members became involved beyond just the original classroom, and there was overall, a sense of insecurity and shattered community. Where at one point, this classroom community had been strong and vibrant, now it was fractured, suspicious and traumatized. How do we resolve this situation, move forward, and keep the important things the important things?

Myself and my colleague administrator decided to do the following – first we listened to the thoughts and feelings of parents who reached out to us. The classroom teacher talked to individual students and got their story, and then imposed some activity restrictions during recess and other unsupervised times of the day. The administrators met with and listened to the students, individually, not validating any statements nor indicating any actions that would be taken. Then, we met with parents who reached out and were actively involved in the issue at hand. A general meeting was then held with all the students involved, to outline the expectations that this classroom would be doing moving forward. Also, we directed the teacher to take time in a daily classroom meeting and as the issues arose during the day, to stop, direct attention to the issue at hand (maybe an action between students, words exchanged, etc.) and deal with it, immediately, as a learning experience. We did discuss the implications that may be at risk in the future for this group, if they can’t figure out how to meet our expectations of them as members of this community.

This meeting raised another round of concerns with some parents, so it was important for us, as school leaders, to clarify our intentions, again allow communication to be two-way so they could be heard, and work in the context of a learning experience for our students, as they were watching the reactions of all adults surrounding this issue. As we talked to students, talked to parents, and kept our focus on what is best for the students at hand, we were able to resolve the immediate situation, and focus on the interest of helping our students become better individuals from what they can learn about this issue and all the actions that swirled around

it. By keeping the main thing, the main thing, there was a slowdown in academic learning in this classroom, but what was best for kids at that point was to focus on their social and group learning, and to take the time to again, analyze, discuss openly, listen and hear, while talking and being heard by all the other parties. The best thing at this time was not what they could learn from the books, but rather what they could learn from each other and together, in a social context. This was what was best for the kids, and we worked as teachers, other staff, students, parents and administrators to keep that in our focus, and teach the students some important life lessons, where they learned the implications of inappropriate actions, how to resolve these issues, and to listen to all and communicate clearly. What was “Best For Kids” was to focus on this temporary issue, to impact their long-term lives.

Temporary setbacks and small issues can seem to dominate our attention and our focus, and attempt to draw us into a sense of drama and attempt to persuade us to lose our concentration on the main thing of “What’s best for kids?” We need to continue to plan, act and reflect within the context of doing what’s best for our students. Our students are our most important commodity in the economy of school, and we must leverage all our other capacities and our activities to keep them at the heart and center of all our work, as they always have been.

Kayla Duncan  
Professional Learning Specialist  
Forsyth County Schools

### **Through Another's Eyes**

Across the nation, schools have returned to 'normal,' yet there are many circumstances present that was not in place pre-pandemic. We've seen the headlines about decreased proficiency on standardized tests, the growing teacher shortage, rising parent expectations, and the mounting anxiety of educators and students. These headlines paint a gloomy picture of public education. But as educators and professional learning professionals, there is a powerful yet simple process we can use to address these hairy problems - design thinking. Strategically and intentionally going through the design thinking process can allow a person, team, or district to see these problems through another's eyes and understand the problem from a different perspective. Before we can dismiss the students as distant or apathetic, parents as unruly, or teachers as quiet quitters, we must do as the saying goes and "walk a mile in their shoes."

Over the past six years, I have had the opportunity to support schools in the design thinking process. I have helped conduct and analyze interviews with thousands of students, teachers, and parents. No matter what year, pre-pandemic or now, the outcome is the interviewers gain deep insight and enjoy connecting with these stakeholder groups at such a deep level. The interviewees are incredibly grateful for the opportunity to share their perspectives and have their voices heard. As educators, we must remember our voices are but one in the learning journey. With the immense pressures we faced during the pandemic, we cannot navigate this journey alone and have to engage more intentionally with all members of the learning community. Design Thinking is an effective way to make this happen.

This process cannot happen in a day or even a week. It takes time and dedication from a committed group. We might have to sacrifice or disregard what we thought should happen or is best based on evidence that comes out, and we cannot take the findings personally. Perspective is reality, and through empathy, we must remember we seek to understand our stakeholders' views, not affirm our beliefs. To truly empathize, the group must move beyond the simple survey and move into the interview process to evoke stories. Allow participants to share their lived experiences and go off on tangents based on what others in the group said. Couple this with observations so you can experience the student's or teacher's day-to-day. After we have enough information to craft a perspective, we must analyze the data and define the areas to celebrate and enhance based on our findings. This analysis is in-depth and cannot be rushed. The team must be committed to going through *all* data and allow enough time to do this thoroughly. Once we're through this intensive process, we must dispel the notions of what can or can't be in education and embrace moonshot thinking. Dispel judgment and think of what can be! We never know what can happen if we don't allow ourselves to dream. Ideating is about radical ideas, and all ideas count. Then through carefully crafted criteria, we can come back down to earth and think about what we can prototype and test - at a small scale - that will help us solve those hairy problems we have defined. It is paramount we don't rush the process and implement our ideas schoolwide. We have to acknowledge there are barriers to implementation and challenges to work out. False starts or rushed implementation can increase feelings of frustration and actually move our progress backward.

Thinking about what can be and creating solutions based on the needs of our community excites me. We have to be creative - maybe inside the box instead of outside - but this process can help us move

from a feeling of consternation back to optimism. Educators joined the profession because they have a passion for helping the next generation and move into administration and working with adults because they want to help others be the best they can be. We want to move the needle, and to do that, we must have all people working together. The Design Thinking process excites me because I have seen how it can bring about unique and powerful insights that motivate schools to embrace a new vision of reality, and I feel blessed to be part of this journey with them.



Ayesha Farag, Ph.D

Assistant Superintendent for Elementary Education  
Newton Public Schools

**Creating a Culture for Learning  
Belonging. Engagement. Joy. Challenge.**

These words fuel my work as an educator and describe the environments I strive to cultivate for all students and adults through my work as an educational leader. I once heard it said that the most important thing a leader does is create and sustain a positive culture. It is indeed a critical foundational priority. Whether leading at the building or district level, I believe an essential responsibility is to create the conditions for all humans in our system to make connections, learn, and grow.

While the elements of belonging, engagement, joy, and challenge are interrelated and share a synergistic quality, each has defining characteristics that help to define their importance and observable indicators of their presence. Articulating and routinely revisiting the essence of these characteristics is important to sustain focus, assess progress, and align action to support these important foundational aspects of our school and district culture for students and adults alike.

***Belonging:*** When I was a principal, a team of teachers with whom I worked were once taken aback when a child's parents confronted them at the fall conference with the questions, "Do you *like* my child? What do you like about him?" While few come out and ask this directly, the question captures a desire at the heart of every person's hopes as a member of a given community--to experience a sense of belonging and to be appreciated for the person they are, to be able to show up as their authentic self and be comfortable doing so. This requires attention to the development of trusting relationships to assure every person is known and experiences a sense of genuine connection and care with others. I've always loved the E.E. Cummings quote, "We do not believe in ourselves until someone reveals that deep inside us something is valuable, worth listening to, worthy of our trust, sacred to our touch. Once we believe in ourselves, we can risk curiosity, wonder, spontaneous delight, or any experience that

reveals the human spirit.” Environments of care, connection, and belonging foster the motivation, investment, and risk-taking necessary for learning.

**Engagement:** A seemingly endless variety of resources detail the importance of engagement in fostering learning and growth. Numerous teacher evaluation models include measures of student engagement as indicators of effective practice. While these resources often focus most strongly on indicators of *student* engagement, it is important for school and district leaders to consider the factors that foster intellectual and emotional engagement for children and adults alike. Assuring relevance of skills and content, providing opportunities for social interaction and collective meaning-making, offering choice and autonomy foster motivation by making learning and participation meaningful and worthwhile.

**Joy:** While some equate joy with *fun*, I think about joy as a sense of pleasure and satisfaction that come from experiences and environments that are deeply rewarding and heartening. Joy comes from connection. It comes from relevant learning experiences and challenges. It comes from tasks that we find motivating and interesting. And yes, joy comes from things that we find fun. As a district leader, I think about the *quality* of the school, teaching, and learning experiences we are striving to build for all. Are our schools’ places where children and adults experience joy in their interactions and work? Joy brings a sense of peace, exhilaration, delight and happiness that fuels our motivation and perseverance, even in the face of challenge.

**Challenge:** Learning thrives in environments of appropriate challenge. The process of grappling with new ideas and concepts, practicing skills, and persevering through difficult tasks is not only satisfying, but a critical process necessary to support new learning. We create the conditions for productive struggle when we tailor learning experiences to allow people of all ages to build upon their existing knowledge, explore new ideas, practice new skills, and utilize personalized feedback and support to strengthen their meaning-making and skill acquisition. “Just right” challenges--those which are not too easy nor too difficult--spark our innate curiosity and stretch us to learn and grow.

It is important to emphasize that creating environments of belonging, engagement, joy, and challenge for *all* students and adults necessitates both commitment and action to promoting equity in our schools. We must be willing to acknowledge longstanding patterns of inequitable schooling experiences and outcomes that have disproportionately impacted Black and Brown students and students from other marginalized populations. We must be deliberate in our focus and action to ensure that our policies, practices, and decisions are responsive to the needs of our diverse communities and relentless in our efforts to promote truly inclusive cultures of learning in which people of all backgrounds flourish.

All students, families, and staff members deserve a school experience that supports their growth as a learner, fosters their connections with others, and invests in them to develop the attitudes, skills, and knowledge necessary to be happy, healthy, engaged, and successful. Deliberate cultivation of belonging, joy, engagement, and challenge through an equity-focused lens is essential to supporting thriving learning environments.



Laura Garland  
Principal  
Kaneland CUSD #302

### **Inclusive Education**

Despite the fact that public school districts are required by federal law to educate students with disabilities in regular classrooms, with their nondisabled peers, in the school they would attend if not disabled, to the maximum extent appropriate, many students with disabilities continue to be denied this right. They are placed in far too restrictive settings and made to prove they have made enough progress to warrant time in a general education setting. When students with disabilities are fortunate enough to gain access to a general education setting, it is often without the necessary supplemental aids and services they need to be successful. Furthermore, the environments they enter are often inflexible and built only for the student who can learn within the dictated timetable of a basal reading series, who can regulate their emotions in accordance with a research-based developmental chart and who can meet arbitrary expectations established within a given classroom. Essentially, they are set up to fail, often by well-intentioned educators who simply do not have the training, resources or time necessary to support their needs. This injustice drives my work, both personally and professionally, to build structures and systems that meet the needs of all learners, rather than maintaining outdated structures and systems that only meet the needs of a few.

Inclusive education is an area of passion for me as an educator, but also as a mother. My oldest son, Drew, was born with Down syndrome. My attitudes and beliefs surrounding inclusive education come from a fierce desire to give my child what every parent wants, a chance at a life full of meaning, value, worth, love, happiness, passion, success and opportunity. Educating him in an artificial learning environment where he was sheltered from typically developing peers and exposed to lowered expectations was not an option. Throughout the course of Drew's formal education, we were fortunate to work with a school district that supported a placement of 80% or more of his day in general education. Although he was happy and had kind and accepting peers and teachers, he did most of his learning one on one with his paraprofessional in the hallway or a corner of the classroom, not alongside non-disabled peers. I mistakenly thought that because he was "in the room", this was Inclusion.



What I have come to understand is that inclusive classrooms are characterized by practices and attitudes that ensure all learners get the right support to help them develop their talents and achieve their goals and that all learners feel welcome and valued. Successful inclusive experiences rest on the fundamental belief that students with disabilities are as competent as those without. When education is truly inclusive, all learners benefit, not only those with disabilities. My beliefs are supported by over 30 years of research showing that inclusive systems provide a better-quality education for all children and respect and understanding of differences grows when students of diverse abilities play, socialize, and learn together.

I strongly believe that when education is more inclusive, so too are concepts of civic participation, employment, and community life. As Dr. Temple Grandin states, "The world *NEEDS* different kinds of minds to work together."



**Leah Glashow-Mandel**

Director of Professional Learning  
Catalina Foothills School District

### **Portrait of a Learner**

In the fall of 2018, I lost a dear friend, mentor, and colleague – a woman I was privileged to spend much of my career learning from and alongside – to ovarian cancer. Whenever I participate in or facilitate a workshop, my mind inevitably drifts to an image of Hedwig, scribbling intermittently on a yellow legal pad, brow furrowed, eyes searching upward, lips moving in silent conversation with herself. She disregarded margins, rarely erased, paused frequently to capture others' ideas in quotation marks, and vigorously drew arrows and circles for emphasis and connections.

Her pages were peppered with question marks, and when she spoke, her sentences almost always began with, "I'm wondering if..." or "What would it look like when...?" She offered her own lessons as specimens to be examined under the microscope of the workshop laboratory, and she willingly scrapped tried-and-true assessments to experiment with different approaches suggested by a student teacher or colleague. While many of us would complain about being made to learn "the same" strategies year after year, Hedwig approached every topic as though she were seeing it for the first time, but through the lens of her accumulated wisdom. She was thoughtful and egoless, tirelessly curious. She was a perennial learner: comfortable in the ambiguity of not knowing, and humble in acknowledging the limits of her own expertise.

In the classroom, Hedwig's students became her teachers, and their work became her texts. She studied their reactions to structures, strategies, and tasks; methodically analyzed their performances; and made corresponding course corrections. She was transparent in acknowledging when a process was not working and relied on her students' insights when making adjustments. Hedwig felt no pressure to maintain the "man behind the curtain" mystique that so many educators believe is necessary, and both she and her students learned more because of it.

Our professional learning team often joked about bottling Hedwig's mindset and sprinkling it like fairy dust on our colleagues to magically transform them into learners. Since Hedwig's passing, I frequently reflect on her impact as a teacher and learner and how, in the absence of magic, we might inspire others to engage in learning with that same eagerness and introspection.

If we are to cultivate learners, we must create the conditions that make wonder, tension, and reflection possible. This is not a radical perspective, yet many school systems unwittingly construct barriers that discourage educator learning before it even begins. Benchmark exams, pacing guides, evaluation systems, discipline matrices, and curricular programs, however well-meaning, often encourage conformity rather than creativity. Why should a third-grade teacher indulge her curiosity in project-based learning if she knows she has to follow her team's lesson plans, as written? Why would a high school math teacher take a risk with collaborative learning structures if the expectation is a quiet, "orderly" classroom?

A learning teacher is the product of a learning *system*. As leaders, we must articulate and make public our values about educator learning, and deliberately enact these values in all structures and processes throughout the system. If we value curiosity, for instance, we can't dictate what is worth being curious about through prescriptive learning programs or one-size-fits-all growth plan goals. Treating teachers as learners means inviting them to shape their own trajectory in response to the needs of their students. It means being both flexible in our learning programs and realistic in our expectations.

Transformational learning takes time, and the path to success is not always clearly defined, but we can't expect teachers to be learners when we don't actively support their growth. School and district leaders encourage learning mindsets by deliberately making room for, promoting, and celebrating curiosity, vulnerability, and experimentation. I can think of no better way to honor Hedwig's memory than to do my part to design and sustain a system that builds teachers' capacity for the kind of reflective practice she held so dear.

Dr. Tiffany Hamilton Hall  
Executive Director of Teaching and Learning  
Salt Lake City School District

### **A Consideration of Missing Students**

In Spring of 2020, Utah schools shut down to help stop the spread of the COVID-19 virus. We asked our educators to provide five days of remote lessons to send home with students—we thought the week before Spring Break plus the week of Spring Break would be enough to break the cycle of the virus and let us return to normal.

Well, we hoped.

Mid-Spring Break, the Utah State Board of Education announced that schools would remain closed until the end of the year. The rest of the spring was a mixed bag of success. Some teachers already had an online presence in their classrooms; they made the switch to remote learning and their students followed along. Some teachers struggled, telling students to read the book and emailing assignments. Some students had access to technology at home, but thousands of students needed devices and internet access points. End-of-year state assessments were cancelled. We reviewed grading and attendance policies and slouched our way to Bethlehem.

Our story is not much different than most districts. Across the United States, that spring was a difficult one and most states reacted like Utah. But we were sure that it would be worked out by the fall.

Well, we hoped.

We started preparing in May to come back to school in August with safety protocols, quarantine guidelines, and curriculum support for students who might be out with COVID-19 to ensure they would be able to continue learning.

Our summer included losing our Superintendent and placing an interim. It also included a community and Board that were very divided about in-person or remote learning. Every survey that was administered showed a 48-52% split. We could have polled the color of the sky by August and had a split vote.

Then, just weeks before school started, it was decided that we would return 100% remote. We were the only district in the state to do so. The splits remained in our community and our Board. Our district departments did an immediate pivot to support 100% online learning with teachers—especially elementary—who had prepared for in-person learning and didn't have Canvas pages or other resources. In three weeks, we moved to a completely new dimension, scrapping careful plans and ideas. The next three terms, before we returned to in-person learning in Term 4, were a daily fight that was waged in the paper, in the news, and in the legislature.

Our people are amazing. They showed up. Students were fed, they were taught, they were visited at home.

But something happened in those two years; school became... 'optional' isn't the right word. But the world shifted and suddenly the lines of 'present' and 'absent' changed. What school attendance meant became blurred. Students could Zoom in; they could work asynchronously; they could call the teacher on Thursday with a question from the recording of the class made on Monday. Being at a certain place at a designated time stopped being the One Right Way. Students who craved structure and the safety of routine were thrown off-kilter. Names were on rolls, but were the students really there? Sometimes there would be a quick log-on. Sometimes, the name was marked "no current activity."

[According to the NEA](#), "research by Bellwether Education Partners estimates that as many as 3 million students disappeared between March and October 2020. When schools reached out to students and their families—by phone, by email, and by snail mail—they never heard back." A [New York Times article](#) stated that "according to [a December report](#) from the consulting firm McKinsey & Company, which defined chronic absenteeism as missing 15 school days per year, the percentage of students who were on track to be chronically absent was about 22 percent — more than double the rate of chronically absent students before the pandemic."

Where did they go?

We came back to full in-person schooling with 300+ missing students. Are they working? Home schooling? Leaving the house at 7:45 AM and saying that they are going to school, or telling their parents they are still "attending online"? What part of our system failed them, so that when we opened our doors and came back, they didn't see the point of returning?

We may never know where they all went. And this has made me think about the value of education. Yes, I believe in the value of education. Obviously. I am the target audience. It was inherently a value in our house, where my dad and grandfather were both teachers. School was the way we demonstrated our commitment to lifelong success.

Again—most students came back. But not all kids. That haunts us; why didn't they return? Did they just move, or was it something we failed to do? Did we not build relationships with our students who were difficult, or who didn't read well, or who struggled with language, or who needed more support than the teacher could give them? Those students may have found a way to hide is better than being in a classroom. They didn't want to come back, and they found something to do or someplace to be that is better than with us. They have rejected public school classrooms, a bedrock institution of the United States.

As the district leader for teaching and learning, I think a lot about what students are learning, how they are learning it, what teachers are doing, what materials are best. We are making great progress with our students who are here. Are we finding the ones who aren't?

The students called our bluff in a game we didn't realize we were playing. And as a result, I'm thinking a little less about curriculum and instruction and a little more about relationships. Because if students don't feel like they belong, they won't come. If they don't feel like school makes a positive difference for them, they don't need to come. They know that's an option now. They know how to escape the system.

We need to establish relationships of respect and inclusiveness. We need to be relevant and recognize what students bring to our learning. Yes, we have talked about this before. Yes, we have known that it's important to students that they feel connected. But the battle we are waging right now isn't just about students connecting to school. It's about public school continuing to exist as the corner stone of our democracy.

Public school is the one place where we create classrooms with students who come from different countries, different social situations, different everything—and we help them get along in our little groups so that they can graduate and get along in the big groups. We quietly teach civic competency along with math skills and phonics. Only now, we aren't finding them all, and they may not want to be found.

“But where do you live mostly now?”

“With the lost boys.”

“Who are they?”

“They are the children who fall out of their perambulators when the nurse is looking the other way.”

--Peter Pan



Dr. Lisa Templin Hess  
Assistant Superintendent  
Governor Mifflin School District

### **Going Slow to Go Fast: A Journey Toward Equity and Excellence**

While at dinner in Boston in July 2019, my Learning Forward team members and I had a conversation about equity in our schools. During that conversation, one of my team members recommended the book *White Fragility* by Robin DiAngelo. The book hit me hard and exactly where I needed it to: in my own reflection. As a white female, it forced me to reflect on the fact that I, too, may have implicit bias due to my upbringing and experiences. I may not be explicitly biased, but not always seeing a situation through the experiences of others has not been at the forefront of my decision making. In addition, as a leader, it made me reflect on my district, the effect of implicit bias on our students, as well as the areas in which systematic racism exists. I shared the book with my superintendent, assistant superintendent, and our human resources director. I needed them to know that we had to start looking at ourselves and reflecting on how our experiences as white men and women impacted the decisions we made for our district. Are we truly providing an equitable educational experience for ALL of our students?

I work in the same school district that I attended K-12 and from which I graduated. At the time of my attendance, this suburban district of about 4300 students was made up of 98% white students mostly of a middle-upper class background and free and reduced lunch students made up about 1% of families, if that. Today, our district has a minority population of 32% made up of mostly Black and Latinx families and our free and reduced lunch population in the district has increased to 45%. The community has changed in terms of household income and racial diversity, but the mindset of many who work in the schools and live in the community unfortunately have not.

The term “nostesia,” coined by Jamie Vollmer in his book *Schools Cannot Do It Alone*, refers to a combination of nostalgia and amnesia. According to Vollmer, “Nostesiacs hold a firm belief that the grand temples of learning that existed in their golden past were far superior to the schools we have today.” In turn, these same people also do not believe that change is necessary to meet the needs of diverse learners. Nostesia, which does not allow for reflection

and change, is one of several reasons our district administration knew it had to develop a coalition to create change so that all students have access to a quality education free of bias.

In October 2019, the offering of a three-part learning series titled *Equitable and Excellent: Schools Where All Students Succeed* led by Tyrone Howard, Associate Dean for Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion at UCLA was just the push my district needed to create an Equity and Excellence Guiding Coalition. Due to the awakening that occurred for me from the book *White Fragility*, I was moved to volunteer to be a member of the coalition. The rest of the coalition was made up of the central administrators with whom I shared the book, four principals, a school counselor, and eleven teachers from various grade levels. The series forced our coalition to have critical conversations around our district data related to attendance, discipline, AP course enrollment, curriculum, special education, gifted and talented access, staffing, and many other points of data. On the last day of the series, March 6, 2020, we conducted a SWOT analysis related to equity in our district. The series helped get us on the path to working on a more equitable school district and the coalition was ready to move into action.

Unfortunately, seven days after our final learning series session, COVID-19 hit and schools were closed beginning March 13, 2020. The virus brought the coalition work to a halt since there were other immediate health issues taking priority, but the learning did not stop for me because I knew the injustice and inequalities did not stop for our students and I wanted to be able to move as fast as possible when we returned to work. I read as many books as I could on racism, anti-racism, equity, culturally responsive teaching, privilege, cultural proficiency, inclusivity, the list could go on of the topics on which I tried to educate myself so that I could educate others through my daily leadership. Some books I read were educational-based and others were New York Times Best Sellers, but my objective was always to be ready to pick up the work when we were able to get the coalition back together and start making progress.

The death of George Floyd in May jolted the nation out of its focus on COVID-19 and brought racism and police brutality to the forefront of conversations. It is unfortunate that the death of this man had to remind this nation of its consistent ignorance and the systematic racism and police brutality that exists. It did, however, prompt our Pennsylvania School Board Association to release an anti-racism board resolution template that they encouraged all school districts to adopt. In July our school board passed an anti-racism board resolution, the first ever in the district.

Knowing that many in our community were being personally impacted by the recent events of injustice and knowing we were far from the experts on equity and social justice issues, our superintendent connected with Dr. Nicole Hollins Sims, an educational consultant with the state who works with districts on issues related to equity and social justice to continue the coalition work that was halted in March.

When we were finally able to get back together online in August, our coalition, along with the help of Dr. Hollins Sims, completed an internal assessment using an adaptation of an



Equity Audit Tool from the Mid-Atlantic Equity Center. The results of this tool formed the basis for the guiding coalition's one-year action plan that would create immediate work to launch us forward with the district community.

In September, the coalition took the action plan and identified three priority areas for immediate focus: 1. Establish and conduct a learning series with a group of teachers, students, staff, parents, community members that volunteer to be part of this initial outreach and engagement; 2. Disaggregate a more robust series of data points (perception, academic, demographic, process) for a clearer understanding of current context; and 3. Create family and community engagement opportunities to help inform our work moving forward.

At this point in reading this, you may be saying to yourself, "Well, that is all and good, Lisa. But it has been a year since your district started this journey and I do not see much impact. When are you going to start putting your work into action?"

In the beginning of this work, our coalition wanted to move as fast as we possibly could because we felt like we did not have time to waste and had a lot of catching up to do. We talked about how we could help teachers prepare for coming back to school after a spring/summer of injustice and protests. We wanted to do book studies and develop lesson plans around topics related to teaching antiracism and other topics around equity to push out to our staff. We realized that our coalition still had their own learning to do before they could lead others. Building a foundation of knowledge around topics of such a sensitive nature takes time for that learning to occur in order to do it well. We did not want to move slowly, but we wanted to do this right. We struggled with those opposing forces in this work.

In October 2020, educational consultant Dr. Hollins Sims asked a few representatives from the coalition to be a part of an online equity learning series put on by the Pennsylvania Department of Education. We were hesitant because we did not feel that we were anything close to the experts on equity and we did not feel that we had made much progress in our work as a coalition. (As you were probably thinking this same thing as you were reading this a few paragraphs ago). Dr. Hollins Sims explained that the educators attending the online series would appreciate our honesty in where we are in our learning and work. She was right. The group of about fifty educators appreciated that we were willing to be vulnerable enough to share that we were not experts and that we were taking our work one step at a time. We shared our school district demographics, discipline, and academic data; our community mindset; and our personal experiences that were our impetus for wanting to formally begin a journey in evaluating and improving or enhancing equitable practices. We also shared our challenges, concerns, and next steps in our work. It actually felt good to not be the experts and to be transparent in our answers to the questions that the audience members were posing to us. They did appreciate that we were not just going through the motions of equity work, but that we were being intentional every step of the way even if it was taking longer than we would have liked it to. Regardless of the good feelings from this presentation, our coalition was still struggling with the fact that we were still in the planning phase and not implementing any action steps. We needed some additional confirmation.

In November 2020 a Brene Brown podcast with Aiko Bethea titled *Inclusivity at Work: The Heart of Hard Conversations* solidified for me that our coalition should be moving at the exact pace it is currently moving. While listening to the podcast, something that struck me was that although we want to talk about racism and equity, people of color may not be ready to talk about it. Just because white America is saying “we are now ready to talk about race,” people of color who have been continually hurt by the systematic racism that exists may not be ready because they are so used to compartmentalizing it. We need to think: Who is it we are serving by doing this work? How are we serving them and are we intentional in it? It made me think that although we may want to move faster, our slower and more intentional work may be what serves everyone best. At that moment, I decided to email the podcast to my team to give them that additional confirmation from which they were seeking: We are exactly where we need to be.

In December 2020, I attended an online session on Equity at the Learning Forward Conference that changed the way I thought about approaching the implementation of change around equity in my district. The presenters, Floyd Cobb and John Krownapple, based their session on the book they co-authored titled *Belonging Through a Culture of Dignity: The Keys to Successful Equity*. The authors started out by talking about the steps that districts typically take in their equity work. First, there is a catalyst or a major event (local or national) that makes the district start the equity work. Next, leadership comes out and states that the inequities that exist and/or the events that have occurred, “This is not who we are!” Next, there are statements of personal declarations such as social media hashtags that are used. Next, a committee is developed, which in many cases they recommend some sort of mandatory training to begin to address the problem. The district realizes that they are not equipped to do this work, so they hire an expert in equity because there is no shared vision within the committee. Eventually, the committee rationalizes inaction and the work fades away across time. And then the work dies. When action needs to take place, that is where organizations fail in the equity work.

Listening to Floyd and John made my stomach sick. I started thinking to myself, “Oh no! This sounds like the exact steps our district has taken in this work! We have wasted all this time and we are on the wrong path! We are going to fall into the inaction trap they are referring to!” I was devastated to think we had to start over in order to be successful in this work. I shared this disappointment in my breakout group, and they assured me that the work we have already done is important and that we may just need to readjust to ensure that the coalition follows through in the actions it recommends.

Feeling better, thanks to my breakout group of educators, I was ready to hear what Floyd and John recommended as a course of action. The authors talked about the Three Keys of Inclusion, Belonging, and Dignity. The first key is to inspire a shared vision of educational equity and of inclusion. They noted that diversity does not provide us with a vision and that the work is not about diversity as a focus, but our response to diversity. The second key is to assess the climate for belonging. Belonging means more than access; it means you have full membership. The third key is to take action that honors dignity. If we can shape a culture of dignity, it creates a feeling of belonging, which in turn increases engagement and increases

performance. My thoughts changed into a newly found purpose: “That is where we start! We need to focus our efforts on ensuring that everyone in this district has a sense of belonging and their dignity is honored every single day! This is what our coalition actions need to reflect to make a lasting impact! These key items are specific actions that I will take back to my committee. I know it is going to take some time to develop the specific steps around these actions, but now I actually feel as if we have actionable items that the coalition can move on to make an impact in my district.”

As you can see, at this point in December 2020, my learning and work around equity had been ongoing for a year and a half, yet I felt that I was now poised to lead our coalition to engage in impactful action in 2021 and beyond. Sometimes, going slow to go fast is what is called for to make a lasting impact.

I never realized the extent to which the work would lead us... It is July 2022, and I am revisiting this TPOV as an update because of the changes that have occurred since December 2020. In January 2021, I was named Assistant Superintendent and was asked to give a presentation of the district’s equity work to the community within our State of the District presentation. During the online presentation, I covered the work of the district’s equity coalition, including our work with Nicole Hollins-Sims, Tyrone Howard, Floyd Cobb, and John Krownapple. Although I felt as if I gave a solid overview of our work and I was proud to share that with the community, the backlash came swiftly. Several individuals in the community, including a board member, were less than happy with the information I provided and politicized it to demonize the work. Throughout the rest of that school year and the summer of 2021, many parents and community members spoke at our board meetings raging against Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, Critical Race Theory, the 1619 Project, the district’s Antiracism resolution passed in July 2020, Social Emotional Learning, etc. Twice a month, the board, Superintendent and I were accused of indoctrinating students and touting some political agenda that made white students feel ashamed about being white. In August 2021, with the start of the 2021-2022 school year approaching, I knew that I had to do something to stop this false narrative and provide a place where parents and community members could come together to learn about the district’s equity work and assist in guiding that work with us. I knew the work had to be centered around the Cobb and Krownapple book because that was the heart of all the work we had done previously. In September 2021, I held the first meeting of the Governor Mifflin School District Community Partnership. This group of forty parents, community members, board members, teachers, and administrators met every month throughout the 2021-2022 school year. We conducted a book study, discussed how the district is implementing equity, diversity and inclusion, reviewed district student belonging data, and made recommendations on how the district could connect better with our families in every part of our community. Every single time someone would speak at a board meeting about any of the topics we were discussing at the partnership, I would invite them to the next meeting. Over the course of several

months, the board comments continually reduced, but in March 2022, it became apparent that our Community Partnership was needed more than ever. A high school senior was shot and killed on a local playground and a female junior was injured with a gunshot wound. The outcry from our community around the violence was intense and the finger pointing at different groups online and in-person was increasing. In order to quell the rage, I opened up the March meeting of the Community Partnership to everyone in our community. I decided that this was going to be an opportunity to educate our entire community around the work that has been done by the partnership group and provide them with the space and time to identify ways in which we can break down barriers and connect with those who do not feel welcome in our community to improve relationships among all community members. Over 100 people showed up that evening and identified a long list of ideas. Those ideas were fully developed over the course of the next few months and put into action. Today, we have a Birth to Age 5 initiative to connect with our youngest families in the district, a student mentor program that provides students with positive interactions with adults in our community, a program to learn English for adult community members that currently has 30 adult students attending, and a "Morning Mustangs" program that has adults from the community welcoming our secondary students into school every day by saying, "Morning Mustangs!" We are continually breaking down those community barriers and the longing for the past and creating a new and better future for all students in our district.

As I said previously, it is July 2022 and I am in Minneapolis, Minnesota for the Learning Forward Academy. Although it was not planned at all this way, it was timely and important for me to finish my reflection here and visit the place where George Floyd was killed. I am hopeful that since that day in May 2020, not only has my district and community made strides in equity and inclusion, but also that many other districts across the country have as well. Every district should have a Community Partnership group that focuses on the well-being of everyone within the community and the district. It can only make your community stronger.



Lorie Ann Karls

Director of Professional Learning  
Racine Unified School District, Racine, Wisconsin

### **The Robber**

“If we teach today’s students as we taught yesterday’s, we rob them of tomorrow.” (John Dewey) The same is true for staff. Professional learning is an opportunity for educators to continue their professional and personal growth that directly impacts student growth: academically, behaviorally, emotionally, linguistically, psychologically, and socially.

“Professional learning that changes professional practice and opportunities for student learning requires persistence, diligence, resources, advocacy, leadership, and hard work” (Killion p. 45). Are we the robbers of adult impact? Do our professional learning goals, evaluations, and systems enhance adult and student growth?

“Clarifying the goals and outcomes of the professional learning program is a critical function in designing the program because they determine everything...Goals inspire people to engage in the program” (Killion p. 47). Professional learning should have both long and short term-goals written in a format, such as SMART, that is transparent to all staff. Killion notes, “Outcomes specify the changes that are needed to achieve the goals” (p. 49). Are our professional learning goals focused on results rather than implementation? Do they create a clear image of the desired outcomes?

“Data alone is insufficient to make evaluation useful. It is through the analysis and interpretation of purposefully collected data that evaluations have usefulness and can inform decision makers” (Killion p. 9-10). Evaluations are two-fold; one focuses on adult practice and the other on student learning. Adult practice data should be focused on what was learned, the application of the learning, and students’ benefits of the learning. The targeted learning points centered around students are what do we expect students to learn; how do we know they are learning; what will we do if they do not learn, and how will we respond if they already know it.

Are our professional learning evaluations focused on results orientation versus service orientation? Are they implemented as a natural component of our professional learning?

“One common reason professional learning interventions fail to produce results for students is that they have inadequate resources to deliver what is necessary to promote educator learning and support the implementation of that learning” (Killion p. 61). Professional learning should be an ongoing learning application program and not a stand-alone plan. Protected time, both embedded into the classroom and non-student contact time for intentional professional learning communities, is one of the needed components of a program. Are our system’s resources adequate for our professional learning? Do we have a program, ongoing, or a plan, stand-alone, system for professional learning?

“The capacity to learn is a gift; the ability to learn is a skill; the willingness to learn is a choice.” (Brian Herbert) Killion writes, “They [Professional Learning Leaders] examine attributes of the system including the context, culture, and structures in which the professional learning will occur because the ecosystem influences success and often must be improved for professional learning to have its full impact.” Do our current ecosystems promote maximum impact via professional learning? Are our systems conducive to supporting professional learning that enhances adult and student growth? Are we an awakener or a robber?



*Valerie Minor*  
*Coordinator of Professional Learning and Leadership*  
*Keller ISD*

### **Personalized Professional Learning and Leadership from the Classroom**

Educators are professionals with degrees and certifications. It is time that we start treating them as such! If COVID times have taught us anything, they have taught us that teachers are irreplaceable! No one else can do their jobs and our world can't function without them! Educators have spent the two years pivoting and then pivoting again! They have dealt with lockdowns, hybrid learning, virtual classes, mental health crises (both personally and with their students), fear and pressure like they have never experienced. Our students are struggling academically and emotionally, tensions are high, and rationality has been thrown out the window. If we trust them with our most precious commodity, why can't we trust them with their own professional learning?

Full day, stock professional developments should be a thing of the past. While districts should have a common mission, vision and values, educators should be able to choose the learning that they desire, and they need to become better at what they do. This learning should be relevant, timely and job-embedded as well as give teachers opportunities to try their newly obtained skills with feedback and coaching. As district administrators, it is our job to provide avenues for our teachers to explore the learning that they want to explore. We should put into place more job-embedded and personalized professional learning experiences. Teachers should be able to assess their own knowledge on an initiative or subject and decide the learning that they need in order to reach the goal or be able to implement the skill needed.

Retention is the name of the game; we want to keep our experienced and effective teachers. Keeping our teachers saves the districts money, has a positive impact on student learning in the classroom and creates a continuous culture in our schools. A major way for us to keep our master teachers is to give them outlets for leadership and learning. Let's find ways that we can give teachers leadership opportunities from within the classroom instead of making them think

they have to become administrators to be leaders. What if we offered personalized learning experiences that are grounded in each teacher's goals? What about creating master teacher programs in districts where our teachers can create problems of practice and then work in cohorts to observe each other and provide feedback to one another to grow within these individual goals. We could extend this experience by providing opportunities for teachers to pursue National Board Certification. Create cohorts and find funding to pay for the certifications and then support teachers through the process. Ask teachers who are interested to mentor new or struggling teachers. Create a model classroom initiative where teachers can visit each other to learn new strategies and pedagogy. Implement a video coaching program where teachers can record and reflect on their own teaching or that of their peers if desired. There are so many ways we can involve teachers in leadership and learning.

If someone feels appreciated, they will go above and beyond. If someone feels like their bucket is being filled at work each day, they will be able to handle a lot more challenging situation. It doesn't take a great amount of money to provide learning and leadership opportunities for our teachers to be able to get excited about teaching again. Let's help our amazing educators reignite their passions and remember why they started teaching in the first place. Most importantly, let's allow our effective teachers to teach others, allow them to share their expertise and learning with others and keep the excellence moving forward in our district.

Let's allow our effective educators to lead from the classroom!





Fanchon D. Muhammad  
Curriculum Coordinator  
Midfield City Schools  
Midfield, AL  
Urban Education Investment

**"It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men."- Frederick Douglass**

I have worked in urban education for almost 30 years because the students' lives matter to me. I grew up in a two-parent home where my parents worked professional careers as a registered nurse and teacher/football coach. They valued education and insisted on all around excellence from my older brother and me. My undergraduate degree is in journalism and even though I come from a long line of educators, I had no aspirations of teaching in college. It was not until I graduated and decided not to pursue journalism, that I began substitute teaching for extra money. I remember vividly substituting in a first-grade class in a Title I school when a student asked me to clarify something from his assignment. I explained it to him and when the light bulb came on for him, the look and excitement on his face let me know that I had explained something to him that he would use for the rest of his life. I knew right then I would take on the responsibility to increase the life chances of students who did not have the support, resources and encouragement afforded to me during my childhood.

My first teaching position was a second-grade teacher in the same school. I was literally appalled and saddened by the stories and situations in the lives of some of my young students. It didn't seem fair that adult circumstances could so unfairly shape the attitudes, behavior and academic achievement of innocent seven-year-olds. When meeting and speaking with parents whom I would blame, I began to see that poverty was a vicious cycle that was much more complex than simply telling or expecting parents to "do better". I realized that parents were doing the best job they could with the resources and opportunities they were given. As I progressed through my career and became an assistant principal and high school principal in other Title I schools, I found that disciplinary conferences became therapy sessions and sisterly advice for parents who desperately needed a voice of reason and non judgmental encouragement.. During my tenure, I've seen, heard and been the victim of unimaginable

incidents. I've almost always been able to see past the pain and do whatever I could to see student potential. Urban education is not only a commitment to educating students, but a commitment to the families and communities to increase the life chances of students.

I have seen many success stories of students overcoming insurmountable odds to attain degrees and jobs that changed the trajectory of their families forever. I've also lost many students to violent deaths and prison. My personal goal has been to feel confident that even though everyone was not saved, I made an attempt to speak life into them and provide opportunities through education. I have found most students and families in urban education are working at their maximum potential facing unresolved childhood traumas, untreated post-traumatic stress syndrome and undiagnosed, self-medicated depression.

During challenging times, I have considered going to a suburban district where students come to school prepared with parents that value education. Where resources are plentiful and the community works together to ensure their students receive the best possible education; but then I look into the faces of students whose only chance at success is what happens inside the walls of the school buildings of urban education. Where society seems to be more interested in ensuring these students become the permanent underclass and some educators end up rather than choose employment there. Where the urban areas in which these schools reside have been vacated by suburban flight and economic blight. I feel that my purpose in education is to instill hope and use my resources and relationships to create pathways to opportunities for students and families. Most days, I absolutely love what I do. Having the autonomy to create curriculum experiences and encourage teachers and administrators in this work is rewarding. Our rewards don't come in the form of achievement data, blue ribbon schools or overall positive perceptions. The return on investment in urban education comes from knowing that you can change the trajectory of generations by teaching, encouraging, and supporting students and families. Although I can't personally undo the systems put in place decades ago that redlined communities into poverty, I can show up daily with my best effort and sincerest hope to literally make a difference and assist in changing the trajectory of the lives of our students.



Kim Oliver  
Principal  
Denmark High School  
Alpharetta, Georgia

### **My Why**

As I journeyed into my formal years of education, I discovered fairly quickly that it is not popular to be different from your peers. When I began first grade, I realized for the first time that I was fat. I don't mean a little pudgy in the stomach like some of the other students; I mean fat - as in the fattest person in my grade. I guess I should have realized this fact earlier, but my childhood was surrounded by family and friends who chose not to point out this flaw. However, as I entered school, my classmates let me know. Names like Fatso and Fatty did not do much for my self-esteem nor did shopping in the husky section of our local Five and Dime. I determined that the best way to escape the ridicule was to become the class clown. If I was goofing off in class, misbehaving, and making fun of other students, I was not the target. I was smart enough to earn average grades without much effort, so I continued to clown around for most of my elementary years. The unsatisfactory marks on my conduct card and the corporal punishment I received were certainly disappointments for my parents, but they actually made me more popular with my classmates. Therefore, my misbehavior and apathetic attitude continued year after year after year.

In sixth grade, I had a teacher who took a special interest in me; she liked me even when I wasn't being funny and never seemed to notice my size. She let me help her with classroom tasks, such as passing out papers, scoring tests using her key (probably not best practice) and running errands for her during the school day. One day she sat me down and told me that the clowning around in class was actually "unbecoming" and "disrespectful" and talked about how she knew I could do better. She used a phrase with me that I still use today. She said, "When we know better, we should do better because we are better." This conversation changed my

life because when Ms. Adams was saying I could do better, she was not just talking to the fat kid who misbehaved; she was talking to the kid whose grandfather had committed suicide earlier in the week. She was letting me know that I was better than the whispers of my small town and better than the student who underachieved because of her off-task behavior. For whatever reason I chose to believe Ms. Adams on that day. I thought she was cool because she was a divorced teacher (we did not have many of those teachers in our school) and because she smoked cigarettes in the teacher workroom. Looking back now, I realize that she and I were kindred spirits. We were both outcasts. Other teachers isolated her because of her divorce, and students talked about me because they perceived my family to be white trash and viewed me as an unattractive girl who would never amount to much.

Her words really struck a nerve within me. I wanted to act differently not because I really wanted to but because this person whom I respected recognized I could do better. That conversation with Ms. Adams changed the course of my life. I stopped clowning around in class and started paying attention. I began to complete my work and make sarcastic remarks only when I was adding to conversations not side railing them. I made all A's for the rest of my time in middle and high school and never caused trouble for my teachers again. And although I was still ridiculed for my size and occasionally for my background, people began to recognize that I had true academic talents.

In tenth grade, my life was forever changed again by a teacher. Mrs. Martin was my Humanities teacher, teaching a combination History and English class. She was the smartest and most beautiful person I knew. When she talked about literature and historical events, her passion allowed students to become characters within the lessons. Realizing that I was a reader, Mrs. Martin frequently gave me books to read. It was the first time in my life that I had read historical non-fiction, and this new genre enabled me to gain knowledge of history that textbooks could not supply. I would go to Mrs. Martin's room before school and talk to her about the books I was reading several days a week. But, in addition to discussing books, we talked about other things as well. We talked about politics; we talked about *The Cosby Show*; we talked about Madonna; we talked about clothes and make-up. And, eventually, we talked about how to eat better and how to exercise. Mrs. Martin talked to me about becoming healthier, and I recognized that she genuinely cared about me. We had a small gym in our town which taught step-aerobics, and Mrs. Martin allowed me to join with her membership somehow. (I am pretty sure now that she paid for my membership). During the spring and summer of my tenth-grade year, I lost fifty pounds and became the person that people see today. It is possible that I would have figured out my health on my own, after all Olivia Newton John had been telling us since the early 80's to "Get Physical", but I did not have to do that. I had a teacher who took an interest in me and helped me become a better version of myself.

Today, we place an emphasis on social and emotional health in our schools. I did not call my relationships with these teachers social and emotional health while I was in school; I simply called it love. They loved me for who I was and recognized the potential in me that I could not recognize in myself. They took an interest in me beyond the classroom, changing the course of my life. They influenced my practices while I was a teacher in the classroom as I tried to make sure that every student felt included and no student felt that others' differences justified

ridicule. As an administrator, I continue to recognize the importance of connecting with the student who eats alone in the cafeteria as well as the student who disguises hidden academic potential behind years of acting out. I am the champion for the student who is the underdog because at one time in my life, I was the underdog. One of the reasons that I am serious about education and about teachers and administrators having relationships with students is because I know that relationships have the power to change lives: I am the proof.



Robyn Ongley  
K-12 Math Curriculum Specialist  
South Windsor Public Schools

“I’m so sorry to have to make this call, but I’m calling today to let you know that your child will not graduate this year.” A brief conversation follows. Moments of sadness and gracious words follow, but mostly sadness, before I gently place the phone on its cradle. As the junior and senior associate principal of a high school, it was my role to validate the graduation list, and with that, came the responsibility to personally call the family of any student who would not graduate.

These were the saddest calls to make. None of them were a surprise – the families knew they were coming from our conversations throughout the year. There was sometimes anger, but mostly sadness. Many expressed genuine appreciation for the support we had given as a school throughout the year leading to this final conversation, but I was always left wondering – had we done enough??

There were signs, hints, that this would be the outcome years before – freshman year, middle school, elementary school. It wasn’t usually something from senior year that led to not graduating. These calls have stayed with me for years, and they guide all that I do.

What drew me to this current role – a district position leading a K-12 program, and what drives me every day is to work to ensure that no student, ever, slips through the cracks or moves through school without the supports they may need to find success. I work to ensure that each and every student has their name spoken aloud, their situation considered, their progress noted, their needs identified, and that we passionately advocate for things a child may need. Especially when the child may not have an advocate or a family that doesn’t know how the system works or what needs their child may have.

My phone calls now with families always start with an invitation to tell me about their child, the child’s strengths, interests, goals, and dreams. What the family shares about their child opens the door to a partnership to support the student. These conversations have given wonderful helpful insights to practices and policies that families may not understand, areas of opportunity for clarity, support, or professional learning needs, but have been most powerful in cementing

partnerships and relationships that focus on supporting individual students. It is important to nurture relationships with your students and families.

I strive to have all students find themselves in classrooms where their brilliance is celebrated and they explore mathematics in ways that are engaging, challenging and relevant to their lives. Learner-centered classrooms that hold high expectations for all help students find a place to belong. I believe this is most important when a student does not seem engaged and pushes things away. This is when it is most important to partner with families, build relationships, collaborate and support. Anything else is dismissing the student and maybe unintentionally confirming to the student that they don't matter. Is that what happened for the students that I needed to share the disappointing news about graduation? Did they feel like they mattered? Did they feel important? Did they feel supported? Did they feel connected?

I seek to build the knowledge and confidence of families, so they too can be partners in advocating for their children and setting them up for success. With this comes a focus on transparency – in processes, expectations, performance and goals, so there won't be heartbreak years down the line, but rather opportunities to partner in support of students throughout the journey. We can't expect students to be successful when the measures of success or struggle are hidden.

Instead of picking up the phone to call a family to share that they didn't make it to graduation, I want, instead, to call families to thank them for their partnership, and to congratulate the hard work and effort of their child as they move toward their future goals and dreams. As we start a new school year, I implore you to focus intently on those who you worry won't make it, or aren't connected, or don't have families who seem involved. Lean in, and speak their names every day. Find out their interests, their goals, their needs. Partner with families to provide supports and structures that the student needs. And find opportunities to share celebrations. Imagine how powerful for a family to receive the phone call that starts, "I have some exciting news to share with you!" Be the advocate for every child.

Karen Raino  
Language Arts Division Chair  
Lyons Township High School

### **Reaching Linguistically Diverse Students: A Vision for All**

Waking up every day in Portoviejo, Ecuador, gave me a headache. I was 16 years old, living as a foreign exchange student in 1982, and I was excited to learn about a new culture. I had studied French for four years prior but the exchange program placed me in a Spanish-speaking country, much to my surprise. Each morning, I woke exhausted before the day began because I had to think hard and quickly to acquire the language. My host family enrolled me in school, where I hoped to make friends, immerse myself in teenage culture, and learn the language. It was an isolating experience at first. The teacher didn't know what to do with me and largely ignored my presence in the room. The other students eyed me curiously but didn't know how to interact because they didn't know English and I didn't know Spanish – yet. I listened actively (classes were lecture-based), but my shy personality held me back from jumping in and making language mistakes. It was hard and I felt that no one there understood who I was as a person. I was thrown in, treading water for quite a while. It wasn't until the end of my three month stay that I felt like I had acquired enough social language to survive.

Although that summer was difficult, it sparked a passion in me for learning languages and culture and it transformed my career path, leading me to my current position. One of the most important aspects of my role as Language Arts Division Chair is to serve as the English Learner Coordinator. My work with the teachers and multilingual students in our general and sheltered English classes brings me joy because I see the frightened students that arrive at the beginning of the year from their host countries transform into confident, English speakers with friends and feelings of connection to their high school by the end of their four years. I am passionate about creating learning environments that honor the dignity of our linguistically diverse students because no one should wake up in the morning with a headache, dreading school because teachers and other individuals in the school don't know how to make language accessible.

Teachers in our school are warm, empathetic individuals with the right intentions but they often lack the knowledge and tools to make content accessible to students who come from a broad range of language proficiencies. Students need teachers who know how to make language visible in class and how to break down content so students can engage with their mono-lingual peers on equal footing. Teachers should not rely on their para-educators to teach material; rather, they need instructional strategies that honor English Learners. Para-educators should serve as bilingual resources to clarify concepts and translate the language of the discipline, working in partnership with the teacher. They should not be charged with teaching the material instead of the teacher. Additionally, fostering learning environments in which language proficiency standards are a part of daily planning would directly impact all learners in the classroom and would help bolster the academic achievement of all. With the proper



professional development, all teachers and para-educators can build their capacities to reach linguistically diverse students. The less that students feel isolated and the more they feel they are an integral part of the classroom community, the more positive students will feel attending and learning in school, and I firmly believe that greater academic achievement for students will occur as a result.



Brian Ritz

*Coordinator of Curriculum and School Improvement | Skokie, IL*

Having the privilege of working in diverse educational environments, both between and within districts, has very much helped shape one of my ethos of learning - To be reflective, and develop efficient ways to adapt to the ever-changing needs of school systems especially as they relate to building culturally responsive learning environments for all students. I take a lot of my thinking from Zaretta Hammond on this topic and she makes a clear distinction between being aware of surface culture, like food and dress, versus deep culture which is made up of tacit knowledge and the subconscious that establish mental models for students. I am drawn to her connections to brain science and practical suggestions to help classrooms move towards true cultural responsiveness and away from dependent learners and is something I strive to continue to learn about and apply to my work. One quote by Hammond that I always hold on to is "All instruction is culturally responsive. The question is to whose culture is it responding to?" I think it ties together my value of being reflective, but also reminds me to take action in understanding all my students' backgrounds, especially their deeper characteristics.

I want to be a change agent, someone who has the knowledge and confidence to actually drive change against the marginalization of underrepresented groups in learning and provide them with equitable access. Let's elevate people to spaces where they have the skills and knowledge to make this world a better place. No curriculum will ever see children, so we must use relationships and find ways to use curricular tools to seek out the highest social, emotional, and cognitive potential in kids regardless of their ethnicity, color, religion, gender identification, sexual orientation, ability, or anything else that makes kids different or defiant. This can be the difference between life and death.

"No curriculum - no matter how good - is ever going to see my kids"

*Cornelius Minor*



Leigh Anne Romer  
Principal, Northwest ISD

In our profession, we often confront complex situations and hundreds of decisions are made daily that will affect teacher success and therefore student success. We work in unstable environments with many factors influencing our day to day decisions and sometimes our long-term plans. The stakes are high and because of the high stakes, there is a great deal of stress in our profession. We work in an era when state accountability drives decisions and brings urgency. More than that, we are talking about children. Our profession is fueled by the passion for providing the best education possible to every student in our schools and our Problem of Practice should be fueled by the same passion.

Even though we know how critical it is to maintain goal focus, it is difficult to stay the course and give the change the time it needs to show effects. Sometimes, even narrowing the focus in the first place is a challenge. Brilliant people, literature, and research surround us. Each of them is full of thought-provoking knowledge to share. So many ideas are shared and so many of them sound great. There are so many initiatives added to the plates of educators and many of them would likely lead to at least some gains in student achievement. Working in an environment where the plate is becoming fuller, with the best intentions, can be overwhelming and we have to be sure of our why and stay true to our goals. Knowing who you are and what you stand for, as an educator, determining what your North Star is, must guide school leaders in their practice. If we do not remain focused on the goal, on our Problem of Practice, it will fade away in the brightness of all the other great ideas out there.

For me, knowing that all kids deserve the best we can provide in all areas is what gets me up in the morning and sometimes keeps me awake at night. They need us to be our best every day, collaborating with the best team we can assemble, designing the best lessons and learning experiences, delivering the best instruction, and adapting to the needs of the students as evidenced by the data. Building the capacity of teachers is the best way to reach the desired

goal – maximum progress for each individual student. The cycle must repeat daily in the most loving and supportive environment we can provide, where students are learning to think for themselves, as well how to take care of themselves and take care of others.

A campus problem of practice is grounded in data. Through an analysis of the school's data, hopefully as a team, a problem will arise, an area of growth is revealed. It could be that there is too much of something or not enough of something. While the data guides the development of the problem of practice in order to design the theory of action and specific action steps that need to be taken, it is the passion behind the data that will encourage a school to stay the course. These action steps will guide the professional learning journey of the campus team. Action steps must be observable, encouraged with feedback and support, monitored for impact, talked about and celebrated, and integral to every instructional conversation that happens on campus.

A Problem of Practice does not become a checkbox overnight, sometimes not even in a year. However, if impactful learning is happening for the teachers and in the classrooms, the problem-solvers will remain energized and focused on the actions they are taking. The problem is worth it. Student achievement, in its many forms, is the goal of a strong Problem of Practice. In order to achieve the greatest goals we have, as adult learners we have to continually learn and stretch ourselves, adapt, pivot and analyze where we are on the journey as the North Star above guides us in our struggles and triumphs.



Nancy Rouston  
Student Support Coordinator  
Arlington Public Schools

Students deserve access to highly qualified teaching staff. Speaking for my own district, our teachers must have a minimum of a bachelor's degree to obtain a provisional teaching license. The Commonwealth of Virginia requires that teachers must complete several hours of professional learning every ten years to maintain their teaching license. This process ensures that teaching staff continue to grow and evolve within their role as professionals. However, paraprofessionals are not always given equitable opportunities to access professional learning, despite having the same or more contact with students that have significant needs.

In my own personal experience working as a paraprofessional, I often had paraprofessional colleagues working with minimal qualifications or level of education. Most were high school graduates, but very few had post-secondary education. Some didn't have strong English speaking skills, while some had very little to no experience working with students with special needs. Our pay was low compared to teaching staff and I imagine it was hard to find highly qualified individuals who wanted to work for such a low compensation. In my review of current studies, researchers continually indicate that paraprofessionals often do not have the same access to training and professional learning as their teacher colleagues.

In my experience, there seems to be several barriers to providing growth opportunities for this group of educators. Within this role, there are several variations of duties and responsibilities (some are special education assistants while others may support English learners) which makes it challenging to offer "one size fits all" learning offerings. There are also budget deficits with many districts, which impacts the ability to adopt specific programs or subscriptions, as well as hiring qualified staff to provide the training. It's imperative that paraprofessionals can participate in learning opportunities during contract hours, rather than on their own time. Investing in the growth of all staff members within our district will benefit our most high needs students. Ensuring that paraprofessionals have equitable access to professional learning will strengthen instruction for our students.



Hayley Sauer  
Director for Elementary Education  
Fort Wayne Community Schools

### **Professional Learning: More Than an Event**

Two of the Standards for Professional Learning, Learning Communities and Leadership, are the anchors for my work as a director and the areas in which my POP have been developed. As I look back over my career in education that has spanned over 30 years, my eyes were opened to focus and opportunity for professional learning when I joined FWCS six years ago. To educate all students to high standards enabling them to become productive, responsible citizens is the FWCS Moral Purpose. To achieve our Moral Purpose, we focus on **Professional Learning**, Personalization and Precision.

Professional Learning is how we ensure that the conditions and learning environment are met for all students to succeed. Professional learning provides the leaders and the teachers the opportunities to learn the skills, strategies, content and pedagogy to engage our students in their learning. My previous experience was always about the one and done; isolated professional “development” that all levels were required to engage. To be truly effective, professional learning must be a part of a cycle of continuous improvement.

Professional Learning Communities are the means in which professional learning is proven to be conducted successfully in a collaborative setting with members of school district staff. As directors in the Office of School Leadership, the Principal PLC is the catalyst for the professional learning provided via their leadership at the building level. These communities create a sense of teamwork, accountability and resources for all members. Peer learning holds the members accountable to one another as well as to themselves and their leadership.

By following the FWCS Progress Monitoring Cycle, we start with the most important piece to determine next steps for professional learning and that is data analysis. Once data has been analyzed then goals can be set which then leads to the professional learning plan both individually and collaboratively. Use of authentic data is critical to personalize the learning for

our principals and their leadership. Meaningful and intentional professional learning that can be monitored and assessed for impact on leadership, teaching and student learning is essential to make it through a complete cycle and adjust the professional learning if needed. The true impact of our professional learning is measured in our student learning, not simply the student achievement but the learning that students use their voice to share their experiences of the learning. We can get to this impact of increased student achievement and learning when the necessary professional learning is provided, implemented, measured and is happening at all levels with those in leadership being a priority to ensure support for all.

..... “leadership is second only to classroom instruction among all school-related factors that contribute to what students learn at school” (Leithwood et al. 2004, as cited in “How Principals Affect Students and Schools: A Systematic Synthesis of Two Decades of Research” 2021, p.11).



**Lauren Slanker**

Curriculum and Instruction Specialist  
Museum of Science and Industry, Chicago

### **The State of Science Education and the Role of Professional Learning**

This upcoming April will mark the 10-year anniversary of the launching of the Next Generation Science Standards, or NGSS. 10 years in, we might expect to find that teachers feel comfortable with and are regularly implementing 3-dimensional, phenomenon-based education. What we actually find, however, is that that is not the case. So, where is the disconnect, and where do we go from here?

I started my teaching career in 2011, 2 years prior to the rolling out of the NGSS. In my first couple of years, I used state standards and a series of textbooks that were loosely aligned. Illinois was an early adopter of NGSS, adopting the standards in January 2014, and my mentor teacher at my school quickly worked to support district science teachers as we began to work through the standards and figure out what three-dimensional, phenomenon-based teaching and learning look like.

The NGSS represent a seismic shift in how educators are meant to teach science to students. Instead of focusing solely on content standards, teachers are now expected to integrate Science and Engineering Practices (SEPs) as well as Crosscutting Concepts (CCCs). This three-dimensional structure is integral to the NGSS, and while many science teachers have traditionally integrated active learning in their science classrooms, the inclusion of the SEPs requires them to shift *equal* attention towards building the skills and practices used by scientists and engineers, while the CCCs requires that teachers understand and are able to make connections among the various science disciplines. Additionally, NGSS asks that students engage in phenomenon-based learning, where concepts are integrated with real-world, relevant scenarios that students engage with to deepen their understanding and see the



relevance of what they're learning. Once this way of teaching is fully implemented, the question "Why are we learning this?" will ideally be erased from students' vernacular.

When looking more closely at these standards and the changes they require, the long and arduous shift toward these teaching practices begins to make more sense. While in the next few years we may start to see some young teachers who learned with the NGSS enter the field of teaching, the vast majority of current teachers did not learn this way themselves. Changing teaching practices to ones teachers have no experience with creates huge barriers to implementation. Additionally, while the NGSS has a lot of supporting research behind them, initially there were very few practical examples of what this type of teaching looks like in the classroom. This means that until very recently, teachers were left on their own to figure out how to significantly shift their teaching practice, with very little support.

So, where do we go from here? Lately, there have been glimmers of hope. Some curricula have come out as NGSS-aligned according to the EQuIP Rubric for Science. Three-dimensional tasks are being developed and vetted, which will support teachers as they work to understand how to assess students in all three dimensions. And, importantly, teachers now have wider access to Professional Development that will support them in meeting the needs of these standards and their students as they work to integrate NGSS.

To answer the original question about why implementation has taken so long, we need to take into account the size of the shifts the NGSS is requiring of teachers, the lagging support in terms of curricular and assessment materials they've had access to, and the scarcity of quality professional development. We cannot expect teachers to do this work on their own, and so my team and I feel a call to action to better support teachers as they make these changes in their classrooms. Supporting teachers in times of change requires an understanding of what they are expected to do, as well as continued support and the positioning of teachers as the experts of their students in their classrooms. Only through these various supports can we expect teachers to have the capacity to teach with NGSS.

Hearing the ways in which the teachers in our PD programs talk about what is happening in their classrooms has made me incredibly optimistic about the future of science education in our area. When I was a student, science was my least favorite subject because it was taught in ways that were so disconnected from what I was interested in or what made sense to me. As we continue to support these wonderful teachers as they work to enact difficult, but lasting change in their classrooms, I know that we are working towards a better future for all students.

*Thank you Class  
of 2021  
Graduates for  
sharing your  
brilliance!*



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