Teachable Point of View

December 8, 2024

Rowing In Harmony

A few weeks ago I visited a reservoir by my home and took in the beauty of the surrounding environment. As I sat on the shore I noticed a crew team practicing and watched each member row in unison as the boat glided across the water.

As a newly appointed Assistant Superintendent I often find myself reflecting on the intricate dynamics of teamwork. My staff and I are on a journey to increase student achievement especially for those who have historically been underserved. Some days I feel we are sailing in rough seas as the weight of this task seems overwhelming. Yet on other days our boat is sturdy and we are moving together in the same direction with one common goal; all students will reach their fullest potential.

Rowing and leadership have many parallels and as I navigate my new role I have learned some important lessons that have enhanced who I am as a leader.

Teamwork
My team members each contribute unique skills and perspectives. It has been important for me to recognize their individual strengths - some seasoned veterans who have weathered storms before, and others who are enthusiastic novices, eager to learn and grow. My task has been to ensure that each team member feels valued as together we work in sync to support student learning.

Communication
When communication is not clear or breaks down our boat starts to go off course. Open dialogue and two way communication is essential. This includes being honest, having hard conversations when needed, and just taking the time to connect.

Challenges and Perseverance
Like any journey my team has encountered many obstacles. Some have been worked related, others have been life circumstances. When these moments happen I remind my team that at times we have to rest and rejuvenate and let others lead. It is not the

current that will define our journey, it is how we adapt, respond, and take care of each other.

Celebrating Success
It is essential to pause and recognize our achievements. Taking time to share appreciations and celebrations is important and motivates my team to keep rowing forward. Every win, big or small, acknowledges our work and our drive to make a difference in our district.

I often think about the crew team that afternoon and I have learned that true leadership is more than just steering a boat. It is about working together with all oars moving together in the same direction to reach an important destination - all students will reach their fullest potential.

Jennifer Allen
Redefining Who is a Professional
By Jen Allen

   School Districts devote time and expertise to professional development. As an Assistant Principal, I worked with the building Professional Development committee to plan for our professional development days. When I became a district administrator, I worked with the District Professional Development Committee to plan learning for K-12 teachers in all the content areas. The planning was exhausting, the professional development days were stressful, but the end of the professional development days typically had my team saying "YES!"

However, in my experience, Staff development, learning for support staff, does not garner the same expertise and time. We Staff Development in my districts, but this was given minimal planning support. Human Resources devotes time onboarding, so the task of continuous learning in my district fell to the support staff supervisors.

   Another group excluded from continuous learning is paraprofessionals and substitute teachers. They are not contracted as teachers, so they were not included in the professional or support staff training days. Most school and district administrators would argue that professional development is critical to a district's success. It's time to expand the definition of professional.

   Support staff accounts for approximately half of a school district's employees, and our students interact with custodians, administrative assistants, bus drivers, maintenance workers, paraprofessionals and substitutes as well as teachers and administrators. Every person who works in a school district should have a well-developed professional development plan.

   In our district it started accidently—the administrator responsible for professional development asked to be responsible for the day of learning for support staff. The structure I had for professional development was applied to our support staff.

   1. Determine the continuous learning needs.

a. Compliance and Legal: I started by meeting with each support staff supervisor and discussing the learning needs for the department. This typically focused on compliance or training requirements from OSHA and other federal and state legal requirements.
   b. Other goals from departments: Our support staff supervisors were also interested in visiting other districts. They wanted to learn from experts in their field. Many of them wanted certification in first aid and CPR. Our principals wanted paraprofessionals and substitutes trained in classroom management, safety, and interpersonal relations.
   c. Connections to district improvement plans: Our next meeting was with principals and our support staff supervisors. We shared the district professional learning, which at the time included diversity, equity, and inclusion and Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports. We had failed to include our support staff in both learning opportunities, and we started there.
2. Create a Support Staff Professional Development Committee. My districts had delegated responsibility for staff development to one or two administrators. In one district, two support staff members were responsible for organizing the day for the entire district. We took the Professional Development model and applied it to our support staff.
   a. Representation: We had a representative from each job group as well as a support staff administrator.
   b. Time: They were provided time while on contract to attend the Support Staff Professional Development Committee meetings.
   c. Input: During the meetings, we shared the district initiatives, created a survey for our support staff, and gathered input from the committee. Our Support Staff had incredible ideas about their learning needs; we had just never asked.
   d. Differentiation: We used triangulated data to create a Support Staff Professional Development (SSPD) schedule that met the needs of each department. We could not have done this without a committee, since we had speakers targeted for each group. Over time, we use processes and protocols to teach our support staff how to have deep discussions and reflect on how to apply their learning. We also revisiting learning throughout the year—no one and done for this group either!
   e. Social Emotional Considerations: Our district and buildings used Professional Development Days to build connections with staff—with food. We provided our support staff supervisors a small budget to provide breakfast, snacks, or lunch. We also shared other strategies for community building: potlucks, chili cook-offs, birthday and other recognitions.
3. Gather and use feedback.
   a. Anonymous survey: After our SSPD, we used a google form to gather input. However, this backfired, as there was fear that we could see

who had answered the survey. The next time, we used an anonymous survey engine.
   b. Use feedback: Our support staff was leery of the survey. However, it only took one year for them to realize we were using the data to develop the SSPD schedule.

Attendance improved on our Staff Development Days. Relationships improved between support staff and administrators. In addition, referrals were significantly reduced on buses and in cafeterias, with administrative assistants, with our paraprofessionals and substitutes.

Something interesting came out of our change in structure. After a few years, I was asked to organize the entertainment for the Back-to-School Kick-Off. When I sent out an email to staff to participate, we were surprised to have volunteers from custodial, food service, and transportation to sing and dance with us! We sang "Don't Stop Believing'", and for the first time, we filled the auditorium: our support staff showed up to support their colleagues. We had changed the culture!

Teachable Point of View
Juliane Berquam

Every student deserves a teacher who can really see them.

I believe with everything in my being that teachers make the choices they do because they love their students. In some cases, however, we love them to low expectations. Our desire to support our students and protect them from failure oftentimes results in us lowering what we expect from them. The Pygmalion Effect is a psychological phenomenon in which low expectations leads to low performance. This phenomenon was further tested in the Rosenthal-Jacobson study where students were randomly selected to be in groups and teachers were told that some groups were "bloomers" (high achievers) and others were not. The grouping of students led teachers to have certain expectations from each group and the study's results supported the hypothesis that student performance can be positively or negatively impacted by teacher expectations.

What does this mean for our students with the most significant cognitive disabilities? In many cases, it means giving students arts and crafts to complete instead of academic tasks similar to their non-disabled peers. It looks like 11th graders learning about the constitution of the United States and a special education class of 11th graders learning about how to cut and paste together a craft. It looks like a perfectionistic gifted child, afraid to take risks, being given below-grade level work. Why? Because this is easy and because it's safe.

So how do we really SEE our students? How do we know if they need protecting? Human beings are complicated. Our abilities can't be boiled down to a single quantitative measure, like an IQ test, or qualitative data, like a teacher's own observations. We have to be open to collecting all the information we have and see the student not as "abled" or "disabled", but as a collection of strengths and a collection of areas needing support. For example, how many students in your life have surprised you with some hidden talent or interest that you never would have guessed? Before we write someone off and relegate them to the realm of arts and crafts, have we given them a chance to try (and possibly fail) at something? Or did we take one look, assume their possibilities, and begin to build the protective bubble? A wise colleague of mine once told me: every choice we make about our student's abilities removes options in their future. I know we love our students, but are we loving them to low expectations?

.

Equitable Grading Practices: Shifting Focus from Points to Learning

By Rachelle Burnside

I was in a meeting with a group of AVID teachers the other day, and the subject of equitable grading practices came up. The practice can be confusing to those who are unfamiliar with the idea of grading students according to proficiency levels, rather than points. A teacher asked, "How do I tell a student what they need to do to get their grade up in Teacher A's class if they have an Approaching Proficient? I don't know what this means. Are they missing assignments?"

It was a valid question, and one that gets to the heart of standards-based, equitable grading practices. I told her that the student needed to go back to the assignment rubrics from Teacher A to see *why* they were at the Approaching Proficiency level. The rubric would give the student–and their AVID teacher–feedback on exactly what skills the student had mastered and what skills the student needed to focus on in order to demonstrate proficiency. It wasn't a matter of missing points. It was a matter of demonstrating growth and learning the next time these skills were assessed.

The Problem with Traditional Grading Systems

In traditional grading systems, students are often confused about how their grades are determined, especially when a single letter grade or score reflects a mixture of different types of assignments, behaviors, and performance on tests. Grades are often an amalgamation of academic and extraneous factors—such as grading penalties for late work or behaviors unrelated to learning, like attendance or classroom conduct. While these factors can be important for classroom management, they often do not reflect a student's understanding of the material.

In contrast, standards-based, equitable grading, non-academic behaviors are decoupled from academic performance, ensuring that the student's grade is a more accurate reflection of their academic learning and not their compliance with behavior

expectations. Instead, the student's academic grade is based on specific learning goals or standards, providing students with a clearer understanding of what they are expected to learn and how they will be evaluated. In this system, each standard or learning objective is assessed independently, and students receive feedback on their mastery of these individual concepts, rather than a cumulative grade based on a variety of factors. This transparent approach allows students to focus on mastering specific skills or knowledge areas, and it helps them identify exactly where they need to improve. Students are not left wondering how a late assignment or participation score impacted their final grade; instead, they see exactly where they stand in relation to each learning goal, which makes it easier to track progress, set personal learning targets, and take ownership of their educational journey.

Shifting the Focus to Learning

Traditional grading systems promote an obsession with points and scores, rather than understanding concepts, particularly in high school when grades become all important for college applications. Grades are seen as a final measure of achievement, with the emphasis placed on accumulating numbers instead of fostering intellectual growth. This approach can undermine learning and leave students more concerned with how to "game" the system than with acquiring subject matter competency.

By adopting standards-based, equitable grading practices, educators can shift the focus from point accumulation to meaningful learning. The emphasis is on mastery of skills and content, rather than performance on specific assignments or exams. Students are encouraged to demonstrate their understanding through multiple forms of assessment, which may include projects, discussions, presentations, or reflections, in addition to traditional tests and quizzes. This approach gives students more opportunities to show their learning and helps them focus on the process rather than just the outcome. When students understand that the goal is not simply to get the right answer but to grasp the underlying concepts and improve over time, they become more motivated to engage with the material in a deeper way.

Encouraging a Growth Mindset

Equitable grading also reinforces the idea that learning is a continuous process that involves setbacks and successes. When students are given the chance to reflect on their learning and make corrections, they begin to understand that mastery is achieved over time, not through a one-time performance. This perspective encourages deeper engagement with the content, as students are no longer merely working for the "right answer" but are invested in the learning journey itself.

Conclusion

Equitable grading practices shift the emphasis from earning points to improving learning, which ultimately benefits both students and educators. By focusing on mastery, effort, and growth, these practices help students move away from a fixation on grades and towards a more meaningful understanding of the material. When students are allowed to revise their work, demonstrate learning through multiple assessments, and focus on their progress rather than their performance, they are more likely to develop a lifelong love of learning.

A Lighthouse, A Bridge, A Mirror, and A Canvas

Gwendolyn Best

Have you ever wondered why the teacher evaluation process often feels like a bureaucratic burden rather than a tool for growth? What if I told you that this process could be transformed into something truly empowering and collaborative? Let me share with you a few key experiences on my journey as an educator. Along the way, I've come to see the teacher evaluation instrument as more than just a checklist. I consider it the Swiss Army knife of professional reflection, connection, and growth —a versatile tool that can transform key interactions between teachers and administrators, driving professional learning that ultimately enhances student achievement.

In the realm of education, the teacher evaluation process often stirs up feelings of unease and frustration. But what if it could spark inspiration and collaboration instead? Imagine if, instead of being a source of stress, the evaluation process became a catalyst for professional growth and a platform for shared success. With the right approach, we can turn this tool into a driving force for excellence, ensuring that every educator, whether new or experienced, thrives.

The Swiss Army knife analogy has been evolving in my mind over the past twenty years. However, it was during the first week of 2022, shortly after I joined the Human Resources and Talent Development Department of a school division, I was tasked with engaging with educators to understand their professional learning priorities for the school year that was already underway. I planned to take what I learned and use it to shape a professional learning plan for the following year that aligned with school division priorities while being driven by the teachers' needs, ideas, interests, and student achievement data.

During some of my first discussions with teachers, a spark ignited—an idea that had first kindled more than a dozen years earlier was reignited. How could a fresh and more positive look at the teacher evaluation process serve us in our work of continuous improvement? These conversations highlighted the evaluation process as not just a measure of performance but as a vital tool in our toolkit, helping us navigate the complex landscape of educational growth and student success.

The evaluation system seemed to be the perfect tool to ground us and center our efforts, as it offered something for everyone. Everyone could "get in where they fit in," utilizing their expertise, experiences, and knowledge to enhance the educational environment. For novice educators, the system's expectations served as a springboard for questions, conversations, and actions that fostered their development and integration into our educational community.

This is how things began to unfold. During those conversations, experienced teachers asked, "What about us?" They revealed that for over seven years, their professional needs had been sidelined by division leaders who prioritized the needs of novice educators entering through alternative pathways. These new colleagues, though welcomed, were stepping into the profession without the comprehensive preparation that once defined teacher training—those years of in-depth assignments, readings, and practicums. While the alternative pathways are appreciated, experienced teachers felt a sense of frustration due to the unintended consequence: their own professional stagnation. They were expected to support their new teammates, yet they themselves were left without the necessary support.

Those dedicated educators who had been serving for 10, 20, or even more years in a beloved but challenging school division labeled by the State Department of Education as a "hard to staff" school division felt overshadowed by the emphasis placed on supporting new educators. They weren't asking for the focus to be solely on one group over another. Instead, they were advocating for a reimagining of the school division support systems and professional learning programs to benefit both novice and experienced teachers equally.

In 2009, I worked in a different school division. That year, there were two contrasting situations within the same school that highlighted what I saw as some serious flaws in how educators perceived and used the evaluation process. First, a new teacher, fresh out of college, armed with a degree in elementary education, and full of potential, felt let down when her administrators stopped visiting her classroom after the first two weeks. She wanted more interaction, not just for validation, but for genuine growth. Unfortunately, her desire for ongoing support went unmet, and she left our school system by the end of the year. The administrators did not use any of the typical observation forms during visits to her room. They did not plan their visits or have pre-observation conferences. The post-observation conversations were casual, general

and brief. No written feedback was provided, though positive comments were shared freely. In fact, the administrators often raved about that teacher to others. They were sure to mention regularly that she had very few discipline referrals. In that learning environment, a low number of discipline referrals was considered one indicator of being a good teacher.

For me, that situation highlighted a crucial disconnect: the evaluation system often appeared as a one-way street—administrators observed and assessed teachers without creating spaces for teachers' voices or reflections. I remember mumbling words to myself that I would say countless times over the years, "missed opportunity". At that time, I was a content area specialist serving the school division. I encouraged that teacher to self-reflect and create an action plan based on professional goals she set for herself within the domains of our teacher evaluation process. She engaged and said she believed the practice was vital, but that it was missing guidance from administrators. She wanted two-way communication and feedback and had been taught by her college professors to expect from her school leaders.

Contrast that scenario with a different experience in the same school. There was a teacher struggling with engagement and time management. She was observed frequently by the administrators. By November, she had received more than ten observations. The written documentation was provided to her in the form of hard copies of observation forms placed in her mailbox. Unfortunately, the prevailing culture was that frequent administrator visits were a sign of trouble. The principal's comments suggested the belief that all teachers with a degree in education were expected to enter their own classrooms fully equipped. The teacher saw no signs that the administrator believed that collaborative goal setting, ongoing support and feedback were crucial for a teacher's professional growth. Her pleas for assistance with classroom management were met with comments that indicated she was deficient and at fault. The administrators sought assistance from central office staff to address the teacher's lack of classroom management skills. I wondered why the administrators could not draw on their own experiences as teachers to offer suggestions. I also started to wonder how the mentoring program worked within the school system and what collaborative relationships and structures within the school could support a new teacher.

This experience highlighted how the evaluation process often functioned more as a gatekeeper than a guide. I encouraged the principal to reflect on his own journey of growth and the support he had received. My aim was to steer our discussions away from focusing solely on the teacher's shortcomings without providing actionable strategies. I believed that such an approach could leave teachers feeling demoralized rather than supported and uplifted. This disconnect between an administrator's experience as a teacher and their role in evaluating others was a significant issue.

What a shift! In 2009, I faced significant challenges finding administrators who recognized their responsibility to support teachers dealing with struggles in the classroom. It often seemed as if some administrators preferred to wait for a new school year to bring in new teachers, rather than addressing the issues faced by existing staff. This experience highlighted a critical gap in support for teachers who were not new to the profession but who still needed guidance and development.

Fast forward to 2022, there was a marked shift in my workplace. Both school and division-level administrators made concerted efforts to support the growth and development of new teachers. This renewed focus, and how it was perceived by various stakeholders within the school division, inspired me to seek further ways to advance educational practice for all educators. This led me to join the Learning Forward Academy, where I aimed to explore strategies to move everyone forward, ensuring that both new and experienced teachers received the support they needed to thrive.

My work in the academy has been focused on this belief:

 We don't need to exclude the professional learning needs of one group to effectively serve another group.

For teachers with diverse growth and development needs, the teacher evaluation process can serve as a solid foundation, especially if we see that process as a Swiss Army knife for professional learning. Here's how:

Lighthouse: Imagine the evaluation process as a lighthouse—steady and bright, guiding us through our professional journey. Like a lighthouse guiding ships, it helps us navigate through the challenges and changes in our goals and school division priorities. The standards and indicators within this system anchor both teachers and administrators. They give us a shared language and vision, making it easier to communicate about improvements and stay on track for growth.

Bridge of Collaboration: Picture the evaluation process as a bridge connecting administrators and teachers in a collaborative partnership. Together, we ensure student success and foster a supportive learning environment. The process also has the potential to connect teachers with similar annual professional growth goals within a school or division, forming powerful learning collaboratives among individuals and groups.

Mirror of Reflective Practice: The evaluation instrument acts as a mirror, encouraging each educator to engage in reflective practice, as highlighted by Pete Hall and Alyssa Sameral in their work on effective teaching strategies. It fosters self-awareness and self-management, helping educators become more attuned to their strengths and areas for improvement. By promoting reflective practice, the evaluation process supports both personal and professional growth, enabling educators to continuously refine their

teaching methods. This ongoing reflection not only enhances their instructional skills but also empowers them to make meaningful progress toward their professional goals.

Canvas of Personal Success: I often share that I love the idea of a new school year because of the reflection and goal setting which leads to refinement and improvement each year. The evaluation process is key in improvement. Annually it provides a canvas—rich with information from our knowledge, skills, achievements, and experiences) yet a blank slate awaiting creation. Each teacher has the opportunity to paint their unique picture of success, continuously adding to it year after year as they learn and grow.

The canvas is my favorite part of my analogy, because it is impacted by the other three components and reminds educators that we have agency in this work and that our personal brand and legacy are things we can greatly influence as we move closer to realizing our full potential and making a lasting impact on students and colleagues.

By reimagining the evaluation system as a lighthouse, bridge, mirror, and canvas, we transform it from a burdensome task into a powerful tool that fosters a culture of continuous improvement and collaboration. This approach turns challenges into opportunities for growth, benefiting both teachers and their students.

As a part of my journey in the academy and my quest to bring attention to the versatility and power of the evaluation process, I curated resources categorized by each teacher performance evaluation standard in the framework used in public schools in Virginia: [*Resources for the Virginia Evaluation and Performance Standards for Teachers*](#)

Miladys Cepero-Perez, Ed. S., NBCT

Instructional Supervisor

Office of Professional Learning & Career Development

Miami Dade County Public Schools

Miami, Florida

"In participatory research you can help people in seeing their own problems. You do not tell them, "This is your problem", but you work with them in a way that they become active."

> Marja-Liisa Swantz, originator of "participatory action research."

From Inquiry to Impact: Action Research as a Professional Learning Model for School Improvement by Resolving Problems of Practice

As a professional learning designer and provider with years of experience in the field, I have witnessed firsthand the transformative power of effective professional learning models. Among these models, action research stands out as a particularly effective job-embedded professional learning (PL) approach. In this essay, I will share my teachable point of view (TPOV) on the effectiveness of action research, grounded in my practical experiences and supported by relevant research. According to Darling-Hammond, Hyler, and Gardner (2017), effective professional development is characterized by its job-embedded nature, which allows educators to apply their learning directly within their classrooms. Mertler (2021) also emphasizes that action research fosters a systematic inquiry process that supports educators in critically reflecting on their practices.

In my role as a professional learning provider, I have had the opportunity to work with various educational institutions, each with their unique challenges and goals. The need for continuous improvement in teaching practices is universal, and traditional professional development often falls short of addressing the specific needs of educators. Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) argue that traditional models often lack the necessary relevance and context for teachers, which can hinder their effectiveness. This is where job-embedded models like action research come into play. Action research allows teachers to engage in systematic inquiry within their classrooms, fostering a culture of reflection and adaptation (Sagor, 2000; Mertler, 2021).

Throughout my career, I have facilitated numerous action research projects in diverse educational settings. One particular instance that stands out involved a group of middle school teachers who were struggling with student engagement in math. We collaboratively designed an action research project where each teacher implemented a new instructional strategy aimed at increasing engagement. As they collected data on student performance and feedback, they not only refined their practices but also built a supportive community of learners. This experience reinforced my belief that action research empowers educators to take ownership of their professional growth. Mertler (2021) highlights that this insider perspective is crucial, as it allows teachers to critically reflect on their practices and generate new knowledge about effective classroom strategies. Furthermore, Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) note that collaborative inquiry fosters a sense of community among educators, which is essential for sustained professional development.

Research supports the effectiveness of action research as a job-embedded professional learning model. According to Sagor (2000), action research promotes a cycle of inquiry that enhances teaching practices and student outcomes. Educators who engage in action research are more likely to implement changes based on evidence, leading to improved student learning. Mertler (2021) further asserts that action research enables teachers to identify and investigate problems they have firsthand knowledge of, thereby making the research process more relevant and impactful. Additionally, Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) emphasize that effective professional development should be continuous and collaborative, aligning with the principles of action research.

While I advocate for action research, I also recognize that it is not without challenges. Some educators may feel overwhelmed by the demands of conducting research alongside their teaching responsibilities. To address this, I emphasize the importance of providing structured support and resources. Darling-Hammond et al. (2017) suggest that professional development should include ongoing support and coaching to help educators navigate these challenges. This includes professional learning sessions focused on research methodologies, data analysis, and time management strategies.

Mertler (2021) highlights that structured support can enhance the effectiveness of action research, making it a more manageable endeavor for educators.

In conclusion, my teachable point of view on action research as a job-embedded professional learning model is rooted in both experience and research. I urge educational leaders and institutions to embrace action research as a vital component of their professional learning initiatives. By fostering a culture of inquiry and collaboration, we can empower educators to enhance their practices and ultimately improve student outcomes. As we move forward, let us commit to supporting our educators in this journey of continuous improvement through action research. Sagor (2000) reinforces that action research not only improves educational practices but also cultivates an environment where educators feel empowered and engaged in their professional growth. Together, we can make a significant impact on the educational landscape by prioritizing action research as a cornerstone of our professional learning endeavors.

References

Bradbury, H., Waddell, S., O' Brien, K., Apgar, M., Teehankee, B., & Fazey, I. (2019). A call to
    Action Research for Transformations: The times demand it. *Action Research, 17*(1), 3-10. https://doi.org/10.1177/1476750319829633
Darling-Hammond, L., Hyler, M. E., & Gardner, M. (2017). Effective teacher professional development. *Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute*. https://doi.org/10.54300/122.311.
Francisco S., Forssten A., & Almqvist A. (2024) Action research as professional learning in
    and through practice, *Professional Development in Education, 50*:3, 501-518, https://doi.org/10.1080/19415257.2024.2338445
Mertler, Craig A. (2021) "Action Research as Teacher Inquiry: A Viable Strategy for Resolving
    Problems of Practice," *Practical Assessment, Research, and Evaluation: Vol. 26*, Article 19. https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1314304.pdf
Sagor, R. (2000). *Guiding school improvement with action research. Alexandria, VA: ASCD*.

Michelle Della Fortuna

K-12 Supervisor of Mathematics

Working in "Misery land"

During my tenth year of teaching, I was tasked with leading a building-level initiative at a new school. Despite my decade of experience, I had only been at this school for a little over a year. In October of my second year, I presented the initiative at a faculty meeting. After the presentation, a friendly colleague approached me with a book in hand—Little Miss Sunshine by Roger Hargreaves. She smiled and said, "This is you; you need to read it." I hadn't read the book before, but later that day, I did—three times. That little book prompted me to reflect on my ten years in public education. The next morning, I sought out my colleague, gave her a big hug, and asked, "We work in Miseryland, don't we?" She laughed and replied, "Yes, we do, but you are our Little Miss Sunshine."

If you're unfamiliar with the book, here's a quick summary. Little Miss Sunshine was returning from vacation when she spotted a sign for "Miseryland" and decided to take a detour. Upon entering, she was greeted by a sign that read:

"YOU ARE NOW ENTERING MISERYLAND.

SMILING, LAUGHING, CHUCKLING, GIGGLING FORBIDDEN

By Order of the King"

University playing each other in football) and Mardi Gras. To engage my students I had them each write an essay to persuade me which team colors and logos I should wear, and which team I should root for. Secondly, all my students, coming from their own experience, wrote informative letters to my family members in the Northeast about Mobile's Mardi Gras.

Professional learning that is responsive and differentiated to educators' needs is something teachers can apply immediately in their classroom, or something they can practice, assess and refine to improve their teaching. Similar to my students in Alabama, teachers are eager to learn evidence-based strategies, share their own teaching practices, receive ongoing feedback and receive support to implement and sustain change over time to improve student learning.

Reflective

I learned as much my first few years teaching as my students did. While many of my lessons did not go as planned, I have strived, since beginning as an educator, to learn to adapt, evaluate and improve my teaching practices to adapt to my students and their needs, while learning ways to be more efficient, effective and embrace a growth mindset.

It is important that professional learning provides multiple opportunities for educators to incorporate a continuous improvement cycle. By reflecting on their current reality, teachers can identify what is working well, areas for further development and how they can incorporate what they are learning into their existing teaching.

The four R's have had a lasting impact on me as an educator, and help me to seek continuous improvement personally, but also professionally, for those that I serve and support.

Matt Dunbar
Franklin County Public Schools
Rocky Mount, Virginia

Building Resilient Learners: The "Wheels" of Change

As an elementary school principal, the journey toward building resilient learners is one that requires more than just a focus on academic achievement; it necessitates a deep, sustained commitment to fostering an environment where students can thrive emotionally, socially, and then academically. In our school, this journey has been intricately tied to the principles found in Jon Gordon's *The Energy Bus*, which has not only guided us in building a common language among staff but has also served as a cornerstone in our change process.

The Vision: Where We Want to Be

At the heart of our change process was a clear vision: to create a school culture where every student develops the resilience to face challenges, the confidence to overcome obstacles, and the drive to pursue lifelong learning. We understood that resilience is not just an innate trait but a skill that can be cultivated through consistent support, positive relationships, and an environment that encourages growth. This vision necessitated a shift from a traditional focus on academic outcomes to a more holistic approach that considers the social/emotional wellbeing of our students and the skills/dispositions of our Franklin County Graduate profile as equally important.

Understanding the Starting Point: Where We Are

To embark on this journey, we first had to assess our current reality. This involved taking a hard look at our school's culture, our students' needs, and the existing practices that either supported or hindered the development of resilience. We realized that while our staff was dedicated and hardworking, there was a lack of a unified approach to addressing the emotional and social aspects of student learning. This disconnect often led to inconsistent practices, which in turn affected students' ability to develop the resilience needed to navigate challenges both in and out of the classroom.

The Middle: Bridging the Gap

The real challenge in the change process is found in the "missing middle"—the journey from where we were to where we wanted to be. This is where *The Energy Bus* became a critical tool in our transformation. The book's principles of positive energy, shared vision, and relentless focus on teamwork provided us with a framework to bridge the gap.

We began by introducing *The Energy Bus* to our staff, not just as a book but as a blueprint for change. Through professional development sessions, discussions, and collaborative activities, we built a common language rooted in positivity and resilience. Phrases like "fuel your ride with positive energy" and "drive with purpose" became more than just words; they became the foundation of our school community and the work we were doing.

Building a Common Language

Developing a common language was crucial in creating consistency across classrooms and grade levels. This shared language allowed staff to reinforce the same principles of resilience and positivity, no matter where a student was in the school. For example, when a student faced a challenge, teachers across the school were equipped to respond with a consistent approach, using the language and strategies we had collectively embraced.

This common language also extended to our students. By embedding these principles into our daily routines, assemblies, and even our curriculum, students began to internalize the values of resilience and positive thinking. They learned that setbacks are not failures but opportunities to learn and grow, a mindset that has proven to be invaluable in their academic and personal lives.

The Outcome: Resilient Learners

As we navigated the "missing middle" of our change process, we saw our vision begin to materialize. Students started to demonstrate greater perseverance in the face of challenges, improved self-regulation, and an increased willingness to support their peers. Teachers reported a more positive classroom environment, with students more engaged and motivated to learn.
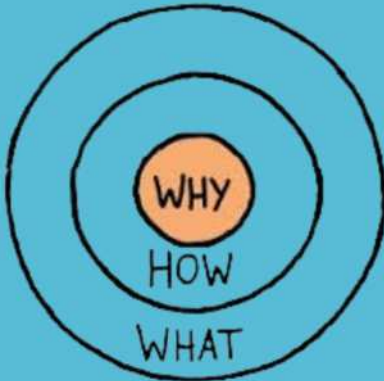
While the journey is ongoing, the change process has already had a profound impact on our school culture and student learning. By thoughtfully considering not just where we were and where we wanted to be, but also the crucial steps in between, we have laid the foundation for a resilient learning community that will continue to grow and thrive.

The Golden Circle

Collective Why
Resiliency is at the core of learning and life. Becoming a resilient learner allows our students to grow and navigate the challenges of life.

How
Through creating a common language and building-wide expectations based on the principles of the Energy Bus. Focusing on a growth mindset, increasing student empathy, and empowering students as drivers.

What
Teaching and learning geared toward academic growth and success on VA SOLs.

WHY
HOW
WHAT

Molly Dunne, TPOV
The Room Was a Buzz….

August 8th, I woke up, nerves fluttering and ready to take on the day. This was the compilation of weeks of planning and sleepless nights. New Staff Orientation was here. "*Did I order enough lunches for everyone? Would the weather hold out for all of our outdoor activities? Would staff understand where to park? Does the administration team remember their talking points?*" All of the fears and worries rushed through my brain as I drove *quickly* down the highway to get to work bright and early. As I arrived at our outdoor education center, it was as if I had scripted it. The sun was shining so perfectly over our lake, creating a reflection that rivaled a Bob Ross painting. The catering arrived early with PLENTY of food for everyone (and more). Staff were walking around with bright smiles on their faces, greeting us with joy and excitement. The first day of their new jobs. Maybe the start of a new career or possibly a first step into the classroom after graduation. 2023 was considered a *special* year. We had hired more than 80 staff members over the summer. In a year of staffing shortages, we were proud to have maxed out the room (apologies to the local fire department but we had to remove the maximum occupancy number for a short period of time). The room was a buzz.

As the day settled in and my nerves washed away, I was able to take in the moment. Taking in what this maxed occupancy room meant for us as a district. For the new staff, it was a bright, fresh start. For our district, it was a visual representation of an increasingly larger issue…staff turnover.

In recent years, we have seen an 18% turnover rate in certified staff and a number I can only assume would be doubled in our non-certified staff. In a small special education cooperative, the impact of that is

significant. Turning over this amount of staff each year erodes your school culture. Turnover impacts collaboration, cohesion, and, most importantly, students. Being a special education cooperative, we serve students with the highest levels of need. To serve them well, we need specialized training, adapted curriculums, clear routines, and consistency. When your front doors become a revolving door, all of those needs get tossed out every year.

So, as I stood back in the corner waiting for my turn, I reflected on the most critical question of that day… "*How can I make a difference? How can we ensure next year's catering order is for 20 instead of 100?*". My astute reflection brought me to a modified idea from the famous philosopher Elle Woods.

> Endorphins make you happy. Happy people just don't leave their schools; they just don't.

What are the levers to increase these endorphins for teachers? **Professional Learning. Mentoring. Coaching**. Educators need to feel good about themselves. They need to believe that they can make a difference. They need to feel efficacious.

In a world where school systems are HARD, we must find the time and place to pour in and keep pouring. When we create systems where staff receive training aligned to their role, we build staff with deeper knowledge bases. When we create safe relationships where staff are mentored, we build staff who are inspired and confident. When we create coaching cycles rooted in reflection and growth, we build staff who become self-directed.

School culture is essential, but no amount of appreciation days will create deep learners who are confident, inspired, and self-directed. When we pay attention to the correct levers, we will keep the buzz at our schools, and not just at new staff orientation.

Rachel Fainstein
Secondary Math Teacher on Special Assignment
Santa Clara Unified School District

What's the Problem with Math Homework

My first year teaching AP Calculus AB my student's pass rate on the AP exam was around 40%, well below my state's average of the mid-60s. It was my first time teaching the course and, like I tell students, "no one is good at something the first time they do it." The following year, I learned from my mistakes and improved my students' pass rate to be in-line with my state's average. A few years later, I made one change and my pass rate jumped to over 80% - where it stayed until I left the classroom 4 years ago. One change was all it took to increase my pass rate by over 20%.

To provide some context: I worked at a Title 1 school and my students' AP exams were paid for by the school. I required all of my students to take the exam, so the change was not cherry-picking students to take the exam or more qualified students enrolling in the course. This miraculous thing that spiked my students' learning… I eliminated all practice problems from homework. Yes, you read that correctly - my students were never told to practice procedures at home; no textbook problems or worksheets, no test or quiz corrections, no "finish at home if you didn't finish in class."

Years earlier, from a lens of equity, my course-alike team and I eliminated all homework in our 9th and 10th grade math classes. We knew many of our students had jobs to help financially support their families, had to look after younger siblings, or simply deserved time to be kids. In order to compensate for the lack of practice students would traditionally get through homework, we shortened our instruction and created a variety of self-checking procedural practice activities that students did in class. The self-checking component was essential, because students were able to immediately seek help if their answers were incorrect.

Yet, even with the success of this approach in my 9th grade class and incorporating the self checking activities into my AP class, I told myself that my AP Calculus students were college-bound and needed the extra practice and time-management skills homework would provide. Then, I heard someone–I can't even remember who it was– say something like "if the work is important enough that all students need to do it, then it can't be homework. And, if it is not important enough for all students to do it, why are

you assigning it to begin with?" While I often argue that procedure is the least important part of mathematics, it is often the part that students find the most frustrating and is required to pass the AP exam. Why was I assigning my students the aspect of mathematics they found most challenging and most important to do at home in isolation?   My practice had to change.

Based on the Curve of Forgetting, I knew my students still needed multiple opportunities to interact with content. Over the course of a year or two and trial and error, I created a list of rules for everything I asked students to do outside of class:
1) I spent time explaining my rationale for the task. For example, "tomorrow you are going to need this skill from last week, so if you spend time reviewing it, tomorrow will be easier."
2) 15 minute rule - anything I asked students to complete had to take less than 15 minutes
3) Nothing was graded. Yes, most students still did it - see #1
4) Every student HAD to be able to do it - homework was not a time to be confused or challenged
5) I asked students to complete tasks, I did not assign them tasks - one is an invitation, the other a dictatorship

With these rules, I focused on tasks that were accessible to all and would support students' metacognition. I had them write and talk. I compiled a list of tasks/prompts for my students to complete at home and would select the one that made sense for that day's lesson and where we were headed. The prompts I used most often were:
● Summarize your notes from that day's lesson: what did you learn? Where are you still confused? How does this lesson relate to something you learned previously?
● Revise a notes summary you had previously written
● Pick one problem you did in class and write a list of generic steps that can be used to help you solve similar problems
● Students would be given two different, yet correct, solution paths to the same problem and asked to compare and connect them.
● Explain one of the problems you did in class to someone else in your house, in a way *they* would understand. No one home that night? Send me a video of you explaining the problem
● Edit your notes from class - use different colors to help explain the process (aka color-coding)
● Write a list of questions you have about this lesson/unit; everyone has questions, if you don't you're not thinking hard enough

- Students would be given a problem solved incorrectly - circle the mistake that was made; What is the misconception behind the mistake?
- What mistake did you make in class today and how did you learn from it?
- How do you feel about this class so far and what can I do to support you?

When I received my student's pass rate in July, I was shocked. My students enter the class with the same knowledge my past kids did (scoring roughly the same on the prerequisite skills assessment I gave every year). I made minor revisions to some of the notes I created, my classroom activities were still self-checking and fairly engaging. The only large change was my approach to homework.

As teachers, we often do what was done to us; what Dan Lortie refers to as the apprenticeship of observation. Relying on homework for practice is illogical. Students who can do the procedure in class, can still do it at home. Students who can't do the procedure in class, can't do it at home. Students who can do the simplest versions of the procedure in class, can do some of it at home. Of course, there were students who couldn't do the procedure in class and somehow came to school with correct homework - either from the internet, copied at lunch, or from the help of someone. As educators, we need to think critically about the practices and policies we bring into our classrooms. Assigning homework because we were assigned homework is not a justification for the practice. Afterall, if this practice was effective, America would have higher math achievement levels.

Linsey Hawkins

Professional Learning Manager, Leadership Development

Florida Virtual School

Inspiring Professional Growth: Hold on to your "Why"

Every educator possesses a unique "why" that fuels their passion for teaching and learning. Throughout my 19 years in education, I have seen so many lose that sense of purpose and passion due to taxing responsibilities that keep us strapped for time and energy. As a professional learning manager, I believe it is my mission to help educators and staff hold on to their "why." By understanding and strengthening intrinsic motivation, we can empower teachers and staff to overcome challenges, innovate, and achieve extraordinary results that benefit all students.

I believe every educator has a powerful "why" that drives their commitment to students. My role is to create a supportive environment where individuals can discover, articulate, and deepen their purpose. By providing opportunities for learning, reflection, growth, and collaboration, I inspire teachers and team members to push beyond perceived limitations and create a lasting impact on student success. I create and encourage ongoing professional development aligned with individual and organizational goals. In this way I can model and teach how to lead with purpose, inspiring others to do the same.

By focusing on the "why," we can cultivate a community of passionate, purpose-driven educators who are committed to making a difference in the lives of students.

Aly Hill

Professional Learning Manager

Florida Virtual School

Why I am passionate about developing my team:

I'm passionate about empowering my team members to reach their full professional potential. I believe that investing in their growth is not just an obligation, but a strategic necessity for our team's success. By nurturing their skills and knowledge, we create a stronger, more innovative, and adaptable team capable of tackling any challenge.

Through my commitment to professional development, I want to help each team member identify their strengths, discover new passions, and build the skills they need to advance their careers. When individuals grow, our team as a whole becomes more effective, collaborative, and resilient. In return, by developing our team's capabilities, we directly contribute to the overall success of our organization.

I envision a team environment where learning is a shared value. I want to foster a culture that allocates time and resources for continuous learning and skill development. I strive to provide mentorship, coaching, and training programs tailored to individual needs.

By focusing on the professional growth of my team members, I believe we can create a high-performing, engaged, and fulfilling work environment.

Adrienne Howard
Director of Elementary Education
The School District of Palm Beach County

"The decline in Grade 3 reading scores signals an urgent need for a focused approach to early literacy, especially in K-2. To build a solid foundation for long-term academic success, we must equip young learners to become proficient readers by Grade 3. This calls for a sustainable, ongoing professional learning structure for K-2 teachers, coaches, and principals to   improve literacy instruction."

Building a Strong Foundation: A Collaborative Approach to Early Literacy and Professional Learning for K-2 Educators

One of the most critical challenges in our elementary education system is the decline in Grade 3 standardized reading scores. These scores signal an urgent need for a more focused and coherent approach to literacy instruction in the early grades, particularly from

kindergarten through Grade 2. As someone with experience working with elementary-age students, I believe it is essential to address this issue to ensure that students build a solid foundation in literacy and reading skills, which are vital for their overall academic success.

To increase reading proficiency, we must provide young learners with the necessary tools to become proficient readers by Grade 3. This is a call to action for educators. We owe it to our students to give them the best possible start by ensuring they receive strong foundational literacy instruction in the early years of their education.

To tackle this challenge, we must implement a sustainable, ongoing, job-embedded professional learning structure. This structure should be designed for K-2 literacy teachers, instructional coaches, and principals, who play a pivotal role in shaping early literacy instruction. Professional development must be comprehensive, targeted, and tailored to meet the specific needs of educators working with young children.

An effective literacy professional learning program should emphasize best practices in early literacy, focusing on core components such as phonics, fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary development. Additionally, it should foster a love of reading in children, which is essential for long-term literacy success. Educators need continuous support, access to the latest research, and updated instructional strategies to keep pace with evolving literacy education practices.

Moreover, this professional learning must be job-embedded, and integrated directly into daily teaching practices rather than confined to occasional workshops or training sessions. Ongoing support, mentorship, and collaborative learning opportunities within schools and classrooms are essential. This approach allows educators to apply new knowledge in real-

world contexts, ensuring that professional development translates into meaningful improvements in student outcomes.

Principals and instructional coaches must also be active participants in this professional learning framework. Their involvement is critical in shaping school culture and ensuring the effective implementation of literacy initiatives. By fostering a cohesive and supportive environment, they create the conditions for literacy instruction to thrive.

By establishing a sustainable, job-embedded professional learning structure, we can work together to address the shortcomings in early literacy education. Our collective goal must be to ensure that every child acquires the literacy skills necessary for success in school and beyond. This is not just an educational imperative; it is a moral responsibility. Our students deserve nothing less than the best foundation we can provide to help them achieve their full potential.

Javier Jiménez

Goshen Community Schools

Goshen, Indiana

The Importance of Inquiry-Based Professional Learning for School Principals

In today's rapidly evolving educational landscape, school principals' roles extend beyond managerial tasks. They must be their school's instructional leaders, shaping the learning environment, ensuring teacher professional growth, and driving student achievement. Principals must engage in continuous professional learning to fulfill these essential responsibilities effectively. Inquiry-based learning is one of the most powerful approaches to professional growth, which can profoundly impact a principal's ability to lead and inspire change.

Inquiry-based professional learning emphasizes the importance of questioning, exploring, reflecting, and improving one's practices. For school principals, this approach is a catalyst for a mindset of continuous improvement. By engaging in inquiry, principals are committed to lifelong learning, demonstrating to their staff and students that education is a dynamic process and that everyone in the school is a learner. This, in turn, helps to create a school culture where experimentation, innovation, and reflective practice are valued, fostering a sense of optimism and forward-thinking.

The complexities of leading a school require principals to navigate various challenges, from addressing student needs to managing resources and supporting teacher development. Inquiry-based learning equips principals with a framework to approach these challenges systematically. By framing problems as questions to be explored rather than obstacles to be overcome, principals can develop more effective solutions. This method enhances their problem-solving skills and enables them to guide their staff through similar processes. It fosters a collaborative problem-solving environment within the school, where everyone feels connected and part of a team.

In an era where data-driven decision-making is crucial, inquiry-based learning encourages principals to delve deeply into data to inform their actions. Through inquiry, principals learn to critically analyze data, identify patterns, and develop action steps to guide school improvement efforts. This data-informed approach ensures that decisions are grounded in evidence, not based on assumptions or intuition, leading to more effective and targeted interventions.

Reflective practice is a cornerstone of professional growth, and inquiry-based learning inherently promotes reflection as it calls for principals to regularly evaluate their leadership practices, consider their decisions' impact, and identify improvement areas. Reflective inquiry allows principals to understand their leadership style better and its effects on the school community. By engaging in this reflective process, principals can continuously refine their approach, leading to more thoughtful and effective leadership.

Inquiry-based professional learning positions principals as instructional leaders who are actively involved in the teaching and learning process. By engaging in inquiry, principals gain a deeper understanding of instructional practices, enabling them to

provide more meaningful support and guidance to their teachers. This hands-on involvement enhances the principal's ability to lead curriculum development, instructional strategies, and assessment practices and instills a sense of competence and effectiveness, ultimately improving student outcomes.

Inquiry-based professional learning is not just an approach but a source of empowerment for school principals who aspire to lead with vision, purpose, and effectiveness. By embracing and modeling this approach, principals can cultivate a culture of collaborative continuous improvement, enhance their problem-solving skills, make data-informed decisions, engage in reflective practice, and empower themselves as instructional leaders. In doing so, they advance their professional growth and contribute to their schools' overall success, ensuring teachers and students thrive in a dynamic and supportive learning environment.

Kurt Johns

Student Learning happens on the student's time, not on the teacher's

I believe that all students can learn. However, our educational system does not always provide students with an opportunity to show their learning. Due to time constraints, the need to push ahead and cover new material, or the end of a school year, sometimes students are unable to demonstrate their learning because they can't do it in time. My experience in completing my Professional Association of Diving Instructors (PADI) scuba instructor certification and my subsequent teaching of our open water scuba diving course at our school completely changed my perspective on student learning and their ability to prove what they know.

In a traditional setting, students are taught portions of the course content and then they are assessed on their comprehension of the material in one way or another. A student is then assigned a grade and the teacher moves on to additional course material. Most students show comprehension by the "deadline", however, there are other students for various reasons who do not learn the material by the unit assessment. Not only are these students penalized with a poor grade, they typically continue to struggle in the course because the content has moved along and to continue to demonstrate learning, students need the requisite skills from earlier in the course.

Earlier in my career as an educator, I had poor feelings towards retake opportunities or the formative process in general. I was concerned that these approaches "teach to the test" or give students the information they need to pass the test the first time without taking ownership to learn the material. As I began teaching as a PADI SCUBA Instructor at our school, there were two things that I experienced professionally that completely changed my thoughts around student learning and our educational process as a whole. Learning about the importance of the formative assessment process and giving students an opportunity for retakes inspired me to become an administrator to help other teachers see the benefits of these small changes in our process to help ensure students learn.

As I began teaching SCUBA diving, I quickly realized the difficulties that students had with comprehending the course material and demonstrating their learning. SCUBA is a unique mix of specific content along with physical skills. Some students struggled with the content while others had trouble with their skills underwater. As such, our

course team decided to get support for students by engaging in an inquiry cycle to address the concepts that students struggled with the most. During this time we learned and embraced the formative process and were deliberate in having students co-create success criteria, showing them models of strong and weak work, having students get realistic goals, having students engage in self and peer assessment, focusing on one aspect of learning at a time, and having students reflect on their learning. Through this process, we were able to give students a clear vision of what we wanted them to be able to know and do, and give them feedback on their learning with opportunities to improve before their final assessment. In comparing student data from before engaging in this work to after there was a significant increase in student learning which showed the importance of teacher clarity and feedback that students still have time to act on.

Giving students an opportunity for retakes on assessments is part of the PADI certification process that I was required to embrace as a new instructor. As I worked with students on their open water certification dives, which is the culminating activity of the course, students need to demonstrate required skills at depth and they can attempt the skill as many times as they need to until they can complete it successfully. I worked with one student who struggled to complete a skill and after a number of attempts and feedback she was able to complete the skill successfully and ultimately completed her certification. Back on the surface the student mentioned that she understood the skill so much more by struggling through the learning process. In a traditional setting, the student would have failed the certification, and not be held accountable for learning the skill. By allowing retake opportunities in our courses we ensure the skills and content are learned and allows students to learn in their own time.

As an administrator who works to develop teachers and high-quality instructional practices, I stress the importance of embedding the formative assessment process in our classes. This clarifies the learning we expect of our students and provides them with feedback they can act on. Assessment retakes ensure students learn the required material and gives them flexibility if they don't learn concepts in the timeframe of the average student. These concepts put the focus on student learning vs. teacher planning and emphasize the old adage of "it is not what is taught, but what is learned."

Steer clear of the Ditch
Gretchen Lawn

Let me start by saying that I'm not a pun girl. I'm just not that quick on my feet. I enjoy them. They make me laugh. But I'm not usually the one to use them. So I want to start by thanking Linda for her assistance with the title and ultimate direction of my TPOV.

There was a period of time when I was very unhappy in my job. Every morning I would get a pep talk from a fellow Administrator during my drive into work. He was essentially my personal cheerleader and he was pretty good at it.

One day though, I just couldn't manage. On a back road, in the dark, I remember looking around me and then saying to Shane, "I think I'm going to drive my car into this ditch."

Readers, there is never a time that your unhappiness with your job should make you feel as if your only option is to point a 4,000 pound vehicle towards a gaping trench in the Earth and hope that Italian-made air bags are more reliable than Italian-made cars. The fact that not only did I make that statement aloud, but that I was also strongly considering the above scenario was the impetus I needed for change.

My life motto has always been, "Find the Fun!" Fun can be had in just about everything you do. Sometimes it's easy to find. Sometimes it's more challenging. And sometimes, you need to make it yourself. But if you can't find it or create it, especially if you once could, it's time to move on to something or somewhere that you can.

For me, I took a hard look at my life to try to figure out where and when I had become derailed. Instead of focusing on what wasn't going well, I focused on what was. It wasn't my job I disliked, not as a whole anyway. But there were certain aspects that I truly loved and where I could find my fun. By devoting more time and energy to those things (coaching teachers and providing professional development to staff), I started to climb out of the proverbial (and not so proverbial) ditch.

Reader, you and I both know that when someone is passionate…truly passionate…about a particular topic, there is a glow about them. You can't recreate or mimic that glow. That's why you can always tell when someone is not being honest in an interview when he/she carelessly throws that term around. Well, I had that glow. And because of it, I was able to land my perfect job where I once again have found my fun.

In my story, the ditch is an actual hole in the ground. Your ditch may be a situation where you aren't feeling respected or valued, a relationship with a friend that has

soured, a loveless marriage, really any situation that is not bringing your life happiness and fun. Just remember, you get to choose the direction you steer your car.

For me, I'll be driving towards the fun!

Amy MacCrindle, Ed.D.
Empowering Educators to Drive Student Success

At Huntley 158, we believe that the true measure of effective professional learning is not just how much educators know, but how it transforms student experiences in the classroom. Our approach centers on the idea that professional development should be as dynamic and responsive as the students we teach. Just as we differentiate instruction to meet the needs of each student, we are committed to providing tailored professional learning opportunities that empower teachers to make a real impact on student achievement.

The heart of our work lies in aligning professional learning with the needs of students. By offering educators a variety of learning experiences that target specific content areas, instructional strategies, and technology integration, we ensure that their development is focused on improving student outcomes. Teachers choose their learning pathways based on the needs of their students, which not only increases engagement but also helps bridge the gap between theory and classroom practice. This approach fosters a sense of ownership, where educators feel connected to their learning and equipped to apply it effectively.

However, professional development cannot end with a workshop or a lesson. To create lasting change, it must be part of a continuous cycle of growth, reflection, and application. This is where tools like the KASAB (Knowledge, Attitudes, Skills, Aspirations, and Behaviors) framework come in, helping us assess how professional learning is impacting teaching practices and, ultimately, student achievement. By tracking these areas over time, we can provide ongoing support that ensures learning is not just theoretical but deeply integrated into classroom practice.

At Huntley 158, we are dedicated to making sure that professional learning translates into measurable improvements in student engagement, learning, and academic success. By focusing on the direct connection between teacher growth and student outcomes, we are creating an environment where all students have the support they need to succeed.

The Power of Coaching
Jenny Maehara

About 12 years ago when I got my 4th grade class roster, my heart sank. Over 50% of my students were reading one to two years below grade level. How would I support the range of learners in my class? I spent the first weeks of school desperately trying to read books and implement strategies to support these 14 students with targeted small group instruction, but I realized pretty quickly that my skills and knowledge were limited.

I breathed a deep sigh of relief when I got an email from a friend about a class offered through New Teacher Center on classroom intervention and signed up immediately. I thought I was signing up for professional learning where we'd learn small group instruction strategies, watch some videos, and meet every two weeks to check in on how it was going and learn more, but it ended up being so much more. Part of course design was monthly coaching sessions–with a pre-conference, observation, and debrief–where Allison, one of the course instructors, came into my classroom to coach me as I planned, implemented, and reflected on the strategies we were learning.

Each time Allison met with me my hands got sweaty and my heart started racing. Was I doing the strategy correctly? How would I prompt the student if they made a mistake? Were my lessons having any impact on my students? I already felt inept as a teacher–I couldn't figure this out on my own. I worried that Allison would judge me. After each observation, however, I felt the opposite–I felt energized and empowered to keep trying new things and refining the strategies I was learning. She made me feel safe by building on my strengths, showing an unwavering belief in me and my students, and asking the best questions and giving quick tips to help me move forward in my practice.

This class changed my life and my students' lives. Not only did I become much stronger at implementing strategic small groups, my students grew by leaps and bounds in their oral language, decoding of multisyllabic words, and comprehension. By the end of the year, most of my students had grown one and a half to two grade levels in reading.

Beyond that, my experience with Allison made me a big believer in the power of coaching to transform teacher and student learning. Without a coach, I was left to figure it out on my own. I could take a class and learn theory, but having someone next to me as I took risks, tried new strategies, and reflected on what worked and what needed to change to transfer my learning into practice. My coach empowered me and our meetings gave me the booster shots I needed to continue to grow as an educator to support student success. Based on this experience with Allison, I kept signing up for more and more opportunities to be coached and, eventually, started to train to be a coach myself.

Three years ago, I stepped into an instructional coaching role at the site where I started my teaching career. Our school is tasked with a similar challenge to the one I had in my classroom many years ago–our Latinx students are multiple years behind grade level in literacy as compared to their peers and are being overidentified into special education. This data point is daunting for our staff. When I

started in this role, coaching was perceived as something "only for new teachers," and, since most of our staff has been teaching for 20-30+ years, it was hard to break through that mentality to get into classrooms to support students and teachers as a coach.

Day by day I've been working to open classroom doors by cultivating trusting relationships with my colleagues, being a thought partner in looking at data and thinking of next steps, listening well for coachable moments, and beginning to build systems for collaboration and coaching in our primary grades. While we're not there yet, I'm hopeful about the progress we have made. Teachers are starting to regularly text or email with questions and several have regular planning sessions, observations, and debriefs, and all are using data to drive instruction. Focal student growth parallels those who have engaged the most in coaching work. When I asked the teachers I worked closely with this year what helped them support students learning most, the answer was collaborative planning and coaching support. One teacher said, "I felt less alone and your belief in me and my students helped me to keep trying new things."

More than ever, I'm a big believer in what Steve Barkley says: "Everyone deserves a coach." I believe that
coaching and collaboration will have an exponential impact on student success and equitable outcomes at my school. I will keep working to build a coaching culture and am confident that cultivating trusting relationships combined with impactful coaching support will continue to empower teachers and develop a coaching culture at our school so that we can support student success.

Take Flight
Linda McDaniel

"Imagine getting into an airplane that was being flown by a pilot who didn't know where he or she was headed. Rather, a control tower would contact him/her at some unspecified time in the future to let him/her know they had arrived, or worse, that they missed the mark entirely. That is a completely irrational way to fly a plane." Fisher et. al. 30.

In *The Teacher Clarity Playbook,* the authors compare learning and outcomes to a pilot flying a plane without a flight plan and/or destination. This analogy resonates with me on so many levels. I believe it holds true not only in the world of education, but in many other facets of our day to day lives. Moments where we assume the people around us know exactly what we are thinking, understand our plan, and will be competent in completing the task. For example, we tell our kids to grab their things and get in the car only to be uptight when we arrive at the soccer field without soccer shoes. Or, we tell our significant other to pick up something for supper and are disappointed when it is not what we are hungry for. These are two simple scenarios where the absence of details leave our requests open for misinterpretation. In education, the absence of details or clarity in the intended learning leaves much to chance in reaching the intended goal. I use, potentially overuse, Fisher and Frey's lingo, "by design, not by chance."

I have a type A personality. I consider myself to be self-driven, ambitious, and goal-oriented. I want to know what to expect in an attempt to control my destination and ensure that I have the tools and resources to effectively complete the task. According to my personal rankings when utilizing a talent mapping activity, I identify with most all talents in the procedural quadrant. This is no surprise to me or the people who know me well.

I live and breathe by a timeline and to-do list. And, believe others should as well. As the elementary curriculum coordinator of a district with 23 buildings, 11,500 students, and 550 teachers I am keenly aware of how this can be perceived. The attributes associated with a type A, procedural personality are strong; which can be misinterpreted through shadow attributes such as arrogant, bossy, or obsessive. As a result, it is important that I consider my audience and their perception to ensure staff are receiving the information as intended.
My end goal is always to provide our staff members with as much information, upfront, as possible, ongoing updates to changes in the plan, and detailed agendas for benchmarks along the way.

As I prepare for a new school year, I generate a vision for the year complete with learning intentions, success criteria, a professional learning timeline, and a theme to tie it all together. Most recently, our theme was *Take Flight*. This provided some entertaining language and analogies to the work necessary for a successful year. By providing our teachers with the destination, flight plan, and access to the tower for navigation purposes, I am hopeful the attitudes and perspectives around our roles as educators will be more conducive to learning.

Destination:
- I have established our desired state for each professional learning component. This desired state is communicated during our professional learning launch during Back to School Professional Learning sessions in August.

Flight Plan:
- Important Dates document and Professional Learning Timeline outlines all dates, times, and topics for the professional learning that will be delivered to staff.
  - Professional Learning Timeline
    - Teachers:
      - Inservice and Director Called Meetings are intentionally scheduled, content planned, and communication ready to go to staff during back to school
    - Coach/Admin:
      - Monthly collaborations scheduled, content planned, and information communicated

Navigation:
- Build capacity (navigation skills) for the how and why behind the learning
- Make adjustments to our flight plan as needed, based on data and feedback surveys
- Utilize 'look for' documents and innovation configuration map
- Engage staff in coaching cycles with our instructional coaches

I believe that by providing our educators with the final destination, complete with a detailed flight plan, they are prepared for an on-time take off at the beginning of the year, to navigate the turbulence that is sure to come throughout the year, and successfully land the plane on the intended runway at the end of the year.

Fisher, D., Frey, N., Amador, O., & Assof, J. (2019). *The Teacher Clarity Playbook: A hands-on*
   guide to creating learning intentions and success criteria for organized, effective instruction ; grades K-12. Corwin, a SAGE Company.

Wendy Owens

Belonging: Why It Really Matters

I learned at a very early age that I have the autonomy to create the space that supports my growth, development and ideas. Growing up in rural Mississippi, I've unfortunately experienced inequities in subtle and not so subtle ways. Fast forward many years, as a black woman in leadership, I've entered many spaces where I didn't feel a connection to the people or collective ideas. Likewise, I understand that feeling disconnected from the people or collective ideas in certain spaces is a common experience that many individuals encounter at some point in their lives. It can be challenging, uncomfortable, and furthermore, isolating. When adults don't feel a sense of belonging in chosen or assigned spaces, it's nearly impossible for them to create safe spaces for students in those spaces.

Self-reflection and awareness collectively bring forth opportunities to be intentional with our words and actions. I believe being intentional with our words and actions supports the creation of positive communities and culture. As educators, we are afforded opportunities to take actions that lead to interrupting and dismantling systems and programs that perpetuate inequities in our education system. Educators must be willing to lead with an attitude that communicates and promotes a sense of belonging for all members within a community. Additionally, researchers continue to note that equity can not be achieved in the absence of creating a culture of belonging. We promote and expect educators to bring their authentic selves in the professional setting, yet as leaders in educators, we continue to look past the work required to create and sustain a sense of belonging for all within a space.

Cobbs & Krownapple (2019) define belonging as, "The extent to which people feel appreciated, validated, accepted, and treated fairly within an environment" (Cobbs & Krownapple, 2019, p. 43). Educators who wish to create safe spaces for everyone must be willing to commit to actions that effectively lead to dignity honoring and belonging for all. We are often engaging in data to answer specific questions relating to the opportunity gap. I believe it is essential to address and respond to cultures that do not promote inclusion and belonging. It has been stated time and time again that belonging is essential to positive student outcomes. A sense of belonging is fundamental to students' academic success, emotional well-being, and overall development. When students feel valued, respected, and included in their school communities, they are more likely to thrive academically, engage in learning, and develop healthy social relationships.

Creating and sustaining a culture of belonging requires intentional effort, collaboration, and a commitment to equity and inclusion from all stakeholders. Educational leaders must prioritize this work and recognize that true inclusion is not just about diversity representation but about creating spaces where everyone feels valued, respected, and empowered to succeed. By promoting authenticity, empowering educators, centering student voices, and fostering accountability and continuous improvement, educational leaders can work toward creating schools where all individuals feel a sense of belonging and have the opportunity to thrive.

References:

Cobb, F., & Krownapple, J. (2019), Belonging Through A Culture Of Dignity, The Keys to
  Successful Equity Implementation.

Flores, O.J., (2018). (Re)constructing the Language of the Achievement Gap to an Opportunity
  Gap. Journal of School Leadership, Volume 28, April 2018.

Ladson-Billings, G., (2006). From the Achievement Gap to the Education Debt: Understanding
  Achievement in U.S. Schools. Educational Researcher, Vol. 35, No. 7 , pp. 3-12

Lindsey, D., Lindsey, R., Nuri-Robins, K., & Terrell, R., (2012), Culturally Proficient
   Instruction: A Guide for People Who Teach.

Singleton, G., Beyond Random Acts of Equity, (2018). The Learning Forward Journal, Volume
  39, (5). Retrieved from

  https://learningforward.org/journal/october-2018-vol-39-no-5/beyond-random-acts-of-equity/
  Wallace Foundation. (2012). *The School Principal as Leader: Guiding Schools to Better
  Teaching and Learning. Perspective. Wallace Foundation.* Wallace Foundation.
  Retrieved from
  http://search.ebscohost.com.ezp.slu.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=eric&AN=ED53805
  5&site=eds-live

Dr. Janith Rhodes
Improving Teacher Retention:
An Important Step to Increasing Student Achievement

As an eighth grade student in rural Mississippi, the quality of teachers was very low. Even more astounding was the fact that teacher retention was not a problem for the school districts. Working as a school teacher was one of the few jobs that had benefits, a retirement and job security. So teachers came to our school and never left. They reaped the benefits the job had to offer; did little or no work and never seemed to care about the most important commodity there- the students.

Then along came Coach Brady, an eighth grade Social Studies teacher. He was so different from any teacher I had ever had. He made it a point to learn something "cool" about everyone of us and most importantly, he made the learning of social studies fun. Every student that had him as a teacher raved about him. I told everyone how much I loved Coach Brady's class and I couldn't wait for my younger siblings and cousins to have him as a teacher. That never happened. One morning, a few years after I graduated from high school, Coach Brady was a "no show". He never came to work that day at our school or any other day afterwards. The "rumor mill" had it that he was frustrated with learning being provided, how the administration handled teachers and how students were treated… so he just left.

Coach Brady's leaving and the way he left was the first ever in our school history. His peers and the administration were shocked. The scores for social studies dropped tremendously. It took the remainder of that year and the following year to replace Coach Brady. For the first time, I think the administration and district leaders realized the importance of keeping good teachers in other words, teacher retention.

We all lost a very valuable and important player in our educational system. Teachers are an important part of the educational process. Research has shown that teachers are the single most important factor in student achievement. A Vanderbilt University study found that "losing a teacher during the school year is linked with a loss of between 32 and 72 instructional days" which roughly translates to one sixth to nearly half of a school year. Another study of New York elementary school found that students in grade levels with high teacher turnover scored lower in math and literacy. In comparison, this same study revealed that decreases in teacher turnover could increase student achievement in math by 2 to 4 percentage points.

Reflecting on this research and the astounding effects of teacher turnover on student achievement was the catalyst of the focus on teacher retention as a problem of practice for one southeastern district. Currently this district's teacher retention rate falls below the state average. This is in spite of the fact that this district has received many accolades for students' success both locally and nationally.

Some key leaders in this district have been aware of this problem since 2018 and have made efforts to rectify the problem. Those efforts include creation of a mentoring program to assist district schools with district support for mentoring new teachers which is defined as those with 1 to 3 years of experience. This mentoring program provides support through professional learning and resources to schools within the district to help with the implementation of their mentoring programs.

At the beginning of work with this problem of practice (teacher retention), the district level mentoring program had a participation rate of its schools at just 32%. In investigation and research, it was found that a major reason for this low participation rate was due to the following 2 reasons:
1. School principals lack of knowledge of the mentoring program
2. School principals lack of knowledge of the goals of the mentoring program
Knowledge of these two reasons made the work of devising a plan to respond to this problem of practice seem relatively simple; increase participation in the district mentoring program.

There was much discussion, collaboration and research into what was the best way to do that. Some critical steps were made initially at the department level but to see adequate results would require discussion, collaboration and research with all stakeholders at all levels of the district. What has been instrumental in moving forward to make this happen is the awareness of this problem of practice and its critical connection to student achievement brought on through this work in the Learning Forward Academy.

Improving teacher retention requires participation at all levels within a district. Starting with one department and district-wide mentoring program is a small step in the right direction but it's just that - a small step. If districts are to do better with teacher retention to reap the benefits it offers to student achievement, they must invest time, money and resources into supporting new teachers which is a crucial benefit of mentoring programs. Research shows that the first year of teaching is highly important for the teacher's career trajectory and depends greatly on the amount and quality of support they encounter in their first teaching job. New teachers can grow into highly competent ones through mentoring programs as research has shown that new teachers involved in mentoring programs have twice as high retention rates. What is also encouraging from the research is that efforts to decrease teacher turnover will inevitably also increase teacher effectiveness for experienced teachers. This is a win-win for education and school systems as they work to improve student achievement .

Diamond Robinson

Chief Academic

Officer

Meridian Public Charter School

The Power of Creating Equitable Achievement System-Wide

An equitable achievement system across an educational organization ensures that all students, regardless of their backgrounds, identities, or learning needs, have fair access to high-quality learning opportunities and support. This approach is critical for closing opportunity gaps, fostering a sense of belonging, and enabling every student to reach their fullest potential.

Systemic inequities, often tied to socioeconomic status, race, language, and disability, create disparities in educational outcomes. This is something that educators acknowledge and refer to often when discussing disproportionate data results. However, a commitment to equitable achievement prioritizes resource allocation, curriculum adjustments, and targeted interventions to meet the diverse needs of all students appear to be lacking in many systems. I believe that when done system-wide, it disrupts cycles of inequality and provides a level playing field for all learners. Research shows that when schools and districts create equitable learning

environments, academic outcomes improve, particularly for students from historically marginalized backgrounds. By focusing on both academic success and social-emotional well-being, equitable systems support a comprehensive approach that nurtures all aspects of student growth.

An equitable achievement system fosters a school culture where every student feels valued, seen, and respected. It promotes practices that reflect students' diverse experiences and identities, helping them feel a genuine connection to their school. This sense of belonging encourages engagement, motivation, and resilience. A system-wide approach to equity builds sustainable practices that don't rely on individual efforts alone. Policies and professional development centered on equity become embedded within the organization, making it possible to maintain and expand equitable practices even as staff and leadership change over time. Equitable achievement systems help prepare students to thrive in diverse communities by teaching them the value of equity, inclusion, and empathy. This approach not only improves students' understanding of others but also fosters critical thinking and cultural awareness, skills that are vital in today's interconnected world.

Ultimately, prioritizing equity system-wide strengthens educational organizations, creating an environment where every student has the tools and support needed to succeed academically and socially. This approach helps build a more just and inclusive educational system, promoting excellence for all.

<u>Kristen Rulison</u>

SLL & School Counseling Manager for the School District of Palm Beach County

Redefining Professional Learning for K-2 Literacy Teachers

What are your memories of learning to read as a child? Reading was my least favorite subject in school. I think it was because I had a difficult time learning to read in first grade. I remember having a tutor after school. I would hate going to tutoring because my friends would be playing outside. I remember being bored reading lists of words and going through tons of flash cards over and over with my tutor. By the end of first grade, I was finally able to read words. I thought I was an excellent reader at this time because my interpretation of reading was to read the words accurately.

In second grade, I remember working with the teacher in reading groups. I was in the Blue Jay group. My teacher would call us back to the large brown kidney table in the back of the room to read. At this table, we would do round robin reading in which each of us would take turns reading a paragraph in a clockwise rotation. I was a perfectionist so I remember counting ahead how many students were in front of me to figure out what paragraph I would be reading aloud. I would practice the paragraph in my head while everyone else was reading. I would read every word correctly so in my mind I was an excellent reader; however, when we were finished reading a book I could not tell you what it was about. I quickly became frustrated with reading and lost my motivation to want to read . As a second grader, I started to despise reading and would do just about

anything to avoid it. This attitude towards reading carried with me until I became a kindergarten teacher.

To my surprise, my first teaching job was kindergarten. I always said I would teach any grade but kindergarten. However, at the time it was the only position available and I was grateful to have secured a job right out of college. All of my practicum and internship experiences were in upper elementary grade levels, so needless to say, I felt like a fish out of water. I remember one of my first tasks was to assess my students on letter and sound recognition. I still remember that pit in my stomach when I sat with my first student and quickly realized that I had no idea what sound "short e" made. As an adult reading had become an automatic process. I didn't have to think about the sounds that each letter made. This is when I recognized that the one reading class I had in college was not enough to prepare me to navigate the complex process of teaching young children how to read. I felt defeated already and it was only the first week of my educational career. How was I going to teach this class of seventeen five year olds how to read by the end of kindergarten?

Lucky for me, help was on the way. Jennifer Jones, a second grade teacher, was assigned to be my mentor. Jennifer was the school's reading guru and there is no doubt in my mind the principal intentionally matched us together realizing I had no idea what I was doing. Jennifer and I would meet at least weekly. I learned so much from our time together specifically focused on the reading process and how to teach early emergent readers, skills that I was never taught in college. With Ms. Jones' ongoing support and coaching I am pleased to say that the majority of my class was reading on grade level by the end of that year. I ended up being so appreciative of the opportunity to teach

kindergarten my first year because it allowed me to learn what needs to happen from the beginning to provide students with a strong literacy foundation. I set a goal for myself to get my master's degree so that one day I could be a reading coach or specialist, and could support other new teachers by providing sustainable job-embedded professional learning.

In six years that dream became a reality. I completed my master's degree and was starting a new chapter in my career as a reading specialist. Working with numerous schools in our district, I quickly realized how fortunate I was that so many of my opportunities for job-embedded professional learning centered around teaching students how to read. I would visit schools and notice that just like me, teachers graduating with Elementary Education Degrees only had one reading course in college, and didn't feel as equipped to teach our youngest students how to read. Not all schools were provided reading coaches or had access to ongoing reading support. My new mission in education became to support kindergarten to grade 3 teachers with quality professional development focused on evidence-based literacy practices.

As a member of the Elementary Education Department I have been able to work towards providing quality professional development to elementary literacy teachers across our District; however, at the end of the year I would sometimes feel defeated when the state test showed that only a little over half of our third grade students were on grade level and reading proficiently. It really made me reflect on how we were conducting professional learning for our educators. Everyone on our team was working hard, so why were we not reaping the rewards of all of our hard work? This is when we realized that we have been doing things the same tired old ways we have been using

for decades. If we really wanted to make systemic change, we would need to redesign and redefine what professional learning for elementary literacy teachers would look like in our district.

Around this same time I had the opportunity to apply for The Learning Forward Academy. Being a part of The Learning Forward Academy for the last two years has helped me gain a wealth of knowledge about the new Standards for Professional Learning and how to design transformational processes to make true systemic change through professional learning. It was perfect timing to align with our district's new Strategic Plan with its heavy focus on K-2 literacy. I have been able to work with two of my colleagues to redesign professional learning for K-2 literacy teachers to ensure that we have a sustainable, continuous, job-embedded professional learning structure that supports all elementary literacy K-2 teachers, coaches, and principals district-wide.

Grading our Students to Fail
Amy Shaver

Access to a free and public education provided me with opportunities and choices that would otherwise have not been possible as a child of a lower middle-class family in Maryland. I was the third of four children, born to parents who married as teenagers due to an unplanned pregnancy. In my younger years, school was a welcome place of enrichment and opportunities. Despite getting married at a very young age, my parents were the first in their families to graduate from high school, and I was the first in our extended family to attend college. The value of education was strongly supported in my home, with the belief that having an education, a diploma, or a degree, would provide choices for my future. These were choices my parents and grandparents never had. School was the sole opportunity for me to have access to learning opportunities and experiences, and it held the promise of affording me and my siblings a better future.

Until I became a career switcher from a lab scientist to a high school educator, I was blissfully unaware that unfair and exclusionary grading practices were a part of my experiences as a high school and college student. I worked very hard in school to achieve high marks. I didn't realize until I became an educator that points deducted for late assignments because I had to work an outside job impacted my GPA. I received lower marks on projects due to neatness because I used materials we had in my home, rather than purchasing items from a craft store or having a parent assist me to make sure the final result looked wonderful. The zero I received for failing to turn in an assignment because I was juggling school work, an outside job, and helping to care for our home while both parents worked multiple jobs was just part of the grading policy, and I believed it was just a representation of my shortcomings. I initially believed this was just how it had to be as an educator. As I reflect, I find myself guilty of continuing to perpetuate these same policies in my own classroom for several years, and it took some deeply personal interactions with students for me to understand that there was a different way, a better way, to assess a student's understanding and mastery while providing equitable conditions to do so.

As a high school educator, I truly believed I was holding students accountable and teaching personal responsibility through some of my grading practices. I used a grade of a zero as a placeholder in the grade book for missing work, telling myself that it served as an alert to

Students and parents of missing assignments. I believed I was helping students boost their grades by providing extra credit for not using bathroom passes during class or for buying and donating tissues to the classroom. To support the theater department, I offered extra credit to students who attended the spring musical, adding a bonus to their chemistry grade. I thought I was helping students create a buffer for their overall average by giving five-point homework completion grades to encourage practice, rather than recognizing the intrinsic value of practice or that not all students need to complete the practice to demonstrate mastery.

The shift in my thinking happened with several interactions with students who had incomplete or late assignments due to working an after-school job daily. These students had no time or energy for homework, and as I listened to their situations, I recognized my younger self in their plight. I also had to work 20 to 30 hours per week as a high school and college student, often turning in assignments late or past the acceptable deadline, receiving a zero. My students understood the content and could demonstrate mastery of skills in the classroom. The question is why I required additional time and work outside of the classroom to have their grades match their understanding. One student would often fall asleep in my classroom, refused to complete any handwritten classwork or homework, and had a calculated grade of 23% before taking the state end-of-course assessment. She passed the state test with proficiency and then came to me after the test, asking if she could pass the class since she passed the test. I remember being shocked at her boldness of asking and immediately denied her request because she had not completed any work or assignments throughout the semester. I think back to that interaction with that student with remorse and regret. I know I thought I was teaching this student responsibility, but this was a failed opportunity for me to put a mirror up to my own practices and have a true moment of self-reflection.

By relying solely on completion of assignments and scores on the end-of-unit tests or standardized lab reports, I was limiting my own ability to fully capture the range of students' abilities and understanding. My practices should have included a variety of methods for students to demonstrate their learning while in the classroom setting, accounting for diverse learning styles, talents, and access to resources. Equitable grading practices should include a variety of assessment methods, such as projects, presentations, portfolios, and classroom participation, to account for diverse learning styles and talents. As educators, we should recognize that students have different starting points and learning trajectories, and our grading and assessment practices should be flexible enough to accommodate individual students' needs and provide targeted support. I am now a strong advocate for equitable grading practices in schools to ensure that all students, regardless of their background or circumstances, have an equal opportunity to succeed academically. By being consciously aware of bias and

promoting fairness, these practices help create a level playing field for all students. Grading practices that are equitable can help reduce the achievement gap among students due to systemic inequalities. In order for my school district to shift policies and procedures, a sustainable model of professional development is required to understand the underlying assumptions of practices and shift for a change in practice that will result in increasing students' opportunities to learn and achieve in school. This has been implemented in my own school through the use of a model of professional learning and the work continues division-wide. Being willing to shift and change

practices to best serve the needs of students while supporting that learning through a comprehensive model of professional development is the only way to affect change and develop continued professional growth in education.

Ming Shelby

School Leadership Teams Learn Together and Elevate Core Instruction

During our summer administrator retreats, we begin conversations about our district and school improvement plan. We looked through multiple sources of data and noticed that our students who score proficient on the NWEA MAP test are also the students who are not growing. After digging into the data, we noticed it wasn't just a one year thing, rather a multiple year trend. In order to course correct, we must go back to Tier 1 and core instruction. This is not a topic that attracts people to jump on board, but we knew it was the right work.

As adult learners and educators, we understand that the foundation of student success lies in the strength of our core instruction. Our focus on elevating this instruction through collaborative teacher leadership is not just about enhancing our skills—it's about ensuring that every student receives the highest quality education from the outset. Our focus was on using high impact teaching strategies and tapping into our school leadership teams to learn, model, and teach about the strategies and how they're being effectively used.

Professional learning communities and school leadership teams are at the heart of this model. We learn and build as teams while maintaining a strong focus on the School Improvement Plan. This collective approach ensures that our strategies are not just isolated practices but are part of a coherent, district-wide commitment to excellence. Some questions that swirl in my mind is that we know this in theory, but what do strong models look like in real life application. How can we get our teams to commit to want to do this work so our core instruction is rigorous and engaging?

Implementing strong Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) allows us to reflect on our practices, share insights, and support one another in real-time, making us more effective and responsive educators. Through instructional rounds, we can observe, learn, and apply best practices across our district, ensuring consistency and continuous improvement.

The data we gather and analyze will not only guide our instructional decisions but also reaffirm our commitment to every student's growth. By focusing on these opportunities, we are not just improving instruction—we are fostering a culture of collaboration, continuous learning, and unwavering dedication to student achievement.

Angie Simmons
Moving from Lucky to Leading with Intentionality

Many years ago, I attended a conference session that started with the presenter greeting us at the door and handing us a poker chip. As she went through her presentation, she would stop and give candy out to folks who had a certain colored chip, leaving the rest of us without. The lesson here was that those folks who just happened to have a blue chip were the lucky ones who got the candy. Just simply showing up when they did, nothing more. She then went on to explain that this happens all the time in education -teachers often work in isolation. So kids in teacher A's class, who has a flexible schedule and can stay after hours -those kids get after school tutoring; or Teacher B, who is amazing at teaching fractions, the kids in her class soar through that unit with high mastery because that teacher has a talent, while other teachers in the school may shy away from fractions because they prefer to teach statistics -those kids get high quality math instruction on that topic. The point she was trying to make was that if we don't have systems in place to support ALL students, then we end up with pockets of luck. Oh sorry Maya, your teacher can't stay after school, sorry Mike, your teacher spends less time on fractions…and so on.

Now this was back in 2007 -we were talking about systems to support all students. It's 2024 and we still have luck happening in public schools. Lucky zip codes, lucky districts, lucky schools, lucky students…

One of my favorite visual tools is "The Leadership for Learning Framework " by Doug Reeves, which effectively conceptualizes the idea of getting results, be they high or low, and the replication of success or failure likely -or in other words, are we getting better on purpose (2005)? The idea of intentionality here is key, as we strive to be "leading," -getting high results and knowing why, or "learning," -getting low results and knowing why, instead of getting high results (lucky) or low results (losing) and not having a clue. I use this matrix during professional learning when I talk about being intentional and choosing high quality materials/strategies, etc, and I believe it applies here as well.

I currently work in districts that are losing -but there are learners right across the highway, and leaders across the county. How can we move from losing or lucky, to learning and leading? We must work together to create systems for success -intentionally getting better and knowing why so we can

replicate it for each and for all. It shouldn't be acceptable to say, "my districts have less barriers," or "teachers are more engaged because they have more support." How could our system dismantle barriers, increase access to professional learning and coaches, promote a sense of belonging and build an inclusive culture for adults and students? Districts, departments, schools, and classrooms have to move from me to we -need to have ownership and feel responsibility for all adults and all students.

It starts by creating a system that uses the Standards of Professional Learning to craft a research-based, intentional plan to increase educator knowledge, skills, and dispositions. This strategic plan can reduce the variability across the county and increase the quality of job-embedded supports, creating a culture of equity, collective efficacy, and ambitious teaching and learning (Forman et al., n.d.). We shouldn't be happy with just lucky, we should be leading.

Sources:

Reeves, D. B. (2005). *The Learning Leader: How to Focus School Improvement for Better results*. https://edrev.asu.edu/index.php/ER/article/view/715

Forman, M. L., Stosich, E. L., & Bocala, C. (n.d.). *The Internal Coherence Framework: Creating the Conditions for Continuous Improvement in Schools*. Harvard Education Press.

Kristin Skogstad
The Power of Differentiated Professional Learning

The hallway floors gleam as the final coat of wax sets, a symbol of readiness for the new school year. As the principal walks through the building, they stop at the classroom of a new teacher who has been dedicating countless hours to creating a warm, welcoming environment. "How are you feeling?" the principal asks. With a smile, the teacher responds, "Excited! I can't wait for my students to arrive." She shares that, with support from her team, she feels confident about the first few days. The principal reassures her, "Remember, we are a family. You're never alone—we're all here to help."

In the first few days, the principal checks in often, offering encouragement and assuring the teacher that support is always available. The teacher remains upbeat but is visibly working hard to manage a few challenging students. At the end of one day, the principal suggests strategies for managing the classroom and reminds the teacher that seeking help is always an option. "Thank you," the teacher responds. "I've been thinking of different ways to reach them, and I have some ideas I want to try."

By the third week, however, the principal notices the teacher's energy fading. Her once-buoyant demeanor has dimmed, and her voice no longer carries the same optimism. The principal recognizes a critical moment: this teacher, like so many others, may be grappling with the growing gap between her

expectations of teaching and the reality. The profession loses too many talented first-year teachers when this gap feels unbridgeable.

As a principal, our next steps are crucial. Supporting new teachers requires more than just encouragement; it demands a tailored approach. Differentiated professional development becomes essential, not only for new teachers but also for our seasoned staff. At Garfield Elementary, we have developed a Professional Learning Map that aligns with our School Improvement Plan.

Each month, teachers choose sessions that meet their current needs, ranging from Teacher Clarity and Visible Learning to best practices in reading and math, student social-emotional support, and navigating the Learning Pit.

These sessions evolve throughout the year based on the ongoing needs of both teachers and students, creating a responsive system that fosters growth.

At the end of the year, the principal visits the new teacher again. She's tired but proud of her journey. "I learned so much this year," she says, "and I'm already thinking about how to apply it next year." She thanks the principal for the consistent, customized support that helped her navigate the challenges of her first year. The principal leaves with a smile, knowing that with the right support, another teacher has found her footing and her passion for the profession.

Janie Stach

Hello World

I don't use the word "painful" lightly when I say I was painfully shy as a child. It is painful to have thoughts and feelings and not be able to express them to your friends, parents, and teachers. It is painful to know you are smart but not be able demonstrate your learning as well as your extroverted peers.

I received my first email address during my freshman year of college. Business majors were required to take a one hour website design course in which our major project was to create an "about me" website using HTML. I enjoyed that class so much that I added an information systems major and began taking technology courses. At that time, those were some of the few courses where computer use was encouraged in class and they would eventually lead me to a career in instructional technology. After graduating, I went back to school to become a certified

Through the keyboard, I was able to communicate more effectively with my professors, participate in class discussions, and work collaboratively in groups. In person, I was an overthinker and would internally talk myself out of speaking up in class.

I was listening to a student panel of students in blended learning courses at one of our neighboring high schools. One student said exactly what I had been feeling all those years. She said, "I was quick to second guess myself but in the online environment I had more time to think about what I wanted to say and was able to build my confidence which eventually transferred over into the face to face environment."

We hear all the time about keyboard warriors, hiding behind anonymity and a screen to express their opinions. We hear about screen time and cyber bullying. All the reasons we have digital citizenship education. But for some kids, the benefits of being able to communicate through the keyboard open doors that would never be opened otherwise.

Sharron D. Stroman

From Struggle-opoly to Life
Learning Forward Academy Class of 2024

I attended a virtual literacy summit, hosted by the largest school district in the nation and some of their external partners. The keynote was delivered by Lacey Robinson, president and CEO of UnboundED. She began with a story of her experience in a game of Monopoly, which became what she termed "Struggle-opoly". She then compared that experience to what many students endure in systems of education where they are not supported to access grade level literacy instruction. These students play the game of Struggle-opoly in systems where panic pedagogy sets in and band aids, like remediation patches, are employed as opposed to strategies that dismantle decades of misaligned policies, practices, and procedures.

In listening to Ms. Robinson's opening story, a familiar feeling returned – heartburn. No, not the kind where an antacid is usually a viable treatment. Rather, it was the burning in my heart that has resulted from learning many times over that as a nation, we are not serving our students well when it comes to teaching them to read. Stories abound which attest to many students not being skilled readers; for example, see NAEP data from [just pick a year – the data are the same for the most part]. I have also experienced this heartburn in my own work in supporting educators to analyze their data from a valid and reliable early literacy screener. I witness computer screens that are bleeding red because an overwhelming majority of students are not meeting grade level expectations. For example, students, who by expectations should be measured on their fluency, are instead assessed on foundational skills because they are not able to meet the threshold on a key skill that would direct them to oral passage reading. Now, one could very well argue that this could be attributed to the pandemic, which is certainly not out of the realm of possibility. After all, there were interruptions to learning, so it's highly possible that there are significant gaps in students' foundational literacy skills. So, my heartburn doesn't solely result from an examination of our assessment data, but also from an examination of years of state and federal accountability literacy data. Further, I have learned that districts employ practices that are not aligned with the body of research that tells us how the brain learns to read and what kind of instruction is the most impactful for teaching the greatest number of students to develop into skillful readers. Instead, the districts employ practices, which include the use of leveled text for

core instruction (inequitable and based on a myth – for example, see [Shanahan](#)) and teaching that reading is a psycholinguistic guessing game (inefficient and disproven – for example, see [Hanford](#)). The districts also use other assessments that have the potential to mislead educators into thinking that students are on the path to skilled reading when, really, they're negotiating text using the compensatory strategies of unskilled readers. You know where that leaves educators? In, as the Temptations sang, a ball of confusion; and then the educators begin to question assessment results, because to quote a familiar refrain, "They're my best reader." Lastly, the districts are committed to a certain philosophy about reading – that it develops naturally from children being surrounded by books and bathed in language - as reflected in their choice of instructional materials, some of which are widely used across the nation, but receive some of the worst reviews; their mandates; as well as in their actual words: "I am committed to [the philosophy]!" Now, are you beginning to understand the sources of my heartburn? Assessment, curriculum, and instruction are not singing from the same sheet of music; it's inharmonious at best.

Sadly, what is happening in these districts is emblematic of a much larger problem. In many districts across the nation, despite guidance from scientific evidence, there continue to be misaligned literacy policies, practices, and procedures. Ms. Robinson reminded us that "they who hold the advanced levels of literacy and writing, hold the power of decision making and are guaranteed the right to determine their life's trajectory." Currently, many students are not being equipped with the resources to determine their life's trajectory. Instead, they're playing Struggle-opoly, which has devastating educational and social consequences, and thus, their life's trajectory is being determined for them.

> We need to be less tolerant, we need to be *outraged*, we need to put our foot down. We need to have a coordinated campaign to change it. It's time to change it.
>
> DR LOUISA MOATS

While the claws of that certain philosophy of reading may seem intractable, there is hope. Some individuals, school districts, states, and organizations have taken heed to the need for change as called for in Dr. Moats' quote. I, therefore, have hope.

I have hope because in my work with partners, I plant seeds that speak to practices that align with what science has found to be effective for both literacy assessment and instruction. Seeds may get buried initially, but eventually they will grow. For example, in the "I am committed to [the philosophy]" district, the teachers are showing signs that they think change is warranted, as evidenced by their whispers to me. I, therefore, have hope that they will water the seeds that have been planted.

I have hope because I work with an organization that has values of "being the best partner you will ever have" and "driven to win for kids." In practice, these values look like telling the truth, not withholding information, and having a strong point of view. In the face of [the philosophy] and its seemingly stronghold on the field of education, the organization has publicly declared its position on what matters in literacy instruction – see, for example, Jiban.

I have hope because of what is happening at the state level. For example, the Council of Chief State School Officers has issued guidance to state chiefs on helping every child learn to read. I think this is major. Additionally, some states have developed policies and guidance in an effort to change outcomes for students. For example, see Mississippi and Massachusetts.

Finally, I have hope because the largest school district in the nation, located in a city that **was** home to a well-known organization that espoused [the philosophy], has a chancellor with a strong position on early literacy instruction. Perhaps we can learn lessons from them as they take on the critical responsibility of ensuring that all students receive great literacy teaching from the start.

I began by lamenting about students being forced to play Struggle-opoly, but I didn't stay there because of the lighthouses that give me hope. If these lighthouses stay the course and continue to heed the call for change and create that much-needed coordinated campaign, they will create additional lighthouses. One day, and for the sake of our children, much sooner rather than later, please and thank you, our students will be on the pathway to promise. They'll no longer be playing Struggle-opoly, but, instead, they'll be prepared for Life.

Tiffany Tommasini

Professional Learning Manager
Florida Virtual School

Empowering Educators: Inspiring Passion and Excellence in Teaching

As a Professional Learning Manager and former educator, I firmly believe that the key to making a positive impact on student learning lies in inspiring instructors and staff to love what they do and strive to be their best. When educators are passionate and engaged, their enthusiasm is contagious, creating a dynamic and supportive learning environment.

To achieve this, it's essential to provide ongoing professional development, fostering a culture of collaboration, and recognizing the unique strengths of each team member. I aim to empower educators to reach their full potential, which in turn translates to a more enriching and impactful learning experience for students, where they are motivated and equipped to succeed.

Furthermore, it's crucial to model the behavior we wish to see. When you encounter something that isn't correct, take the time to address it personally or find the right person who can. This attention to detail and commitment to excellence sets a powerful example for both staff and students. It demonstrates that we are all responsible for maintaining high standards and that continuous improvement is a shared responsibility. By embodying these values, we create a culture of integrity and accountability, where everyone feels invested in the success of the learning community.

Collin Voigt

What makes a "Good" School?

Living and working in the Northern suburbs of Chicago, people frequently want to know if certain schools are "good". These people are often considering moving to another community, and like all families, they want their children to be educated in a great environment.

They might be looking online for independent rating sites that rely on personal reviews; they may be listening to their friends and families' perceptions. The truly ambitious may even have done some research using the Illinois School Report Card system, and looked into the data there. However, the fast majority of Illinois schools receive a commendable rating, so this may not help them much in their search.

People in Illinois often are unaware about the correlations between academic success and the socioeconomic status of a community. Property taxes are a primary funding source for public schools. In communities with higher property values, schools often have significantly larger budgets. This translates to more resources, such as advanced technology, a wider range of extracurricular activities, and a lower student-to-teacher ratio. These advantages can undoubtedly contribute to a better learning environment. However, it's crucial to recognize that these benefits are primarily a result of financial privilege, not necessarily superior teaching or inherent student potential.

In contrast, schools in less affluent areas often struggle with limited resources. This creates a perception that these schools are "inferior." However, this is a gross oversimplification. Dedicated teachers and motivated students can achieve remarkable results, even in the face of financial constraints. It's unfair to judge a school's quality solely based on factors that are largely beyond its control.

Furthermore, this misconception perpetuates a harmful cycle. When a school is labeled as "good" due to its resources, it attracts more affluent families. This further increases

property values and tax revenues, widening the gap between wealthy and disadvantaged schools.

I used to work in a district where there was a clear "good" school from the community perception. I frequently verbalized that the school district was hiring staff in a consistent manner, and that if there were teachers that were clearly better than their peers, they would most likely be assigned to the lower achieving schools, where they could have a higher impact.

Attempting to fix this financial disparity is one of the things I enjoy about my current role. I work with a high school district that has 9 sender (K-8) districts that feed into it. These districts vary in their size, student demographics, and financial budgets. The HS district funds a collaborative where we select and provide curricular materials and professional learning support to these districts. The goal is to equalize the opportunities for all students. Without our support, not all districts would have access to a guaranteed and viable curriculum for all of its students.

I hope that this kind of work leads to conversations about financial and environmental inequities, but I know that it leads to more conversations about "our" students and how to help them all achieve success.

Collin Voigt
Executive Director of K-12 STEM and LIteracy
Niles Township High School District 219
Skokie, IL

Kai Walker

Supervisor, Teacher Development and Support Office of Academics

Broward County Public Schools

Empowering Educators by Supporting Implementation After Professional Learning

In the ever-evolving landscape of education, the commitment to professional learning stands as a cornerstone for fostering effective teaching and learning environments. Professional learning plays a vital role in empowering educators. In my experience as an educator, I have found that professional learning opportunities are a pivotal way to impact student learning outcomes long-term. Providing professional learning opportunities facilitates keeping educators on pace with educational practices, fosters collaboration, and enables continuous improvement to meet diverse student needs. Professional learning is essential for keeping educators informed about research-based best practices, new techniques, research, and technologies. However, the real challenge lies in effectively translating this knowledge into everyday classroom practices.

Professional learning provides educators with theoretical knowledge, but its true value is realized when this knowledge is translated into practice. Supporting educators in implementing what they learn involves practical strategies and resources, which may include collaborative planning and/or coaching. Supporting and coaching educators in the implementation of professional learning is crucial for ensuring that new ideas, practices, and strategies that were covered during professional learning make a tangible impact on teaching and learning. The importance of supporting educators with implementing the information they acquire through professional learning cannot be overstated, because it is a critical investment in the quality of education and the future of our students. Understanding how and why to support and coach educators can unlock their full potential and drive meaningful improvements in education. Bridging the gap between theory and practice ensures that professional learning has a tangible impact on classroom instruction.

As the supervisor for the professional learning initiatives for the Department of Teacher Development and Support, we have developed a full circle approach to professional learning. My team researches best practices and participates in professional learning on pedagogical best practices as needed. The team uses the

knowledge and expertise they have to develop professional learning opportunities. This same group of developers also facilitate the professional learning they have developed. After participating in the professional learning, teachers have the opportunity to receive coaching support on how to implement the practices in their classroom. Implementation support is provided by the same team that completed the research, developed, and facilitated the professional learning. Support entails individualized, in-person collaborative planning, modeling the practices, coaching cycles, and ongoing feedback. In order to glean the impact of professional learning and implementation support, we gather data on participant's learning experiences through surveys, the tangible follow-up task participants submit, and student learning outcomes that derive directly from educator implementation. We use the data to adapt the professional learning content and to better support implementation.
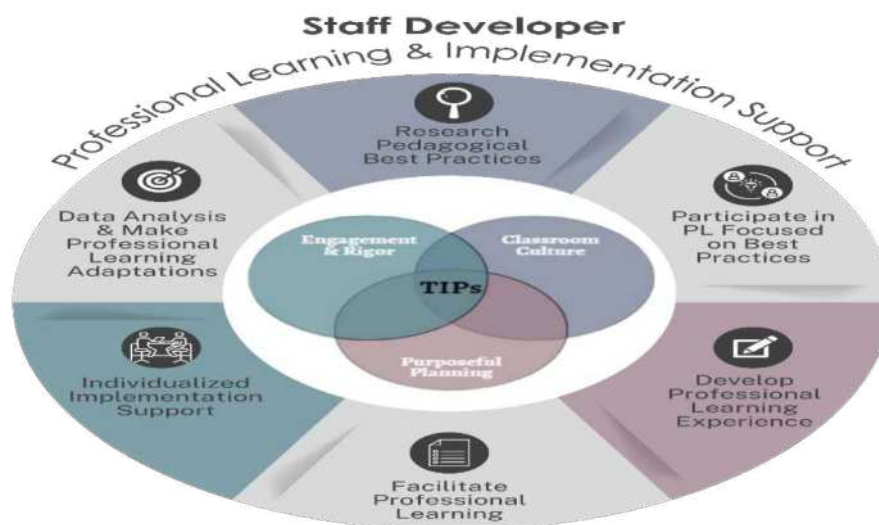
As an educator who is always learning, I have participated in the Learning Forward Academy and been able to implement the learning in my current work. For instance, the Learning Forward Professional Learning Standards has helped to refine the professional learning my team provides. In my department our professional learning is aligned to the *Culture of Collaborative Inquiry*, *Professional Expertise*, *Learning Designs*, and *Implementation Standards*.

It is my point of view that supporting and coaching educators with how to implement professional learning is crucial for maximizing the benefits of their learning experiences and essential for translating learning into effective classroom practices. By translating knowledge into actionable practices, tailoring support to individual needs, building confidence, promoting a collaborative culture of continuous improvement, enhancing student outcomes, and ensuring sustainable growth, we create a thriving educational environment. This investment in educators ultimately leads to more effective teaching practices and improved outcomes for students. Professional learning is an integral investment in the educational system, and it is further strengthened by supporting educators with implementing new knowledge and skills. By supporting educators to implement what they learn, we invest not only in their professional growth but in the academic success and well-being of our students.

Brenda Ward
Director of Multilingual Learners
Lafayette School Corporation
Lafayette, IN

The Table

Throughout the 14 years I've served our small Indiana school district as the Director of Multilingual Learners (MLs) our tactics for **getting a seat at the table** have been numerous, varied and sometimes a little desperate. We found this aphorism from politician Elizabeth Warren to be true, **"If you don't have a seat at the table, you're probably on the menu!"**

Here is where we started: When I was hired for this position in 2009, my work was clearly about solving ML compliance issues and grant writing (Title III, Migrant, and Immigrant Influx); and that is all our district administration wanted me to do. Not knowing what compliance-related issues might be found, the district tasked me with examining the programs of our 12 schools with 1,200 multilingual learners at that time.

Upon initial check-ins with the schools, each with a range of 35-230 multilingual learners, I quickly pinpointed several compliance issues:
- 2 schools had **no idea how to tell which of their students were considered ML**.
- 3-4 schools were simply servicing students **determined by last name**.
- Many schools let the secretary decide program placement: **"She speaks great English!**"
- All schools had **paraprofessionals delivering the English language development**,
- All 95 of the multilingual learners at one school were engaging for 50 minutes daily with a popular **computer program which was meant for international business employees**, and had kindergarten students saying phrases like, "I offer my condolences." and "Will you marry me?"
- Most MLs were **failing a minimum of 2-3 subjects/classes**
- We had **3 EL licensed teachers to service 1200 students**
- Only **15 %** (35/230) **of ML students at the high school had any ENL support**
- **No professional learning** around multilingual learners and their needs was being offered
- **No Individual Learning Plans** were created
- **No one was screening students** as they entered school
- The elementary building with the largest ML population, 230 students, had an administrator who believed in the **"pull yourself up by your bootstraps"** approach, and refused to have an ML teacher.

It was a mess, I was overwhelmed, and **we did not have a seat at the table**.

Shirley Chisholm, the first black woman to be elected to the United States Congress, stated, **"If they don't give you a seat at the table, bring a folding chair."** Compliance became my folding chair---it gave me a self-appointed seat at the table. So, I chipped away methodically at the compliance pieces. I created compliance checklists, had principals assign the compliance duties to staff, and started nudging schools and administrators into compliance. Still, even when we were compliant, it was an underwhelming program which carelessly marginalized our multilingual learners and families. So, I offered to provide a series of professional development sessions at all schools, to which every principal heartily agreed (it solved their staff meeting agenda issues). At each school, I nudged them in the right direction, explained ML pedagogy to them, created new processes for them, and provided professional learning. Suddenly, my weeks and months were full, and it felt like the ML program was finally going somewhere!

However, I soon realized that busyness does not mean effectiveness. My efforts felt empty, and my work was lonely. Disappointingly, the schools weren't putting new practices in place, they were just calling me to "come back" and "fix things…again." I learned that by helping schools too much and depriving them of their own productive struggle, I was creating a dull, draining dependency. ***Having a seat at the table DOES NOT mean having a voice.***

Meanwhile, in my extended professional life, I had a seat at many tables, and my voice was heard and valued. I was a member of the IDOE State EL Leadership group, a Regional Coach for a State Education Center, and a developer and provider of professional development sessions for five of our Education Centers in Indiana. I wrote professional development offerings for Pearson, and presented at various national conferences. As Tarana Burke stated, "If we don't center the voices of marginalized people, we're doing the wrong work." The dissonance I was experiencing between what I knew should be happening for our multilingual learners and what our program was offering left me wondering how I might merge these experiences to benefit our multilingual learners. As my understanding grew, I found Ayanna Pressley's words inspiring, **"If they don't give you a seat at the table, don't just pull up a chair. Build a new table."**

So, my focus changed from "How can I fit in and make this the easiest transition for this district?" to "What needs to happen to elevate the ML program in this district, and How can we amplify the voices of our ML students and families?" Instead of apologizing for taking up time at a staff meeting and for having more strategies, foundations, and best practices to share, I began taking up space, and ensuring we had seats (and voices) at all of the discussions and meetings (tables). I began to share data in a variety of contexts. I spoke to our school board, and helped the district administration understand that the story our district data was telling was bleak for our MLs. We created an EL Leadership Academy for teachers which included monthly 2 hour professional learning for Academy members. The group grew from 16 in year one to 55 in year five. **We were not simply pulling up chairs, we were building new tables large enough to fit everyone!**

Having a seat at the table is just the beginning of our journey! Over the past 5-7 years, we have made impressive progress in our district's ML program, and our district's understanding and perceptions of the ML program. Some remarkable achievements include the following:

- We now have **35 teachers in our district with an EL License.**

- We hold a **2-Day ML professional learning for secondary teachers twice each summer, each filled to capacity**
- We have **11 ML teachers grades K-12**
- We now offer **high school students the opportunity to earn a Certificate of Multilingual Proficiency**, which is an honor added to their diploma.
- We celebrate students who have **achieved proficiency at graduation with a special cord and medal**.
- We have **three PLCs** in our district that focus solely on ML strategies, data, and growth.
- We have an **ML PLC for administrators/ML teachers** once a month.
- We just received a **grant to start a Dual Language program** in our district!
- **And more!!**

A LinkedIN post from JJ Delgado sets the table conversation saying, **"When we all have a seat at the table, our approaches to challenges become more nuanced, and the dialogue richer."** We are not only securing our place at the table, we are also advocating for a round table which seats everyone equitably with richer conversation.

In our ML program, we are embarking on a transformative journey, marked by a progression from compliance to capacity, commitment, and ultimately, collective teacher efficacy. Simultaneously, we're advancing from Equity to diversity, fostering Inclusion, and ultimately creating a sense of Belonging for all. Just as important, we're not merely content with having a seat at the table; we are actively pulling up folding chairs to make room, expanding the table, and aspiring to generate deeper, more informed conversation. This multifaceted approach is a testament to our commitment to progress, inclusivity, and leadership, driving us towards a brighter and more equitable future.

"Diversity is having a seat at the table, inclusion is having a voice, and belonging is having that voice be heard,"

~Liz Fosslien

Karen Weaver
Franklin County Public Schools

Professional learning and motherhood have a common bond and serve as a metaphor, especially during my time in the Learning Forward Academy. During the two and half year experience I have had two children. My perspective in both life and education have exponentially changed over the past few years. How is Professional Learning like motherhood?

1. **You don't know what you don't know.**
2. **You learn by doing.**
3. **The village is important.**
4. **Learning is forever like relationships with my children are forever and continuously being cultivated.**
5. **Trusting others with care is challenging.**

1. You don't know what you don't know.

In both professional learning and motherhood, the journey begins with a sense of the unknown. As a new mother, I felt overwhelmed by the vastness of what you need to learn—everything from caring for a newborn to understanding developmental milestones. Similarly, in professional learning, you enter with a sense of anticipation but also uncertainty about what lies ahead. Both roles require a willingness to embrace the unknown, to ask questions, and to acknowledge that you are not expected to have all the answers from the start.

2. Learn by doing.

Motherhood, like professional learning, is inherently experiential. No amount of reading or training could fully equip me for the hands-on experience of caring for a child, just as no theoretical knowledge can substitute for the practical application of learning in a professional context. In both cases, you learn as you go, making mistakes, adjusting, and improving along the way. The hands-on nature of both motherhood and professional learning is what ultimately deepens your understanding and hones your skills.

3. The village is important.

The saying "it takes a village" applies to both raising children and professional growth. In motherhood, the support of family, friends, and community is crucial. Whether it's advice, a helping hand, or simply someone to listen, my village provides the emotional and practical support I need. Similarly, in professional learning, my colleagues, mentors, and peers form a support network that helps me navigate challenges, offers new perspectives, and encourages growth. The collective wisdom and support of our villages are invaluable in both contexts.

4. Learning is forever like relationships with my children are forever and always being cultivated.

The learning that comes with motherhood and professional growth is ongoing. Just as my relationship with my children evolves and deepens over time, so too does my professional learning journey. Both are lifelong commitments that require continuous effort, reflection, and adaptation. The bond I have

with my children is something I nurture and develop all the time, just as my professional skills and knowledge require continuous cultivation to stay relevant and impactful.

5. Trusting others with care is challenging.
In motherhood, entrusting your child's care to others—whether it's a babysitter, teacher, or family member—can be one of the most difficult aspects. I have to ensure that those who care for my children will provide the same level of love and attention that I would. In professional learning, trusting others to guide our growth and development can be equally challenging. It requires vulnerability and a belief in the process and the people involved. Whether it's trusting a mentor, collaborating with colleagues, or implementing new strategies, there's an inherent risk in letting go of control, but doing so is essential for growth in both areas.

As I reflect on the importance of being a lifelong learner, I see how closely it mirrors my experiences as a mother. Both have challenged me to embrace the unknown, to learn through doing, to rely on the support of a village, and to recognize that learning—like the bond with my children—is a lifelong process. The trust required in both motherhood and professional growth, though difficult, has taught me that letting go is sometimes the most significant step toward meaningful development. Ultimately, these parallels between professional learning and motherhood have deepened my appreciation for both roles, as each continues to shape and enrich my life in profound ways.

Dorina Popa Varsamis, Ed.D.

I understand Teachable Points of View (TPoV) to be the lens through which I perceive the world. This perspective has profoundly shaped my unique vision, values, and ability to communicate effectively with others. It is through this lens that I aim to inspire and guide individuals in navigating their challenges, much like I have navigated mine. My journey began with my immigrant parents, whose struggles significantly impacted my life as a non-English-speaking student in the early 1970s. I faced numerous obstacles, including emotional isolation and academic disorientation, which ultimately led me to question our educational system and choose a path as an educator. I became a teacher to ensure that no child would endure isolation, discrimination, or marginalization because the necessary support to help them thrive was absent in our educational community.

Reflecting on my formative educational experiences, three major themes consistently emerge resiliency (the ability to bounce back), perseverance (the determination to keep going), and accountability (the commitment to upholding standards of excellence). My parents' struggles instilled in me a deep appreciation for these qualities. Witnessing their fight against language barriers and cultural differences inspired me to believe in my ability to overcome obstacles. Their dedication to establishing a better future for our family emphasized the importance of hard work and sacrifice. Their unwavering determination taught me that with perseverance, anything is possible, and this instilled in me the confidence to believe in myself and my capabilities. This resolve propels me to continuously question practices in education, pursue a better future for all children, and strive to leave the educational system better than I found it.

My focus on equity—ensuring a fair and just distribution of resources—along with ongoing evaluation and measurement related to teacher growth and student achievement, stems from my educational challenges. These experiences provide me with a profound understanding of the barriers that many students face, and they fuel my commitment to dismantling these obstacles and ensuring equal opportunities for all. This journey has fostered my empathy and understanding for students from marginalized backgrounds. Overcoming personal challenges through resilience, perseverance, and accountability reinforces my belief in the transformative power of education, a belief that drives me to advocate for quality education for all students.

Evaluation and measurement play an essential role in ensuring equitable outcomes for every student. They provide valuable data that can be utilized to:

1. **Identify Disparities**: By tracking student achievement and progress, educators can pinpoint performance gaps that may arise from inequities in resources, instruction, or opportunities.

2. **Inform Targeted Interventions**: Once disparities are identified, focused interventions can be developed to address the specific needs of struggling students, effectively leveling the playing field.

3. **Monitor Progress**: Regular evaluations can track the effectiveness of interventions, ensuring resources are used efficiently and that students are progressing toward their goals.

4. **Hold Schools Accountable**: Measuring student achievement allows schools and districts to be held accountable for upholding high standards for all students, incentivizing equitable policies and practices.

However, it is critical to understand that evaluation and measurement alone cannot ensure equitable outcomes. These tools must be complemented by comprehensive strategies, such as:

- **Culturally Responsive Pedagogy**: Training teachers in relevant and engaging methods for all students.

- **Access to High-Quality Resources**: Ensuring all students have access to superior instructional materials, technology, and support services.

- **Supportive School Climate**: Fostering a positive and inclusive climate that encourages all students' sense of belonging and motivation.

By thoughtfully implementing evaluation and measurement, educators can allow all students to reach their full potential. Promoting teacher growth and development, particularly in underserved communities, is vital for achieving equitable educational outcomes. Here are some strategies that can be enacted:

Professional Learning Opportunities

- **Targeted Learning Teachers**: Offering tailored courses that address specific challenges teachers face in underserved communities, such as culturally responsive pedagogy and managing diverse classrooms.

- **Targeted Learning Instructional School Leadership Support:** Offering tailored courses that align teacher professional learning needs to Standards for Professional Learning practices with ongoing progress monitoring analysis of student instructional growth.

- **Mentorship Programs**: Pairing experienced educators with newer teachers in underserved schools to provide invaluable guidance and support.

- **Collaborative Learning**: Encouraging collaboration among teachers to share best practices, confront challenges, and learn collectively.

School Culture and Support

- **Collaborative Leadership**: Cultivating a culture where teachers feel valued and empowered to contribute to decision-making processes.

- **Adequate Resources**: Providing teachers with the necessary resources—instructional materials, technology, and professional learning—to succeed in their roles.

- **Community Engagement**: Establishing partnerships with community organizations to augment support and resources for educators and students.

By implementing these strategies, schools can create a supportive environment that fosters teacher growth and development, ultimately improving educational outcomes for all students.

The execution of these strategies has led me to pilot a three-year professional learning program titled **Evaluating Year-Long Professional Learning on Teacher Growth and Student Achievement**. This program not only equips instructional leaders with actionable tools and training but also engages deeply with the values of resilience, perseverance, and accountability. It embodies my commitment to positively impacting the lives of our students as they embark on their life journeys.

learningforward
THE PROFESSIONAL LEARNING ASSOCIATION
ACADEMY CLASS OF 2024

A very special thank you to our coaches:

Ashley Helms
Blue Ridge ISD, Chief Academic Officer

Nadira Singh
Gwinnet County Public Schools,
Coordinator, Office of Professional
Development, Teaching & Learning