

WINTER 2025

LEGACY

TRANSFORMATION IN ACTION

Kristina
Pennell-
Götze

Iyabo
Tinubu

Kevin
Simpson

Kwame
Sarfo-
Mensah



Rama
Ndiaye

Nayoung
Weaver

AIELOC Conference
Hanoi - January 2024



The Worthy Educator

theworthyeducator.com



Legacy is the official journal of The Worthy Educator, elevating the good work being done by leaders in education who are working to change the narrative on the profession and actively plan for impact that transforms its future to serve the needs of a diverse, decentralized, global society that is inclusive, equitable and open to all people as next generations adapt, evolve and contribute by solving problems and creating solutions that meet the needs of a world we have yet to envision.

Submissions are accepted on a rolling basis from educators who are implementing new and innovative approaches in the classroom and at the building and district levels. Information on specifications and instructions to submit can be found online at theworthyeducator.com/journal.

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This Passion Project

Retiring six months ago, I sought to launch a new community that served leaders in education in the latter portion of their careers. They are the forgotten heroes of our profession. Working with Gretchen and Shanté, we identified key components of such a community and began to develop the concept.

I retired early; earlier than I thought I would. So there is plenty left in my tank. I still wanted to pursue my passion serving leaders in education, but on my own terms. I worked for someone else for more than forty years, and I grew tired of doing the heavy lifting to help someone else's bottom line. Education has become too much business and not enough heart, as far as I'm concerned.

That's the beauty in building The Worthy Educator. I have no need to make money on this. It's not a business. We're building a community, and any costs are so low overhead that they are inexpensive for everyone participating. Where else can you find an in-person day of world-class learning for \$35, a month-long book study with an author-practitioner for \$50 (\$100 if you also need a copy of the book), or monthly impact coaching for \$125?

This is a freeing phenomenon for all three of us: me as a retiree, Gretchen running a graduate university educational leadership program, and Shanté managing curriculum and instruction for a Virginia county school district. In this passion project we can champion what is good and best for educators and the students they serve without any of the constraints and pressures we know all too well in our other roles in life. We can speak freely as a trusted voice that is not influenced by the business and political considerations of organizations pursuing the almighty dollar. The Worthy Educator is altruism in its purest form.

When I met with my closest colleagues to share my decision to retire from ASCD+ISTE, one of them piped up at the end of the meeting, "What is your passion that you want to pursue? Let us know – we want to support you!" It caught me off guard. On the one hand, I figured it was understood that my life's work was my passion: serving and championing educators doing the work! Then again, I was touched at the explicit expression of wanting to help, no matter what steps I decided to take next. This is the clearest affirmation that this work matters, and that those who join us see the value and want to help. You are invited to be a part of this caring community, as well.

With all of the business practices and market influences that have flooded education with the influx of educational technology dollars into the profession, this kind of selflessness and social consciousness is getting harder and harder to find. It should come as no surprise that we are regularly approached by business interests and self-promoters looking for ways to make a buck off our good name. It is my promise to you that The Worthy Educator will not sell out. We will never treat you as a customer or a source of revenue. Those of you who see the value in the work will support us through your participation, in kind contributions, and our affordable rates for our offerings when we need to cover costs. Everyone else can keep on walking. There's no place for anything here but giving back to the profession.

There are all kinds of reasons we each got into education, and they are all based on a passion to be part of something bigger than simply collecting a paycheck. What's yours? And how can we support you in pursuing it? There's a place for you here. We invite you to connect in and be a part of *our* passion at The Worthy Educator!


A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Walter McKenzie".

*Walter McKenzie
Gretchen Oltman
Shanté Knight*



WINTER 2025 PROFESSIONAL LEARNING OFFERINGS

January

Wed 15 A Worthy Town Hall 7:00 pm et 

Thu 23 Next Gen Leadership Session 1 @ 4:00 pm et 

Transforming Education: Core Community @ 6:00 pm et 

Tue 28 Educator Advocacy Training 1 @ 7:00 pm et 

Thu 30 Next Gen Leadership Session 2 @ 4:00 pm et 

February

Wed 5 Empower the Learner @ 7:00 pm et 

Thu 6 Next Gen Leadership Session 3 @ 4:00 pm et 

Sun 9 Learning to Relearn Book Study 1 @ 9:00 am et 

Tue 11 Educator Advocacy Training Session 2 @ 7:00 pm et 

Sun 16 Learning to Relearn Book Study 2 @ 9:00 am et 

Sun 23 Learning to Relearn Book Study 3 @ 9:00 am et 

Tue 25 Educator Advocacy Training Session 3 @ 7:00 pm et 

March

Sun 2 Learning to Relearn Book Study 4 @ 9:00 am et 

Sat 8 Restorative Justice: EmpowerED Beginnings @ 9:00 am et 

Tue 11 Educator Advocacy Training Session 4 @ 7:00 pm et 

April

Sat 5 Elevate Teaching Accelerator @ 8:30 am – 5:00 pm et 

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It's all about Relationships: My Leadership Journey with Freedom Crossing Academy

Melissa Lime, Principal, Freedom Crossing Academy,
St. Johns County School District, St. Augustine, Florida



Freedom Crossing Academy (FCA), home of the Falcons, is celebrating its seventh year in St. Johns County, Florida. St. Johns County School District has an outstanding reputation for academic excellence and commitment to character development, consistently recognized as one of Florida's top-performing school districts, earning an "A" district grade every year since 2004 and ranking second in the state for total accountability points in the 2023-2024 school year.

As a highly performing K-8 school, we are committed to academic excellence, character education, and cultivating a positive school culture, all of which align with the district's mission to inspire students to develop good character and a passion for lifelong learning. Since our founding, Freedom Crossing Academy has fostered a culture of leadership and innovation aligned to our school's mission and vision, empowering our students and staff to "Take Flight and Break Barriers." By upholding high expectations, FCA has earned an "A" rating since 2019, and has been recognized as a National Showcase School for Capturing Kids' Hearts, and a Florida PBIS Gold Model School for three consecutive years.

Freedom Crossing Academy is dedicated to cultivating a supportive and positive school culture where both students and staff are excited to come to school each day. At the heart of FCA's approach are three critical goals:

- 1. Creating a Positive Learning Environment with Capturing Kids Hearts Best Practices**
We are intentional about utilizing Capturing Kids' Hearts best practices to foster positive relationships with our students, staff, and community. Capturing Kids Hearts best practices include greeting students at the door, sharing good news, developing classroom social contracts, and launching every class with a positive message or inspirational quote. We believe these strategies foster positive relationships and promote a positive school culture.
- 2. Promoting Teacher Collaboration and Student Achievement with Professional Learning Communities**
Through Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), we prioritize collaborative teamwork to improve student achievement. PLCs provide a framework for teachers to enhance their instructional practices, share strategies, and analyze student data to ensure mastery of essential standards. We are committed to this collaborative approach, which strengthens teaching and promotes continuous improvement.
- 3. Fostering a Positive School Culture with PBIS Best Practices**
We are committed to implementing school-wide Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) best practices to create a positive, safe, and supportive learning environment. Our PBIS systems are aligned with our school mission and vision along with our Capturing Kids' Hearts and the CHARACTER COUNTS! education program. This alignment encourages leadership, outstanding character, and positive behavior outcomes.

These three goals drive our school-wide deliberate practice growth plan and school improvement plan initiatives. The FCA leadership team, comprised of administrators and teacher leaders, reviews feedback and survey data from students, staff, and parents to develop action steps aligned with each goal. The leadership team shares and discusses these goals with all stakeholders during School Advisory Council (SAC) meetings, Parent Teacher Organization (PTO) meetings, PBIS Team meetings, and monthly communications. We believe a shared commitment and understanding of FCA's goals are essential to fostering a positive culture across the entire school community.

The “FCA Way”

Our traditions and approach are always student-centered, with a strong emphasis on building meaningful relationships. At the start of each school year, we create a staff social contract: a collaborative agreement developed by all staff members that outlines our shared commitments on how we interact with one another, our students and parents throughout the school year. In the same way during the first weeks of school, our teachers prioritize building relationships and collaborating with their students to develop their classroom social contract. Students are empowered to take on various group roles throughout the year, such as classroom greeter, social contract rater, and classroom affirmer. Our middle school students also develop their leadership in the Leadworthy class and participate in classroom internships throughout the year.



During the hiring process, we prioritize selecting staff who align with our core values of building relationships, utilizing the PLC process, and implementing PBIS best practices. We are fortunate to have a highly dedicated and compassionate team who go above and beyond to build meaningful connections with our students and one another. From the classroom to faculty meetings, our culture is centered around affirmations and sharing “good things” across our campus.

New teachers are supported in a variety of ways including support from their grade-level professional learning communities, coaching cycles with instructional literacy coaches, professional learning from district curriculum specialists, and our New Teacher Cadre program. Our new staff are also paired with mentors to provide guidance and support for a successful transition into our school community.

We also intentionally establish school-wide systems that foster a family atmosphere by incorporating Capturing Kids' Hearts, CHARACTER COUNTS! and PBIS best practices into our daily routines and rituals. Our students are rewarded and recognized daily for adhering to the “FCA Way” school-wide behavior expectations through our LiveSchool/PBIS incentive program. The Freedom Crossing Academy MTSS Team (Multi-tiered System of Support) reviews discipline data on a weekly basis to measure the effectiveness of the school wide PBIS strategies and to identify students who may need additional supports and interventions. The PBIS team also identifies problem areas, brainstorms interventions, and acknowledges students exhibiting positive behavior. Our goal is to work closely with teachers, students, and families to create individualized targeted interventions to help our students succeed in the classroom.

“I lead by example. It’s all about relationships! I continue to closely align with the mission and vision at Freedom Crossing Academy, rooted in servant leadership to serve and empower the community, build strong relationships, and create an environment where everyone can thrive.”

In addition, our teachers collaborate weekly in their professional learning communities to develop a shared understanding of the curriculum, design common assessments, and analyze formative assessment data to inform instruction. By working together and taking shared ownership of student learning, each teacher ensures every student receives the support and resources needed to reach their full potential. Our teachers are dedicated to the PLC process and Four Questions, creating daily intervention and enrichment opportunities for our students. Through daily “Nest” sessions, our elementary students are grouped according to formative assessment data and receive targeted interventions and enrichment that align with the essential curriculum. These interventions and enrichment opportunities ensure that each student's unique needs are addressed.

Community at our Core

At Freedom Crossing Academy, our families and community partners play a vital role in supporting the initiatives and programs that contribute to the success of our school. FCA’s Parent Teacher Organization (PTO) is a cornerstone of our school culture, offering support for a variety of events and initiatives that enhance the educational experience for both students and staff.

The PTO’s contributions are numerous and impactful, ranging from organizing staff appreciation events to coordinating school-wide PBIS incentives and fundraising efforts for new technology and school improvements. They organize monthly themed luncheons, supports our PBIS/LiveSchool incentive program, provide the Sunshine Cart with snacks and drinks for our teachers, and support numerous classroom donations.



Our PTO's involvement goes beyond daily activities, playing a pivotal role in organizing large-scale events that bring the entire school community together. One such event is *Rock Your School Day*, a global educational movement that encourages educators to create engaging and rigorous lessons. This event has become a tradition at Freedom Crossing Academy, with school-wide thematic units, classroom transformations, STEM projects, assemblies, and experiences all centered around a shared theme.

This year, our teachers truly exceeded expectations by creating hands-on and highly engaging learning experiences based on the theme, "WILD About FCA." Students participated in interactive science presentations, project-based learning activities, and a range of exciting lessons that aligned with essential science standards. Our students also participated in several highly engaging in-house field study experiences sponsored by our PTO. These educational programs brought science to life and supported our PBIS program. The day was filled with memorial moments that sparked curiosity and excitement for learning.

Rock Your School Day in-house activities included:

Jacksonville Museum of Science and History (MOSH) Reptiles on the Road - Our Middle school science classes, along with 4th and 5th graders, enjoyed a live, up-close experience with reptiles, as part of a PBIS/LiveSchool incentive.

Jacksonville Zoo Educational Outreach Program - The top three Boosterthon classes from K-5, as well as middle school science classes, received an exclusive presentation from experts at the Jacksonville Zoo. Students learned fascinating facts about Florida wildlife and enjoyed up close animal encounters.

Scientist in Every Florida School - All students took part in a series of engaging virtual Zoom presentations from scientists, each focused on topics aligned with their grade-level standards. Students enjoyed presentations with the Sea Turtle Hospital and a paleontologist who studies frog fossils from around the world.

In addition to these highly engaging presentations, our PTO families transformed the school campus with animal themed door decorations, balloon arches, and hallway transformations. With their support, we created an unforgettable learning environment for our students in the classroom and throughout the entire campus! Through events like *Rock Your School Day*, our amazing PTO helps strengthen our school community and enrich the learning experiences for all students.

The FCA Leadership Journey

St. Johns County is one of the fastest-growing communities in the state, and to keep up with this growth, the district is planning to open five new schools over the next five years. Since opening in the fall of 2018, Freedom Crossing Academy continually adapts to the challenges that come with our rapid growth and success. Starting with 1,008 students and 105 staff members, we have expanded to 1,967 students and 203 staff members (114 instructional and 5 administrative). Through it all, we focus on maintaining a family-oriented, supportive learning environment where every student feels connected, valued, and engaged.

When FCA opened, I served as the assistant principal, and I participated in developing the school's vision and mission. From the beginning, I ensured that these core values were embedded into our daily practices and culture, emphasizing the importance of relationships and community partnerships. I believe servant leadership is about prioritizing the needs of others, and I have carried this mindset forward in my current role as principal. We work diligently to break down barriers and empower both students and staff to create a positive school culture where everyone is encouraged to reach their highest potential.





Now serving as FCA principal, I lead by example. It's all about relationships! I continue to closely align with the mission and vision at Freedom Crossing Academy, rooted in servant leadership to serve and empower the community, build strong relationships, and create an environment where everyone can thrive. I place a strong emphasis on fostering a culture of trust, respect, and open communication, so that students feel connected and supported by both their peers and trusted adults. I also strive to maintain a school culture where students and staff look forward to coming to school every day. Parents and guests frequently comment that there is something special about the atmosphere at FCA when they walk through our doors. This positive, family-oriented environment is central to our strong sense of community. It is incredibly rewarding to develop a shared vision for student engagement and achievement and for the community to come together to support these goals. Everyone is deeply invested in our students' success.

A Bright Future

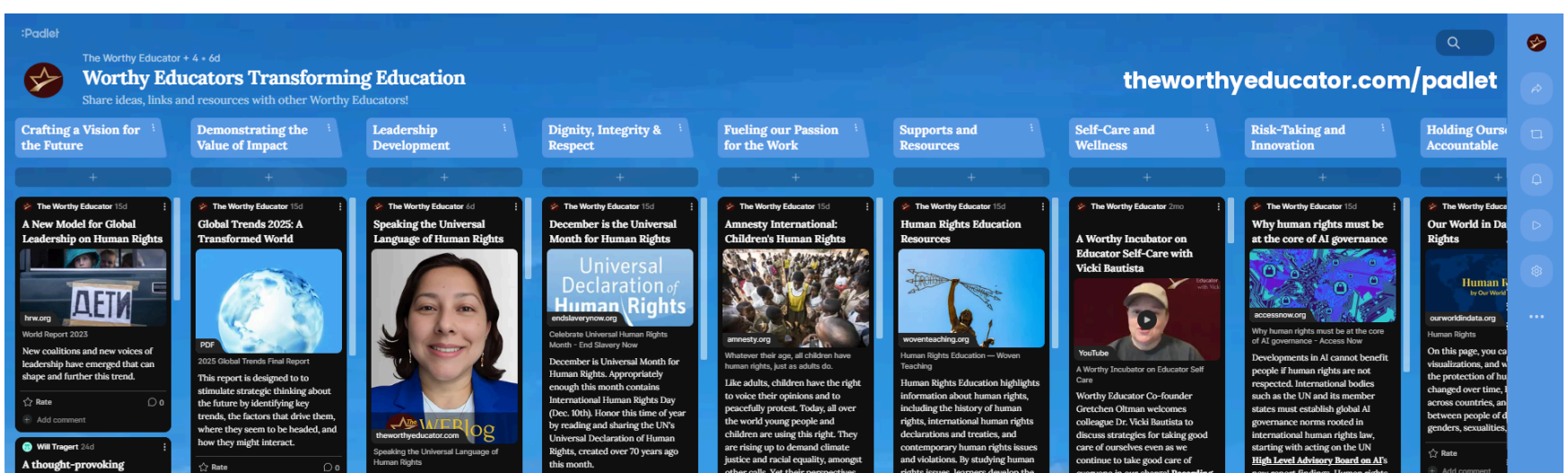
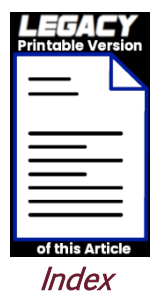
As we strengthen our connection with the community, we are committed to cultivating deeper relationships and traditions among our families. By focusing on the whole child we ensure that our students receive the necessary opportunities and supports to promote their emotional well-being and academic success. One of the exciting new initiatives we are implementing this year is Sources of Strength, a proven, evidence-based prevention program successfully used in high

schools throughout St. Johns County. Sources of Strength empowers students to utilize peer social networks to promote positive behaviors and shift away from unhealthy norms. Our goal is to train middle school students as leaders who can influence their peers in a positive direction, fostering healthier social norms and encouraging help-seeking behaviors. This initiative will contribute to creating a more connected and supportive school environment while strengthening relationships between students and caring adults. We have already trained more than fifty student leaders who will help spread this important message and drive lasting positive change. We plan to host a Sources of Strength Family Night that will focus on building resiliency and sharing valuable resources with our families.

We are excited to expand on these initiatives with the goal of enhancing school culture, extending Sources of Strength to support our teachers' mental well-being, incorporating an "upstream approach" to help manage stressful times. The focus is on eight protective factors: family support, positive friendships, mentors, healthy activities, generosity, spirituality, mental health, and physical health. Committed to ensuring that our staff and students feel connected, supported, and empowered through strong, meaningful relationships, we look forward to the continued growth and success of our school community as we work together to inspire and support each child on their journey.



Melissa Lime is a St. Augustine native honored to serve as the Principal of Freedom Crossing Academy. Her leadership philosophy and core beliefs are rooted in fostering positive and trusting relationships with students, their families and the community. As a champion for all students, she is passionate about creating a positive school culture where everyone feels valued, supported, and empowered to achieve success.





An Important Convening

It's time to come together and identify
our way forward framing the narrative for our profession!



Featuring these veteran voices in education:



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Lake Charles, Louisiana



Susan Brooks-Young
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Kathleen McClaskey
Amherst, New Hampshire



Walter McKenzie
Washington, D.C.

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Literacy and Justice for All at Cox Campus



Ramona Brown, EdS, NBCT Science of Reading Professional Development Coach, Cox Campus, The Rollins Center for Language and Literacy, Atlanta Speech School, Atlanta, Georgia

Professional development is a critical component of any career, but it is especially important in education. Teachers have a tremendous responsibility to shape the minds of future generations. To be equipped to meet the challenge, effective professional development requires access to the latest research and best practices. Access to professional development opportunities is only sometimes equitable.

I've seen this disparity firsthand. During my first six years as a classroom teacher, I worked in one of my state's premier districts. I received high-quality professional development that prepared me to achieve National Board Certification in Early Childhood Education and impact colleagues and students. For the next three years, I taught in a neighboring district and found that not all professional development is equal.

Professional development was more compulsory than relevant, and teachers were held accountable for knowledge they could not access. The professional development provided support for translating research into practice. During my time at the state level in two different states and my experience with teachers from across the country, I learned that funding is one of the main barriers to high-quality professional development that is actionable, sustainable and growth is measured.

In 2022 I joined the Rollins Center for Language and Literacy, whose mission is Literacy and Justice for all. Cox Campus is at the center of fulfilling this mission. Research shows that a well-qualified teacher has the most significant impact on student achievement. Cox Campus is an online platform that provides access to professional development based on the latest science of reading research and provides resources that align with evidence-based practices.

“Cox Campus is the only free professional development platform that addresses literacy beginning with the last trimester of pregnancy through third grade. The knowledge of the science of reading is shared with healthcare practitioners to support them in putting parents on the path to developing literate children.”

At the Rollins Center for Language and Literacy, we believe “reading belongs to all of us.” Cox Campus is the heartbeat of this belief in action. Cox Campus is the only free professional development platform that addresses literacy beginning with the last trimester of pregnancy through third grade. The knowledge of the science of reading is shared with healthcare practitioners to support them in putting parents on the path to developing literate children. Partnerships with Grady Memorial Hospital, Wellstar, daycares, and parents provide the foundation for children to develop a deep reading brain.

The Cox Campus

In addition to building knowledge in the birth through 5 spaces, we have a suite of K-3 courses for all educators. Recently, Cox Campus courses were accredited by the International Dyslexia Association (IDA). This means educators who take our course are eligible to take the Knowledge and Practice Examination for Effective Reading Instruction (KPEERI). Passing this exam provides educators with the distinction of being highly trained to teach reading effectively to all students.



Our coursework is supported by pioneers in getting the science of reading out to the masses. We work with subject matter experts to ensure high-quality and practical courses and resources are developed and based on current research. Over the past two years, Cox Campus course enrollment and completion have skyrocketed. This means reaching more countries, states, districts, and classrooms with scientifically proven methods for teaching reading.

Why does this matter? Providing a free online platform eliminates barriers to educators' access to knowledge about best practices and evidence-based resources. Teachers are better equipped to serve all students, including those for whom reading is challenging. With this knowledge, teachers have more agency to implement practices that have proven to be “helpful to all children and harmful to none.”

Literacy significantly impacts a person's life outcomes. The inability to read limits access to employment, higher education, the ability to be a fully engaged citizen, and healthcare, and it can also impact a person's self-esteem.

The most recent NAEP report, known as the nation's report card measurements, shows a decline in fourth and eighth-grade reading scores since 2019. Currently, only 32% of fourth graders are proficient in reading, 31% of eighth graders, and 37% of twelfth-grade students. While this is alarming, there is a solution. It begins with equipping our teachers with knowledge that gives them the tools to reach all children.

The decline in reading scores is not solely due to the pandemic. The current scores represent a 3% decline in reading in both fourth and eighth-grade scores. The decline has persisted despite legislation such as the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). Cwiklinski, H. (2020). Reading performance has shown a decline since 1971.



How it Works

At Rollins, our approach is to move knowledge to practice. The Wheel of Equitable Outcomes guides our work with systems change. The Wheel of Equitable Outcomes consists of the following six components: Teacher Professional Learning, Instructional Coaching, Culturally Responsive Practices, High-Quality Instructional Materials, Data & Assessment, and MTSS & Intervention. I will provide suggestions to make the knowledge actionable in districts and schools by focusing on Teacher Professional Learning and Instructional Coaching.

In my role, I provide district and school support through coaching for system change to support sustainability. While Cox Campus provides research-based knowledge, a comprehensive professional development plan must be ongoing, be applied with support, and be measurable. Coaching is the lever that provides the consistency required to sustain and scale best practices.

Cox Campus also offers coaching based on Jim Knight's Impact Cycle. The Rollins Impact Cycle is a modification of Jim Knight's Impact Cycle and includes, Initial Conversation, Identify, Explain, Modeling and Guided Practice, Observe, and Improve. The Rollins Impact Cycle is the framework used when working with districts and schools. We recommend the framework to districts and schools for continuous growth—coaching tools for collecting data and measuring progress through classroom observations.

Our courses provide a basis for teachers' professional learning. It is a cost-saving benefit with high-quality research-based content that states, districts, and schools can use to improve student literacy outcomes. Coaches can use course guides in PLCs to deepen professional conversations. The course guides and content-aligned resources are helpful for leaders and coaches to support coaches with modeling evidence-based practices for teachers. A repository of resources that includes modeling by coaches or teachers can support the sustainability and scalability of evidence-based practices. Districts or schools can use the videos to refresh teacher practice and for new teacher training. Learn more about the Reading by Design Structured Literacy Certification Program.

Schools can develop specific implementation plans for actualizing practices highlighted in the structured literacy courses. An implementation plan should include collecting baseline data through classroom observations and analysis of student data to determine key areas of focus. Establishing a calendar or schedule for course completion to be completed individually, in teams, or school-wide is important for developing a foundation for knowledge that will drive changes. We recommend using a peer collaborative process that we call an action lab. In an action lab, coaches model the targeted practice and teachers observe, discuss what they observed, and make a plan to put into practice what they observed. The coach provides additional professional development to teachers or teams of teachers. Coaches and administration monitor effective implementation through classroom observations.

The focus should be for a specific amount of time and have clear objectives, and Cox Campus can also be used to create a virtual professional learning network across states, districts, and within schools. Universities can use the platform to build knowledge



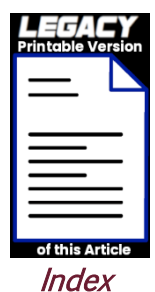
for preservice teachers providing them with an understanding of research and application to support their development as professional educators. Educators can create groups on the platform to facilitate collaborative learning in multiple educational contexts.

So what are you waiting for? It takes less than a minute to create an account and start the journey to building knowledge that provides access to all students. Don't stop there; share with your colleagues, healthcare practitioners, and parents. The power of Cox Campus is that there are no time restrictions, geographic barriers, and, most of all, no obstacles due to cost.


In an information-powered society, literacy is the civil rights issue of our time. Using this resource is one step anyone can take towards harnessing the potential we all possess. By equipping ourselves and others with knowledge and utilizing the power of practice, we can accomplish literacy and justice for all.




Ramona Brown is a Science of reading Professional Development Coach passionate about education equity because it aligns with her belief that ALL children possess gifts and qualities that can make the world a better place. She sees how inequity has stifled our growth as a society because we are limiting opportunity and placing limitations on everyone's potential. Join her online at Cox Campus!



Cox Campus Provides \$140+ Million in Free Teacher Training
 A revolutionary approach through free access to professional development
[Read more here!](#)



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Get Your Skills On!



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with Isabel Bozada-Jones

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7pm et every other Tuesday January 28-March 11

Educators successfully completing our Worthy Advocacy Training receive our exclusive microcredential verifying your acquisition of the skills and strategies critical to success as an advocate and influencer.



theworthyeducator.com/educator-advocacy-training

How Behavior Creates School Culture

Houston Kraft, Cofounder of CharacterStrong

In today's rapidly evolving educational landscape, "Equipping Educators to Meet the Moment" was our most recent theme for [The CharacterStrong National Conference](#). What does it truly mean?

To answer this, we need to understand the definition of "equip." According to Google, "equip" has two parts: supplying necessary items for a particular purpose and preparing someone mentally for a specific situation or task. This duality perfectly encapsulates the current needs we have in education - [we require both tools and training](#).

Consider this: having tools without training is like carrying a heavy pack filled with useful items but lacking the knowledge to use them. Conversely, training without tools leaves us well-prepared but unequipped to handle practical challenges. In education, [we need both to truly meet the demands of our time](#).



Each year, we survey the educators we serve to understand their needs better. This year, 678 respondents, including staff members, school counselors, principals, and district leaders, highlighted their top pain points:

1. [Student mental health](#)
2. [Disruptive behavior](#)
3. [Attendance and engagement](#)
4. [Staff buy-in](#)
5. [Student discipline](#)

Notably, Four out of these Five Issues are Behavior-Related

So, what does it mean to be equipped for these challenges? It means understanding behavior deeply—how to navigate, support, and respond to it. At CharacterStrong, [we equate behavior with culture](#), drawing from James C. Hunter's definition: "Culture is how group members actually behave repeatedly and habitually." Culture isn't just a mission statement or values on a wall; it's the collective behavior of the group.



Phil Boyte, an expert in school culture, frames it well, "You either have a school culture by default or by design." Group behavior is your culture, whether you're paying attention or not. The question is, are we intentional about shaping it?

To shape group culture, we must recognize that it is a collection of individual [behaviors](#). Personal behavior, or character, is formed by thousands of daily choices, which collectively shape the culture of a classroom or campus. Therefore, the behaviors we want on our campuses—kindness, for example—require both common language and intentional action.

[Access Tier 1 Sample Lessons and Resources here](#)

Skills Create Character

- 1. Self-Awareness and Self-Regulation:** When students and educators develop self-awareness, they become more attuned to their own emotions, strengths, and weaknesses. Self-regulation follows, allowing individuals to manage their emotions, thoughts, and behaviors in different situations.
- 2. Empathy and Social Awareness:** Empathy enables individuals to understand and share the feelings of others, fostering compassion and consideration. Social awareness involves understanding social cues and dynamics, which is essential for building respectful and inclusive relationships. These skills contribute to the development of character traits like kindness, respect, and integrity.
- 3. Responsible Decision-Making:** Making ethical and constructive choices about personal and social behavior is a key aspect of character. When individuals are equipped with strong decision-making skills, they are more likely to act in ways that reflect their values and the collective good.

“Creating a culture of kindness isn’t accidental; it requires deliberate, proactive effort. Our goal at CharacterStrong is to equip educators with tools and training. To help everyone understand that social-emotional skills build character, and character builds school culture.”

Character Shapes School Culture

Defined by the sum of individual behaviors, character directly influences school culture. Here’s how:

- 1. Modeling Positive Behaviors:** When students and educators exhibit strong character traits, they model positive behaviors for others. This modeling creates a ripple effect, encouraging similar behaviors throughout the school community.
- 2. Creating a Respectful Environment:** Character-driven behaviors foster an environment of respect, trust, and safety. This environment is crucial for effective teaching and learning, as it reduces conflicts, bullying, and disruptive behavior.
- 3. Encouraging Inclusivity and Belonging:** A culture built on empathy and social awareness promotes inclusivity and a sense of belonging. When individuals feel valued and understood, they are more engaged and committed to the community.



Intentional Design of School Culture

By intentionally fostering [social-emotional learning](#), we can design a school culture that supports every student and educator:

- 1. Integrating SEL into Curriculum:** Embedding social-emotional learning into the curriculum ensures that students regularly practice and develop these skills. Lessons and activities focused on SEL can be incorporated into daily routines and academic subjects.
- 2. Professional Development for Educators:** Providing educators with training in SEL equips them with the tools to support their development and to teach these skills effectively. Educators can model SEL competencies, creating a consistent and reinforcing environment for students.
- 3. Creating Supportive Policies and Practices:** Policies that prioritize mental health, well-being, and character development contribute to a positive school culture. Practices such as restorative justice, peer mentoring, and community-building activities reinforce the importance of SEL and character.
- 4. Building a Common Language:** Establishing a common language around social-emotional skills and character helps create a shared understanding and commitment to these values. It enables consistent communication and reinforces the collective goals of the school community.
- 5. Celebrating Positive Behavior:** Recognizing and celebrating acts of kindness, empathy, and responsible decision-making reinforces the desired behaviors. Celebrations can include awards, shout-outs, and showcasing positive stories in school communications.



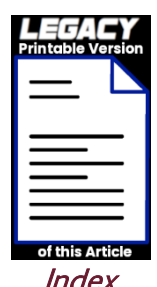
Creating [a culture of kindness](#) isn't accidental; it requires deliberate, proactive effort. Our goal at CharacterStrong is to equip educators with tools and training. To help everyone understand that social-emotional skills build character, and character builds school culture.

By fostering these skills that live beneath the behavior, we can [intentionally design a school culture](#) that supports every student and educator.

[Access FREE CharacterStrong Curriculum Samples and Resources here](#)



Houston Kraft is a speaker, curriculum maker, and kindness advocate. In 2016, Houston cofounded CharacterStrong providing curriculum and trainings that transform the way schools teach social-emotional learning, character education, and kindness.. This piece was reprinted with Houston's kind permission. We celebrate his important voice in education and beyond and the impact his work is having on all of us!





Principles of Educator Agency and Efficacy

<https://adobe.ly/3Wwwo0N>

In an age of societal shifts, educators play a critical role preparing children for the future. Stakeholders can support us by honoring these twelve principles so that we thrive and not merely survive:

- Vision** Work with us to craft a vision for education that matches the needs of this age of digital transformation
- Impact** Demonstrate value for the individual professional impact each of us chooses to pursue across our careers
- Growth** Create contexts that support our learning through sharing, collaboration and action research
- Dignity** Provide the conditions for us to learn, teach and lead without compromising or sacrificing our honor
- Passion** Acknowledge and nurture the reasons we entered the profession and help us fan those flames
- Support** Allocate programs, services and resources that feed our bodies, our minds and our souls
- Respect** Treat us with the esteem, regard and consideration accorded to those who teach our children
- Integrity** Engage us in our work without commercialization, politicization or any other cynical agenda
- Wellness** Prioritize our health and well-being over the endless demands of the institutional status quo
- Innovation** Ensure safe, supportive environments that promote experimentation, rigor and risk-taking
- Recognition** Celebrate our learning, growth and success as we model the journey on which we launch our students
- Accountability** Expect everyone at the table to hold everyone else accountable for the good of the profession

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Creating a Foundation for Learning through Intentional Community Building



Nayoung Kim-Weaver (They/She) Teacher of IB MYP Mathematics and DEIJB Coordinator, Copenhagen International School, a Fellow of The Association of International Educators and Leaders of Color (AIELOC) with a focus on social and restorative justice, and a Worthy Educator Leader

Rama Ndiaye (She/Her/Elle) Cultural Wealth & Lifelong Learning Practitioner, The Association of International Educators and Leaders of Color (AIELOC) and a Worthy Educator Leader

As educators, we have long understood that meaningful and authentic learning takes place in environments where students feel safe, supported, and valued. [But what happens when the very foundation of these environments within our communities is fractured or insufficient](#) (Kim-Weaver & Ndiaye, 2021)?

We have spent much of our careers fighting for the simple recognition of our basic humanity in spaces that demand our excellence while withholding the tools and support we need to succeed. These systems were designed for others: those who fit neatly into the dominant narrative of belonging in academia and in the world at large. We have advocated for ourselves through channels that were never made for us, and this ongoing struggle leaves us questioning: How can we help our students thrive when we are just trying to survive?

Intentional Community Building

We know representation matters. Students need to see themselves reflected in the adults who guide them. But if what we model is a constant battle for visibility and respect, what message are we really sending? If we embody oppressed adulthood, are we merely teaching children how to survive rather than how to thrive?



In her transformational book, Dr. Bettina Love (2019) argues that “Abolitionist teachers have to hold themselves and their colleagues to a level of accountability that focuses on justice, love, healing, and restoring humanity.” We believe a collective approach to education can cultivate the values articulated by Dr. Love.

Community building is often discussed in education as something we do for our students. We create safe spaces for them, foster connections among them, and teach them the importance of supporting one another. However, community building is equally crucial for us as educators. We need strong, intentional communities where we, too, feel seen, heard, and valued - not just for the diversity and competencies we bring, but for our humanity. Without this foundation, building prosperous educational communities for our students becomes increasingly challenging.

The reality is that community building in schools cannot happen in isolation. For students to thrive, their educators must also feel supported and empowered. This requires systemic change - change that goes beyond token representation and addresses the unique challenges faced by educators from marginalized communities. We need structures that allow us to grow, lead, and model the very success we hope to cultivate in our students.

When students see their teachers fighting for survival, it sends a poignant and troubling message. They learn an understanding of success steeped in neo-colonial, patriarchal, and capitalist standards - an idea that equates thriving with constant struggle. A struggle that is, in turn, overshadowed by the immediate need to navigate systems not built with the most marginalized in mind. Conversely, when we, as educators, feel a genuine sense of belonging within our own communities, we have the opportunity to model a kind of success rooted in [Indigenous knowledge](#) (Ravilochan, 2021) and a chance to fully embrace our humanity, embodying self-actualization as perceived by [the Blackfoot Nation](#) (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2024).

“We are committed to this work, not just for ourselves but for the generations of learners who look to us for guidance. We will continue to fight, advocate, and build - using every channel available to us, even if those channels were not made with us in mind. But let us also demand more. Let us demand that the structures and systems within which we operate be rebuilt to serve everyone equitably. Only then can we truly say that we are modeling something worth striving for.”

Eight Tenets in Building Authentic Community

To build truly intentional communities in schools - where all members - students, educators, and support staff alike - feel valued and empowered - we must shift our focus from traditional top-down structures to more inclusive and collaborative approaches. Here are some practical ways to authentically build such a community:

1. Involve All Members of the Community in the Curriculum

To foster a holistic learning environment, we must actively involve all members of the school community in shaping the curriculum. This includes maintenance staff, cafeteria workers, and other support staff, especially in international schools, where these individuals often come from the local community. Their lived experiences and perspectives can be invaluable.

Example: Host a community event where staff members share their cultural or personal stories, which are then incorporated into lessons. For instance, a local staff member could teach students about local history, traditions, or language, enriching the curriculum and modeling respect for every role within the school.

2. Model the Importance of Acknowledging All Adults With Whom We Interact

Educators can model inclusive behavior by acknowledging and engaging with all adults in the school, regardless of their role. This behavior shows students the importance of recognizing the humanity in everyone, reinforcing a culture of respect and dignity.

Example: Make it a daily practice to greet and converse with staff members in front of students. Include their contributions in school-wide acknowledgments and celebrations. Encourage students to express gratitude to those who support their learning environments, like janitors, security staff, and office personnel.

3. Seek Meaningful and Substantial Time with Other Educators

Time for educators to collaborate is crucial for professional growth and the creation of a unified community. We must advocate for structured, intentional opportunities for educators to engage with one another intellectually.

Example: Advocate for professional development days focused on peer-to-peer learning and discussions around pedagogical challenges and innovations. Create cross-disciplinary study groups where teachers can share best practices, discuss challenges, and co-create solutions. These meetings should allow ample time for deep intellectual exchange.

4. Enlist Support for Building Relationships with Caregivers

To truly center students' needs, educators should be supported in building strong, trusting relationships with caregivers. Co-constructing a child's learning experience with caregivers ensures that education is not just something that happens in the classroom but is an ongoing, community-wide effort.

Example: Advocate for structured time for home visits, regular family conferences, or virtual meetings with caregivers. Schools should provide training and resources to facilitate meaningful dialogue between educators and families, empowering caregivers to contribute to and understand their child's learning journey.



5. Build a Mentorship Program within the School

A formal mentorship program can provide much-needed support for new educators and staff, especially those from marginalized communities. Mentorship fosters connection, reduces isolation, and helps educators feel more integrated into the community.

Example: Advocate for a mentorship program that pairs new or less experienced educators with seasoned staff. This mentorship should extend beyond traditional guidance to include emotional support, professional development opportunities, and assistance with navigating the school's culture.

6. Adopt a Collaborative Teaching Model

Collaborative teaching - where two educators share responsibility for a classroom - enriches the learning environment by providing more opportunities for differentiated instruction and teamwork modeling. It also allows teachers to share the emotional and practical burdens of teaching, creating a more sustainable work environment.

Example: Advocate for a co-teaching model where two teachers, possibly with complementary skills or from different disciplines, collaborate in every classroom. This could mean a subject matter expert working alongside a special education teacher to ensure all students' needs are met, providing more individualized attention and fostering deeper connections and support.

7. Insist on a More Humane and Co-Constructed Professional Development Program

Many traditional professional development programs are top-down and can feel disconnected from educators' real needs. A co-constructed, trauma-informed, and responsive approach to professional development will [empower educators to engage deeply with their work](#) (Gonzalez, 2024), leading to a more compassionate and resilient teaching community.

Example: [Advocate for professional development that is co-created with educators](#) (Aguilar & Cohen, 2022). Offer workshops on trauma-informed teaching, emotional resilience, and culturally responsive pedagogy. Bring in speakers who reflect the diversity of the school community, and ensure collaborative reflection where educators can share experiences and learn from one another.

8. Implement Culturally Sustaining Restorative Practices

To cultivate a truly supportive and equitable community, organizations must implement [culturally sustaining restorative practices that prioritize healing and accountability](#) (Project LIFT, 2023) for those who have been harmed. Traditional disciplinary actions often fail to address the root causes of conflict, particularly for students and staff who hold historically marginalized identities. A restorative approach ensures that all parties involved are heard and respected, fostering a sense of belonging and safety, especially for individuals who have been harmed or systematically discriminated against.

Example: Advocate for integrating restorative justice circles into the school's discipline system, where students and staff come together to discuss conflicts and find solutions rooted in empathy, accountability, and cultural awareness. Ensure facilitators are trained in culturally responsive practices, so conversations honor the lived experiences of marginalized individuals. These restorative practices should be proactive, embedded in the school culture, and regularly utilized, not just as a reaction to conflict but as a means to strengthen relationships and community cohesion.



Conclusion

Intentional community building is critical. It's not just about ensuring our students feel connected and supported; it's about creating spaces where we, as educators, can "do more than survive" (Love, 2019). When we are strong in our own communities, we can better serve our students, showing them what it means to build, nurture, and grow within a system that values every single one of us.

To truly cultivate thriving educational communities, school leaders must model the very practices and values they expect of educators. Leadership cannot be a distant or top-down directive; it must embody the same intentionality, empathy, and collaboration that we strive to nurture in our classrooms. If leaders want educators to build supportive, inclusive, and thriving communities for students, they must first create those environments for the staff.

Leaders must actively demonstrate how to involve all members of the community, advocate for equitable practices, and prioritize the well-being of every individual. They should foster meaningful dialogue, provide time for educators to grow intellectually together, and ensure that restorative, culturally responsive practices are embedded into the school culture.

When school leaders model these actions - authentically embracing the values of equity, inclusion, and support - educators will be empowered to do the same for their students. This top-to-bottom commitment is essential. Only when school leaders embody the principles of intentional community building can we create truly equitable systems that benefit both educators and students alike.

We are committed to this work, not just for ourselves but for the generations of learners who look to us for guidance. We will continue to fight, advocate, and build - using every channel available to us, even if those channels were not made with us in mind. But let us also demand more. Let us demand that the structures and systems within which we operate be rebuilt to serve everyone equitably. Only then can we truly say that we are modeling something worth striving for.

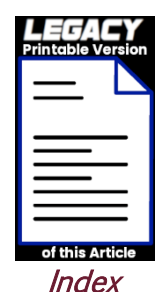
And until that day, we will continue to work toward creating communities that allow both educators and students to thrive because we know that the foundation of all learning is a strong, intentional community - one where everyone is seen, heard, and valued.

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Our third panel continuing this seminal discussion

TRANSFORMING EDUCATION **CORE COMMUNITY**



Thursday, January 23rd 6:00pm et

Derek Pierce

Ramona Brown

Alexandra Laing

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The Importance of State-Level Education Associations: Advocating for Quality Education

Ryan Nevius, Executive Director, Illinois ASCD



Associations serve as critical voices between stakeholder groups such as educators, policymakers, and the community, ensuring that teachers and students are heard and that the educational system's needs are met. As the Executive Director of [Illinois ASCD](#), I have risen through the State Level Education Association ranks. Through my work at Illinois ASCD, I've had the honor of seeing firsthand how educational policy is shaped, how to advocate for educators, design and provide cutting-edge professional development and develop hard-hitting publications.

State education associations have a long history in the United States, originating in the mid-19th century as organizations aimed at improving the quality of education and supporting teachers. Illinois ASCD shares a long and illustrious history, starting as one of six original ASCD affiliates in the 1940s. According to former Illinois ASCD Executive Secretary Don Kachur, our Affiliate history predates the ASCD affiliation. The group initially started as a group of Curriculum Supervisors traveling via horse and buggy through the Illinois prairie back in the days of the one-room schoolhouses. These Curriculum experts would provide instructional support to local teachers and principals. Images of Abe Lincoln traveling the judge circuit in the 1800s always come to mind when I picture these humble beginnings. Since the Gilded Age, Illinois ASCD has grown into a state-level Association with the mission of helping educators develop their skills and knowledge, aiming to improve students' learning and achievement across the state. The organization seeks to promote effective teaching and leadership practices, foster professional growth, and advocate for high-quality educational opportunities for all learners.

Our Professional Learning Program Offerings

One of the association's most critical functions is facilitating professional development for educators. Illinois ASCD believes that education without quality professional development is malpractice. High-quality professional development is the influence driver that makes all Illinois ASCD's focus area work possible. Therefore, every professional development opportunity offered by Illinois ASCD is modeled after the indicators of quality professional development:

- ✓ *it focuses on deepening educators' content knowledge and pedagogical skills (InPraxis, 2006)*
- ✓ *it includes opportunities for practice, research and reflection*
- ✓ *it is embedded in educators' work and takes place during the school Day*
- ✓ *it is sustained over time, and*
- ✓ *it is founded on a sense of collegiality and collaboration among teachers, and between teachers and principals, in solving important problems related to teaching and learning"*

George Evans once said, "Every student can learn, just not on the same day or the same way." Adult learners are no different. Our members come from affluent districts, urban inner cities, and rural farm towns. Regardless of location, the challenges are consistently growing, and professional development goals often fall down the priority list. We feel our responsibility as the Provider is to meet our audience at their level and availability! Workshops, meetings, institutes, cohorts, and conferences must have a wide variety of depth, delivery, and entry points. Members are looking for different experiences at each level of training. For example, a small group cohort allows participants to analyze topics at a deep level with one-on-one attention. On the other side of the coin, you have large national and state-level conferences attended by thousands of people and a la carte variety of topics. One learning style isn't "better" than the other; both experiences are vital to a well-rounded Professional Development calendar. Allow me to share an example of how the different approaches made a noticeable difference in the lives of our members.

[Empowering Visionary Curriculum Leadership](#) is an innovative professional development Cohort designed to support new and veteran Administrators as they create and implement high-quality, student-centered curricula. Over five days, the program focuses on elevating cultural competence, Grant Writing, Difficult Conversations, a state-wide literacy plan, PLCs, and Finding Balance. Attendees choose one of two convenient locations and expect to walk away strategies for navigating their professional and personal lives.





The [44th Annual Pump-Up Primary Conference](#) is the opposite of a small leadership cohort. This internationally attended conference provides Best Practices and Professional Growth to nearly 2200 PreK, Kindergarten, 1st grade, and 2nd grade teachers from the US and beyond. Attendees walk away feeling inspired and motivated to make a difference in their classrooms! The 2025 Conference is scheduled for March 5-7, 2025

Our Advocacy and Influence Work

Illinois ASCD has a long history of collaboration with educational leaders, policymakers, and other stakeholders to promote a balanced education for each child. Most state-level associations similar to Illinois ASCD cannot directly campaign or support candidates as registered non-profits. However, we are allowed to advocate for best practices! Launched in 2007, ASCD's [Whole Child Initiative](#) is an effort to change the conversation about education from focusing on narrowly defined academic achievement to one that promotes children's long-term development and success. Illinois ASCD supports this premise. In 2012, Illinois ASCD officers and members met with the Illinois Legislature to promote the national organization initiative on Whole Child Education. The Illinois Legislature declared March to be "Whole Child Month." Members of Illinois ASCD advocacy task force keep the names of ASCD and Illinois ASCD in Illinois legislators' minds as the go-to learning organization. Organization members helped to promote the passage of the Whole Child Resolution in Illinois in both houses on March 9, 2012. As the years progress, our members keep in touch with legislators and believe that we have had a say in helping promote educational issues in our state. You can read these for yourself In [Whole Child Senate Resolution SR 0545](#) and [Whole Child House Resolution HR 0781](#), and we are proud to report a reauthorization of the [House Resolution passed again in 2021](#).

[The Whole Child Award](#) recognizes these schools for not only educating the whole child but for successfully creating students who are knowledgeable, emotionally and physically healthy, engaged in an inclusive learning environment, and prepared to become lifelong learners. This award recognizes those schools that have changed their focus from one of a narrow academic vision to one that promotes the development of the whole child; healthy, safe, engaged, supported, and challenged. We invite you to apply for ILASCD's Whole Child Award. Nominees need to indicate a feasible plan that includes their approaches to a whole child education through collaboration, coordination, and integration of services, as well as strategies to educate the whole child: healthy, safe, engaged, supported, and challenged. Applications are collected each spring and are scored based on a [grading rubric](#).



"I am proud of Illinois ASCD's role in giving educators a powerful collective voice, providing high-level professional learning and services needed to thrive in their roles, and ultimately contributing to a more effective and innovative education system."

Our Memberships and Partnerships

A solid core membership and partnership network helps build influence, reach, strength, and sustainability while engaging Educators from around the state. These partnerships can provide additional resources and support for schools, enhancing the overall educational experience for participating members. Illinois ASCD focuses on the changing needs of members, assists in developing partnerships for school-based and other organization partnerships, and coordinates area representatives to promote effective communication and collaboration.

There are six classes of [membership](#): professional, honorary, complimentary, student, Group/School, and retired professional. Any person desirous of promoting Illinois ASCD's interest and sharing in its work shall be eligible for membership and may become a professional member by paying the annual dues as provided in the by-laws. A skilled member shall be entitled to vote on agenda items at the annual meeting and to elect officers. Members may also hold office, participate in discussions, and receive such publications as may be provided for the dues paid.

Professional [partnerships](#) among like-minded local organizations are becoming more critical as resources in education become scarce. Pooling resources for a common goal is a mutually beneficial venture. The approach lends itself to increased innovation, leveraging expertise and resources, expanded reach and influences, and the “biggie” as small nonprofits... cost and risk sharing. We hate discussing money in all forms of education, but we all know the reality. The success or failure of specific programs comes down to funding. Finding a trustworthy partner allows for reduced financial burdens. As a leader, my grandiose ideas often come at a significant cost and risk! We can mitigate individual risks and share collective rewards by sharing responsibility.



Our Publications and Communications

Publications and communications are crucial for all non-profit associations. They are powerful tools for communicating, building credibility, and fostering relationships with various stakeholders. These platforms also allow us to highlight the fantastic work being done by educators around the state. At ILASCD, we have two types of publication products: an in-depth journal and a weekly education brief.

[The Quarterly Journal](#), Illinois ASCD's flagship publication, is intended for everyone interested in Pre-K–12 education issues, including curriculum, instruction, supervision, and leadership. Each issue contains articles written by educators for educators. We particularly look for articles that inspire improved teaching and help bridge the gap between research and practical application.



[ILASCD Education Briefs](#) are weekly publications designed with the busy Educator in mind. The Illinois ASCD Staff and Board select 5-6 articles from around the US that directly affect Illinois Educators and could have been easily missed. The curated articles focus on the latest insights, research, and best practices in education.

Staying current with education trends is critical for educators, school leaders, and education professionals because the field of education is constantly evolving. I am proud of Illinois ASCD's role in giving educators a powerful collective voice, providing high-level professional learning and services needed to thrive in their roles, and ultimately contributing to a more effective and innovative education system.

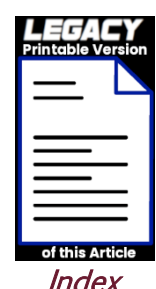
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Since graduating from Illinois State University in 2010, Ryan Nevius has served first as assistant executive director, and now as executive director of Illinois ASCD for fourteen years. He is a strong practitioner of collaborative leadership, building capacity at the state level through relationships and opportunities that meet the needs of professional educators doing the work in schools.



New Age Leaders!

Next Gen

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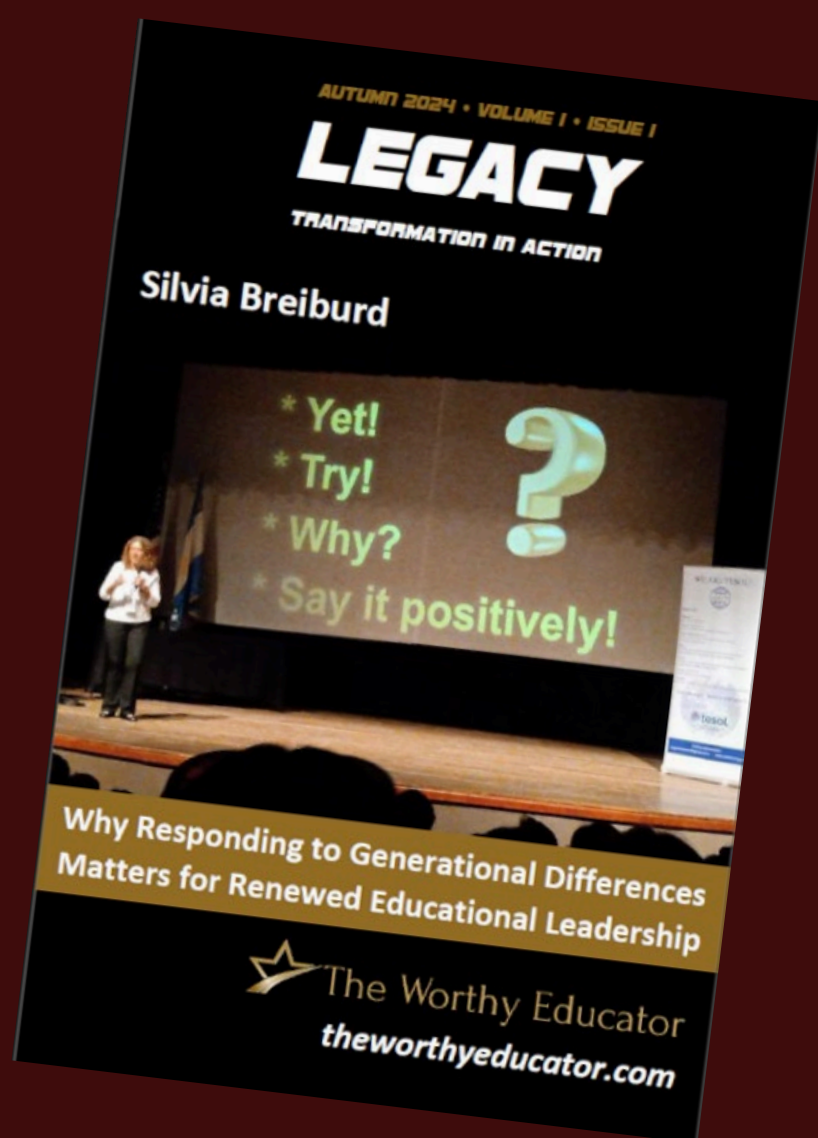
with Silvia Breiburd



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Silvia shares insights and strategies for the next generation of leadership in education, helping us to transform the profession and meet the demands of a new age. This is based on her work featured in the Autumn 2024 issue of our flagship journal, *Legacy: Transformation in Action!*



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Building Bridges: Dual Mentorship Programs for CTE Teachers



Samantha Shane, Career and Technical Education Instructor,
 Morris County Vocational School District, Denville, New Jersey

“Stay out of the copy room!”

“Avoid that teacher!”

“Don’t try to do anything over the top!”

These comments are all too familiar to most of us when we first start our careers in education. I heard countless pieces of similar advice similar when I started teaching. Why does this have to happen when an excited educator starts on a faculty? How can we keep our enthusiasm and momentum alive further into our careers? While the veterans sharing their experience may think they are being helpful, their negative spin perpetuates pessimistic views of education.

During our first year of teaching in New Jersey, teachers are required to have a mentor who serves to help them ease into their first teaching role, provide feedback, and increase their knowledge as they gain experience. As I met my mentor for our first meeting. I had few expectations or ideas about how we would spend our time together. I honestly expected it to be a therapy session! She provided a folder and notebook that I used to reflect, brainstorm, and remember key takeaways, along with a meeting schedule and journal prompts related to teaching. She turned into a lifelong mentor; someone whom I still seek out for advice. Since then, as I have moved on in my career and joined other organizations, I have found additional mentors along the way. The strong foundation mentors provide has provided constructive feedback loops that have made me a more reflective practitioner who sets higher expectations for myself.

Mentorship is an essential practice that helps shape educators at each stage of our careers. Effective mentoring establishes the kind of trusting relationships necessary for us to reflect on our practice, seek collegial advice, and take risks in the classroom. Unfortunately, it is a common misconception that only new teachers require the support of mentors when they start their career. A collaborative work environment significantly improves a teacher’s mindset and outlook, which provides students with a stronger classroom experience. Not only does the continued partnership between a mentor and mentee have a strong impact on student learning, it increases a teacher’s self-worth and pride in their work. These two traits provide educators with the resilience needed to get us through difficult times and last us across the span of our careers.

“Choosing passionate, motivated, and trustworthy teachers is essential to sustaining a mentoring program. Look for teachers that find joy in coming to work every day, volunteering to help others, and pursuing their own growth.”



Dual Mentorship for CTE

My positive experience with my mentors encouraged me to explore more in Career Technical Education (CTE) teaching. CTE teachers often enter education with on-the-job skills from other industries and take alternative routes to teacher certification to begin their careers in the classroom. The lack of foundation in classroom management and instructional experience can be overwhelming and defeating for promising new CTE teachers. While they may be highly qualified in their trade, they may not come prepared with the specific strategies needed to impart their knowledge so that it is within the reach of students. Since they are tasked with teaching essential work theory and knowledge while engaging students in practical applications of the work, CTE teachers are entrusted to create rigorous work-based learning experiences, and the demand to constantly stay current with industry trends and practices can be exhausting.

Three mentorship benefits that can support CTE teachers, and teachers in general at any stage of their career are:

1. Combining specialized professional learning with real-world experience

CTE mentors provide teachers with understandings and strategies that help transform their teaching. Since CTE teachers serve specific pathways like welding, healthcare and computer science, a mentor helps bridge the gap between teaching theory and actual practice. CTE teachers often require specific training above and beyond that of traditional classroom teachers, plus mentors provide opportunities for real world learning to help keep up with industry trends. That having been said, CTE teachers may need to look beyond their school building to find a good mentor match, seeking out schools with similar programs and contacting teachers can be helpful. In the same way, joining trade organizations outside of the school district can provide additional ways to connect with likeminded practitioners.

It can be beneficial for a CTE teacher to have both education and industry mentors, providing opportunities to observe strong teaching practices, experience new industry innovations, and create authentic learning opportunities for students. These kinds of mentoring relationships convert into more robust networking leads, more sustained growth for educators, more meaningful learning opportunities for students, and increased self-fulfillment and satisfaction for the educators involved.

For example, a welding teacher makes use of his professional development time to shadow his mentor working in a welding shop, learning current industry standards, trying out new techniques, and building partnerships where students can potentially intern. Likewise, the welding teacher also has a teacher mentor who help him learn instructional strategies to reach students and help them learn necessary welding theories, techniques and safety practices.

Mentoring helps us take charge of our professional learning. Recently, my administration announced at a staff meeting that teachers could pursue an externship and visit a mentor during our upcoming professional development days. I chose to visit a university and meet with education professors to collaborate on curriculum changes I want to make to my high school CTE program. I was able to gain insights on curriculum changes and current trends in education, and I acquired knowledge on how I could better prepare my students for field experiences and university level coursework.



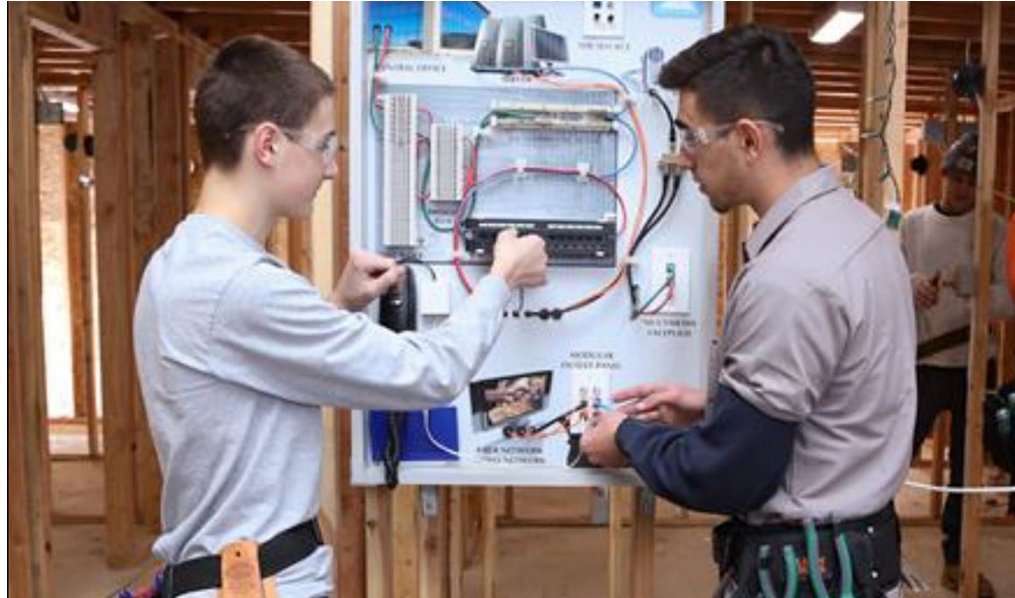
2. Building a strong teacher pipeline

Mentors are often the first, best impression a teacher has about a school and its support community in an era when we are watching many teachers leave the profession. Mentors help to recruit and retain strong teachers, instilling confidence, self-reflection, motivation and success that helps them commit to the profession long term. Growing and developing as a professional keeps teachers in the classroom, even when the mundane and difficult days can seem like a never ending cycle for a teacher going it alone.

A mentor can provide emotional support, helping teachers cope with the stresses of the job, reducing the risk of cumulative burnout. Serving as positive role models, mentors not only demonstrate effective teaching practices, they inspire us to strive for excellence.

The mentorship cycle perpetuates itself as new teachers join schools and the mentee eventually becomes the veteran mentor. Through these strong mentoring relationships, we build a pipeline of educators with increased self-worth who want to give back to new teachers when the time comes. The sense of empowerment builds a sense of purpose and supports ongoing sustained learning as members of a proud profession. When our design teacher first started, he was eager to learn everything and improve his practice. He listened to others, tried new strategies and attended professional development. After several years of working with his own mentor, the design teacher had the opportunity to mentor his first CTE teacher. Using his experience and wisdom, the design teacher was able to pass his knowledge on and continue forward the cycle of mentorship.

In the same way, I have had the opportunity to serve as a mentor for preservice teachers, taking the same steps my first mentor did with me. I provided a dedicated schedule, a folder with journal prompts, and a notebook for them to write down their reflections. I also met with student teachers monthly to help shape the initial stages of their careers, provide support and encourage self-reflection.



3. Promoting growth for all

Mentorship provides opportunities for everyone to grow. The mentor and mentee both benefit, and students benefit from their educator engaging in constant feedback, reflection, and personalized professional development.

The best epiphanies often happen when two passionate educators are discussing the work, and the results often directly transfer to students. This cycle furthers when students enter the workforce with their learned skills. Preparing students who are career ready with both hard and soft skills acquired from their teachers benefits everyone involved. This was demonstrated when a Law & Public Safety teacher was mentoring the new Computer Science teacher. In one of their scheduled meetings, the topic of cybersecurity came up. The teachers organically planned a collaboration for the computer science students to teach the law students different hacks, but as a result of the collaboration, students also created computer safety awareness posters.

Of course, there can be challenges to mentorship. Unaligned schedules, lack of training and personality conflicts may hinder the experience. Clear expectations and norms, ongoing training and support for both mentors and mentees, and ongoing open communication can all help mitigate potential issues proactively, fostering a positive and supportive mentorship environment. It is also critical that school administrators provide clear guidelines and training for mentors. Creating a calendar for the year with specific times and protocols leads to less confusion and stronger partnerships. Finally choosing passionate, motivated, and trustworthy teachers is essential to sustaining a mentoring program. Look for teachers that find joy in coming to work every day, volunteering to help others, and pursuing their own growth. Also, encouraging teachers to pursue externships, take time to observe other classrooms, and shadow industry professionals are additional dimensions of successful mentoring programs.



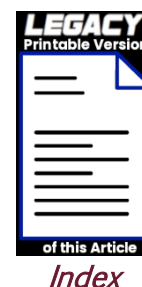
Conclusion

The powers of positivity and relationship go a long way in starting a mentorship. In order to make any mentor relationship work, clear expectations and guidelines should be in place. Clear and consistent schedules that allow for self-reflection, discussion, and feedback are strong foundations for mentor relationships. Schools can support their mentoring program by providing training for mentors to learn meaningful protocols and strategies.

I urge all schools to make a formal mentorship program for teachers, including externship opportunities for staff members, observing peers, and leadership opportunities. Mentors can connect teachers with a network of experienced educators, opening doors to new opportunities and collaborations. By boosting teachers' confidence and self-esteem, mentors can help them feel more empowered in their roles. Modeling mentoring relationships promotes the same benefits for students, fostering a culture of collaboration, support, and continuous learning within the classroom and beyond.



Samantha Shane is an innovative high school career and technical education (CTE) instructor, shaping relevant and engaging experiences that empower students to take charge of their learning. Her goal is to ensure that each lesson equips students with meaningful, real-world learning that prepares them for their chosen career paths, bridging the gap between theory and practice. [in](#) [X](#) [✉](#)



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Thomas R. Hoerr, PhD, Emeritus Head of the New City School Scholar In Residence, University of Missouri at St. Louis



While time brings change, there are still some constants: educators are passionate people and education is always rife with conflicts. Today there are rancorous discussions about phonics and how to teach reading, questions about grading policies and the fairness of giving students a score of zero, and intense debates about charters versus public schools. Educators, it seems, can only agree to disagree. But one area about which there is universal unanimity is that parent involvement is a positive. Simply put, students do better when parents are engaged in their education. Of course!

Yet despite this strong consensus, our profession does not do a good job of preparing and supporting teachers to work with their students' parents. Reflect back on your educational preparation, please: I'm sure that your undergraduate coursework gave little, if any focus, on this topic. You spent hundreds – maybe thousands – of hours observing in classrooms and student teaching, but it's highly unlikely that you experienced training on how to conduct a parent-teacher conference or received feedback on your interactions with students' parents. But you're not alone!

Oddly, despite the fact that we know that students perform better when parents are involved and informed, little emphasis given to this topic in teacher education. Perhaps even more oddly, all too often not much time is spent on this topic in professional development. These are missed opportunities.

Parent-Teacher Conferences

Let's start with parent-teacher conferences. First, yes, teachers are asked to do more and more, so they generally never have enough time for anything - and that includes parent-teacher conferences. And realistically, how much information can be shared – can be exchanged - in fifteen or twenty minutes? Parent-teacher conferences should be thirty minutes, at least three times per year. Finding the time to do this won't be easy, but it can be done if it becomes a priority.

Related, as noted, regardless of how much time is available, it should not simply be teachers talking to parents; rather, it must be teachers and parents interacting, discussing, exchanging ideas. Teachers should have a question or two – perhaps a set of questions – for their students' parents: How does Jose like to spend his free time? Where does Mia do her homework and how does she proceed? What does Keith do when he is frustrated at home? The answers to these questions will help teachers understand their students better. Not incidentally, these questions demonstrate to parents that the teacher sees their children as more than just students.

Of course, regardless of how much time is available, engaging in dialogue rather than simply sharing data requires both intrapersonal and interpersonal skills by teachers. Their intrapersonal skills (their intrapersonal intelligence) will enable them to know how they are perceived so they can improve their communication skills



with parents. (We often overlook the reality that communicating to students' parents is quite different than communicating to students.) Teachers will also need to work to improve their interpersonal skills (their interpersonal intelligence), eliciting thoughts from and listening to parents. With intent and effort, these are not difficult skills; without intent and effort, however, parent-teacher conferences can be unsatisfying for everyone. Success in these areas doesn't happen by chance. That's why PD sessions focused on parent-teacher conferences are so valuable.

Professional Learning on Communications

Indeed, one of my more successful PD sessions was focused on parent-teacher conferences. We began by meeting in small groups and generating the qualities that were needed for parent-teacher conferences to be successful. No surprise, we all agreed on the validity of the axiom that parents need to know that you care before they care what you know. But how to do that? How to demonstrate – remember, even at thirty minutes, time is fleeting – to parents that we care about their children? Then how to prioritize what’s important and how to share? And what do we want to learn from our students’ parents? We brainstormed ideas and strategies for each of these questions and then we role-played parent-teacher conferences.

I began the role plays by being a teacher and my assistant played the role of a parent. I asked the faculty to observe and look for what worked and what I could have done better (and then exhibited what I hoped were good strategies). Before meeting in small groups to discuss what behaviors they had seen, we did a second role play, only this time the person playing the parent role was aggressive, even hostile. Yikes! I was under attack and teachers watched how I tried to respond. I made some foolish errors which both taught and brought laughter. After groups met to share their perspectives about my performance, they met in groups of three to do their own role plays. They rotated among playing the role of teacher, parent, and observer. Afterwards, I asked folks to share what they learned. Teachers learning from teachers is always powerful.

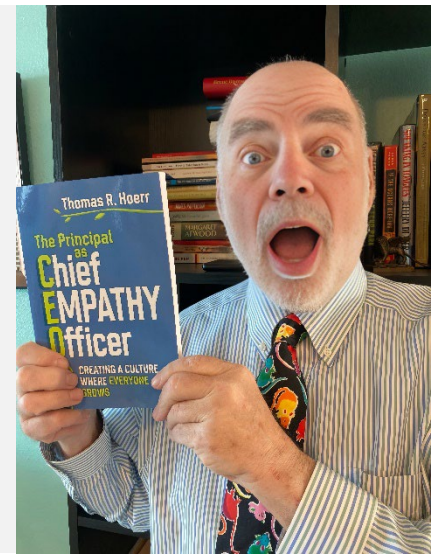


*“They rotated among playing the role of teacher, parent, and observer.
Teachers learning from teachers is always powerful.”*

I concluded this PD session by offering some basic tips for conferences. For example, it is important, I noted, to begin by structuring the limited time, e.g., “Thanks for joining me today, Ms. Aiken. We have limited time so I will begin by sharing a story about Karl that made me smile, then I’ll give you my thoughts about how he’s doing, including showing some samples of his work. When there are about five minutes left, I’ll ask if you have any questions. How does that sound?” Setting out the expectations, including the sequence and time allocation, shows parents that you respect their time and have planned for a productive conference. It also serves as a reminder that while this conference is a conversation, not a speech, the teacher is in charge.

Be sure, I said to the faculty, that parents have full-size chairs and that you have arranged seats so that you are facing the clock (glancing down at your wristwatch during a conference is never a good idea. Offering comfortable seating in the hall so that they can wait for their conference in comfort is wise. In addition to having a sample of the individual student’s work available, I suggested, you may want to consider having papers of student work – with students’ identifications obscured – posted in the hall so that parents can get a sense of the range of achievement on a particular task within the cohort group. Finally, I said, it’s up to you to stay on track and not let a conference go beyond the time limit because doing so will have an impact on the timing of the rest of your conferences. When I taught, I shared, I would secure a free time after every sixth or seventh conference. If I was on schedule, this empty period would allow me to catch my breath and plan the next few hours; if I was running behind, however (something that happened more than I wished), that extra time could allow me to catch up on my schedule.

“Administrators should model respecting others’ time, too. I recently read where a university president instructed the staff that no one should send a text or an email to someone they are supervising after 6:00pm. What a good idea, I thought, and wished that I had done this. I’m sure that the teachers at my school wished even more that I had done this!”



Conclusion

Beyond parent-teacher conferences, too often communication from school to home, from both teachers and administrators, needs more attention. My bias is that a weekly newsletter, one from a child’s teacher and one from the principal, is important. Teachers’ classroom newsletters are opportunities to share what is happening in the class and to offer ideas about how these activities might be supported at home. My weekly newsletters were designed to inform and educate parents. I shared student achievements and often wrote about multiple intelligences, mindsets, grit, diversity, and the importance of empathy. Writing these took a good deal of time because I worked to make them interesting, i.e., I often included a “Quote of the Week,” sometimes humorous and sometimes educational, but always focused to encourage a busy parent to take the time to read my newsletter.

Finally, in this media-rich time (actually, media-too-rich time, I think), administrators need to set clear expectations about when home-to-school

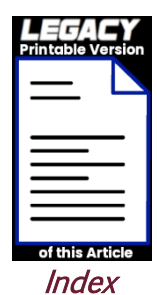
communications are acceptable and what is the time period by which a response will be sent, e.g., 24 hours. This expectation should be shared by the principal and be consistent for all teachers so that Mrs. Crankie isn’t viewed in disfavor because she doesn’t answer emails as regularly as Mr. Smiley.

Administrators should model respecting others’ time, too. I recently read where a university president instructed the staff that no one should send a text or an email to someone they are supervising after 6:00pm. What a good idea, I thought, and wished that I had done this. I’m sure that the teachers at my school wished even more that I had done this!

This article brims with ideas but I have only touched the surface. I hope your take-away is that we educators must devote the time and energy necessary to help our students’ parents become informed and engaged. When that happens, it’s a win-win for everyone, beginning with students.



Tom Hoerr is a Scholar In Residence at the University of Missouri–St. Louis, where he teaches prospective principals. He became head of New City School in St. Louis in 1981 with a commitment to progressive learning and respect for human diversity. Under his leadership, New City began implementing the theory of multiple intelligences (MI) in 1988 and created the world’s first MI Library in 2006. Tom would love to hear from you! Email him at one of these two email links!



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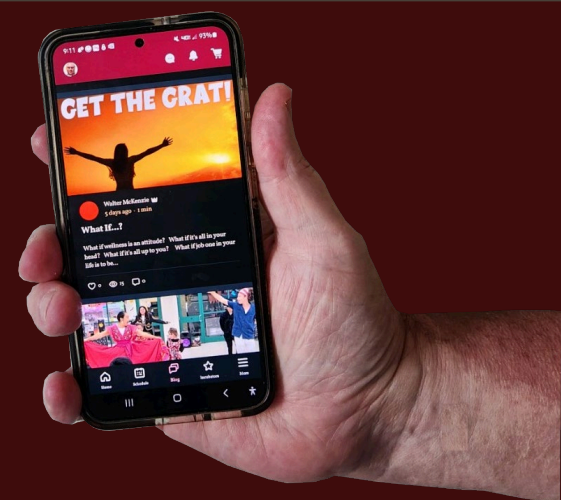
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Fostering Inclusive Spaces: The Power of Affinity Groups in Education



Iyabo Tinubu, Dean of Students, International School of Beijing

Affinity spaces have been around for a very long time. Pendharkar 2022 writes “Black teachers formed the first affinity groups in Georgia in 1878.” Affinity spaces as defined by Gee is “loosely organized social and cultural settings in which the work of teaching tends to be shared by many people, in many locations, who are connected by a shared interest or passion” (Gee, 2007).

After experiencing identity-cased harm throughout my teaching career, I reflected on how I can support BIPOC girls at my current school. I want to create a safe space where they can be with other students and adults that they feel comfortable with, have their identities affirmed, and celebrate and build their confidence. Such affinity spaces serve as more than just meeting grounds. These are sanctuaries where students from marginalized backgrounds can gather, be themselves, talk about their experiences, and lift each other up. Within these spaces, students find solace in shared experiences, gain validation for their identities, and forge bonds of solidarity that transcend outside the classroom walls.

Benefits of Affinity Groups

Affinity groups are safe spaces where members self-select by common identity and interest. For example, Black, Indigenous, or People of Color (BIPOC) affinity groups are safe spaces specifically designed for students who identify as such. These groups offer a supportive environment where members can discuss shared experiences, celebrate their cultural heritage, and address issues unique to their communities. A year and a half ago when I set up the affinity group, I had no idea of the level of impact it would make on the BIPOC girls who attended the group. I knew it was important to create the space and that it was needed but as time went by I thoroughly appreciated the community and friendships the girls were forming in this group. During one session, the students shared “we all belong to Girls Empowered.” The students are girls Grade 1 to 5, who come together on Wednesdays during lunchtime to eat, talk and engage in projects together.

There are many benefits of forming an affinity group especially in a homogeneous school environment. In the affinity group that I facilitated, the common identity shared was gender and race. Regardless of the shared identity of the group, the following benefits generally apply:

Representation

BIPOC students are often minorities especially in international school environments, having a space with a teacher of color to support them and seeing people who look like us further affirms their identity. During a conversation about skin color and melanin, happily shared, “you have similar color skin like me.”

Validation

BIPOC students face microaggressions, stereotypes, and feelings of isolation in predominantly white spaces. I know when I was a child, I didn’t have the language or courage to articulate these experiences especially in my school with all white teachers. Affinity groups offer a space where their experiences are validated, celebrated, without judgment. Another girl shared how she was ridiculed when she joined the school because of her accent and didn’t have any friends and was happy because all the girls in the group were now her friends.

Empowerment and Support

Affinity groups allow BIPOC students a space to share their stories, express their concerns, and seek guidance from individuals who have navigated similar challenges. This support network fosters resilience, self-esteem, and a sense of agency among students. This empowerment also comes from the fact that they can just BE knowing that nobody is judging because they are already self-actualized. Furthermore, facilitating initiatives that can further build confidence feeds into the students’ academic and social progress.



“These are sanctuaries where students from marginalized backgrounds can gather, be themselves, talk about their experiences, and lift each other up.”

Bell (2015) writes “schools, like other institutions, are spaces in which those outside the dominant culture can feel disregarded, whether the disregard is intentional or not. When establishing the affinity group, my intention was deliberate: to empower students with agency in shaping the group according to their desires. It was imperative that the group centered around them, their identities and their needs.

Launching our BIPOC Affinity Group

I began starting my group by proposing it to the leadership team, who were in full support of setting up the initiative. I expressed that the group needs to be facilitated not only by a teacher who shared the identity of the students, but also that it was imperative that the person takes as Talusan (2022) states, an “identity conscious approach that emphasizes that differences matter.” Doing identity work as an educator before embarking on creating an affinity group ensures that it is led by someone who recognizes that our identity informs and impacts how we act and see the world. I must emphasize that this is ongoing work.

I consulted teachers and the school counselor to identify female BIPOC students who may benefit from additional support with building friendships and a sense of belonging. After receiving recommendations, I personally spoke with the girls to gauge their interest and ensure their participation was voluntary. Once the girls expressed interest, I extended formal invitations to their families, providing them with the opportunity to ask questions and decline if necessary. Finally, I coordinated a time and day that accommodated the girls' schedules for our meetings.

Our BIPOC affinity group serves as a platform for amplifying student voice. By providing opportunities for students to take on leadership roles, organize events, and advocate for change, the group empowers participants to become agents of positive social transformation. At the beginning of the year, it is very important to hear from the students what they want to gain out of the group. As a result, we created a group agreement so that everyone felt safe to participate. Our students selected the group name Girls' Empowered. We went on to co-construct ideas for events and trips based on group member input. As a result, the students knew it was a space for them and they voluntarily took ownership in its activity.



Considerations in Managing Affinity Groups

There is no one way to set up an affinity group, however there are some recommended considerations based on our experience:

- ✓ Engage with members of the community (including teachers, and counselors) to identify the specific needs of the students.
- ✓ Reach out directly to the students to gauge their interest and willingness to participate in the group.
- ✓ Communicate with families to provide detailed information about the group, inviting them to ask questions and express any concerns they may have.
- ✓ With the group, establish group norms once the members are organized, ensuring that they have a say in defining expectations and goals.
- ✓ Utilize feedback gathered from students to organize events and outings that cater to their interests, providing opportunities for support and empowerment.
- ✓ Create opportunities for students to explore, celebrate, and affirm their identities within the group setting.
- ✓ Provide opportunities to gather feedback from both students and teachers to continuously improve the facilitation and effectiveness of the group.

Affirming identity is an ongoing journey that takes constant reflection and evaluation. Talusan (2024) offers a reflection tool in her book as a starting point. In Klienrock (2021) and Ahmed (2018), there are several engagements to explore and celebrate identity such as identity flower, identity map and bio map all of which I have used with my students. Learning for Justice (Bell, 2015) is an incredible resource with lesson plans such as [Discovering My Identity](#).



“Our BIPOC affinity group serves as a platform for amplifying student voice. By providing opportunities for students to take on leadership roles, organize events, and advocate for change, the group empowers participants to become agents of positive social transformation.”

Conclusion

In conclusion, BIPOC affinity groups are a powerful opportunity for creating inclusive educational spaces where every student feels valued, supported, and empowered. By providing a platform for cultural celebration, dialogue, and activism, these groups help foster empathy, understanding, and equity within schools. As educators, it is our responsibility to recognize the importance of BIPOC affinity groups and actively support their establishment and growth. Together, we can work towards building a more just and inclusive educational system for all.

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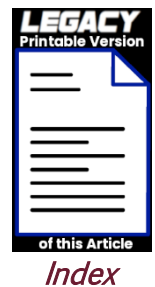
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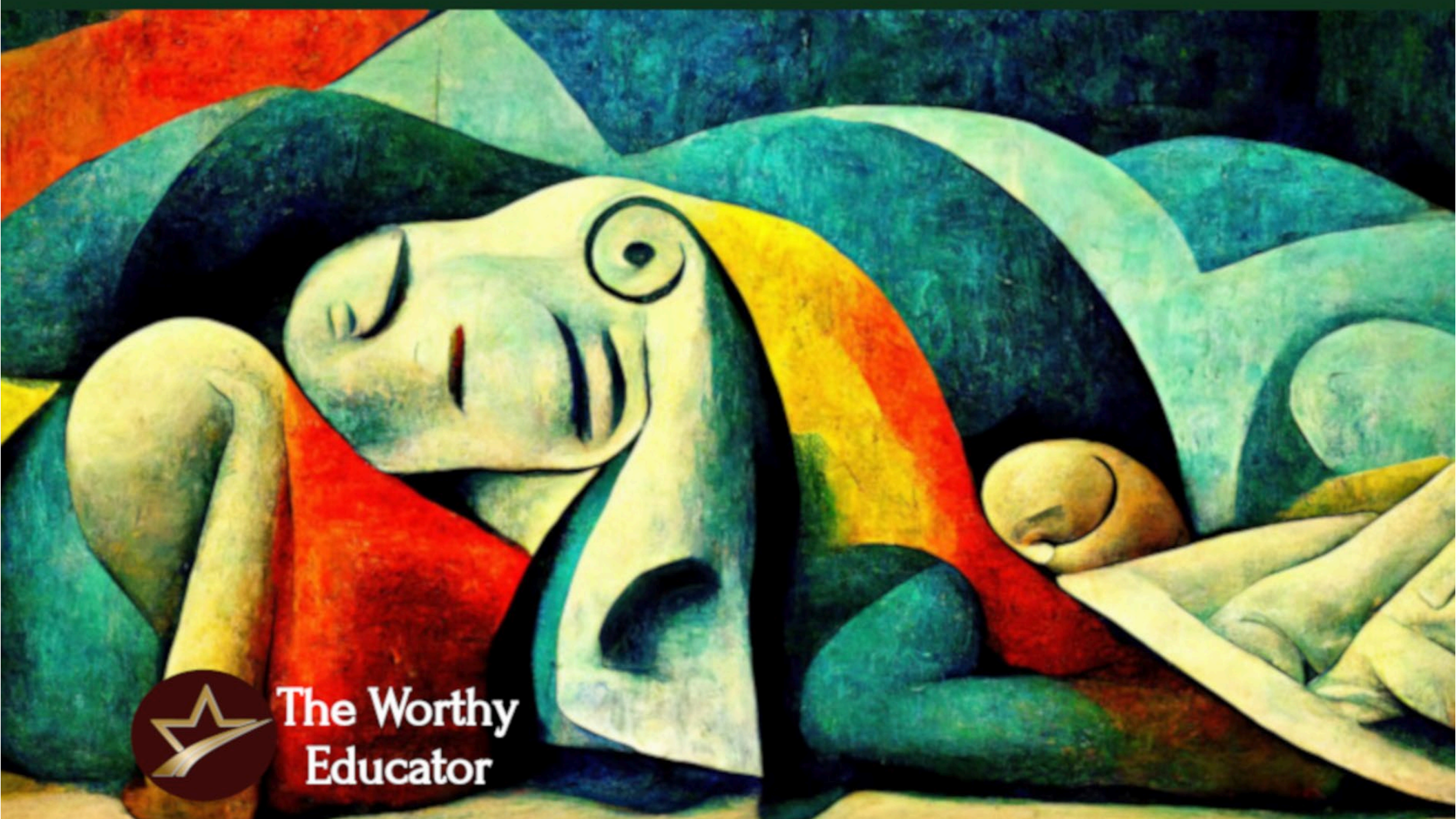
lyabo Tinubu is a seasoned educator with over 12 years of experience, spanning various educational settings across the globe. From state schools in inner London, UK, to international schools in China, Singapore, and Germany. She has honed her skills in fostering inclusive learning environments and prioritizing a holistic and humanizing approach to education. She has taught in various year/grade levels across primary with experience teaching English as an Additional Language and Library Teacher. With a deep commitment to Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Justice (DEIJ), lyabo is a member of the Association of International Educators and Leaders of Color (AIELOC), working to advocate and amplify voices of teachers of color. As an ASCD Emerging Leader, an AIELOC Aspiring Leader of Color, and as a Worthy Educator Leader, she is dedicated to driving positive change in education.



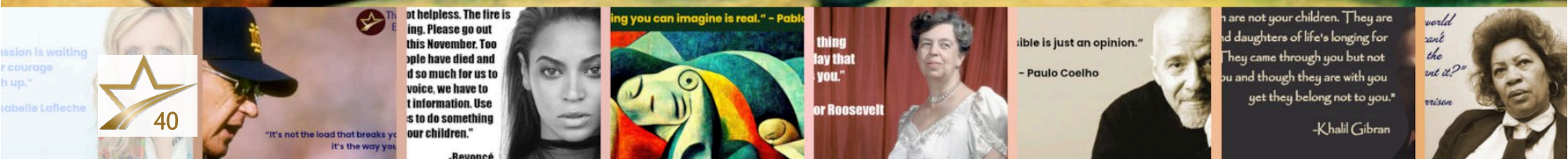
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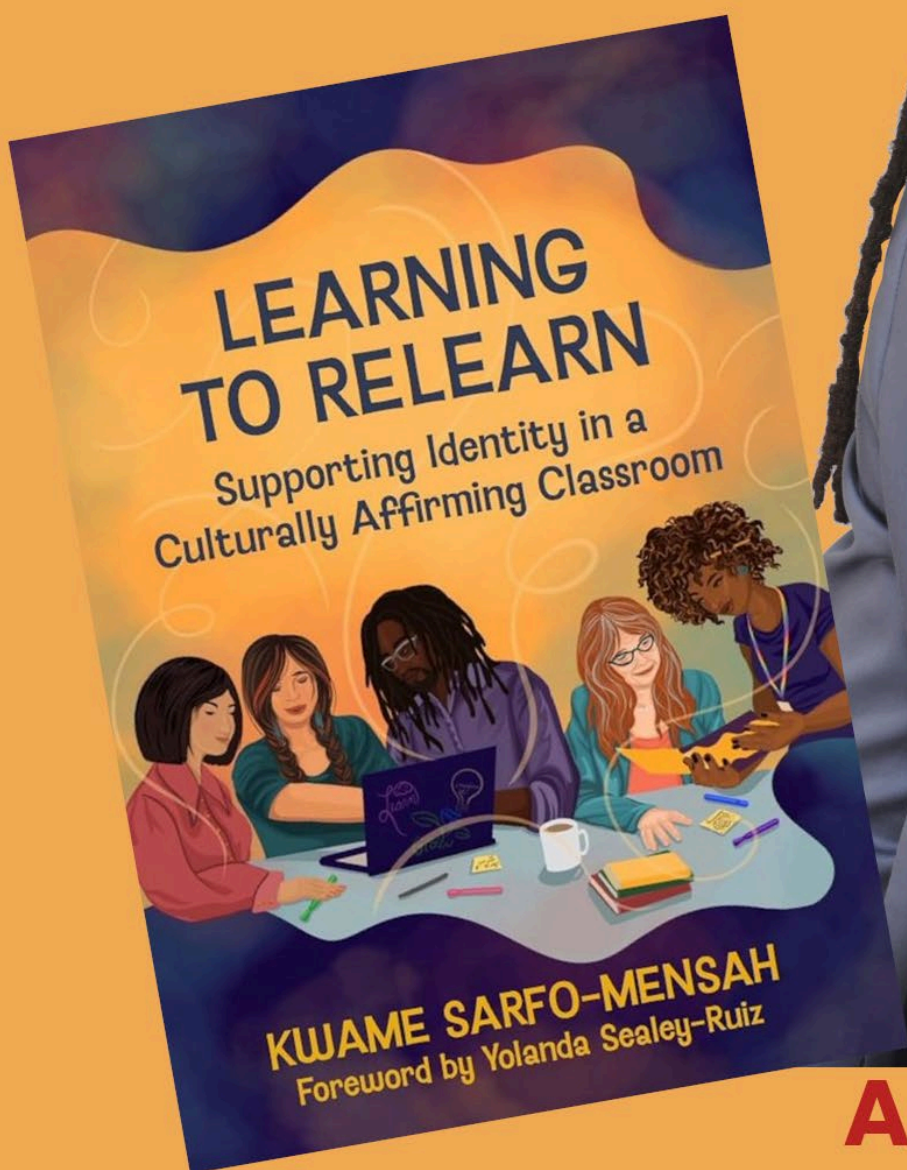




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ADVOCACY

A More Robust Welcome is Needed for our Immigrant Students and their Families

Ari Gerzon-Kessler, Author, Speaker and Trainer

We were a nation of immigrants long before the recent surge of migrants. As of two years ago, one in four children in U.S. schools was born in another country or had at least one parent who was. Approximately twenty million children in the United States have an immigrant parent, comprising 27 percent of the child population.

Just this past year, thousands of new students have entered public schools in small towns and major cities around the country. Yet schools across the country have not revamped their approaches to engaging with families quickly enough to meet the shifting demographics, with educators too often relying on outdated school-centric models.



Despite our deep differences about immigration policy, it's in everyone's interest to make sure that those who do become our fellow citizens do well. So the question is: *how do we make sure they and their children don't become disconnected or alienated in our nation's schools but instead become successfully woven into these communities?*



A Family-Centered Approach

I've worked with hundreds of teachers, parents, and school leaders over the last seven years to develop a structure that centers the voices of immigrant families in a way that strengthens the entire school community. As I outline in my book, *On The Same Team*, our Families and Educators Together (FET) teams at 28 local schools bring together immigrant families with teachers and school leaders for a collaborative gathering once per month, where immigrant families and school staff connect over dinner, engage in team-building activities, share information that helps families navigate our intricate systems, and engage in candid dialogue that forges trust, sparks mutual learning, and leads to collaborative action.

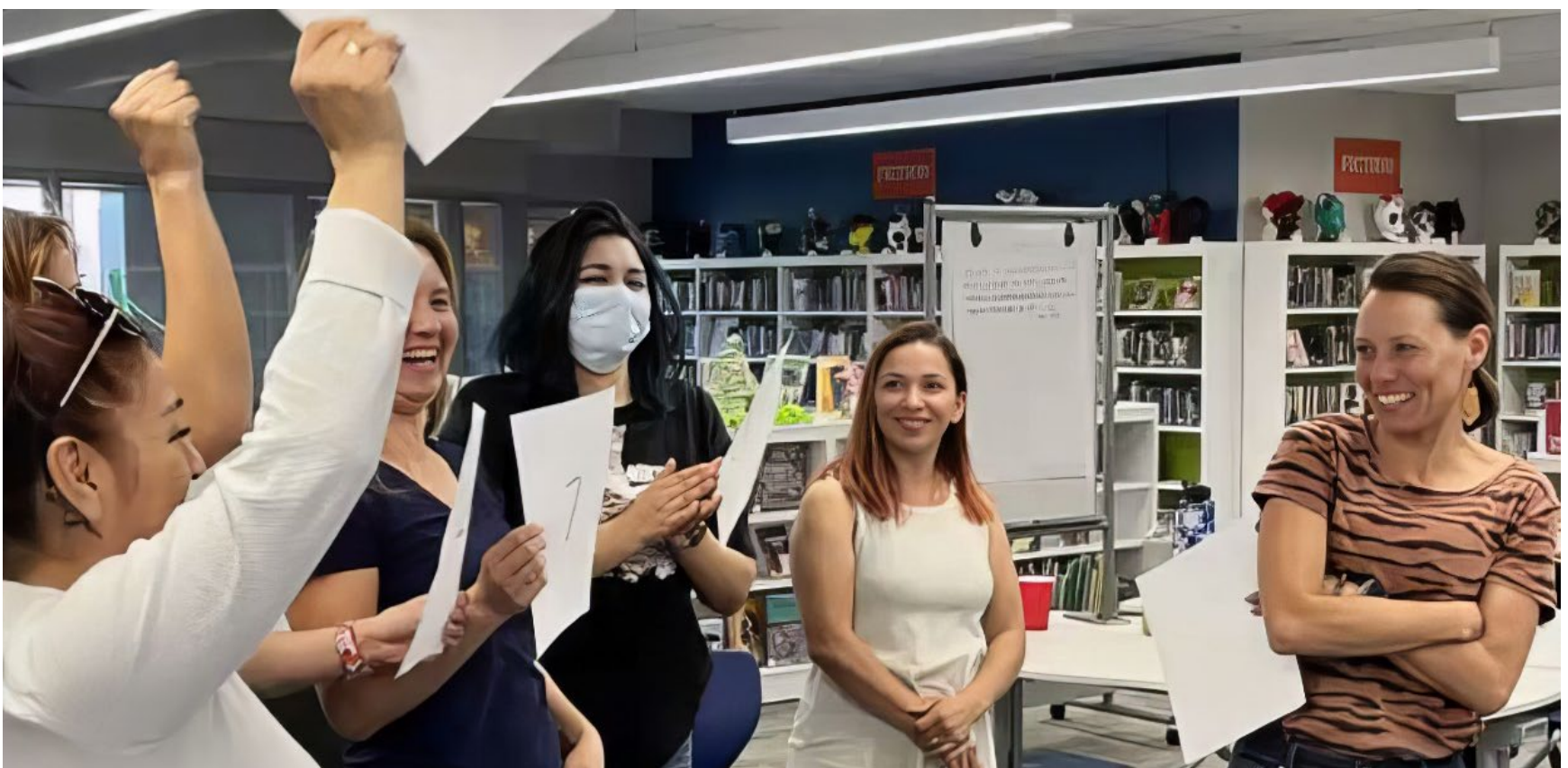
Here are four core reasons why this family-centered approach is so important:

1. Our schools have many unwritten rules that unintentionally leave underrepresented families on the margins. When we equip families with information about how our schools work, their children are more likely to thrive and the school community feels more cohesive.
2. We need to create spaces for a mostly white workforce that was born in the U.S. to learn how to more effectively collaborate with immigrant and other underrepresented families. When we solicit their input, we're then able to shift those systems to be more "user-friendly." For instance, during our FET gatherings, we have learned that many of our immigrant families do not often read the emails sent, but will respond when we send more text messages.
3. Our nation's schools are a pivotal entry point for immigrant families to access community resources. At each FET meeting, we embed "family learning time," which informs families around topics such as how to navigate the tech tools for parents, what afterschool clubs are available, and the role that the school counselor plays in supporting students and families' well-being.
4. There is tremendous value in creating connections between families and a network of support for them that extends beyond the assistance of overstretched educators. At a recent FET gathering, a mother shared that weeks earlier she had crossed the border with her youngest children and felt lost. A mother who shared her background said, "I've been at this school for four years. Here's my number. Call me whenever you have questions!"

We stand at a crossroads, a moment of truth for education. Are we willing to move beyond the types of school-family approaches that we are familiar with? Or do we have the foresight and determination to make this "moment of disruption...a moment of reinvention," as David Brooks writes.

Partnering more effectively with families through structures like FET teams is one of the keys to addressing many of these challenges and charting a more human-centered approach to improving our education system.

Our schools are the gateway to helping these new students and families become a part of our broader communities and creating an inclusive and just society where we can all thrive.



Ari Gerzon-Kessler is author of *On The Same Team: Bringing Educators and Underrepresented Families Together (Solution Tree, 2024)*, which won the gold medal for the Best Education Book of 2024. He is an author, speaker, and trainer supporting schools and districts committed to strengthening ties with all families. You can contact Ari using these icon links: [in](#) [globe](#) [envelope](#)



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The Importance of Teacher Self-Care



Shannon Szymczak, Instructional Coach
Meeker Middle School, Tacoma, Washington

We plan, we teach, but we are never prepared for everything our students bring with them into our classrooms. At least, I wasn't prepared for what happened in my classroom in April of 2017.

One morning in my third period class, one of my 7th grade students took out a box-knife, slitting her neck in front of myself and her twenty-four classmates. Reacting in shock, I grabbed the knife from her hands and rushed her to the nurse, where staff put pressure on her neck to try to stop the bleeding until paramedics came and took her to the hospital.

As I sat there on the floor in the school nurse's office, I couldn't stop shaking. I remember staring at my knee, wondering why it was bouncing so much. I spoke to a counselor and tried to talk through what had just happened. My principal called my mother to drive me home. I cried, in shock, the entire way, reliving that moment again and again.

My student recovered, and eventually I did, too. But I struggled for months after the incident, and at times I wondered whether I'd ever be able to return to the classroom. Before I could, I needed to learn that I cannot be the teacher my students need me to be if I don't take care of myself, first.

Coming to Terms with My Own Self-Care

Self-care is defined as "the practice of taking action to preserve or improve one's own health." I didn't abide by that. As a teacher, I saw my job as taking care of my students. I educated them, fed them, stood up for them, challenged them, listened to them...it was always about *them*. I thought this is the way it's supposed to be, as many teachers put their students first. That's just who we are. It's what we do!

But what I wasn't doing was listening to myself.

Only a few months prior to that April morning, I'd returned from maternity leave. I was a sleep-deprived working mom, and in hindsight I realize I was suffering from undiagnosed Postpartum Depression and Anxiety. But I put that aside and focused on my child at home and my students at school, continuing my focus on what was best for them. Sure, I took a nap when I could, but I sure didn't talk about my thoughts and feelings. I didn't set any boundaries or take time for just me. I pushed forward.

The night of the incident, my mother took my son to her house, allowing me time to recover and process what I'd just witnessed. I laid on the couch watching TV, because that was my attempt at self-care at the time. I spoke to some people from school and made the decision that I would go to work the following day, for the kids.



Looking back, that was my biggest mistake. I knew it would be too much for me, but I went anyway because my life centered around my students. While I wasn't teaching that day, I was there in the hallways, the office, even my classroom where it had all happened. I was present for my students. I set aside my own trauma to try and show them I was okay. I wasn't there for myself. I listened to any student who needed to talk, and I took on all their trauma from the day before.

After school, I picked up my son, returned home and experienced my first panic attack. I paced my bathroom with a feeling of cold electricity running through my arms. My 7-month-old son cried for me, sending me even more over the edge. My husband ran him to the neighbors, came back and threw a few blankets on me, squeezing me tight. We sat on the floor for what felt like an eternity, until my panic subsided. I called my best friend, a nurse, who explained to me what I was experiencing. It was one of the worst nights of my life.

I didn't teach for the final two months of that school year, experiencing multiple panic attacks. I couldn't step foot in that classroom, let alone be in that hallway. I attended numerous therapy sessions, tried medications, and began journaling after some prompting by my principal, who coached me through the whole ordeal. I had to learn a lesson about self-care the hard way, an extreme way, really.

“We must feed our own souls, stand up for our own needs, challenge our own minds, and listen to what our bodies are telling us. We deserve to be ‘whole teachers’ even as we work to teach the whole child.”

Reset and Restart

I know my story is not a common one, but there are plenty of teachers out there who felt, and still feel, the same way I did. They want to do right by their students, because they see the trauma they experience daily. They want to educate them, feed them, stand up for them, challenge them, and listen to them. But it can't always be about them. If we aren't careful, we take on all that trauma ourselves. It wears us down.


I'm not saying that I wouldn't have missed the final two months of school had I taken the time to heal myself before walking back into that building, but my gut says that had I taken the time to care for myself first, to preserve my own health, I might have been able to be there for my students the rest of that year. I know its cliché to say that we must take care of ourselves before we can take care of others, but it's the reality.



Now I take the time to listen to myself and set boundaries. If I need to, I spend time alone after school, sometimes meditating, working out, going to therapy, or journaling. It doesn't matter what it is I choose to do, as long as I am proactively taking the time and actively listening to myself.

We, as educators, require just as much care as our students. We must be aware of our mental health. We must feed our own souls, stand up for our own needs, challenge our own minds, and listen to what our bodies are telling us. We deserve to be 'whole teachers' even as we work to teach the whole child.



As an NBCT Instructional Coach and AVID staff developer, Shannon Szymczak brings a wealth of experience to her role as instructional coach at Meeker Middle School in the Tacoma, Washington Public Schools. Her passion for education and her dedication to supporting teachers' well-being drives her commitment to fostering a positive and sustainable teaching environment. 



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- Community Life
- Connections
- Leadership Opportunities
- Presenting My Work
- Professional Learning
- Publishing
- Thought Leadership
- Other

* What scheduling best suits your busy life?

- Asynchronous Learning
- Half-Day In-Person Learning
- Full-Day In-Person Learning
- Two-Day In-Person Learning
- Half Day Virtual Learning
- One Hour Virtual Learning
- Half Hour Virtual Learning
- 15 Minute Check-Ins
- Monthly Networking/Social Meetings
- Regularly Scheduled One-on-One Meetings
- Other

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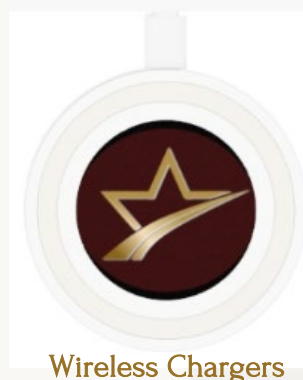
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