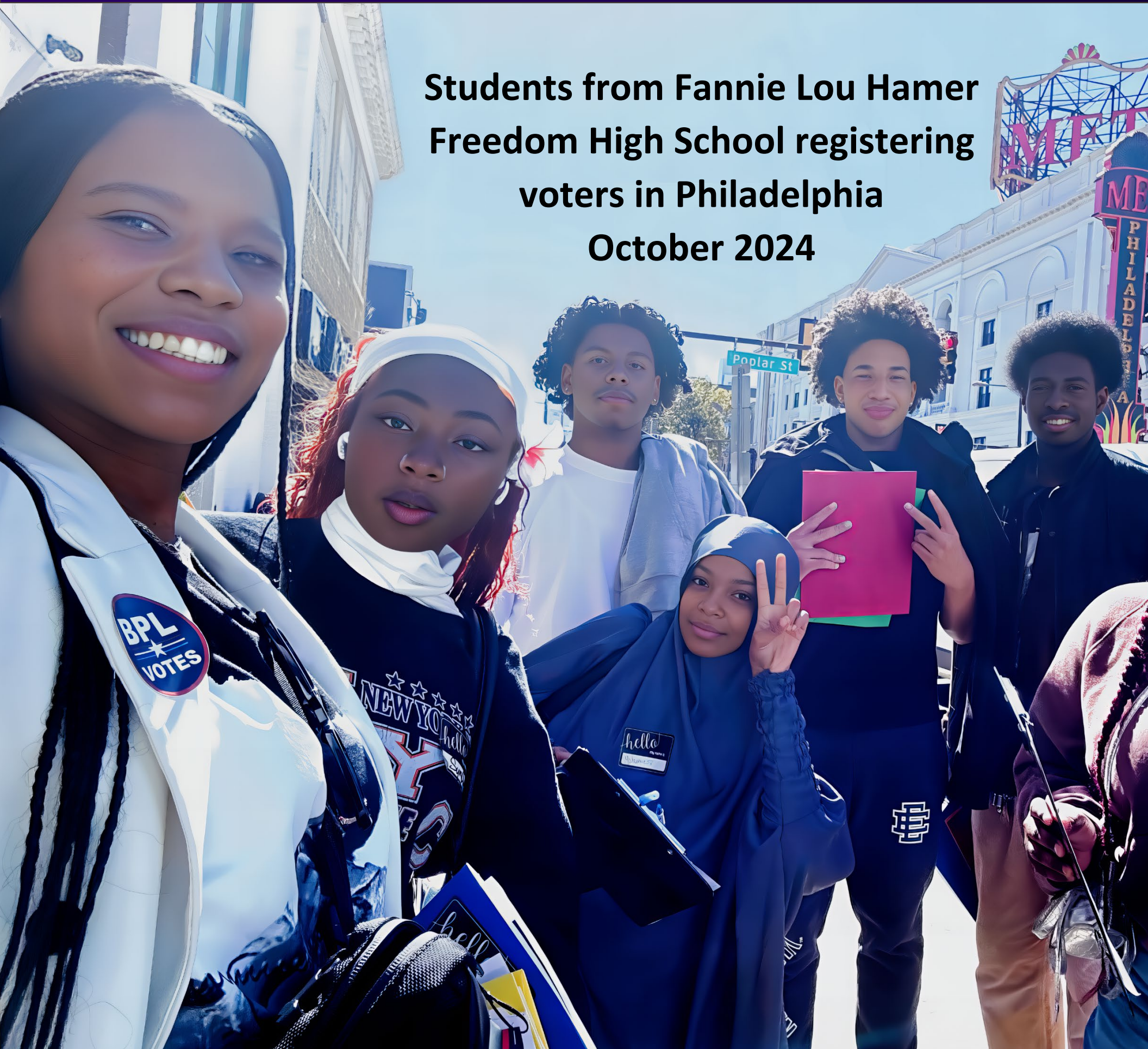


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**Students from Fannie Lou Hamer
Freedom High School registering
voters in Philadelphia
October 2024**



The Worthy Educator
theworthyeducator.com

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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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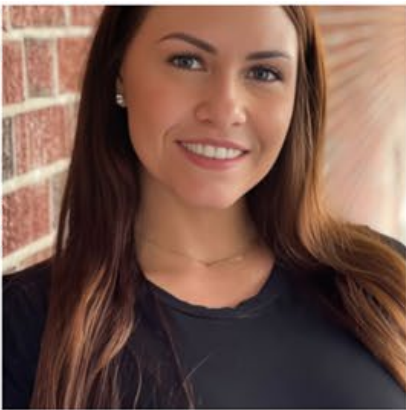
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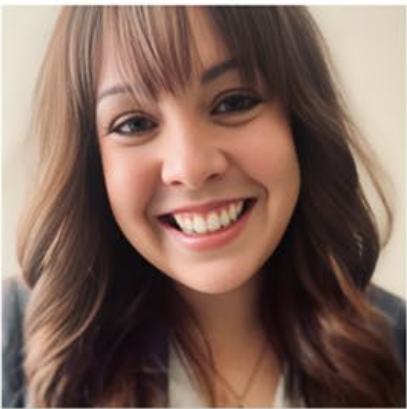
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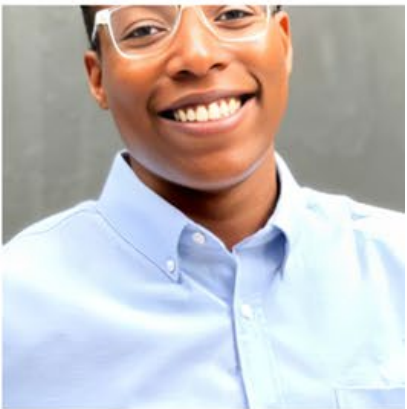
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A Call to Action

If anyone tried to tell me last summer that this is where public education would be in the spring of 2025, I would have said they were crazy. Yet, here we are, and being a member on the tail end of the baby boomer generation, I cannot sit still nor stay quiet. We grew up in the turbulent sixties with the expectation that we make a difference. It is striking how much comes back to you sixty years later, like riding that proverbial bike; both instinct and muscle memory kick in.

During those years we were taught western history, from Greek and Roman Times through the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, the founding of our nation, the Civil War, and of course, the first and second World Wars. I was too young to understand the latter had just concluded fifteen years before my birth. It read like ancient history, and I made childlike assumptions that we had learned much from the past. My young mind couldn't fathom people being seduced by propaganda and hate, nor how humanity allowed such atrocities to take place, so I naively assured myself our generation would never allow these things to happen again.

Now in our golden years, we are facing disinformation and propaganda on a national scale, with an entire swath of people willingly buying in to the "afactual" (truth neutral?) okay lies and hate-mongering that is fueling movements against entire classes of people, our institutions and our rights. It's no coincidence that public education, a cornerstone of our democratic society, is part of the targeting going on.

What is inexplicable to me as that child of the sixties is how silent so many people are, sitting watching all this playing out in real time. Technologically we're much more connected, but the disconnect to action is unjustifiable. Much like accounts from the past, entire groups are being singled out, scapegoated and victimized and the general public is laying low as if it isn't happening, or as if it will just go away. The lies are so big they are overwhelming, and people shut down.

I can make the plea that as citizens we all have a responsibility to each other, but this space is better used as a call to action specifically to educators. We have a special responsibility. We are the teachers, the role models, the truth tellers for each child that we welcome into our classrooms. Society depends on us to prepare them to become responsible citizens who contribute to the greater good, and they are watching.

Let's ratchet this down a notch. Consider this is one of those moments, like running into students while we're grocery shopping. We're not in our instructional setting, yet they look at us on a pedestal and want to know what we're doing right down to peering into our cart. We can either pretend we don't see them because we're on our own time, or we can acknowledge them and make it a human moment, sharing our everyday selves right down to our choices of cheese and bread and beverages. Sure it's easier to be left alone, but...

In this moment in our personal and collective history as a people, each of us in education must share our humanity, speaking to what is best for children, to what is essential for public education, and to those American values we teach as content and now need to be demonstrated. There is no safety in silence. If we don't stand and speak now, the damage being done will take generations to repair, assuming our descendants can ever recover everything we are losing. My more cynical boomer brethren tell me that you won't respond until it affects you personally, and that by then it will be too late. I know so many of you in your thirties, forties and fifties and I don't believe this is true. I'm asking you to stand up, speak out, and be a vocal majority standing up against the dismantling of our institutions, defending our rights and the rights of the most vulnerable among us. You don't have to do anything more than what you have the wherewithal to do, but you must do what you can. Assess what's possible and commit to action [here](#).

We've launched [EDInfluencers](#) at The Worthy Educator to support you with tools, strategies, and resources to advocate for our profession and for the students and stakeholders we serve. Participate in our virtual Town Halls, speak with colleagues and neighbors in your community, contact your elected officials and express your views as a voting citizen. Decisions are being made, and the time is now to make a difference in how it all plays out. Doing nothing surrenders your rights and our future. *Do something. We are with you!*

Walter McKenzie

April offers two opportunities to Work with Dr. Chaunté Garrett!

Monday, April 7th • 7:00 p.m. e.t.

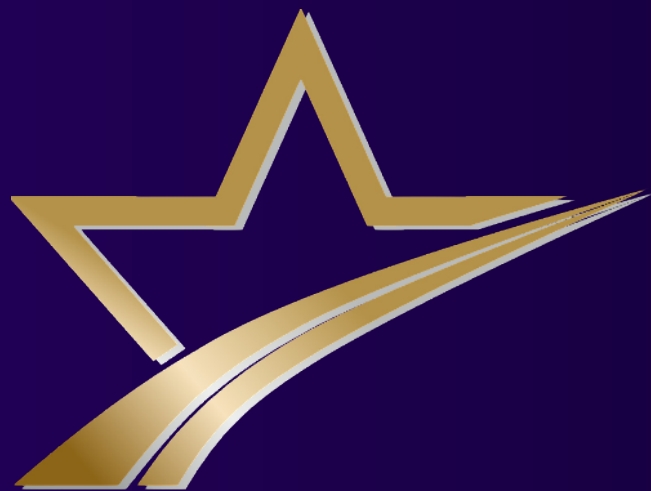


A Worthy Incubator on Let's Help Students get Unstuck and Help Learning Stick!

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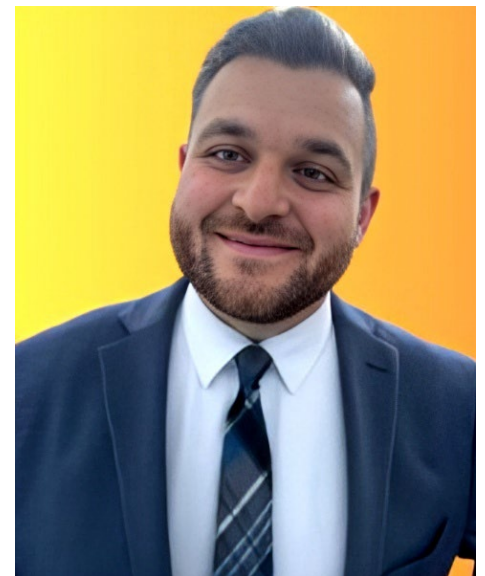
TRANSFORMATION IN ACTION

Climbing New Summits: A Journey of Passion and Purpose

Dan Reichard, M.Ed., Assistant Principal, Shrevewood Elementary School, Fairfax County Public Schools, Worthy Educator Leader, Fairfax, Virginia

The Quiet Whispers

They came in fits and starts - feelings of the need to turn back and start over. Google searches for new possibilities. Taking mental notes of how others connected passion and purpose. The courage to scale the heights of the new and unknown. A response to the many quiet whispers.



The First Summit

Thirteen years ago, in the final year of my undergraduate teacher preparation program, I was a student teacher in Pittsburgh Public Schools, eager to change the world. It was the beginning of the climb. Determined to secure a full-time teaching position, I set out on a long drive to Virginia for an interview - pursuing my lifelong dream with unwavering focus. With only a few pennies to my name, I took a leap of faith, inspired by a passionate principal - now my great friend and mentor, Kim Austin - who had

called me on a Sunday morning, just a day after my college graduation, inviting me to visit the school she led. From the moment I stepped inside the school, I felt the energy - the strong culture, the deep sense of connection, the shared vision, and the unwavering sense of purpose. Shortly after, I accepted the offer. A lifelong dream, realized.

My nine years teaching third and fifth grade at Kate Waller Barrett Elementary were filled with some of the greatest memories of my life to date. I was part of a team of mission-driven leaders and educators who constantly asked, "What if?" and made incredible things happen for students. I reached the summit of one of the most beautiful professional landscapes imaginable. My students became the Room 21 Rock Star Family, where they were part of something greater than themselves. They worked with effective effort to reach their goals, cheered on others with zest and kindness, and created a lasting classroom legacy. We transformed our space into immersive learning environments, traveled to the nation's capital to bring lessons to life, and established a social-emotional program that continues to foster belonging and connection today.

In addition to education, one of my other great passions is hiking and exploring national and state parks. When you begin hiking a trail, you see the wooden marker indicating the name, length, and elevation at the trailhead. To me, the merge of passion and purpose mirrors the ascent of a mountain. My teaching journey was a challenging climb. There were nights I drove home wondering if I was making a difference - if the time and energy I poured into my students truly paid off. Teaching is hard work, and like hiking, there were moments I had to stop to catch my breath.

But I never doubted that I was climbing closer and closer to my purpose. After nine years, I reached the summit. The breathtaking view made every struggle, every ounce of effort, worth it.

Yet, as I stood at this peak, I realized something: this climb had taken everything from me: my personal life and many of my friendships. I had been so focused on the ascent that life was passing me by. I wasn't finished learning or growing, but the quiet whispers urging me to try something new grew louder. I was burned out, and ready to climb a new mountain.



A New Direction

At the end of my ninth year, I made the decision to leave behind everything I found familiar - Room 21 at Kate Waller Barrett Elementary. It was time to scale a new summit. I accepted a role in the school district's human resources office. As new leadership came in, the role evolved with new vision and realignment. Throughout it all, I worked with new teachers and their mentors, leading the district's novice teacher mentoring program.

Leading the new teacher mentoring program for a rapidly growing school district in the aftermath of the pandemic was a monumental task. Much like scaling a mountain requires innovation and problem-solving, developing a program that could adapt to the diverse needs of novice teachers demanded the same level of creativity and flexibility. With the hiring landscape shifting nationwide and varying levels of teacher preparation, I recognized the importance of mobilizing program leaders at each school. We had to create something new. Building relationships, assessing current experiences, and collaboratively shaping a mission, vision, and structured mentoring framework required the engagement and contributions of hundreds across the district. Together, we established a shared experience, strengthened mentor capacity, and extended mentoring support beyond the first year in the profession.

The climb was rocky and uneven, challenging everything I thought I knew about myself. Looking back, I see now that it was a journey of self-discovery. But I never reached the summit. Instead, I chose to stop, turn around, and take a new trail. Though I had left the classroom, I remained too comfortable in this role - I still held onto relationships from my teaching years, understood the district's systems and structures intimately, and felt my personal and professional growth had plateaued. The excitement, passion, and sense of purpose that once fueled me had faded, leaving me feeling lost, as if I had wandered off the beaten path. And once again, the quiet whispers grew louder.



Turning Around and Starting Over

One day, I set my sights on a new climb. I applied for a new role - Assistant Principal - in a completely different school district. The desire to lead a school had always been part of the whispers that came and went throughout my journey. I was nervous, unsure, and scared. For the longest time, I worried more about what others would think if I left the place that had shaped my early career than my own happiness. It seems so trivial to write this now, but at the time, it was paralyzing.

I can't pinpoint the exact moment I decided to fully live life for myself, but I did. After much encouragement from my partner, I applied. I was no longer worried about what others thought. I was ready to take the leap.



In September of this school year, I began a new climb. I was appointed Assistant Principal of a wonderful elementary school in a new school division. Is it too soon to declare that I've rediscovered the connection between my passion and purpose? Maybe. But I can tell you this: I've never been happier. I wake up each morning with a renewed sense of purpose. This climb feels different. I now better understand how to balance my professional and personal life. I no longer define myself solely by my role as an educator.

Being new is one of the most humbling, vulnerable, and fulfilling experiences you can undertake. A new school district. New expectations. New relationships. Vulnerability is where courage shines and dreams are realized. I'm living that reality now. I'm on a hike toward leading a school as principal one day. Each moment, experience, and challenge is a small step toward fulfilling that dream. I love the work I do. Each day, I have the privilege of serving students, families, and teachers in my community. Every moment is different, unique, and deeply rewarding. Hard days still exist, but my passion and purpose are once again aligned.




Looking back, I see each day, each experience as a gift. Every interaction, moment, relationship, role, and challenge brought me here. I have no regrets. Society tells us that life is a linear path, but my journey proves otherwise. You don't climb a mountain by walking straight up - you follow winding trails, navigate rough terrain, and sometimes, you must stop, turn around, and seek a new path.

The start of a new trail is exhilarating.

Questions to Consider for Aligning Passion and Purpose

- ✓ What brings you joy personally and professionally? Make a list and place a star beside the items you engage in daily or weekly in your professional practice. If you find that few items are starred, your passion and purpose may be out of alignment.
- ✓ What have you always dreamed of doing but haven't tried yet?
- ✓ Who are three people in your life you could talk to about their sources of joy and passion?
- ✓ When and where are you at your best? Make a list and look for patterns and trends - these may point you in the right direction.
- ✓ What are the next steps you can take with sure footing and an eye on your next stop?



Dan Reichard currently serves as an Assistant Principal in Fairfax County Public Schools. He has over twelve years of experience in elementary education, professional development, and teacher leadership. From his work as the teacher of the "Room 21 Rock Stars" at Kate Waller Barrett Elementary to leading the development of a beginning teacher support program, Dan is guided by the core values of community, optimism, and excellence. His leadership has earned him several honors, including being named a 2018 Washington Post Teacher of the Year, the 2019 Virginia Region III Teacher of the Year, the 2019 Indiana University of Pennsylvania Young Alumni Achievement Award, a 2023 ASCD Emerging Leader, and a 2024 Worthy Educator Leader.   

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"I am writing in support of H.R.5166 - Protecting Sensitive Locations Act and S.455 - A bill to amend section 287 of the Immigration and Nationality Act to limit immigration enforcement actions at sensitive locations, to clarify the powers of immigration officers at sensitive locations, and for other purposes. No one should live in fear of being detained while taking their child to school, seeking medical care, or practicing their faith. Allowing ICE to invade spaces where people access health care, education, justice, and prayer is cruel and unnecessary, as well as a threat to public safety. When people are too frightened to seek medical care or report a crime, the entire community suffers. This bill prohibits immigration enforcement actions within 1,000 feet of a sensitive location except in exigent circumstances. Sensitive locations include:

- places of worship;
- health care facilities;
- public assistance offices;
- schools and school bus stops;
- facilities used as polling places;
- courthouses and lawyers' offices; and
- places that provide disaster and emergency services

The prohibition shall apply to Department of Homeland Security officers and agents, as well as state employees pursuing immigration enforcement actions. I am asking for you to support this legislation as it makes its way through congress. Thank you."

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[Commit to Take Action](#)

Setting the Movement to Music

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WORKING TOGETHER

Make these upcoming virtual events part of your learning plan for the month of March!

POPTOK: Improving Teacher Trainee Performance offered by WE Leader Dan Reichard
Thursday March 6th 7:00 pm et

[Join Us Live](#)

Transforming Education: Conditions and Cultures so Kids Can Do Great Things
Monday March 10th 6:00 pm et

[Register Now](#)

A Worthy Educator Town Hall: Funding, Vouchers and Federal Programs Supporting Students and Classrooms
Monday March 24th 7:00 pm et

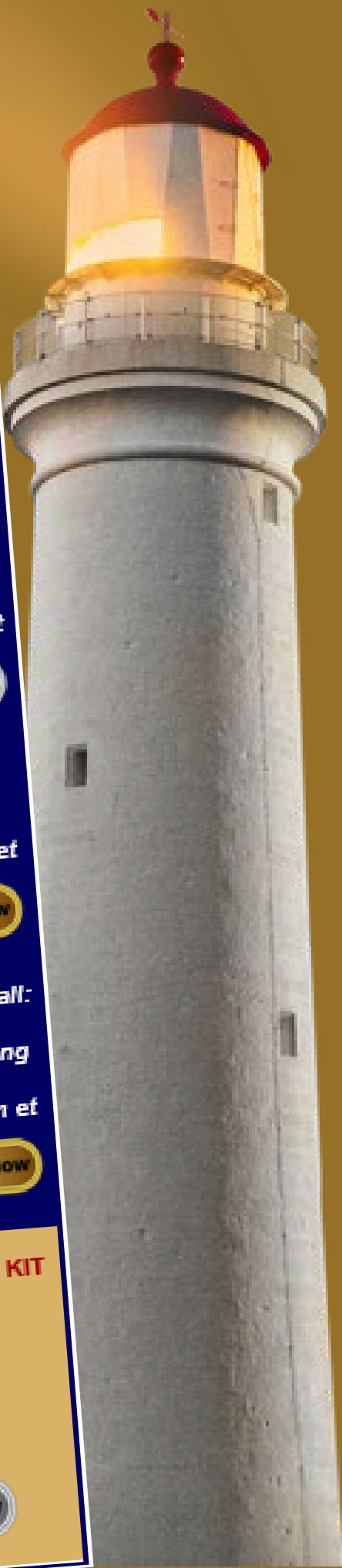
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When Teachers Tell Their Stories, Change Happens

Hannah Grieco, M.Ed., M.F.A., Writer, Editor, Advocate. Columnist, Washington City Paper, Adjunct Professor, Marymount University, Writing Instructor, The Writer's Center, Washington, DC

"When people translate their emotional experience into words, they may be changing the way it is organized in the brain."
-James Pennebaker

As teachers, we exist within the push-and-pull of educating vs caregiving. Yes, we're there to support the learning of our students, no matter their age. But we don't just teach subjects and skills. We also teach life lessons, as well. Where is the line between learning about Ancient Greece and learning how to communicate effectively? The line between learning to conjugate verbs and developing a healthy skepticism about online influencers? The line between solving for X and advocating for yourself in the classroom and beyond?

How does this tightrope walk impact us, as human beings who offer such complicated, layered forms of instruction and care?

I am an English professor, but I used to teach elementary school. The difference between six-year-olds and nineteen-year-olds is vast, but their needs are surprisingly similar. They need to feel safe in order to learn. They need to feel respected. They need lessons to be accessible, individualized, and interesting.

What about us, though? What do *we* need, as educators? As we work to support each of our classroom learners, how do we manage our own emotional experience when navigating challenges? Perhaps we face classroom behavior issues or an administrator we don't mesh well with. Perhaps we have a student who is struggling with mental health needs or trauma in the home. Perhaps there are disabilities we don't quite know how to support, or a new political landscape taking hold at our school. There are many "what ifs" in teaching and they all seem to end up as weights on the shoulders of us as teachers.

How can we process these experiences, find a sense of healing and purpose, and move forward in our work without burning out? Many of us are also looking to go beyond the classroom and make change on a larger scale. We want our schools to be better. We want to help *MORE* students. We want our teaching to be more effective, more kind, and more inclusive. How do we combine all of these goals and still get to sleep at night? One way to process, heal, and make change is to write about teaching. Not just articles and how-to pieces, but personal essays. Our stories, vulnerable and deeply relatable, can make big changes: both inside us and out there in the world.

I wrote about the healing nature of expressive writing for [Craft Literary](#), based on my research at graduate school:

In 1986 social psychologist James Pennebaker co-published a research study about the benefits of expressive writing in trauma recovery. His research involved university students writing about specific traumatic experiences for fifteen minutes, four times a week. The results were astonishing. The students who wrote their stories visited the campus student health center 50% less over the next six months versus the students in the control group.

"Many students came out of their writing rooms in tears, but they kept coming back. And, by the last day of the experiment, most reported that the experience had been profoundly important for them."



At the time, Pennebaker was focused on physical symptoms. And follow-up studies pointed to improved health as a result of this confessional-style writing. There seemed to be indicators that expressive writing could encourage healing in the therapeutic environment.

In 1997, Pennebaker wrote “[Writing About Emotional Experiences as a Therapeutic Process](#)”, in which he discussed the natural inclination of humans to tell their stories after an emotional upheaval. He noted that keeping secrets interfered with sleep, health, relationships, and performance at work or school. Hundreds of studies confirmed Pennebaker’s work over the following decades, including one that suggested that trauma actively damages the brain - but “when people translate their emotional experience into words, they may be changing the way it is organized in the brain.”

Now I’m not trying to suggest that teaching is a source of trauma. But it’s a mistake to assume we’re immune to the emotional impact of taking care of others. It’s exhausting, even as it’s exhilarating. Sometimes, it’s the greatest gift we’ve been given. Other times, we stumble home and crumple onto the sofa. Occasionally, we experience trauma. Often, we feel misunderstood and alone on this journey. There are so many things we wish parents and politicians knew about the classroom and about the pedagogical choices we make. There are so many times that we wish we could just pull those people in to observe.

Look at me love your child! Look at me patiently explain this over and over! Look at me take a quick bathroom break so I don’t lose it, then come back and start all over again. I’m here, fighting the good fight to support and care for these students. Don’t you see?

We need them to see. We need to know that we’re not alone on this path. One essay in a newspaper, one poem in a literary journal, and all of a sudden: we are seen. Our needs are more real to them, our students more than just numbers on a page. The key to this transformation in thinking is our own storytelling. Where facts and figures hit a brick wall, sometimes a story of our lived experience can break through.



So where do we begin? We start by asking ourselves: Why am I writing this piece?

- To inform?
- To connect to others or help to establish community?
- To convince people of something that I believe?
- To make people laugh or feel good?
- To make an experience more real for others who may not have experienced it before?
- To change something that must be changed?
- To help people?

Then we ask

Is this my story? Is this about my life and experience, and my students and their experiences play important parts in the story? Or is this a story primarily about THEIR experience(s), thus their story to tell?

We ask

Does this story elevate my students, portray even very hard things in a hopeful, generous, and kind light? Or is this embarrassing, shameful, blaming, or overly negative?

We ask

If my student reads this piece...how will they feel?

Will they feel seen?

Will they feel loved?

Will they feel cared for?

Also, we can be particularly thoughtful when writing about students with disabilities and/or lived experiences that we, ourselves, don't live with. We can use [sensitivity readers](#) for pieces (or books!) that are outside our own personal experiences.

For example, as the mother of a disabled child, I can speak to being a mother of a disabled child. I cannot speak to being disabled. As a professor, I can write about teaching students with disabilities. I cannot write about HAVING disabilities, and it helps the quality (and impact) of my writing to have a sensitivity reader ensure I'm using appropriate language and examine any potential biases in my writing that I might not be aware of.

Some final quick tips

Ensure your students stay un-Google-able. (No names and no identifiable photos!) Demand that the publisher utilize appropriate language when discussing disability, illnesses, language needs, poverty, etc.

Touch base with your administration about any legal requirements related to visibility, school representation, etc.

Consider whether or not you want to use your actual name or a pen name. Privacy is of particular importance when writing at the national level. Some online readers will not be respectful of your privacy!

Happy writing! I can't wait to read all of your stories.

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Hannah Grieco is a writer, developmental editor, teacher, and disability advocate who has published her work in The Washington Post, The Week, Al Jazeera, The Independent, Huffington Post, and many more newspapers, magazines, and literary journals. She writes a monthly column about authors and books for Washington City Paper, and edits novels and prose collections for various small presses. Hannah teaches writing courses at Marymount University and through The Writer's Center. She led a [Worthy Incubator on educator writing and publishing](#) in the autumn of 2024 which is a must watch for anyone wanting to successfully publish opinion pieces in popular journals, papers and online!



~~Coaching?~~

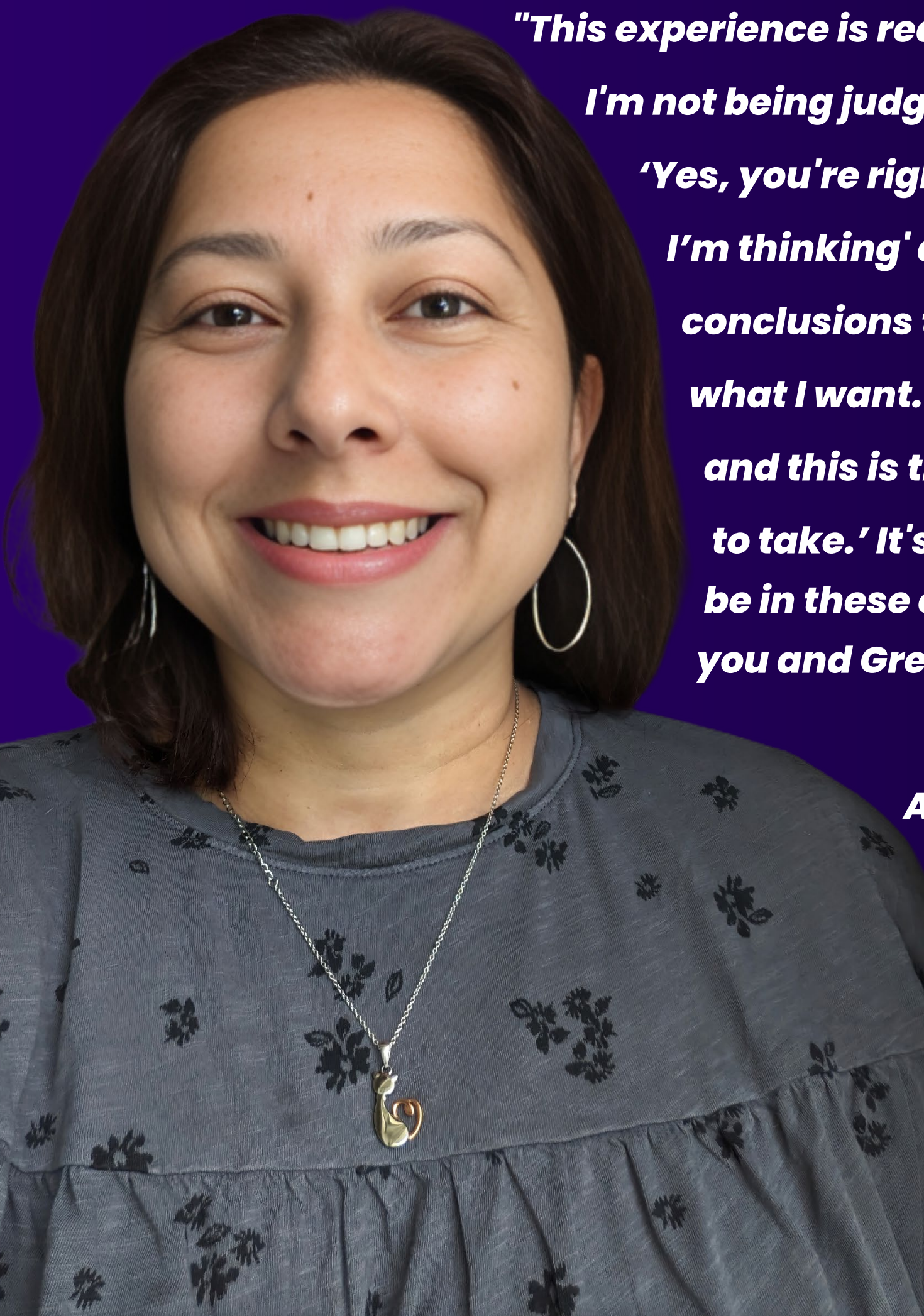
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"This experience is really good. I feel like I'm not being judged, so I realize 'Yes, you're right, this this is what I'm thinking' and I come to conclusions to say, 'Yes, this is what I want. This is what I mean and this is the path that I want to take.' It's really powerful to be in these conversations with you and Gretchen."

–Xatli Stox

A Worthy Champion



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What Was The Principal Thinking When She Said That?

Carol Ann Tomlinson, Ed.D, William Clay Parrish Professor Emerita, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, Virginia



In my early years on the faculty of the University of Virginia, and after 21 years in public school classrooms, I taught Catherine who was working on a Master's Degree in Education. Her dream was to be part of the Muppet company. The degree was in case that didn't work out. Catherine was great fun to teach. She asked unexpected questions that inevitably made me think - often long after class ended. Her work was consistently creative and multi-layered, integrating multiple aspects of teaching with the world beyond teaching, organized around "big ideas" that spanned times and places and disciplines, and slightly unorthodox. Some of those traits simply reflected who she was as a human being. Some resulted from the fact that she did not major in education in her undergraduate years, meaning that she had never learned to "think like a teacher."

The Muppets gig did not work out, so, degree in hand, she was leaving Virginia, bound for a teaching job in a large school district a little further South. In our final conversation before she traveled to her new job and new apartment, she asked if it would be okay for her to send me journal notes throughout the first year of her teaching pilgrimage, "for feedback - but just if you have time."

That conversation took place about 30 years ago. She did send journal notes. I did respond to them. I still have a copy of her journal and value it as much today as I did during the year we corresponded about the ideas in it. Catherine's journal caused me to re-think many facets of teaching. Each re-thinking made me a better teacher and a better teacher of teachers.

Her journal questions often began with a phrase like, "What do you think (fill in the name/position) was thinking when she asked us to do (fill in the suggestion/mandate); or "Why do teachers do (fill in the blank)"? In her first journal entry, she wrote about the faculty meeting that takes place a couple of days before students return to begin the year. Like many of you, I had attended scores of those meetings during my two decades in K-12 teaching. Long before Catherine mailed that entry to me, I had learned the script. She reported on each aspect of the meeting - sometimes with grim accuracy, sometimes with humor, and sometimes with fresh-eyed puzzlement. The meeting took place on Thursday afternoon of the pre-school week when teachers typically attend a torrent of meetings. Friday was the first and only day teachers would have uninterrupted time in their classrooms before students entered those classrooms on Monday morning.



"The principal told us she knew we had more to accomplish on that day than there was time to accomplish it," Catherine wrote. The principal continued, "Most of you will feel torn between getting your lesson plans in order and getting the bulletin boards and other finishing touches done in your rooms." She paused long enough to indicate the something important was coming and then concluded the meeting with one final piece of advice. "In case you have any doubt about which of those choices I'd be happiest to see you make, let me clarify that now. Do the bulletin boards!"

The question Catherine posed at that point in her narration became familiar to me as the school year and journal shipments continued. "What was she thinking when she said that?" Catherine thought she might have misunderstood what the principal said - or perhaps that the principal was being sarcastic or comedic. I knew the principal was unreservedly serious. I was so accustomed to thinking like a teacher that the only thing surprising about Catherine's question was that she found the principal's directive surprising.

Responding to Catherine’s journal entries was almost as much fun as our conversations had been. She was clearly thinking creatively and that stimulated my creativity, using analogies, examples from her life and mine, humor, philosophy, images classroom applications, and questions in her responses to the what-was-she-thinking-when-she-said-that kind of queries. My response to the “bulletin board” question, like ones that would follow, often began by explaining how we came to think in a certain way as educators, and followed by saying something like, “but you don’t seem to think that approach would be our best one. Asking yourself why you think “Plan A” is flawed and why you think Plan B, C, or D is more promising is what will be most instructive to you. (What would you hope to accomplish in your work with students that makes “Plan A” seem ill-advised? Why do you feel an alternative approach would benefit your students? Would it benefit all of them alike - or just some? How would you find the answer to that? How does this moment you’re pondering fit into your larger goals as a teacher - your philosophy of teaching?)



For both of us, our on-paper dialogue (because online-everything was a bit sparse in the early 1990s) was stimulating and the year passed quickly. Catherine remained a questioning teacher, thoughtful, and challenging. Her creativity didn’t accommodate acquiescing to the “this-is-how-we-do-things-here” script. In time, she became a highly respected, award-winning teacher, a widely admired school administrator, a university researcher and professor for undergraduate and graduate students, and an associate dean. All of that happened not because she learned the scripts she was given as an educator but because she did not! She continues still to ask the question, “Why are we doing what we do the way we do it? What other options might better serve the students in our care and us as their teachers?”

The Question Still Needs Asking

Catherine’s question has been my companion for 30-plus years and perhaps never in the foreground of my thinking more clearly than it is now. In the past few months, I have been working on a revision for a book whose previous edition is ten years old. That has reminded me daily how much has changed in the past decade. Our world has changed markedly. Our students are different in a myriad of ways than they were ten years back. Research in education is not perfect - that imperfection mirrors the complexity of the job we do and the people we teach - but we have a solid research base that should guide our decision-making as certainly as current research in medicine guides the work of doctors. And yet, we persist in teaching not only like we did ten years ago, or 30. Much of what we do in our classrooms in 2025 mirrors classrooms in the early 20th century and before.

Consider the students we serve. Schools vary markedly, of course, so generalizations are just that - broad strokes that represent a whole better than it can represent the complex parts of that whole. In general, however, our students are more diverse than in the past - in cultures and languages, certainly, but also in economic status, adult support systems, past school experiences, exceptionalities, talents, interests, and aspirations, to name just a few descriptors.

The students currently in our classrooms also share some earth-rattling experiences that make them similar in important ways. These experiences have dramatically changed many of them and will continue to change them for years to come. Following are a few of the shared, life-altering experiences.

COVID-19 Changed Most Young People

Our current students and those who will come to us in the near future, have lived through a worldwide pandemic which, for many of them, was traumatizing, for most of them disorienting and disruptive. COVID-19 added thick layers of anxiety to the lives of many young people who were already more stressed and anxious than their peers in earlier decades.

As the pandemic persisted for many months, young people experienced stress related to absence of normal routines and parental stresses including job loss. Some students experienced deaths - even multiple COVID-related deaths of family members, friends, and community members. Students of all ages often experienced sleep disturbances, isolation, and depression. They frequently spent more time engaged with screens and less time in physical activity and playing or “hanging out” with peers.

Most, if not all students were impacted academically to some degree, with the youngest students generally more negatively impacted than older students, students from low-income families more negatively impacted than those from middle- or upper-income families, and math achievement generally more negatively impacted than reading achievement (although deficits in both areas are problematic in terms of students continuing academic development and will likely remain so for years into the future). LGBTQ students reported greater levels of emotional abuse by a parent or caregiver and having attempted suicide at a higher rate than their counterparts (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022, March).



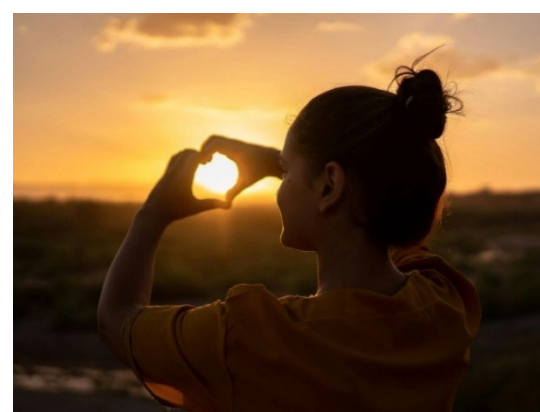
Some students experienced positives stemming from the extended time away from school such as extra time with parents and time to pursue some personal interests. Many, however, returned to school with impactful social and emotional challenges as well as learning challenges. Teachers of young children found that some could barely speak, were not toilet-trained, had not developed fine motor skills necessary to hold or manipulate a pencil, were not able to sit at a table, and could not verbally communicate with peers. Many students of all ages evidenced poor social skills, inability to regulate emotions, short attention spans, and/or anxiety when asked to work or communicate with peers. In some schools, a noteworthy number of students simply have not come back to school (Center for Disease Control, 2022; Chang, 2025; Miller & Mervosh, 2024).

Even though the return to school following the pandemic was, in many ways, an invitation to change the ways we teach to be better suited to the nature and needs of those students, we have largely persisted in how we do school, even as those practices seem less well-suited to post-pandemic learners than they were even to pre-pandemic students.

Climate Change is a Threat to Today's Students

The current generation of students includes the first “climate anxiety” babies - children born into a world more deeply aware of the dangers that threaten the planet we live on than any generation before them. They understand acutely that they will almost inevitably pay a heavy price for damages done by earlier generations.

While climate change has far-reaching implications for the health and futures of current children and young people, they have little power to limit its harm. Fifty percent of young people in a survey of over 10,000 reported feeling sad, anxious, powerless, helpless, and guilty related to climate change. Many say their daily lives are negatively impacted because of those feelings, including irritability, poor concentration, and insomnia. Seventy-five percent of those surveyed in one large study say the future is frightening to them (Hickman, 2021). Many of these young people are losing, or have lost, faith in their governments. As one author observed, “When the future of all living things is in danger, it is difficult not to feel depressed.” (The Lancet, 2022).



Social Media Have Powerful Impacts on Young People

Most of today's students have never experienced life without social media. While most social media apps require users to be at least 13 years old, nearly 40% of children 8-12 years old and 95% of young people 13-17 years old report using social media apps. Teens report spending an *average* of nearly 5 hours a day on social media (Cleveland Clinic, 2024; DeAngelis, 2024).

These media can offer numerous benefits to young users including outlets for additional learning, creativity, connection with old friends and opportunity to make new friends, as well as to be part online communities of people who share their interests, talents, life experiences, challenges, and concerns. Social media can facilitate identity development, offer opportunities for civic and community engagement, and provide social support for young people. (Annie E. Casey, Foundation, 2024; Mayo Clinic Staff, 2024; Weir, 2023).

Use of social media comes with significant risks as well as an array of benefits. Rates of anxiety, depression, and suicide in young people that were rising before COVID intensify when social media use becomes a negative in a young person's life. For example, overuse of technology can lead to issues such as: low academic performance, difficulty paying attention and concentrating, low creativity, delays in language development, delays in social and emotional development, physical inactivity and obesity, social incompatibility with others, and aggressive behaviors (Johnson, 2024). Cyberhate, cyberbullying, racial bias, racism, illegal and explicit content, misinformation, hate speech, and content that supports unhealthy behaviors such as substance abuse and self-harm are realities in the virtual world that extend beyond the maturity levels of children and teens.

Artificial Intelligence will Change Everything in Students' Lives



The discovery of fire, invention of the wheel and later the printing press, harnessing of electricity, and invention of computers and creation of the internet are examples of waves of technology that transformed civilizations, altering power structures in their wake. Experts tell us we are about to see the greatest redistribution of power in history through widespread use of AI (Thomas, 2025). Artificial intelligence can be available to anyone, not just a wealthy or privileged few. And this reshuffling of power, the greatest one in history, is unfolding in the space of just a few years (Suleyman, 2023).

In the biological sciences, inventions and breakthroughs that would now take 50-100 years will be possible in a 5-10-year span using AI. In schools, AI will change the way humans of all ages learn. Its use of machine learning, natural language processing, and facial recognition can help digitize textbooks, detect plagiarism, and gauge the emotions of students to help determine who's struggling or bored, and provide print materials in hundreds of languages in an instant, helping teachers meet students where they are in learning and understand how to help each of them move forward efficiently and effectively (Thomas, 2025).

There are, of course, disruptive and potentially calamitous negative consequences associated with AI. It is likely that 44% of current workers' skills will be taken over by technology or become obsolete all together. Human biases, already detected in AI, reflect the biases of the people who train the algorithmic models. If this trend continues, AI tools will reinforce existing biases and perpetuate social inequalities. The spread of deepfakes and misinformation blurs the line between truth and deceit, making misinformation a threat to individuals and entire countries alike. We see that already in use to promote political propaganda, commit financial fraud, and place individuals in compromising positions. Further, security breaches to data privacy threaten safety, legal rights, and intellectual property rights (Thomas, 2025).

Perhaps the most disturbing aspect of AI at this point in its development is that it is readily availability to virtually anyone who wants it and is, at this point, unmanaged. "Whether it's commercial, religious, cultural, military, democratic, authoritarian, every motivation you can think of, can be dramatically enhanced by cheaper power at your fingertips. And it's coming faster than we can adequately prepare for it" (Suleyman, 2023).

Societal Polarization and Fracturing Lead to Unhealthy Levels of Uncertainty

The United States is operating currently in a fractured and polarized state which makes it almost impossible for various stakeholder groups to agree on even the most foundational elements like who we are as a people, the root system of our government, and how we move forward in ways that are mutually productive rather than mutually destructive. Polarization is not another word for a disagreement about how to solve public policy problems. Such disagreements are natural and healthy in a democracy. Our current polarization results in our not wanting to have neighbors who don't share our views, not entertaining ideas that don't align with our own, seeing life as a zero-sum game in which negotiation and compromise are perceived as betrayal. We demonize one another and loathe those whose views differ from our own. (Jilani & Smith, 2019).

We feel pressure to conform to our groups, find it almost impossible to engage in healthy dialogue, and are more antagonistic and violent toward one another, less likely to help one another out, and more likely to see deception and lying as acceptable tools to use against those we see as our enemies. Our government is in gridlock, which damages its institutions, including schools, and causes people to lose trust in those institutions they once trusted to serve their best interests. As a result, our physical health is probably suffering as our level of stress continues to escalate (Jilani and Smith, 2019; McDonald, J. 2022).

It is not surprising that young people are acutely aware of and suffering from these divides that seem virtually impossible to bridge. They, too, feel pressure to conform to the beliefs, attitudes, and practices of their "tribe." In many schools, there is more animosity among students, greater unwillingness to listen to "the other," and more acting out through the use of angry rhetoric, bullying, and other manifestations of their own anxiety and disequilibrium.

Teachers often feel they teach in the bullseye of the larger societal conflict. Often, they do. The young people we teach are products of these major life forces and upheavals. They come to school carrying the weights of the impacts. They need their schools and teachers to understand that the ground beneath their feet is moving, that they feel ungrounded in many ways, and that long see a future that feels inviting to them. They are our students. We are their teachers.



Consider our Response to the Young People in our Care

I have great faith in teachers. They have taught me that trust as I have worked among them for over 50 years. I believe that if we sat together in a conversation about how we could best respond to the kids who bring the residue of COVID, climate change anxiety, stresses and threats of social media, the looming changes of artificial intelligence, and the uncertainty and rancor spawned by social and political fractures, along with the immense challenges of growing up even in the best of circumstances, we might make suggestions much like these:

They need, first and foremost, classrooms and teachers who are genuinely excited about teaching and learning from them - places where:

- they feel safe, seen, known, appreciated, and valued,
- their teachers work daily to know and understand them more adequately, more deeply, as individuals,
- they feel a sense of community and a responsibility for contributing in positive ways to the welfare of that community and each member of it,
- each of them is viewed as capable of doing great things, where expectations for their work are very high, and where there are reliable support systems that help them meet and exceed those expectations,
- they work in partnership with their teacher and with one another to create a classroom that contributes to the success of every member of that classroom,
- they encounter and contribute to joy every day.

These students also need to engage with curriculum that inspires them and motivates them to invest the hard work of learning; curriculum that:

- helps them make sense of what they are learning and of the world around them,
- feeds their curiosity,
- connects with their experiences, cultures, talents, interests, and aspirations,
- supports them in seeing the interconnectedness of everyone and everything in life,
- prepares them to do authentic work in each discipline,
- empowers them to be problem-solvers, and creators,
- demonstrates to them regularly that they can have an impact on the world outside the classroom door,
- invites them to shape what they will learn and how they will learn it,
- helps them realize, over and over again, that learning is a human gift which makes life richer and that enables them to walk with confidence in their world.



These young people, at all ages, need to experience assessment more as mentoring than judging. They need assessment that helps them:

- seek clarity about learning goals and how those goals align with success criteria,
- develop the attitudes and habits of mind that lead to success in learning and in life,
- see how mistakes can be their partners in learning,
- express learning in a variety of modalities,
- compete against themselves as learners and take their own next steps in learning every day,
- ask questions that move their learning forward,
- develop agency and independence as learners and thinkers.
- value growth more than a stationary, unitary, and often arbitrary indicator of performance.

These young people need to learn in ways that feed them academically, intellectually, affectively, and socially. They need instruction that:

- establishes high expectations for quality work,
- mentors learners to achieve high quality work,
- is responsive to student strengths, readiness needs, interests, cultures, and learning preferences,
- provides consistent, regular time and support for students to take their own next steps as learners,
- is active,
- is collaborative,
- is connective,
- helps them make meaning of what they learn,
- invites them to make suggestions and choices about how they learn,
- helps them organize what they learn for remembering, applying, transferring, and creating,
- calls on them to work, think, and assess the quality of their work like experts in a field.



These descriptors of teaching that enlivens, nurtures, challenges, and supports young people are representative of the research base that defines our profession. They also point toward the kind of education most likely to prepare students for meaningful engagement in their present and future worlds (Tomlinson, 2021). I believe this is the vision of teaching that drew many teachers to enter teaching as their life's work. K-12 classrooms that represent this vision are not wholly absent, but they are, in my experience, uncommon.

Consider our Current Responses to the Students in our Care

Schools and teachers within those schools are as varied as the students we teach, so there is no single profile that captures how every classroom operates - how every classroom responds to the young people who come there every day. Nonetheless, I would argue that there is a profile that is broadly applicable across schools and classrooms. Classrooms that match the profile are characterized by many or most of these descriptors:

- The mission of the class is to raise standardized test scores.
- The curriculum is largely focused on coverage of standards.
- Subjects that will not be tested are valued and taught less (if at all) compared to subjects around which the standardized tests are designed thus limiting the scope of learning for many or most students.
- Instruction centers on practicing basic (foundational) skills that are enumerated in documents that delineate and support the standards, and that govern the development of standardized tests that will judge student and teacher performance.
- There are far more standards that teachers are expected to cover than there is time to address at more than a surface level.
- To ensure that teachers in a specified grade level or content area provide students with the same instruction, teachers are often mandated to follow pacing guides that define what every teacher should be teaching at a given time.
- Teachers struggle to reconcile mandates to adhere to the pacing guide, to accept the reality that their students' worth and their own will be based in large measure on a standardized test - and simultaneously, to address student variance by differentiating instruction.
- Of necessity, instruction becomes teacher-centered, low level in terms of student reasoning, time- and test-driven, and frequently regimented.
- Teachers in middle and high school often feel strongly that between the number of students they teach, the need to "cover" vast amounts of content, and the pressure to have students perform well on one or more standardized tests, there is no chance to address student readiness or interests - or even to provide alternative ways for students to express learning. Not only is there too much to "cover" in too little time, but the test won't make those accommodations available, therefore it seems counterproductive to provide them.



In the United States, we have placed standardized test scores at the center of teaching and learning in public schools for over 30 years. During that time, it seems fair to say that earnest, hard-working teachers have done their very best to honor the mandates that surround the standards and the standardized tests themselves. If that diligence had resulted in consistent, significant improvements in test scores (which could arguably be different from improvements in learning), then it would be possible to make a case, if not a robust one, that the efforts of teachers and students had been worth the cost. That is not the case.

There are occasional increases in certain scores at certain grade levels in particular locations on high stakes tests. There is no evidence, however, that students as a whole are doing better on the state standardized tests, or on other standardized tests (for example, AP, IB, NAEP, TIMMS) whose scores *might* have been positively impacted *if* student learning *had* risen as a result of the state tests.

There *is* an argument - or multiple arguments - to be made that the single-minded focus on test scores has caused significant harm to students and their teachers:

- Elementary students often experience higher levels of anxiety and lower levels of self-confidence in the face of standardized tests - including irritability, frustration, boredom, crying, headaches, and loss of sleep. When they were asked to draw pictures of their test-taking experience, nearly all the drawings suggested a negative experience. They showed students who were nervous about not having time to finish the test, not being able to figure out the answers, and not “passing” the test. Researchers who examined the drawings noted that in nearly every drawing, children drew themselves with unhappy or angry faces. Smiles were nearly non-existent. When they did occur, they related to things like being able to chew gum during the test or an ice cream party that would follow the test (Terada, 2022).
- The tests do not measure what we sometimes call “soft skills” like knowing how to learn effectively, willingness to take academic risks, or persisting in the face of difficulty; nor do they assess complex thinking, creativity, ability to navigate relationships with others, and many other skills and mindsets that are valuable in students’ current and future lives (Terada. 2022).
- When rewards and sanctions are attached to performance on tests, students become less intrinsically motivated to learn and less likely to engage in complex learning and critical thinking (Berliner, 2003).
- High stakes tests cause teachers to take more control of learning experiences, denying students to learn to direct their own learning and explore topics and concepts that are interesting and relevant to them and can obstruct their progression to becoming lifelong learners (Berliner, 2003).
- Students who consistently score in the bottom quartile of standardized tests are more likely to drop out of school, even when those students have acceptable academic records (Amrein-Beardsley & Berliner, 2003).
- High stakes tests have often reduced curriculum to a list of facts and fundamental skills separate from any meaningful context or application.
- Teachers who are compelled to gear the great majority of their classroom efforts to raising test scores have little, if any, motivation, support, or opportunity to develop their own creativity, at least insofar as it might be useful in teaching.
- Rather than being at the center of instructional decision-making as they should be, students have become collateral damage of an outdated, ineffective, non-responsive, mandate-driven teaching.

Channeling Catherine

I see Catherine occasionally and always joyfully! I think about her much more often as I find myself worrying about teachers, teaching, learners, and learning. I find myself asking, almost as though the question were stuck on “repeat”:

- What are we thinking when we teach as though all our students are essentially alike, when we assume they all need us in pretty much the same way?
- What are we thinking when we push to the corners of our consciousness the weights virtually all our students bring to the classroom every day because we can’t find time to engage with them about their hopes and fears and anxieties?
- What are we thinking when we say, “I’m sorry. I have no choice but to teach as though a test is more important than the humans in my classroom - more important than their humanity”?

I understand the relentless pressure teachers feel to “follow the script.” I understand the cost of following the script in terms of job satisfaction, worry about students, and personal growth. I am not untethered from reality enough to say, “Just forget about the test,” although I applaud courage when I see teachers move in that direction - even in small steps.

“I do believe it is possible to integrate the foundational knowledge and skills that are central to the disciplines we teach into work that inspires young minds so that we are “accountable for the standards” and for the well-being of the well-being of those we teach.

I do believe we can organize what we teach in ways that make it more memorable, relevant, meaningful, and useful.

I do believe it’s possible to make a profound difference in the welfare of our students when we say, ‘Today, I will build in time for these learners. Tomorrow I will do it again.’

I do believe we can create community, teach empathy, enable students to work together in harmony and productively - all elements that today’s young people hunger for in their bones.”

I am hopeful that enough of us have managed *not* to so completely learn the script for “how we do things around here” that we will be able to ask Catherine’s question of ourselves, among like-minded colleagues, of leaders, and in public forums: “What are we thinking when we (fill in the blank with what matters most).



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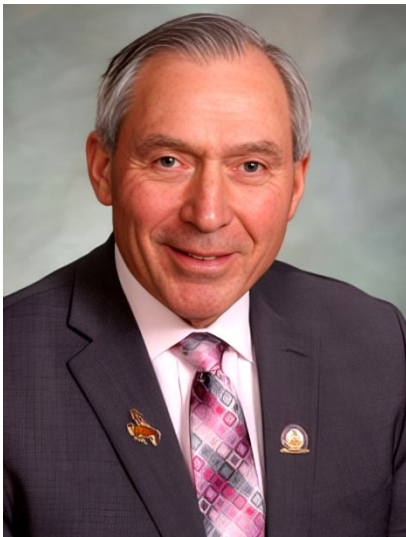
Carol Ann Tomlinson taught in public schools for 21 years and was later a faculty member at the University of Virginia for 30 years. Her two “lives” as an educator have enabled her to develop, pilot, research, refine, and share a model for “differentiating instruction” in today’s diverse classrooms. The model supports teachers in recognizing and addressing students’ varied strengths, needs, interests, cultures, and school experiences to maximize each learner’s possibilities. Carol was Virginia’s Teacher of the Year in 1974 and received an All-University teaching award at the University of Virginia in 2008. Since 2013, she has been ranked in the top 20 of Education Week’s Edu-Scholar Public Presence Rankings of the 200 “University-based academics who are contributing most substantially to public debates about schools and schooling,” and in the top 5 voices in Curriculum.



SPRING 2025

LEGACY

TRANSFORMATION IN ACTION



Reimagining and Innovating the Delivery of Education in Wyoming

R.J. Kost, M.Ed., Executive Director, Wyoming ASCD, Member, Wyoming State Board of Education, Former State Senator, District 19 Wyoming Legislature, Powell, Wyoming

In a world of changing attitudes around education in Wyoming and around the country, the Wyoming Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (WY-ASCD) has made shifts from the pre-COVID era to today's post-COVID world.

WY-ASCD struggled during and since the pandemic with districts focusing on internal challenges, from online learning to absences to failures, forced to respond in ways for which we were not prepared as teachers, curriculum directors, and administrators, and the unanticipated negative and counterproductive implications have created less than desirable learning environments for our students.

A bit of information for those who might be reading this from outside of Wyoming. We have 48 school districts statewide and many are pretty small, so curriculum directors can be wearing two or more hats, which can make it hard to completely focus on their primary responsibilities. We have a total of about 92,000 students across the state and we cover a lot of miles between districts, so it isn't easy for a small district with only one teacher per grade level to connect with colleagues and have input. In many cases, that sole teacher can feel like they are stranded on an island. Working to get them in touch with educators in other similarly sized districts can help address this sense of isolation.



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With all this in play, we decided it was time to become more active and help all directors in the state not only understand the focus and purpose of WY-ASCD, but to feel they are all an important and active part of the association. But how? Charlotte Gilbar, president of WY-ASCD, developed the executive committee with the including our president, president elect, treasurer, secretary, and past president initiated monthly online meetings for district and regional curriculum directors. Wyoming is divided into five regions, with representation from districts of all sizes, which translates into an additional ten extra seats on our board.



[Click here to view RIDE implementation in Park County School District #1 in Powell!](#)

Another strategy was to enhance in-person professional learning. We have always had a fall and spring conference, but attendance was dwindling during and since the COVID-19 disruption. So in the summer of 2024, we decided to partner with our state elementary principals' association, secondary principals' association, and special education association so that our conferences can provide better breakout groupings while expanding our capacity and offerings of speakers and sessions. This has proven to be a great success, with an increase in attendance and membership. Since many administrators in our small districts wear multiple hats, joining relevant organizations can provide necessary supports while being efficient with time and travel.

This spring, our conference will focus on meeting the needs of curriculum directors as they begin to plan for the next school year, bringing in the State Board of Education to report on its current work and introduce new officers. The Wyoming Department of Education will also attend and present what is changing federally and how it impacts our state since the state legislature has convened. Many of the bills introduced will have a direct effect on schools' daily operations, as well as the other areas legislators feel need attention. The information provided at the conference will help everyone attending stay current, ask questions and get answers that help them effectively plan for these coming changes. WY-ASCD anticipated these shifts in education happening at the state level, and we have been strategizing since the 2023-2024 academic year to strengthen our reputation in the state as a trusted partner educators can rely on for direction, support, and assistance during this time of change.



The State Board of Education tasked to develop a Profile of a Graduate, our governor appointed a group to focus on making innovative changes in education by developing the project entitled “Reimagining and Innovating the Delivery of Education” (RIDE, for short).

Andrea Gilbert, the curriculum director for Converse County School District #1 in Douglas, Wyoming describes how RIDE looks in some districts:

*“Governor Gordon’s RIDE program, supported by expert consultants from **2 Revolutions**, is transforming Converse County School District’s assessment practices by integrating engaging performance assessments into a balanced system. These assessments, designed to be more dynamic and comprehensive than traditional tests, require students to demonstrate their understanding through real-world tasks that align with multiple standards.*

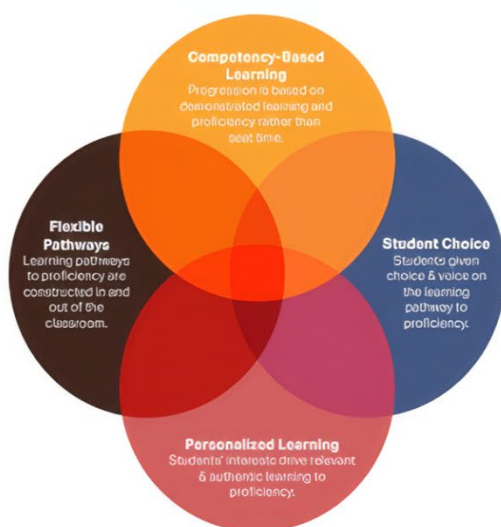
Teachers have adapted their instructional strategies to focus on student choice and voice, fostering a more personalized learning experience. This shift has also better prepared students for more rigorous summative assessments. The program has encouraged cross-curricular collaboration, uniting core subjects with specials like the arts, STEM, computers, library, and PE, enriching the learning process and providing a holistic education that bridges subjects and skills.”

Wyoming's Future of Learning Reimagining & Innovating the Delivery of Education (RIDE) Pilot

An Overview

- One Wyoming-wide goal to transform instruction and assessment.
- Four interrelated strategies to support student-centered teaching and learning.
- Unlimited ways to customize in districts to be community responsive.

Wyoming's Student-Centered Learning Domains



Student-Centered Learning

Competency-Based Learning

- Competency-based learning creates transparent, relevant, rigorous, and flexible pathways to reach agreed upon learning outcomes and proficiency. This might look like the following:
- Students engage with resources for support or enrichment as they are ready so that learning is always happening at a pace that meets the learners' needs.
 - Students progress through learning based on increasing skill and proficiency, not time on task. They have multiple opportunities and a variety of ways they can demonstrate learning.
 - Assessments not only measure learning but empower learners by providing timely, relevant, actionable evidence and next steps in their learning pathway.
 - Students engage with learning activities where they not only learn and apply content but also transferable skills like communication, collaboration, and creative problem solving.
 - Students progress through increasingly more complex learning expectations based on compelling evidence, regardless of where that evidence came from- all learning and demonstrations are valued and inform next steps.

Personalized Learning

- Personalized learning is intentionally connected to the unique interests, passions, and needs of the learner so that learning is relevant and authentic. This might look like the following:
- Performance-based assessments where students are solving real-world problems from their communities while gaining and demonstrating new skills and knowledge.
 - Students writing letters to the editor about topics of personal relevance that impact their lives and community to demonstrate and practice persuasive writing.
 - Instruction that incorporates technology where students access the personalized level of resources and support they need to meet rigorous learning outcomes.

Flexible Pathways - Anytime, Anywhere

- Learning can take place anytime, anywhere and is not limited to the classroom but can include extended learning opportunities, internships, public-service, career-based learning, and enhanced Career & Technical Education (CTE) pathways. This might look like the following:
- Students participate in career-based learning, internships or extended learning opportunities (ELO) where they receive credit for activities where they are gaining and demonstrating rigorous real-world knowledge and skills.
 - Increased access to CTE pathways aligned with Wyoming needs, where students can earn credit for subjects like math, science, English, and social studies through career-based training and other aligned outside of school learning opportunities.
 - Students progress through increasingly more complex learning expectations based on compelling evidence, regardless of where that evidence came from- all learning and demonstrations are valued and inform next steps.

Student Choice in Learning

- Students have increasing voice and choice to help make decisions about how they learn and how they show what they know which leads to increased engagement. This might look like the following:
- Students reflect on personal strengths and needs aligned to expected learning outcomes, set goals for growth, and have agency in selecting activities to reach these goals.
 - Students can choose how they will demonstrate their knowledge and skills in a way that is meaningful to them.
 - Students help to select the topics, define the essential questions, and make personal choices as they navigate rigorous and flexible pathways to proficiency.

After holding sessions around the state listening to educators and public education stakeholders, the State Board of Education decided to reduce the number of standards in each content area, which continues to be a gigantic undertaking. The table at the top of the next page breaks down the standards reduction in six of ten state content areas from 386 to 140, with math and science standards reduced by the largest percentages.

WY-ASCD is stepping up to make a huge difference in the outcome of these reductions and helping to provide support for successful implementation. WY-ASCD is having our curriculum directors connect with their classroom instructors to review the reductions in standards and what they mean for the continuity and quality of instruction. As a result, the changes and their implications are better understood by everyone involved, and curriculum directors have the necessary buy-in from educators and stakeholders to support an effective rollout.

Table 3. Overall Standards Reduction, from Currently Adopted to Proposed, by Content Area and Grade Band

(current # / proposed # | % of reduction)

Grade Band	Overall Reduction	Math	Science	PE	Health	F&P Arts	Comp. Sci.
K-2	235/69 70.64%	70/31 55.71%	39/13 66.67%	16/6 62.50%	22/6 72.73%	70/8 (K-4) 88.57%	18/5 72.22%
3-5	220/74 66.36%	79/32 59.49%	51/17 66.67%	17/9 47.06%	50/10 (G3-6) 80.00%	proposed 4 in K-2 + 4 in 3-5	23/6 73.91%
6-8 (MS)	282/99 64.89%	81/38 53.09%	60/28 53.33%	17/8 52.94%	27/11 (G7-8) 59.26%	72/5 (G5-8) 93.06%	25/9 64.00%
9-12 (HS)	409/108 73.59%	156/39 75.00%	71/29 59.15%	17/7 58.82%	28/11 60.71%	73/11 84.93%	64/11 82.81%
TOTAL K-12	1146/350 69.46%	386/140 63.73%	221/87 60.63%	67/30 55.22%	127/38 70.08%	215/24 88.84%	130/31 76.15%

In 2023, the Wyoming State Board of Education asked the WY-ASCD to form a state Curriculum Directors Advisory Committee (CDAC). The CDAC was asked to get information out to the staff of each district and receive their input. Our monthly online meetings proved to be very productive, with everyone indicating the value of our collaboration made a significant difference in the process.

The President of the WY-ASCD Curriculum Directors, Charlotte Gilbar explains the work of the CDAC. Charlotte is the Executive Director in Natrona County School District #1 in Casper, Wyoming:

“The Wyoming Curriculum Director’s Advisory Committee (CDAC) plays a pivotal role in shaping the state’s educational standards and rules. Composed of a representative group of curriculum directors and educational leaders from various school districts, CDAC is a committee that was formed by the Wyoming State Board of Education (SBE). The CDAC also collaborates with the Wyoming Department of Education (WDE) to review, audit, and recommend modifications to the state’s content and performance standards.

Key Responsibilities: Standards Review and Recommendations: CDAC evaluates existing educational standards across the ten content areas Math, English Language Arts, Science, Social Studies, Computer Science, Physical Education, Health, World Language, Career and Technical, and Fine & Performing Arts. The committee reviewed proposed changes to the Math and Science Standards, leading to a 61% reduction in K-12 Science Standards and a 64% reduction in K-12 Math Standards.

Provide Feedback: The CDAC reviewed feedback on the proposed Wyoming Math, Science, Computer Science, Fine and Performing Arts, Health and PE Standards that were gathered through surveys and virtual public meetings by the SBE and WDE, ensuring that community perspectives inform educational decisions.

Impact: Through its collaborative efforts, CDAC collaborates with the SBE to help ensure that Wyoming’s educational standards are rigorous, relevant, and responsive to the needs of students and educators. By integrating public input and expert recommendations, the committee plays a crucial role in maintaining high-quality education across the state.”









Students visiting the Wyoming State Capitol in Cheyenne.

The SBE's work to reduce standards is intended to provide greater focus on essential learnings while making room and providing flexibility for schools to implement the vision of the Profile of a Graduate:



Seven Key Competencies derived from the Wyoming Profile of a Graduate

-  Master, apply, and transfer foundational knowledge and skills.
-  Think critically and creatively to solve complex problems.
-  Communicate effectively to various purposes, audiences, and mediums.
-  Identify and use credible sources of information to build knowledge and make decisions.
-  Demonstrate strong interpersonal and collaboration skills.
-  Cultivate curiosity, self-awareness, resilience, and a growth mindset.
-  Practice effective work habits, including organization, time management, attention to detail, and follow through.



WYOMING
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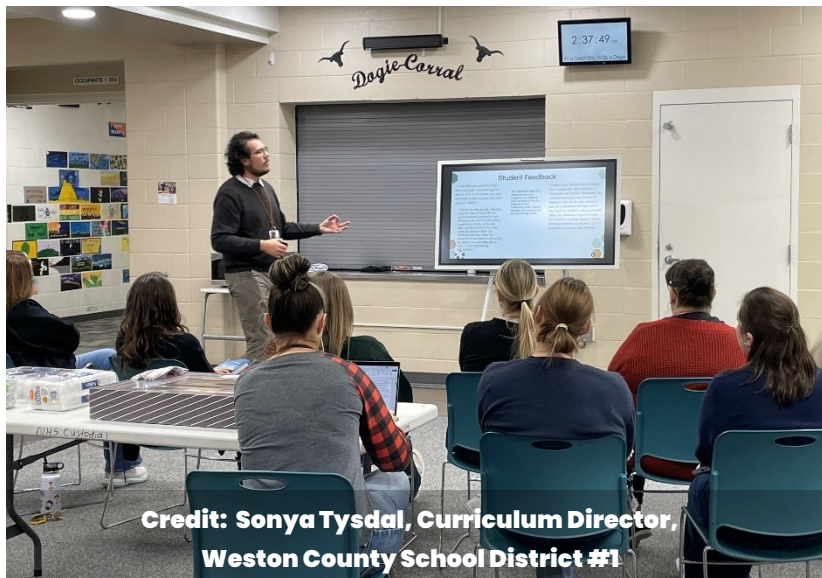
The Wyoming Profile of a Graduate is an initiative led by the State Board of Education and developed in partnership with students, families, educators, community leaders, and employers from across Wyoming. The purpose of the Profile is to articulate the knowledge, skills, and mindsets students need to thrive after graduation; establish a North Star for state and local policies; and create a strongly aligned educational system for Wyoming. For more information, visit the Profile of a Graduate [webpage](#).

The powerful combination of the innovation of the RIDE project with the reduction in standards and the connection to the profile creates many questions, challenges and opportunities, and WY-ASCD is positioned as a leader in this implementation work. The question is how to merge the standards with the profile to best identify graduates. Each district's accountability documents are being developed to meet state and federal requirements while allowing for local control, and we are working with curriculum directors to identify optimal solutions.

While the performance of our state compared to the nation is good, we are focused on finding ways to have an even greater impact on our students, and our state legislature who is asking to see an even better return on the investment in our schools. The three major changes we have discussed here task curriculum directors with much of the responsibility for implementation, under the direction of the Wyoming Department of Education and the State Board of Education, and WY-ASCD is a proud partner in this important work. Our collective goal is for students to be more excited, more engaged and more in control of their learning, connecting what is being taught about the world in which they live with their aspirations for the future.



An important additional consideration is the connection between career and technical education (CTE) and the academic standards all students should master. We feel we are on the right track there, as well. Whether it be a certification, an associate's or bachelor's degree, or entering directly into the work force post-graduation, we are working to provide each student with a quality education and the ability to achieve their dreams.



Credit: Sonya Tysdal, Curriculum Director,
 Weston County School District #1

As we implement the combination of the RIDE program, the reduction in standards, and the Profile of a Graduate, we must provide the flexibility and support that our instructors, their curriculum directors, and our district leaders need to implement new approaches that break free of the industrial-age practices to which we have been beholden for the last century.

WY-ASCD continues to be the leading voice in the education of Wyoming students, tackling challenges and growing membership as we engage with all of the districts in our state. As we reimagine the future, it is bright with educational innovation empowering our students to fulfill their potential and achieve success in school and in life.

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Shop class as a feature of RIDE implementation in the Park County School District #6 in Cody

Thank you to each of these outstanding leaders in Wyoming education who contributed to this article:



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Cody, Wyoming



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Casper, Wyoming



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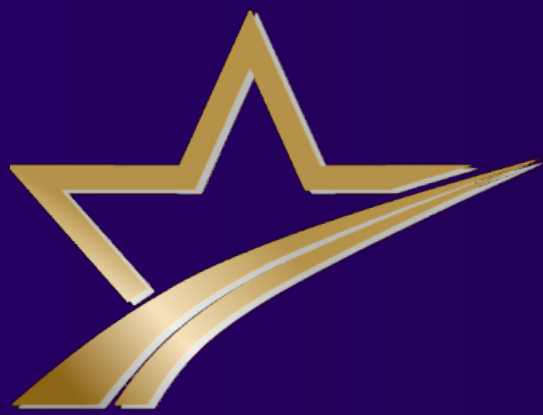


Sonya Tysdal
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R.J. Kost has served as Wyoming state senator for District #19 (Big Horn and Park Counties) from 2019-2022 and in 2023 he was appointed to the State Board of Education. As executive director for the Wyoming Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (WY-ASCD), he helps lead Wyoming curriculum directors in reimagining the delivery of education to their students.





Friday, April 18, 2025

1:00 – 2:00 p.m. e.t.

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TRANSFORMATION IN ACTION

Real World Learning: Civic Engagement for Students from the Bronx and Philadelphia

Jeffrey Palladino, M.Ed., Principal of Fannie Lou Hamer Freedom High School, Bronx, New York

“I really like it here. I feel like I belong at a place like this!” twelfth grader Rasaun Hill told me on a beautiful October day on the campus of Temple university in Philadelphia.



I have known Rasaun for the past four years as his Principal at Fannie Lou Hamer Freedom High School (FLHFHS) in The Bronx, New York. So why were Rasaun and I on the campus of a University 2-and-a-half hours away from our school? Well, the easiest answer is: BPL Votes.

Fannie Lou Hamer Freedom High School is one of 275 schools that are part of the [Big Picture Learning](#) (BPL) global network. BPL schools focus on going beyond the school campus to learn by bringing community into the classroom. Forty students and four staff members from [Fannie Lou Hamer Freedom High School](#) (FLHFHS) made the early morning trip down to Philadelphia to meet up with students from [Vaux High School](#) and [El Centro de Estudiantes](#), two of our sister schools from Big Picture Philadelphia. Together we were part of the initial group of schools participating in BPL Votes, an initiative created by Fannie Lou Hamer alumni Naseem Haamid. Naseem, a civically active student since his freshman year in high school and now in his last year of law school, who created BPL Votes to engage, educate and empower the Big Picture Learning Network in the electoral process.

Naseem conceived this idea last summer through conversations with Joshua Poyer of Big Picture Learning and members of the Fannie Lou team, discussing how we could involve students in civic education during the 2024 presidential election. There we were on October 8th, just under a month from election day, with eighty students canvassing Philadelphia reminding citizens of their voting rights, registering them to vote and making sure they were prepared to follow through and vote on election day. It was one of the most powerful moments in my close to thirty years in education.

In late August, I had received an email from Naseem expressing how much he wanted to engage students in the electoral process of the quickly-approaching election. Going to a school named after arguably one of the greatest civil rights leaders in our history, our students are well-versed in the work of Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer registering African-Americans in the south to vote. Since we also use classwork, extracurricular activities and internships to focus on community organizing and civic engagement, Naseem’s passion fit nicely into our mission. His pitch was to connect FLHFHS with another school in the network, preferably from Big Picture Philadelphia because of the importance of Pennsylvania in the upcoming election. We knew from the outset that the project had to be non-partisan with the focus of increasing voter turnout, especially among young voters. We enlisted two of our internship teachers, Aaron Broudo and Juvanee Bedminister, who were immediately on board. Now we needed partners in Philadelphia to see if we could make Naseem’s dream a reality.



I emailed fellow education leaders in Philadelphia, Tia Hall, Shavonne McMillian and Dawn Johnson in early September to set up a visit. Not only were they supportive and ready to host us, they were already in touch with Naseem for BPL Votes in Philly. He certainly doesn't wait around for things to happen! We set up a call for all of us with Joshua Poyer, the youth advocate for Big Picture Learning, to discuss how the collaboration could happen in the city of brotherly love. After our first call to explore the possibilities, the next step was to get students involved in the planning process. After all, this movement was for them to learn about civic engagement and prepare them to be the future leaders of their communities.

We set up a Zoom meeting with students from Fannie Lou and Big Picture Philadelphia, and they hit it off right away. Though they were from different states, they could identify similar issues facing young people and they were clear that they wanted to be part of the solution. Miranda from Fannie Lou and Mattias from Big Picture Learning Philly took the lead on student planning. Although they had very different experiences with civic education, this quickly became a passion project for both of them. September brought more planning meetings, with students creating icebreakers and activities for eighty students from three different schools. Fannie Lou students decided to provide a lesson on the legend of Fannie Lou Hamer so everyone understood that to do the work that they were embarking on, they were standing on the shoulders of giants. Behind the scenes, Dawn Johnson coordinated an amazing plan for us in Philly, selecting mentors from voting rights internship sites, local business leaders and politicians to sit on a panel in front of our students and discuss critical local issues, share pointers on how to canvas for voting, and discuss the importance of civic responsibility. Dawn also helped secure a place for us to meet, arranged the sites where student groups would go to canvas, and handled the logistics necessary for successful collaboration.

On the morning of October 8th, two days after what would have been her 107th Birthday, the students and staff of Fannie Lou Hamer Freedom High School boarded a bus at 6:30 a.m. in order to participate in a full day of civic activities. Their excitement was evident as we drove down the New Jersey turnpike and they wondered what the Big Picture Philly students would be like, and how they would talk to strangers about their civic duty in order to get them to register to vote.



The bus dropped us off in the parking lot of a local supermarket owned by a young Philadelphia businessman who was serving as one of our panel speakers, and our students made their way over to the Philadelphia Housing Authority where we would spend the morning meeting our new friends and learning how to engage people in the voting process. After we entered the building, we intentionally intermingled students from the three schools so they could get to know one another. At first there was awkwardness, but students overcame it as they found their common purpose for coming together.

We also came bearing gifts, handing Big Picture Philly students shirts with an image of Fannie Lou Hamer on the front and the slogan "We are Fannie Lou" on the back. It's a shirt all of our students and staff receive to honor our namesake. We shared the importance of Mrs. Hamer to the Big Picture Philly students and the seriousness of the work on which we were about to embark filled the room. The panel further emphasized the importance of civic engagement, celebrating our students for being present and ready to make an impact. The students were trained on how to ask people if they are registered, how to fill out voting registration applications, and how to talk to people about the importance of voting for issues that mattered to them. This was the same training that adult voting registration guides receive. The panel and the volunteers elevated this experience for our students because it wasn't just their teachers telling them about the seriousness of what they were about to do. This is the same work that proactive adults actually undertake as engaged citizens. FLHFHS senior Wilbely Nunez discussed the impact of the panel of adults on her experience:

“I found inspiration in the panelists who spoke about their career paths and community contributions, reinforcing the belief that passion and determination can drive meaningful change. Their insights motivated me and underscored the impact we can all have in advocating for important causes, reminding us that collective efforts can lead to lasting differences”

We split into five heterogeneous groups and Dawn provided instructions on canvassing locations. Students walked out of the Philadelphia Housing Authority with a sense of purpose, headed to local community centers, shopping centers and the campus of Temple University. Our guide from Big Picture Philly, Vaux High School Student Government President and senior Rahmeen Fleet, took us through the streets of Philadelphia showing us interesting landmarks, waving hello to neighbors and moving us along. It was a beautiful early fall day; the sun was out and the early semester hustle and bustle of the university campus added to the students’ excitement. It was an organization fair day at Temple, so the quad was lined with tables, organization signs and giveaways.

Dawn arranged for BPL Votes to have its own table, so our students sat down with their voter sign-up sheets and voter registration information, seeing that other college organizations were also doing voting registration drives. This gave our team some confidence, coming out from behind the assigned table and approaching Temple students, staff and random strangers to ask if they were registered. The Big Picture Learning students quickly found out that most people on the college campus were registered, but this wasn’t a deterrent. It actually gave the students more confidence in what they were trying to accomplish. They were witnessing young people that looked like them that were registered to vote and who cared about many of the same issues that they cared about.



As the number of registrations started to rise, so did our ownership of the process and our confidence. BPL students started going to other organization’s tables to find out what was offered at Temple. They spoke with faculty and student leadership and a day of voter registration efforts also became a college visit. Before we knew it, our time was up and we were heading back to the Philadelphia Housing Authority to meet with the other canvassing groups. As we arrived, the energy filled the room and teenagers that were total strangers hours before were sharing social media handles and posting about their experience together.



As they debriefed, I wasn’t really fully prepared for what I heard from our young people. We counted out the number of voter registrations that were done by our five groups and the total was twenty-six new registered voters. It might not have seemed like a lot, but our professional voter registration workers shared that twenty-six new voters in a couple of hours was a great accomplishment. We also heard about how the students got to know each other and became fast friends. One group told us they didn’t register a single person, but they had many wonderful conversations with local Philadelphia residents and learned about important local issues, and they were told by elders in the community how impressed and proud they were of the work they were doing. FLHFHS senior Symphony Williams reflected on her interactions while canvassing:

“One thing that stood out for me was when I was out encouraging people to vote this one lady was so excited and proud of our movement that she had asked us for a picture and she even encouraged us to continue spreading this positivity and message. This made me feel like I was doing something great for the community even though it’s not my own.”



Seeing young people concerned about voting and civic engagement elevated the narrative about young people, and the community members wanted the Big Picture students to know that. As we debriefed, we celebrated our victories, acknowledged individuals in our groups, and left with a new sense of purpose and pride. Traveling north back up the New Jersey turnpike, the students of Fannie Lou Hamer Freedom High School felt proud that they represented their namesake well. They knew what they accomplished on that day wasn't the end of the work, that no issues were resolved; but they understood that their voices mattered and that they *could* make a difference. Our students felt empowered by this experience, understanding that they can make a difference in their own lives and in the lives of others, influencing the course of events in the society in which they live. This was demonstrated in FLHFHS senior Omayra Del Rosario's reflection:

"I feel that with our school being named after Fannie Lou Hamer, the woman who made voting possible among black people, this trip was necessary and really allowed us as students to reflect on how fortunate and important voting is and how we need to get our community more involved. When I'm 18, I plan on voting in every election as I want my voice to be heard, every vote counts."



FLHFHS senior Isabella Haddock shared this feeling of accomplishment:

"The experience of actually going canvassing was really cool. I was nervous at first. People did tell me no, and people were rude to me at times. But that didn't really stop me from going up to people and asking them if they were registered to vote. People told me that what I was doing was good and it made me feel a little bit more comfortable and courageous to go through what I was tasked. I loved the group members I was with; they had amazing vibes and it felt like we clicked well, and our personalities meshed well together. We ended up having the most registers, with 8 total. Not to brag but I think we did pretty well"

The work didn't end in Philadelphia. Many of the students from both cities keep in touch. One student has even gone back down to Philly to visit her new friends since we've returned home. Students are also continuing their voter registration efforts back here in the Bronx. Fannie Lou Hamer junior Miranda Acosta has conducted voter registration sessions in the cafeteria for students age eighteen and older, energizing classmates around voting, voter rights and other youth issues. In hindsight, Miranda reflected:

"The idea came up that some students from Fannie Lou should go to Philly and try to convince people to vote with students from Big Picture Schools in Philadelphia. Aaron handed all the responsibilities to me. At first I really didn't think I could handle it, but I did it. It was such an amazing experience and accomplishment of mine. It's definitely something I will never forget."

Despite the fact that BPL Votes is non-partisan, many of our students were clear about who they wanted to win the election for the Presidency of the United States. I fully expected them to be discouraged after election day, worrying that the time and effort they put into voting registration didn't reflect in the election result. But I am very proud to say that I was wrong. The students have expressed their commitment to continue this work with their new friends from Philadelphia. They have continued to videoconference to discuss important issues, share information about upcoming local elections, and strategize about how to implement what they have learned.



In February 2025, Fannie Lou Hamer Freedom High School hosted a guided experience for visitors from across the country, including a co-panel of students from FLHFHS and Philadelphia Big Picture to discuss what they learned about collaboration, civic engagement and incorporating the community into their classroom learning. The work continues and has the potential to grow in scope and impact. Big Picture Philadelphia and Fannie Lou Hamer Freedom High School students want school leaders from across the country to know that BPL Votes was not an isolated experience. They encouraged school leaders to put students in the center of the curriculum and give them influence and impact on issues that affect them in the real world.

There were many powerful lessons I learned from this experience that I hope to continue in our practice FLHFHS:

We can benefit from utilizing our alumni network

BPL Votes was Naseem's idea, but he was comfortable connecting us to his network. How do we continue to open doors to alumni to share their expertise, give back and create new opportunities for current students?

Students respond to meaningful work that is important to their lives.

Registering people to vote wasn't just a task for many of the students, it was a mission. They identified issues they wanted changed and knew voting was the way to make it happen.

Community involvement provides real world learning

Student learning and engagement was enhanced by its connection to the community. Big Picture Philly students demonstrated their knowledge and connection to the community and the community, in kind, responded. Our students recognized that and they are doing the same for their community here in the Bronx.

Collaboration with other students, schools and organizations expands our capacity

One of the powerful things about this experience was the collaboration of young people and staff among the schools. It was important that local community-based organizations, nonprofits and businesses got involved and supported the work. Students were given ownership to collaborate with other students around critical and issues.

Students need to be at the center of their own learning

Students planned much of the event and the work that has continued. Give them tasks that are meaningful and important and they will respond. When they went out to canvas for voting, our students took the lead.

I am proud to have been part of this work and I am looking forward to what our students do with their new learning, new friendships, and newfound mission.



References

[Big Picture Learning](#)

[Fannie Lou Hamer Freedom High School](#), Bronx, New York

[El Centro de Estudiantes](#), Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

[Vaux Big Picture High School](#), Philadelphia, Pennsylvania



Jeffrey Palladino is the proud principal of Fannie Lou Hamer Freedom High School in the Bronx, New York. He has served the students of New York City for the past 25 years and has been the Principal of Fannie Lou Hamer Freedom High School since 2014. In 2016, he was invited to speak at the White House by the Barack Obama administration for the Reach Higher forum on higher education.



Turns out there *IS* such a thing as a free lunch!



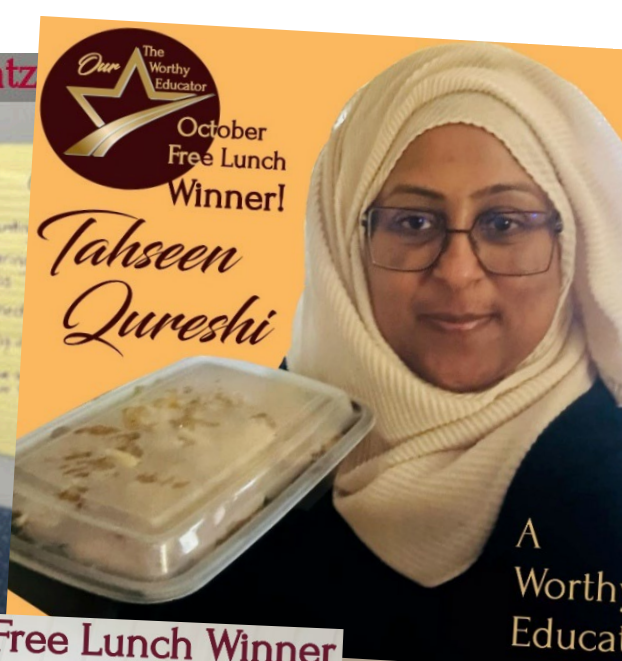
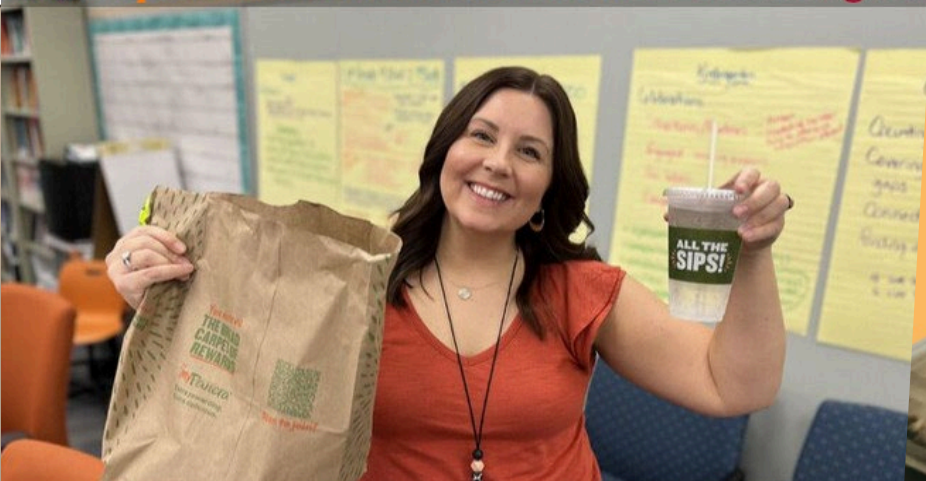
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Our September Free Lunch Winner Leah Pongratz



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Monty Hitschler



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Our December Free Lunch Winner



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The "Coach Approach" to Social-Emotional Growth: Why Special Education Students at a Continuation High School were able to Transition with Confidence to a Clear Post-High School Path

Fran Kenton, M.A., Career Educator, Certified Health and Wellness Coach and Founder of Autonomie, aligning district Portrait of a Graduate profiles with CASEL-aligned Social-Emotional Learning, Calabasas, California

Building a Safe and Supportive Environment

Franland - as my students fondly referred to our classroom - was more than just a physical space. It was a place where students felt seen, heard, supported, and celebrated. If that sounds a bit cliché, it's because we hear those words often. But what do they really mean in practice? What does it take to create an environment where students - especially those who have struggled in traditional settings - can thrive?

For students at our continuation high school, a traditional academic path hadn't worked. Many of my special education students had experienced repeated setbacks, leaving them disconnected from learning and hesitant to engage. It wasn't enough to simply offer academic support to my students; they needed something more - a foundation of trust, emotional security, and connection before they would feel comfortable engaging in the learning process. Only then could they let down their guard and begin the real work of self-discovery and personal growth - both personally and academically, while daring to imagine what a successful and fulfilling life could truly look like.

Trust is built over time through reliability, consistency, authenticity, and a commitment to affirming each person's dignity and worth. Students need to feel safe with both their peers and the adults entrusted with teaching them. This means knowing they won't be ridiculed or dismissed and that their thoughts, feelings, and experiences matter. Respect must be given, boundaries must be upheld, and emotions - both positive and challenging - must be validated.

To embark on that often intimidating journey of self-discovery, growth, and change, students had to feel genuinely safe - physically, emotionally, and psychologically. That meant establishing an environment of trust and respect, involving clear communication, modeling empathy, and fostering inclusivity. It required setting boundaries that respected each individual's needs and experiences while also encouraging vulnerability and openness without fear of judgment. I had an elderly classroom assistant who my students absolutely adored, though she had little tolerance for rough or foul language. Amazingly, my classroom was most often free from swearing thanks to my assistant, Lynne.



Earning everyone's trust, care and respect from her very first day, Lynne became a beloved figure to my teenage, at-risk continuation high school students. With her traditional, grandmotherly warmth and spirit, she was always ready for anything and was deeply committed to going the extra mile for the kids. When our special education director retired, Lynne brought in her quilting materials and taught the students how to quilt, creating a beautiful gift where each student made a square that expressed their heartfelt sentiments for our retiring director. Lynne's authenticity and grounding demeanor imparted a sense of safety and reliability, making every experience feel more secure and enjoyable for the students. Her unwavering support and genuine care left a lasting impact on the students, who treated her with complete respect and appreciation.

Although my personal background, experiences, and engagement in school were vastly different from the students I taught, I was curious about why they felt comfortable enough to consistently show up and engage day after day. I wanted to understand what made them feel so at ease, so I asked them directly. Their responses were simple yet powerful - they told me that no matter how they came in each day, I was always Fran, consistent and authentic. This consistency allowed them to feel safe and confident in our relationship, which fostered a sense of trust and openness. They felt encouraged and appreciated for what they could contribute to the greater school community. This sense of safety, inclusivity and confidence empowered them to create and engage beyond the classroom, helping to build an even more vibrant environment. Their creativity, whether as artists, musicians or creative thinkers, brought energy to the school through celebrations of various holidays. They became so empowered that they even initiated a student council where they took on leadership roles, further contributing to the positive culture of our school.



The Journey to Self-Discovery and Growth

It wasn't until I retired from teaching and earned a certification in Health and Wellness Coaching that I fully understood the process and the science behind what we had intuitively created in Franland. This approach enabled our students to make progress and thrive in ways they hadn't been able to in their previous educational settings. Within our classroom we were able to facilitate students' growth and change.

If we reference the [Transtheoretical Model of Behavior Change](#), developed by Dr. James Prochaska, the preconditions and processes behind our students' engagement and growth become clear. We met each student where they were, without judgment. Growth and change were encouraged and supported one small step at a time, grounded in the foundational coaching principles of Appreciative Inquiry, Motivational Interviewing, Neuroscience, Mindfulness, and Positive Psychology.

Beginning with the [Appreciative Inquiry Framework](#), the core idea is that by focusing on the positive aspects of an individual, we can envision and work toward a better future. My students were simply trying to survive from day to day. They had no concept of having a dream for themselves. In Franland, we were able to create that dream and the hope that what they envisioned for themselves was actually attainable, based on their core strengths and capacities, our authenticity, and the appropriate resources and support.



[Motivational Interviewing](#), (MI) a collaborative, goal-oriented counseling approach which fosters individual's motivation to change by resolving ambivalence, played a critical role in guiding my students through their self-discovery process. Using MI's guiding principles of empathic communication, open-ended questions, and active and reflective listening, we guided students through self-doubt, rolled with the inevitable resistance and self-sabotaging behaviors (such as avoiding school) while encouraging them to discover their own intrinsic motivations. A simple axiom from geometry illustrates this point: if the shortest distance between two points is a straight line, why would you choose to avoid school if your goal is to

graduate on time? Rather than dictating a path for them, we guided them to find their own reasons for growth and change, which empowered them to take ownership of their learning and their future. Each student was able to discover their own unique path that would lead them to their version of success and fulfillment.

My student, Danny, comes to mind when I think of students taking a unique path. Although Danny struggled with traditional coursework and found it impossible to thrive in conventional educational settings, he had natural mechanical ability that set him apart. When it came time to graduate, Danny had an opportunity to pursue his passion. He had a fascination for guns, which as you might imagine, led to grave concerns from everyone, including our local sheriff. However, with their support and everyone's blessings, Danny entered and completed a program to become a gunsmith as a star student, and today he is gainfully employed as an armorer in the entertainment industry.

What the Research Says

Neuroscience tells us that when students feel emotionally safe, their brains are more receptive to learning. Stress and trauma can trigger the brain's fight-or-flight response, making it difficult to absorb new information. By fostering a calm and supportive environment, we helped students remain in a state of cognitive openness, where they could engage more fully in their education.

The process of mindfulness and self-awareness - the ability to recognize thoughts and emotions in the present moment, became the foundation for regulating their discomfort and making informed choices about behavior. Neuroscience shows that mindfulness strengthens the prefrontal cortex, the area responsible for decision-making and emotional regulation. When my students learned to pause and observe their emotions without immediately reacting, they developed greater control over their responses and actions. More positive actions led to better outcomes!



As students gained insight into their emotions and learned to regulate them, they developed resilience - the ability to navigate setbacks and challenges without being overwhelmed by them. This resilience was key to their success, both in school and beyond. Resilience is not just about bouncing back from challenges but also about developing the ability to process emotions and seek support. In our program, students learned that resilience grows when they acknowledge their emotions and share their experiences in a supportive environment. Craig, one of our students, exemplified this when he was finally able to open up about his early painful family experiences. Initially hesitant and fearful of what emotions might surface, he witnessed his peers model vulnerability by sharing their own struggles, which helped him see the power of expressing emotions. By taking that step himself, Craig not only strengthened his own resilience but also deepened his connections with others, reinforcing that resilience is built through honesty, community, and emotional awareness.

Several years after graduation, Craig stopped by to visit, holding a dozen red roses in hand. He thanked my assistant and me for showing him that he could manage the life that was dealt to him as a young child - that he was worthy and capable. He had just successfully negotiated a raise in his position as a master welder and was beaming with pride from ear to ear. Seeing him stand tall in his accomplishments was a powerful reminder of how resilience, when nurtured, can change the trajectory of a life.



Positive Psychology was instrumental in this process. Instead of focusing solely on problems, we helped students identify and activate their strengths. Research in Positive Psychology demonstrates that when individuals focus on their strengths, they build confidence, experience greater motivation, and achieve higher levels of well-being. By recognizing their competencies and personal strengths, students build confidence and a clearer sense of direction for their future. Understanding their capabilities, values and passions gave them the foundation they needed to step into adulthood with purpose and self-assurance, in anticipation of a bright and fulfilling future.

The **PERMAH** model in the context of Positive Psychology - **P**ositive Emotion, **E**ngagement, **R**elationships, **M**eaning, **A**chievement, and **H**ealth - was embedded into everything that happened in Franland. Students were encouraged to cultivate **Positive Emotions** through laughter, gratitude and simple fun experiences. **Engagement** was enhanced by providing opportunities for students to immerse themselves in activities that aligned with their strengths and passions, creating a sense of curiosity and flow. **Relationships** were strengthened through discussions and sharing experiences through collaborative activities, ensuring a supportive and connected community. **Meaning** was cultivated by helping students connect their learning to personal values and long-term aspirations. **Achievement** was celebrated in both small and large ways, reinforcing a growth mindset. Finally, **Health** - both mental and physical - was prioritized through mindfulness, self-care strategies, and discussions on overall well-being.

A Collective Effort for Student Success

This culture of safety and support extended beyond my classroom. It was strengthened by the commitment of administration and support staff, who played a crucial role in fostering a positive, supportive school environment. Our founding principal was keenly attuned to the needs of our unique student population, and found ways to support them. We offered programs and resources tailored to their specific challenges, including group counseling, peer support groups, and school-based individual counseling.

We tried to instill a sense of hope and optimism in our students, knowing that many felt they were missing out by attending our alternative school. By reframing “fewer options” as simply “different opportunities,” most were able to shift their perspective and embrace new possibilities. One powerful example comes to mind. Rather than missing out on traditional grad night and prom, our graduating seniors collaborated with faculty to create a deeply personal senior dinner and prom. This special event brought together staff, parents, and students to celebrate each graduate, making the experience truly meaningful.



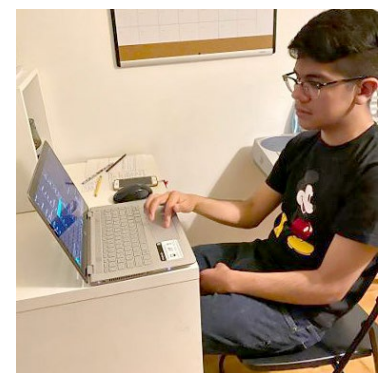
We focused on providing a compassionate, nonpunitive approach to behavior, while setting firm but caring boundaries that encouraged growth and accountability. Of course, there were naysayers - there always are. But at the end of the day, we all shared the same goal: to support our students and their families in achieving positive life outcomes.

Creating this kind of environment is always a work in progress. There's no perfect formula and there's no one-size-fits-all solution. But when students feel safe, valued, and empowered, they begin to believe in themselves. And when they believe in themselves, they can chart a future they never thought possible. Understanding the process and the science makes replicating a safe, supportive environment where students can thrive replicable!

Bringing the "Coach Approach" to Every Classroom

Every student deserves to be part of a learning environment that fosters self-discovery, emotional resilience, and personal growth. But I also know that not every teacher has the time, training, or resources to create curriculum and impart the tools and strategies for personal development and resilience to their students.

That's why I created **Autonome** (pronounced "*autonomy*" with an emphasis on "ME") - a digital, plug-and-play curriculum designed to bring the "Coach Approach" for personal development to any classroom, anywhere. Autonome provides a structured, easy-to-implement framework that requires no prior expertise or prep time from teachers. It's designed to guide both educators and students on a shared journey of emotional growth, personal development and well-being, allowing teachers to learn alongside their students as facilitators, rather than experts. By embedding professional development directly into the program, facilitators share the journey of learning, personal growth and wellbeing alongside their students.



The Autonome platform is structured in a way that makes implementation seamless and facilitation a breeze - whether a teacher has extensive experience with social emotional skills development and wellbeing or is completely new to the approach. The program offers multiple models for implementation, so schools and educators can integrate it in a way that best fits their needs - whether as part of an advisory period, integrated into special education programs, modularized for a college career or wellness center, embedded within academic subjects or after school programming.

At its core, Autonome empowers students to take an active role in their personal growth and wellbeing. Through thoughtfully sequenced thematic lessons, Autonome is designed to help students develop intrapersonal skills followed by interpersonal skills.

- ✓ Build self-awareness and mindfulness skills
- ✓ Recognize and regulate emotions
- ✓ Develop resilience and coping strategies
- ✓ Discover their strengths, values, and passions
- ✓ Foster meaningful relationships and effective communication skills
- ✓ Set goals and create a vision for their future

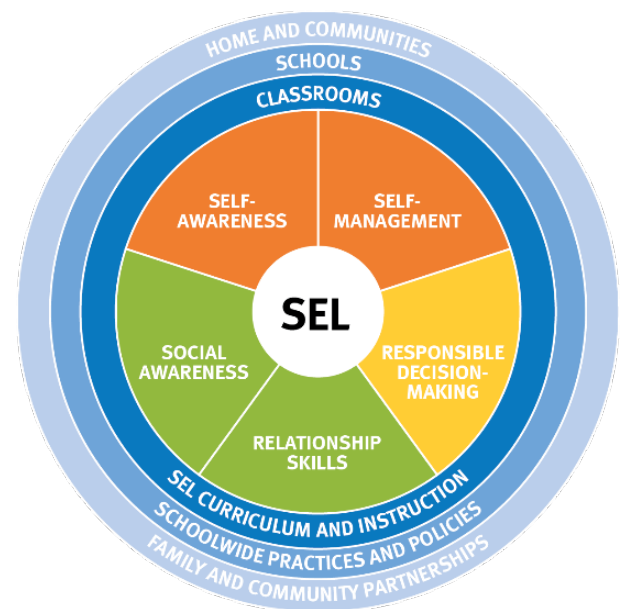
Autonome provides structured opportunities for student voice, empowering them to take an active role in discussions, sharing perspectives and experiences, positioning them as leaders in shaping a healthier school climate and ultimately, a healthier, more inclusive world. These learning experiences help bridge the gap between educators and students.



Beyond Social Emotional Growth

Research from the [Yale Child Study Center](#) shows that curriculum focused around the five areas of social emotional learning competency as outlined by [CASEL](#), promotes a myriad of positive outcomes in school and beyond. Autonomie’s curriculum is designed to support positive outcomes in academic achievement, career and life readiness. Research shows that when students feel safe, heard, and valued, they are more engaged in their learning, leading to improved academic performance.

The first iteration of the Autonomie program was specifically designed to support the transition of mild to moderate special needs students from high school to the next step in their journey, whether that be employment, vocational training, or further education. It was successfully implemented in a “Transition” class focused on equipping students with the essential durable skills that are essential for success in the workplace - such as communication, problem-solving, self-advocacy, critical thinking, adaptability, collaboration and overall workplace etiquette - that complement the technical skills required for their specific job roles. Autonomie, as the curriculum is now known, ensured that students not only developed confidence in their abilities but also cultivated the skillset and the mindset needed to navigate work environments successfully.



The updated digital version of Autonomie has evolved into a robust, comprehensive platform that can be universally implemented for any and every student population. It has expanded to include skills that support school success, college and workforce readiness, and overall health and well-being, preparing students for long-term success in both their careers and personal lives.

A Vision for the Future

I am thrilled to share that teachers and students in our partner schools are already reporting incredibly positive results and outcomes. Teachers appreciate the ease of facilitation and the embedded professional development, which allows them to implement the program on the spot without the need for onboarding or lesson preparation. Everything they need is right on the screen, ready to go!

Even more exciting, students are sharing powerful feedback during our visitations, telling us that they are managing frustrations more effectively by implementing the simple strategies they’ve learned. They report feeling more confident in communicating their feelings assertively and even express a desire for their parents to learn these same skills alongside them. It’s inspiring to see firsthand how Autonomie is already making a powerful impact on the lives of these young people.

My dream is simple: to give as many teens and young adults as possible the tools they need to thrive - academically, emotionally, and socially. Too many students graduate high school without a clear sense of who they are, where they are going, or how to navigate life’s inevitable challenges. Autonomie is my way of ensuring that every student, regardless of background or learning environment, has access to the same life-changing journey my students experienced in Franland.

When we create emotionally safe spaces in our schools, we open doors for students to become their best selves. And when we give teachers the tools to guide them on that journey, we transform education into something truly meaningful. I am truly excited to see this vision becoming a reality!

[Listen to Pauline P. from Partnerships to Uplift Communities schools share her experience using Autonomie with students \[Vimeo Video 00:29\]](#)



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Autonome

Fran Kenton is the creator and founder of Autonome, a social-emotional learning/wellbeing platform for teens and young adults. A lifelong educator, Fran has served middle and high school students, both general and special education, as a teacher and a counselor. Fran is a Certified Health and Wellness Coach. Drawing from her extensive experience, Fran developed Autonome to support students’ social and emotional growth.



[View Fran’s Worthy Incubator on SEL for Adolescents \[YouTube Video 55:28\]](#)

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Shared Accountability in Education: Moving Beyond Blame

Marlene Lawrence-Grant, Ed.D., Researcher and Head of Practicum, The Mico University College, Teacher, Jamaica Ministry of Education, Kingston, Jamaica

Report card day often brings a predictable routine: parents hear about what their child is not doing, missed assignments, low participation, or lackluster grades. However, what's missing from these conversations is a reflection on the role of the teacher in the student's progress. Education is not a one-way street, and shared accountability among teachers, students, and parents is critical for meaningful learning outcomes. Without acknowledging this, the cycle of blame risks undermining the very partnership necessary for success.

A Narrow Lens on Student Performance

While the dominant narrative during parent-teacher conferences tends to focus on student deficiencies, and identifying areas for improvement is essential, this one-sided perspective can lead to frustration for parents and disengagement for students. Research shows that when students feel supported by both teachers and parents, they are more likely to succeed academically (Epstein, 2011).

Instead of merely pointing it out when students are not fulfilling their potential, educators must also reflect on their own practices. Questions such as, what teaching methods have been employed to reach the student, how has the teacher adapted to the student's unique needs, and what additional resources have been offered should be part of the conversation.

Teachers' Responsibility in Accountability

The role of the teacher goes far beyond delivering content. Teachers shape the learning environment, motivate students, and serve as facilitators of growth. Here are critical areas where educators can demonstrate accountability:

1. Differentiated Instruction

Every student learns differently, yet traditional teaching methods often fail to accommodate diverse pathways to learning. Research by Tomlinson (2001) underscores the importance of differentiated instruction, which tailors teaching strategies to unique individual orientations to learning. Teachers who adapt their methods can better engage students with whom they might otherwise not connect.

2. Early Intervention

Teachers should proactively identify when a student is struggling and provide timely support. According to a study in the Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk (Fuchs et al., 2010), early intervention significantly improves outcomes for at-risk students. Waiting until report card day to address issues often leaves little room for meaningful improvement.



3. Regular Communication

Consistent and constructive feedback is vital. Parents should not only hear about their child's progress during scheduled conferences but through ongoing formative updates. This builds trust and ensures that challenges have the opportunity to be addressed collaboratively before they escalate.

4. Professional Growth

Just as students need to grow, teachers must be provided continuous professional learning opportunities. Effective teachers keep up on new strategies, tools, and approaches to instruction. Without current skillsets and practices, teachers are prone to be less successful in today's classroom.

5. Building Relationships

Teachers who take the time to build meaningful relationships with their students create better instructional engagement which leads to optimal academic results. Roorda et al. (2011) found that positive teacher-student relationships significantly boost student motivation and learning.

The Importance of Shared Accountability

Effective education requires a team effort. Teachers, parents, and students must all take ownership of their roles to ensure success. Here are three components of shared accountability in practice:

✓ Collaborative Problem-Solving

During report card day, the focus should shift from assigning blame planning for solutions. For example, if a student is underperforming in math, the collaborative plan might involve extra tutoring, changes to teaching techniques, and parental support for homework completion.

✓ Clear and Transparent Goals

Teachers must establish clear expectations and communicate them early in the academic year. Likewise, parents and students should be encouraged to provide feedback, asking for supports and ensuring that goals are realistic and understood by everyone involved.

✓ Action-Oriented Meetings

Rather than rehashing problems, report card day should focus on actionable steps. What will the teacher do differently? How can parents assist at home? What commitment will the student make? Defining roles and responsibilities ensures accountability and success for everyone involved.



Parents' and Students' Roles in Accountability

While teachers play a significant role, parents and students are equally responsible for success:

- ✓ Research from the Harvard Family Research Project (2014) highlights that parental involvement is one of the strongest predictors of student success.
- ✓ Parents must actively engage in their child's education. This includes checking progress regularly, reinforcing study habits at home, and maintaining open communication with teachers.
- ✓ While supports are critical, students need to take ownership of their learning, developing self-discipline, staying committed to their goals, and asking for help when needed.

Challenges of the Blame Culture

One of the greatest obstacles to shared accountability is the tendency to assign blame. A blame culture creates tension between parents, teachers, and schools, undermining the focus on the student. Social media can amplify the issue, providing a public platform for grievances, escalating conflicts instead of seeking solutions.

When schools and teachers are publicly criticized, it weakens their authority. Teachers feel unsupported and students receive mixed messages about being accountable. A constructive mindset emphasizes partnership over creating division, understanding that everyone wants what's best for students.

A Path Forward

To rebuild trust and promote shared accountability, schools must:

- ✓ **Train Teachers in Communication Skills:** Educators need tools to facilitate constructive conversations with parents, ensuring that report card day is one of many opportunities to share and collaborate.
- ✓ **Foster a Culture of Mutual Respect:** Create ongoing opportunities for teachers, parents, and students to interact, be heard, and feel valued.
- ✓ **Provide Spaces for Collaboration:** Possibilities include online portals sharing progress, digital messaging tools, regular check-ins, and parent workshops to strengthen the home-school connection.
- ✓ **Celebrate Successes:** Acknowledge not only where students are struggling but also where they are shining, recognizing growth, reinforcing positive behavior, and building confidence.

Conclusion: Reframing Accountability in Education

By fostering a culture of shared accountability, we can ensure that education remains a pathway to growth, not a battleground of blame. Together, we can create environments where every student has the support they need to thrive.



Education is not a solo journey; it is a partnership built on trust, communication, and shared responsibility. Report card days should move beyond fault-finding to become opportunities for meaningful collaboration. Teachers, parents, and students each play a vital role in shaping success, and through a unified effort real progress can be achieved.

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Dr. Marlene Lawrence-Grant is a distinguished educator, academic strategist, and thought leader in higher education. With a career spanning over 15 years, she has made significant contributions to curriculum development, instructional design, and teacher training. She currently serves as the University College Practicum Coordinator, Head of Practicum, and Chairman of the Practicum Board at The Mico University College, where she has led transformative initiatives to enhance practicum programs and bridge the gap between academia and industry.





Reflection

Worthy quotes to sustain us on the journey,
posted weekly for educators everywhere.



“We realize the
importance of
our voices only
when we are
silenced.”

- Malala
Yousafzai



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The Critical Imperative: Advocacy for Public Education in a Time of Crisis

Sheryl R. Abshire, Ph.D., Thought Leader and Former Chief Technology Officer, Calcasieu Parish Public Schools, Lake Charles, Louisiana

It's time to pay attention!

Public education in America is not just at a critical juncture; it's in a state of emergency. Our schools are under siege, struggling with inadequate funding, political attacks, staffing shortages, and a growing chasm between students' needs and the resources available to meet them. **NOW** is the time for education leaders, policymakers, parents, and community members to raise their voices in strong advocacy for public education! Failure to act risks dismantling one of the bedrock institutions of our democracy.



Public education has been treated as an afterthought in policy discussions for far too long. Yet, it is the foundation upon which our nation's economic prosperity, civic engagement, and social mobility are built. More importantly, public education is the economic engine that drives our country now and into the future. Today, as challenges mount, our collective advocacy is not just crucial; it's our strength. Advocacy is not just a buzzword; it is a moral imperative. We are responsible for speaking out, taking action, and fighting for the resources, policies, and support systems to ensure every child, regardless of zip code, has access to a high-quality education.

The Assault on Public Education

Today, public education faces an unprecedented onslaught of challenges. Funding is at crisis levels, especially in communities that heavily rely on federal, state, and local revenues. Teacher shortages have reached epidemic proportions, driven by stagnant wages, overwhelming workloads, and a lack of respect for the profession. Politicized attacks on curriculum, book bans, and restrictions on what can be taught in classrooms threaten to undermine the very purpose of education: to empower students with knowledge and critical thinking skills.

The rise of voucher programs and the expansion of charter schools framed as "school choice" have drained resources from traditional public schools, exacerbating inequities. The students who remain in public schools, often those with the greatest needs, are left with fewer resources, less support, and an educational system that is being set up to fail.

Technology gaps, exacerbated by the pandemic, continue to limit access to digital learning for millions of students, further deepening the divide between those who have and those who have not. Meanwhile, school safety concerns, mental health crises, and declining student engagement post-pandemic have left teachers and administrators grappling with complex challenges without adequate support.

If these challenges remain unaddressed, we are not just failing our students, we are failing our future. The consequences of inaction are dire, with a generation of students at risk of being left behind and our nation's future prosperity and stability in jeopardy.



The Role of Advocacy: Why We Must Act Now



*“Advocacy is **THE** force that drives change. It is the engine that compels lawmakers to allocate resources, forces policymakers to reconsider harmful decisions, and ensures that public education remains a national priority. We must embrace advocacy in multiple dimensions at the local, state, and national levels to defend and strengthen public education.”*

1. Advocating for Increased Funding

Education funding is not a luxury; it is a necessity. Yet, in many states, public schools are underfunded to the tune of billions of dollars. We must advocate for sustained, equitable funding that provides every student with access to high-quality teachers, up-to-date instructional materials, modern technology, and safe school environments. This is not just a call to action; it's a demand for change.

Grassroots efforts, engagement with local school boards, and direct lobbying of state legislatures and Congress can influence budget decisions. Educators, parents, and community leaders must work together to demand that lawmakers prioritize education funding and reject efforts to divert public dollars into private institutions at the expense of public schools.

2. Defending the Teaching Profession

Teachers are the backbone of our education system, yet they are leaving the profession in record numbers. Advocacy efforts must ensure competitive salaries, reduce class sizes, provide mental health support for educators, and foster a culture of respect for the teaching profession.

We must also advocate for policies that eliminate unnecessary bureaucratic burdens and empower teachers to focus on what matters most—teaching. This includes fighting against the politicization of curriculum decisions and resisting efforts to censor educators who seek to provide students with a well-rounded, truthful education.

3. Fighting for Equity and Inclusion

Public education must serve all students, not just the privileged few. Advocacy must center on dismantling systemic inequities that disproportionately impact students of color, students with disabilities, English language learners, and those from low-income families. This means pushing for policies that expand access to early childhood education, support culturally responsive teaching, and ensure school environments are welcoming and inclusive for all students.

School districts must also be held accountable for addressing disparities in discipline, graduation rates, and access to advanced coursework. We need advocates willing to challenge policies and practices that widen achievement gaps and limit opportunities for historically marginalized communities.

Protecting Public Schools from Privatization

The push toward privatization, through the expansion of vouchers and for-profit charter schools, threatens the very existence of public education. Advocacy efforts must focus on ensuring that public funds remain in public schools and that policymakers understand the long-term consequences of draining resources from traditional school districts.

We must also hold charter schools accountable for transparency, equitable enrollment practices, and fair treatment of students with disabilities. The unchecked expansion of charter networks and voucher programs should not come at the cost of weakening the public school system that serves most American students.

Turning Advocacy into Action

It is not enough to acknowledge these challenges. We must act now. Effective advocacy requires a multipronged approach that includes:

1. Engaging with policymakers

Attend school board meetings, contact elected officials, and participate in policy discussions that impact public education. For instance, you can write letters or emails to your local representatives, attend town hall meetings, or even schedule a meeting to discuss your concerns.

2. Building coalitions

Partner with parents, community leaders, businesses, and advocacy groups to amplify your message.

3. Leveraging media and storytelling

Use social media, op-eds, and community forums to share personal stories that illustrate the real impact of educational policies.

4. Encouraging voter participation

Education policy is shaped at the ballot box. Supporting candidates who prioritize public education and encouraging voter turnout are critical advocacy strategies.

5. Empowering students

Students are not just the recipients of education; they are powerful advocates for their rights. Encouraging student voices in policy discussions ensures that those most affected by decisions are part of the conversation, and it's a crucial part of our advocacy efforts.

A Call to Action

Undoubtedly, we are in a battle for the soul of public education. The forces seeking to dismantle our schools are well-funded and relentless. However, we have something even more powerful, the collective voices of those who believe in the promise of public education.

We cannot afford to be silent. We must fight for every child's right to a high-quality education, for the educators who dedicate their lives to teaching, and for the communities that rely on strong public schools to thrive. Our advocacy must be bold, relentless, and unwavering.

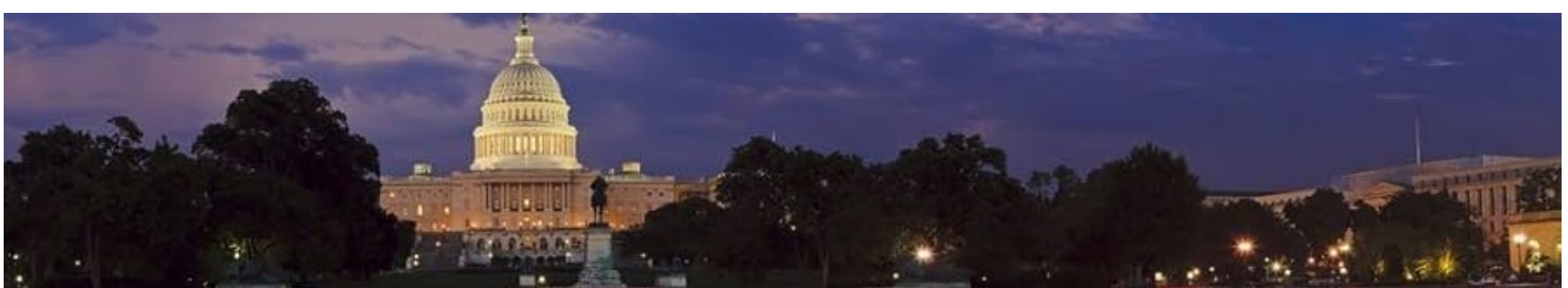
Public education is not just another issue on the policy agenda; it is the foundation of our democracy, the driver of economic opportunity, and the key to a better future for all. The time to act is now.

Will you join the fight?



SherylAbshire.com

Dr. Sheryl Abshire has an impressive body of work and an unwavering passion for education that has built a legacy of transformative impact on education. As an important voice in the profession, she serves as a panelist on our Worthy Town Halls and contributes resources to our EDInfluencers initiative. We are grateful for her continued commitment to education!



The next of our **POPTOKs**

Practical Approaches to Problems of Practice

with Ryan Anthony Bell
is Thursday, April 10th at 3pm



POPTOKs are talks about Problems of Practice.

**Have a nagging issue? Want to vet it for
solutions with likeminded practitioners?**

Submit your proposal here!

Current POPTOKs:

Thursday, February 13th at 7pm et:

POP: Recruitment and Retention of Educators

Problem Originator (PO): Cynthia Jacquet

Status: Launched, In Progress

Thursday, March 6th at 7pm et:

POP: Improving Teacher Trainee Performance

Originator (PO): Dan Reichard

Status: Scheduled

Status: Launched, In Progress

Thursday, April 10th at 3pm et:

POP: Accessibility for Adult Learners

Originator (PO): Ryan Bell

Status: Scheduled

Join April 10th 3pm et here

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Authentic Learning Projects: Partnering Students and Community Members in Meaningful Learning

Donna Neary, Ed.S., English as a New Language Specialist, Ooltewah Middle School, Hamilton County Department of Education, Chattanooga, Tennessee

I have been teaching multilingual, newcomer, immigrant-origin and refugee students for more than a decade. The major take-away of my time in the classroom is that meaningful projects provide students platforms to showcase their skills and knowledge, to think critically and provide connections to their communities past and present, and to our collective future. Furthermore, these projects create a lasting legacy of the work, blazing trails for future students.

My goal is to integrate curriculum standards and design creative applications aligned to them. Every project we complete is connected to compelling questions and is often the culmination of a unit of study. This kind of project-based learning (also known as problem-based learning) supports students with authentic, real world experiences that provide them with the skills they need to contribute to the community after they graduate.

A favorite project of mine resulted from planning for museum a visit for immigrant and refugee students. Once the staff of the Speed Art Museum in Louisville, Kentucky understood these new students in our community had never been to a museum, they worked with us planning a year-long learning experience. Students were celebrated in an exhibition of their artwork entitled “Lost and Found” in the main hall of the museum on a family Sunday, along with a speaking project entitled “Immigration Stories” that was posted on [Soundcloud.com](https://www.soundcloud.com). This connected students’ migration stories to the collections at the museum, with students selecting a work of art that connected to their personal journeys to the United States. By reflecting on their selected works of art, students crafted essays relating the fear, discrimination, poverty and luck they experienced as they made the trek to their new home in our community.

These recordings are in English, or their first or other language that showcased their language acquisition as a superpower. The resulting audio files are poignant, joyful, haunting explorations of human migration and are constructed upon an interdisciplinary study of World History, American History, Civics and the Humanities. Recording a personal essay provides students experience in developing academic language, historical context, and the skills to evaluate and make conclusions about themselves. Even more importantly, they provide students a voice in their community to which they might not otherwise have access..

Great projects result when we plan experiences for students that integrate coursework with our community partners. Former students attended a Title I school within walking distance of an urban farm on the site of demolished public housing. A local non-profit reclaimed the land and began repurposing it for farming, which was its original historic use. A community garden was also located on the site, providing garden plots for neighborhood residents, including many immigrant-origin families and local residents impacted by poverty. We were approached by the garden to take part in a series of lessons on healthy foods, which led to more conversation with its staff that led to a three-year project using the farm as a setting for learning about planting, culture, and community life. Many of our students are from rural backgrounds, and they were excited to be learning outdoors.



Students grew and cooked vegetables while utilizing research, including a study on food insecurity. As a non-profit, the urban farm was multi-pronged, and hired students from our school to help with the work. Taking my students from the classroom to the farm engaged them in multiple sources of information, including the National Geographic Encyclopedia, local cookbooks, and primary source materials about our local neighborhood. In addition they conducted interviews with their family members and chose recipes to include in a digital cookbook, from which many dishes were prepared and served at a community meal. We invited community partners to also bring a dish of their choosing, so that the tables were loaded with fufou, falafel, and Cuban congri right alongside Mawmaws favorite potato salad. Tears rolled down the cheeks of the most seasoned of us as students described what this experience meant to them. The other culminating project the first year of the program was the construction of an outdoor oven built of straw and mud called a cob oven. We all learned incredible lessons.

Sometimes projects come in the form of academic competitions. Participating in the Aspen Challenge in 2019 in Louisville brought a heightened level of accountability for students and powerful lessons for teachers as we watched our students step up to the challenges presented to them. Knowing the work we were doing with immigrant-origin students, our school district invited us to field a team of eight English learners to represent our school. The work was grueling, requiring meetings after school and on weekends for six weeks. I worked with a wonderful colleague to coach our team, supporting and guiding their efforts as they planned and hosted a teen immigrant forum. They called themselves “Futurum,” choosing Latin as the central language of learning. Their solutions-based project on making immigrants feel welcome in their new community won them the Best Collaboration Award, overcoming language barriers and academic voids to successfully represent their school and make their coaches exceedingly proud.



I encourage you to search for and imagine which partners across your community want to work with immigrant-origin students. Once we connected with organizations, we often were introduced to others who expressed additional ideas for projects and partnerships beyond our initial thinking. Students' interests also drove projects and competition entries. Because my students were technology savvy and interested in creating digital products and music, they participated in the [WE.org](https://www.weare.org/) film festival in the spring of 2020. My students created two first place winning films, incorporating the past and the present realities of people who migrate to the United States by tapping into their existing knowledge, the study of U.S. and World History, along with their own personal experiences as immigrants and refugees that provided context for their films that other learners did not have. As a result, they completed high school with tangible evidence of their skills.

These and so many other projects provide students opportunities to combine research skills, competencies and content to create authentic products that bring value to their communities. For example, on a unit of the Civil War in United States history; we visited Abraham Lincoln’s Birthplace National Park. They toured the site and got a feel of the man they had been researching for four weeks. They presented their research projects in the park auditorium, gaining an understanding of what it feels like to present to audiences outside of school. My students also staged exhibitions in museums in Louisville and became the first Guatemalan artists to exhibit at the Hunter Museum of American Art in Chattanooga, Tennessee in its 70-year history. They also invited a Congressman to an open forum where he addressed their concerns and questions as new immigrants in his district. Though not yet able to vote, they asked hard questions concerning their families and their futures.



My work with multilingual learners illustrates the power of prior knowledge as the foundation for learning, with students not only calling on their own experiences but that of generations before them. I am talking about the knowledge that comes from surviving famine and war, enduring refugee camp conditions, overcoming interruptions in their formal education, caring for the elderly and young siblings, and standing bravely and sometimes alone when entering a new school. Students' in our classes routinely share family and cultural knowledge about events of the past, and inviting their ideas and reflections are often multi-generational in scope. I support the ongoing development of a growth mindset as they learn new words, new foods, and build new relationships with peers. We do this by setting high expectations for everything they do and giving them the space to push themselves, growing through the productive struggle that results in impressive learning artifacts and products including thoughtful essays and responses to ongoing discussions and community service activities.

Multilingual students have their work cut out for them, so how can we as teachers and administrators connect students and grow their sense of belonging to the school and the surrounding community? How can we provide the spaces in which they will thrive?

We can make learning accessible by providing opportunities to use English in real life social and academic settings in projects with clear outcomes:

- We can provide spaces and permission for students become active agents in their learning.
- We can imagine and plan meaningful partnerships that serve both students and the community with mutually beneficial outcomes.
- We can create awareness beyond the school campus by creating internships and apprenticeships beyond these projects that open the door to possible pathways to work and careers.

Planning, organizing, coordinating, following-up and following-through take time, patience and attention to detail to create successful projects. The front-end work is often unseen by students and the community who take part in these wonderfully created exhibitions and presentations, but living in these moments of imagining what can be possible is only topped by the joy of watching students accept academic and social challenges and bring their best selves to the task. Feeling the joy and power unleashed in students who persevere in spite of uncertainty in their learning and in their futures, who are often those who have the most to gain or to lose in all aspects of their lives, and yet are open and receptive to using new tools, new thinking and new approaches to their learning, is something that serves them well the rest of their lives. And in terms of life in their new community, they care about the stories being told about themselves and their families, and they bravely bring their voices to share their truths. Through these projects, the community hears them.



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The Continued Need for Servant Leaders in a Post-Pandemic Educational Setting: A Personal Perspective

Joshua Medrano, Ed.D, Academic Dean and Director of Robotics, Rancho Christian School, Temecula, California



When I began my teaching journey in South Central, Los Angeles, my time at AJMS was a blessing because the leadership team established multiple supporting systems that allowed me to enhance my pedagogical practices and methodology. After several years and three schools later, I made the decision to transition from teacher to administrator. One of my core goals was to offer the same experience I had to my team.

After careful reflection, I realized what made the school successful was the style of leadership. There was a teacher-first attitude that permeated throughout the school culture. Administrators genuinely valued the staff and worked to create an environment where people felt safe and their health was a priority. Experiencing the COVID-19 pandemic as a teacher there, I began to think about how leaders, including myself, can support their teams in a post-pandemic educational setting.

A survey conducted by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) in 2014 reported that teachers work in isolation, rarely collaborate or observe their peers, and 46% of teachers never received feedback from their leaders. Five years later, a report conducted by the United States Department of Education identified that teacher job satisfaction dropped by 15% and teachers were becoming more likely to leave the profession.



Now, after five years of suffering the lingering effects of the pandemic, we see teacher satisfaction in the profession at a higher risk than ever before. Teachers feeling the need to adapt new strategies and methodologies to close the gaps created by the COVID-19 disruption are experiencing a variety of stressors in the educational setting. Steiner and Woo (2021) explored the issue of job-related stress among teachers and identified that nearly one in four teachers stated they were likely to leave their jobs. Gabor (2022) shared that the number of education job openings surged by almost 75% by the fall of 2021, compared to the previous year. It is evident that education is in a state of crisis, and we are in need of new solutions to steady the profession. To achieve this, we need servant leaders more today than ever before to meet the needs of teachers and ease the unprecedented levels of stress documented in the research.

As a teacher, I experienced multiple leadership styles. Some, unfortunately, were managers masked as leaders. So I knew I wanted to offer a leadership experience similar to what I experienced as a teacher at AJMS. Morgan (2020) defines a leader as someone who sees how things can be improved and rallies people to move toward a better vision. Using this as a working definition, I ask how can servant leaders be a catalyst for combating the current crisis? Harper (2020) contends that a servant leader is sensitive to the needs of others, and is sensible, grounded and relatable in making practical, reasonable, realistic decisions that prompt others to rise to stated expectations for the benefit of everyone involved. The administrators at AJMS set the gold standard for me in my own leadership journey because of their intentionality. They made themselves available during my times of need, and most importantly, they actively listened to what I had to say. They did not dismiss any of my concerns or make me feel like I was the problem. As a result, the trust and understanding they built led to a relationship that was more proactive than reactive, and I made great strides growing as an educator.



Leaders influence individual and group behavior in the organization, and servant leaders support those in their charge through their value-oriented approach. Teachers trust leaders who show they have their best interests at heart. Staff feel more valued when leaders explain the “why” instead of the “how.” Sharing the vision and goals with the team allows everyone to understand and buy into the journey.

Hauden (2020) identified that servant leaders ask, “how can I help?” when teachers feel overwhelmed with work expectations and changes in the environment. This straightforward, meaningful expression of empathy goes a long way instead of simply stating expectations. By sharing common goals and working with the team to incorporate milestones, servant leaders help to identify areas of growth and work towards the ideal of work-life balance. And because servant leaders do not micro-manage, team members are less likely to experience burnout.

Servant leadership is essential in order to address the numerous needs researchers have identified in today’s teachers. Imagine if each of us adjusted our leadership approach to put the needs of our teachers first, in the same way that teachers adapt their instructional approaches to meet the varied and unique needs of the students in their care. This kind of flexibility and adaptability would go a long way in easing the stress and burnout we’re witnessing across the profession, and help us retain teachers rather than having them leave.

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Joshua Medrano holds an EdD in leadership focusing on systems thinking and educational policy. He has dedicated his career to fostering innovation in education. With years of experience teaching science and math, he successfully spearheaded numerous STEM-based programs that inspired students to engage with complex scientific concepts. Now, as Academic Dean, his passion for educational leadership and commitment to hands-on-learning empowers administrators, teachers and students to further enhance their learning and practice.   



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