

SUMMER 2026

LEGACY

TRANSFORMATION IN ACTION



The Worthy Educator
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Legacy: Transformation in Action 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.

We do not identify quarterly themes. Rather, we are open to the diversity of voice and thought that reflects the rich tapestry of humanity and represents the full range of stakeholders in education.

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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Our Wish for You this Summer

It has been a tumultuous year in education, with many changes and shutdowns that make anyone paying attention wonder

- a) which end is up?
- b) why is this happening? and
- c) how much more can we handle?

The good news is, reality isn't situational, and we don't have to let influences beyond our control dictate the quality of our lives. Starting this summer, we wish for you and educators everywhere...

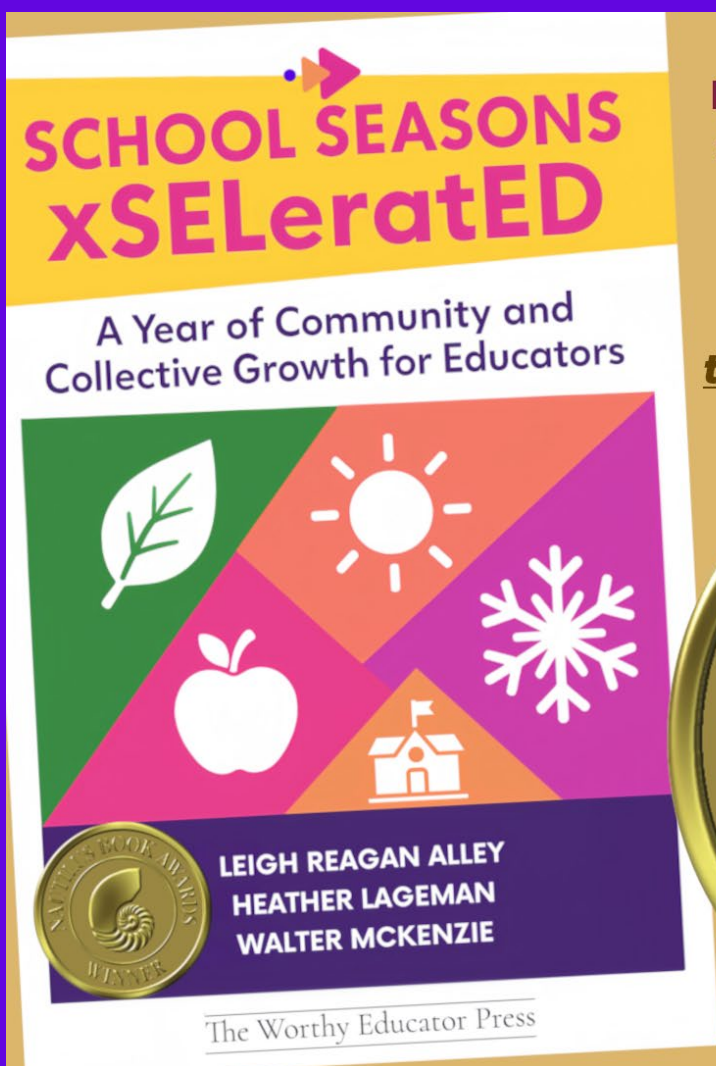
- Time to decompress, heal and renew your spirit
- The cultivation of relationships that restore your faith in the goodness of people
- Conversations that reinvigorate your hopes, dreams and values
- Experiences that make you feel alive and excited for what life holds for you ahead, and
- Clarity around your next steps in building a meaningful legacy of which you can be proud.

If we each accomplish these things in the three months ahead, it will be a summer well spent and well invested in our social, emotional, physical and mental well-being, and you deserve all of it.

As we approach the conclusion of the second year of The Worthy Educator, we have demonstrated what can be done to make a difference with big ideas, big energy, and no big money. It is our hope others will follow our lead and keep the impact going. It's good, hard rewarding, worthy work, and there's more of it!

Walter McKenzie





We are honored to announce our first published title, [School Seasons xSEleratED: A Year of Community and Collective Growth for Educators](#) has received a 2026 [Nautilus Book Award](#) as a Gold Winner in the category of Social Sciences & Education!

Written by [Team xSEleratED](#), the book is developed as a monthly guide of reflexive practices that span the entire school year, serving not as something extra, but as your essential companion for well-being, growth and fulfillment. Written in collaboration, it complements the experience and perspective of Leigh Reagan Alley's orientation to wholeness, Heather Lageman's community-building and Walter McKenzie's systems thinking, weaving a three-part harmony of intentional reflection and insight across the months.

The Worthy Educator is also selected for Special Honors as the [Best in Small Press](#). You can view the announcement on the [Nautilus site](#). and read more about School Seasons xSEleratED on its [official page](#) at The Worthy Educator.



**Three passionate, dynamic voices
pioneering pathways forward for
SEL implementation in education!**

xSEleratED

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the speed
of life.**

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ROADMAP 2031

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Connecting Viewpoints and Enhancing Connections: Five Approaches to Elevate Leadership and Curriculum Teams



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Overview

When leadership decisions are misaligned with classroom realities, student outcomes can suffer, instructional coherence breaks down, and equity gaps widen. The effective alignment between leadership and curriculum teams is essential for cultivating a learning environment that promotes student achievement. Research shows that collaborative professional development, reflective practices, and ongoing dialogue can help bridge the gap between leadership priorities and instructional design. When school leaders actively engage in curriculum discussions, it ensures that instructional practices reflect the district's vision and meet the diverse needs of students. Despite widespread agreement on the importance of collaboration, many districts still experience a disconnect between leadership decisions and classroom implementation. Competing priorities, fragmented communication, and uneven capacity across schools can create silos that limit instructional coherence and slow progress toward equity. Addressing these challenges requires intentional structures and practices that connect leadership vision to curriculum realities.

1 Align Around a Shared Vision for Student Success

In K-12 settings, it's essential that leadership and curriculum teams are anchored in a common vision focused on equitable student outcomes. This shared purpose creates cohesion across grade levels and departments. To put this into practice, school divisions should begin by co-creating a vision for student success that is clearly communicated and widely understood by all stakeholders—teachers, school leaders, families, and students. This vision should serve as a north star, guiding decision-making in curriculum design, instructional practices, professional development, and resource allocation.

For example, divisions can ensure alignment by embedding the vision into school improvement plans, structuring professional learning communities (PLCs) around shared instructional goals, and using the vision as a filter when adopting new initiatives. When the vision is used consistently at every level—from central office strategy to classroom instruction—it fosters coherence, builds trust, and drives measurable progress toward student outcomes.

Research underscores that the success of an organization is profoundly influenced by the clarity and effectiveness of its vision, particularly in terms of how well it aligns with strategic objectives and is communicated across all levels (Akinola, 2025; Kim, Gao, Woo, & Cannella, 2024; Bilgin, Van Knippenberg, & Dietz, 2024). Kim et al. (2024) emphasize the positive correlation between a strong vision and organizational outcomes, while Bilgin et al. (2024) caution that misalignment between internal and external messaging can undermine credibility and effectiveness. Collectively, these findings underscore that vision is not merely aspirational but a strategic tool that, when leveraged effectively, drives cohesive culture and measurable success.



Ultimately, when school systems are grounded in a unified vision, they can more effectively lead change, sustain improvement, and elevate student outcomes across the board. Once teams are unified by a shared vision, the next step is ensuring that those at the table reflect the diversity of the students they serve.



Cultivate Diverse and Inclusive Teams

Diversity in roles, experiences, and perspectives enriches curriculum discussions and leads to more thoughtful, equitable decision-making. Inclusive teams ensure that instructional strategies reflect the diverse needs of students across a school division, particularly those who have historically been underrepresented in curriculum design and instructional leadership.

To build inclusive and effective leadership-curriculum teams, school divisions should intentionally bring together a range of voices, including classroom teachers across grade levels and content areas, instructional specialists, support staff, and when appropriate, student and family perspectives. Each member offers unique insight into how curriculum decisions impact learners in real-world contexts.

For example, a division might expand its curriculum review process to include English learner (EL) teachers, special education professionals, and school counselors. These team members can help identify gaps in accessibility, suggest culturally relevant content, and advocate for instructional materials that support all learners. Including student voice through focus groups or student advisory panels can also provide valuable insight into engagement and relevance from the learner's perspective. Additionally, diverse teams support innovation and responsiveness. As highlighted by Learning Forward, inclusive professional learning communities are more likely to generate creative solutions, adapt to emerging challenges, and implement strategies that serve a broader spectrum of student needs.

To sustain diverse and inclusive teams, school divisions should foster a culture of trust, mutual respect, and shared leadership. This includes establishing norms that value every perspective, providing equitable opportunities for participation, and ensuring all voices are heard during planning, implementation, and reflection phases. By cultivating teams that mirror the communities they serve, schools are better positioned to create curriculum and instruction that is both rigorous and relevant—paving the way for meaningful learning experiences and improved student outcomes. However, simply bringing diverse voices to the table is not enough; teams must cultivate trust and psychological safety to fully leverage those perspectives.



Foster a Culture of Psychological Safety and Trust

For leadership and curriculum teams to function effectively, psychological safety must be a foundational element. When team members feel safe to express ideas, question assumptions, and admit mistakes without fear of judgment or retaliation, collaboration deepens, innovation flourishes, and stronger instructional decisions are made.

In practice, school divisions can foster psychological safety by creating norms that prioritize active listening, respectful dialogue, and curiosity over criticism. Leaders play a crucial role by modeling vulnerability—such as openly reflecting on their own areas for growth or asking for feedback. These behaviors signal to others that all contributions are valued and that mistakes are viewed as opportunities for learning.

For example, during curriculum planning sessions, facilitators can begin by setting shared agreements for engagement (e.g., "assume positive intent," "speak your truth," "one mic at a time") and check in regularly to ensure every voice is heard. Using protocols like "think-pair-share" or anonymous digital responses can encourage participation from quieter team members or those hesitant to speak in larger groups. Additionally, leaders can build trust by following through on commitments, acknowledging team input in final decisions, and being transparent about changes and their rationale. Over time, these practices create a team culture where members are empowered to speak up, challenge groupthink, and co-create solutions that better meet the diverse needs of students.

As highlighted by Edutopia, strong leadership teams that prioritize trust are more collaborative and make better decisions. When people feel psychologically safe, they are more willing to take risks, engage in meaningful dialogue, and commit to shared goals—all of which are essential for effective curriculum design and implementation. Ultimately, a culture of psychological safety not only supports adult learning and growth but also models the kind of inclusive, student-centered environment schools aim to create in every classroom. With trust and psychological safety established, teams are better equipped to engage in meaningful inquiry and reflection—examining their practices and outcomes to continuously improve teaching and learning.



Leverage Collaborative Inquiry and Reflection

Effective leadership and curriculum teams thrive when they embrace collaborative inquiry and regular reflection as part of their routine practice. By systematically examining teaching strategies, analyzing student outcomes, and assessing team dynamics, schools can maintain a sharp focus on student-centered improvement and foster a culture of continuous learning.

To bring this to life, school divisions should establish structured opportunities for teams to engage in cycles of inquiry. This might include using protocols such as “Looking at Student Work,” data digs, or lesson study to evaluate the impact of instruction on student learning. These sessions are most powerful when teams use real-time data—such as assessment results, student feedback, or classroom observations—to identify areas for growth, design targeted responses, and monitor progress over time.

For example, a middle school math team might notice through benchmark data that students are struggling with multi-step problem-solving. In response, the team could co-develop a series of scaffolded lessons, observe each other’s implementation, and reconvene to reflect on student engagement and understanding. This iterative approach, when supported by strong facilitation and consistent meeting time, leads to more relevant instructional decisions and improved outcomes.

Leadership teams can also use reflection to assess how effectively they are functioning as collaborators. Tools like self-assessments, structured debriefs, or partner feedback protocols can surface insights about team dynamics, communication patterns, and decision-making processes—all of which influence the success of curricular work.

The Carnegie Foundation advocates for such improvement science cycles—structured around identifying problems, testing small changes, and refining based on evidence. These cycles empower teams to move beyond one-time fixes and toward sustained, measurable change. Networked Improvement Communities (NICs), as highlighted by Carnegie, also offer a model for scaling what works across schools or divisions while honoring local context.

“When reflection and inquiry become embedded habits, teams remain responsive to students’ evolving needs, more agile in addressing challenges, and more united in pursuing equitable, high-impact learning experiences for all. Reflection and inquiry naturally lead to data-driven insights, enabling leadership and curriculum teams to make decisions that not only improve performance but also promote equity across all student groups.”



5

Use Data to Drive Equity-Focused Decisions

To truly elevate leadership and curriculum work, teams must commit to using data not only to improve performance but to ensure that all students have equitable access to high-quality learning experiences. Equity-focused leadership requires intentional analysis of data to uncover opportunity gaps, respond to student needs, and guide more just and inclusive decision-making.

School divisions can begin by disaggregating academic, behavioral, attendance, and engagement data by student groups—such as race, gender, language proficiency, disability status, and socioeconomic background. This process helps teams identify trends and disparities that might otherwise remain hidden in overall averages. For example, if chronic absenteeism is disproportionately high among English learners, teams can dig deeper into root causes and design targeted supports, such as outreach efforts, language-accessible family communication, or community partnerships.

In another district, disaggregated reading data revealed a gap for English learners. The team responded by diversifying texts, adapting scaffolds, and providing targeted professional development. Within a semester, reading comprehension scores for the subgroup improved significantly, illustrating the power of data-informed, equity-focused action.

One school division developed a systematic approach to ensure that decisions, training, and implementation processes are aligned and leave no student or staff member behind. The process begins with identifying an Area of Focus based on data and student needs. Division leadership is then trained and monitors implementation, followed by school leadership teams, who provide ongoing feedback. Teachers and staff implement the strategies, and student outcomes are monitored to measure progress. The cycle then loops back to data and outcomes to inform the next Area of Focus. When followed consistently, this system ensures clarity, communication, and accountability across the division, resulting in stronger outcomes for all students.



Systematic Improvement Cycle

1. **Identify Area of Focus:** Based on student data and outcomes.
2. **Leadership Support:** Division leaders provide training and monitor implementation.
3. **Team Monitoring:** School teams track progress and give feedback.
4. **Implementation by Staff:** Teachers apply strategies and monitor progress.
5. **Student Impact:** Students benefit from interventions and supports.
6. **Data & Outcomes Review:** Analyze results to guide the next focus area.

The cycle continues iteratively to ensure continuous improvement.

Leaders should also model data transparency by sharing findings with school teams and engaging educators in collaborative data dialogues. These conversations go beyond test scores—they include student voice surveys, walkthrough data, and social-emotional metrics to build a fuller picture of the student experience. When used responsibly and in context, data becomes a tool for advocacy rather than judgment. Additionally, curriculum teams can leverage data to inform inclusive instructional practices. If student performance data reveals gaps in reading comprehension among certain subgroups, for instance, teams might diversify text selections, adapt scaffolds, or embed more culturally responsive materials to better meet the needs of all learners.

The Education Trust stresses the importance of using data in equity-driven school improvement planning. Their guidance emphasizes not only disaggregation but also the inclusion of stakeholder perspectives—students, families, and community members—in interpreting data and co-developing solutions.

Ultimately, when teams use data through an equity lens, they are more equipped to break down barriers, allocate resources wisely, and ensure that every student—regardless of background—has the opportunity to thrive. By grounding decisions in both evidence and an equity lens, schools can ensure that their vision, collaboration, and culture translate into meaningful, inclusive learning experiences for every student.

As you consider your current leadership-curriculum system, reflect on questions such as:

- How aligned are our leadership and curriculum priorities right now?*
- Whose voices are missing from our decision-making tables?*
- How do we use data to reveal—not conceal—equity gaps?*

Engaging with these questions can help identify opportunities for more cohesive, inclusive, and equitable practices in your division. In a time when schools face increasing complexity, alignment between leadership and curriculum teams isn't optional—it's the foundation for meaningful, sustainable change. When divisions anchor their work in shared vision, inclusive collaboration, trust, reflective practice, and equity-centered data use, they move from compliance-driven meetings to purpose-driven learning communities. The challenge and opportunity for today's leaders is to create the conditions where every voice shapes the vision and every decision brings that vision to life for students. Leaders must now move beyond awareness to action, ensuring that every decision, meeting, and initiative reflects this integrated approach to student-centered, equitable learning.



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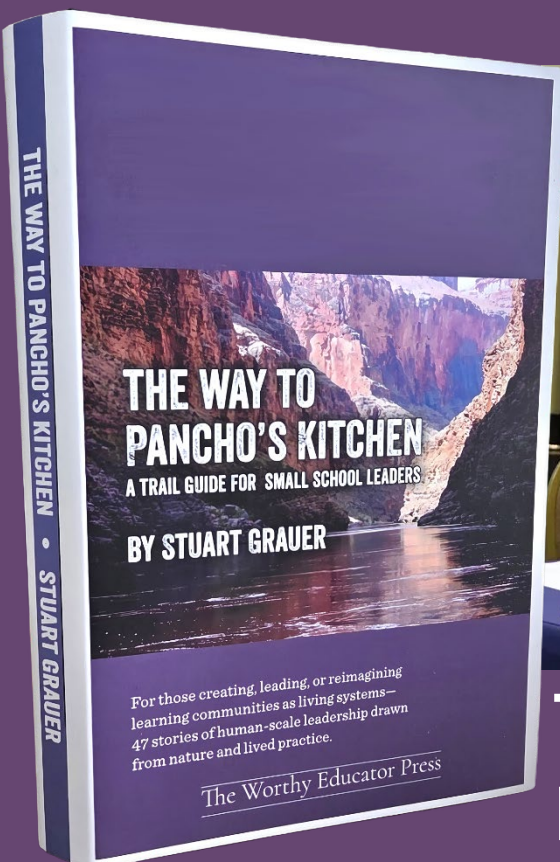


Dr. Katelyn R. Leitner is the founder of *Do What's Best for Kids (DWB4K) LLC*, a consultancy grounded in the mission: “Align the work. Elevate the impact.” Her work centers on bridging research and practice through the DWB4K Framework: *The Aligned Learning Ecosystem*, ensuring high-quality learning is not left to chance, but guaranteed for every student. She currently serves as Director of Curriculum and Instruction for the *Suffolk, Virginia Public Schools*, where she specializes in coaching educators on the 5E instructional model, strengthening Tier 1 instruction, and implementing effective, research-based practices for 21st-century classrooms. Her passion is for building educator capacity, improving student outcomes, and creating sustainable systems that drive continuous improvement—not short-term change.  



Dr. Jamel Gibson is the Chief Executive Officer of the *Andasti Performing Arts Mentoring Academy*, providing motivation to elementary school males to reduce suspensions and raise student achievement with a focus on social skills, self-monitoring tools, self-esteem building strategies, and self-care practices for young people engaging in social media. Serving as Director of School Leadership for the *Portsmouth City, Virginia Public Schools*, he has experience as a teacher, elementary and secondary school principal, and college professor. His insight and understanding into how students think, process, collaborate, and socialize, combined with his researcher expertise, make him a unique voice in education today.  

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We're Not More Divided; We're Fighting Ghosts.

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Career Educator, District and State Leader
Co-Author, *The Hope-Centered Educator*
Co-founder of xSELeratED
Baltimore, Maryland

Introduction

I heard something on *CBS News Sunday Morning* that stopped me cold.

Northwestern University researcher Eli Finkel was explaining what his lab had found about political polarization: we haven't actually grown further apart on the issues. We've just convinced ourselves we have. We've built elaborate mental villains, shadow versions of "the other side," and we're waging war against those phantoms instead of engaging with the real, complicated, sometimes-surprisingly-reasonable people who actually exist.

I've spent more than 25 years in education as a teacher, school administrator, state curriculum director, and now a district leader. I've sat in hundreds of meetings where people had stopped listening and started arguing with the version of their colleague they'd constructed in their heads. Finkel's research doesn't just describe American politics. It describes every one of those rooms, and every classroom where students watch adults model contempt instead of curiosity.

The Number That Should Embarrass All of Us

Here's the finding I can't stop thinking about: a 2020 study in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* found that Democrats and Republicans overestimate how much the opposing party dehumanizes them by 50 to 300 percent. Not a little off. Spectacularly, devastatingly wrong.

We all choose the teams we cheer for, and the teams we root against, but it becomes a problem when we lose sight of the beauty of being able to participate. When we can no longer appreciate the perspective of the entire field, we all lose.

Finkel, who founded Northwestern's Litowitz Center for Enlightened Disagreement, frames it simply: we're "fighting phantoms." We've stopped encountering the people who disagree with us and started encountering our *idea* of them. This isn't just a civic problem. It's a learning problem, and our national education standards know it.

What Our Standards Are Already Telling Us

The National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) identifies civic competence, "the knowledge, intellectual processes, and democratic dispositions required of students to be active and engaged participants in public life," as the primary aim of social studies education. Its Theme X, Civic Ideals and Practices, frames exactly the questions our students are living through: What is the balance between rights and responsibilities? How can I make a positive difference? How do I engage my fellow citizens constructively?

The Center for Civic Education's National Standards for Civics and Government reinforce this with a framework of intellectual and participatory skills that goes beyond content knowledge. To be civically competent, students must learn to interact and to question, to answer, and, crucially, to deliberate with civility, as well as to manage conflict in a fair and peaceful manner. They must also learn to build coalitions, negotiate, and seek consensus: skills that are impossible to develop if we're only practicing arguments against opponents we've invented.

The National Institute for Civil Discourse (NICD) names the same core problem differently. Their Engaging Differences framework identifies three practices at the heart of constructive civic engagement: Empathy instead of vitriol, Listening for Understanding instead of hearing to overpower, and Humility instead of all-knowing. These aren't soft skills. They're the preconditions for democracy itself.

And the U.S. Courts’ Guidelines for a Civil Discussion remind us that courtrooms, our most formal arenas of adversarial disagreement, are built on a profound civic commitment: that we differentiate facts from opinions, ask questions before assuming, and never mistake the loudest voice for the most credible one. Civil discourse, the courts tell us, is not the absence of disagreement. It is the disciplined practice of engaging disagreement well.

Disagreement Isn’t the Problem

The goal isn’t to disagree less. Finkel calls disagreement “the lifeblood of innovation.” I’d go further and say that productive disagreement is how we discover what we actually value, and it’s one of the most transferable skills we can help students develop. The question isn’t *whether* we disagree. It’s *how*.

Finkel’s lab uses a deceptively simple improv exercise. One person rants for a minute about something that makes them furious. Then their partner does something unexpected: they don’t rebut. They identify what the speaker *values* and what’s underneath the anger, the thing they’re actually trying to protect.

Not what you’re against. What you’re *for*.

I’ve watched this dynamic play out in leadership development programs and team meetings across schools and districts. The veteran administrator who seems resistant to change? She may be terrified that abandoning what works will cost kids the stability they desperately need. The newer leader pushing hard for innovation? He may have watched too many students fall through the cracks of a system that never made room for who they are. Both are trying to protect children. They’ve just been arguing with the villain they invented instead of the person in front of them.



Four Step-by-Step Strategies for Your Team

The following strategies draw on the U.S. Courts’ Guidelines, the NICD’s Engaging Differences framework, and Finkel’s research to build the participatory skills our standards describe. Each can be adapted for classroom use with students or professional learning with adults.



Strategy 1: Establish Ground Rules Together (Before Any Hard Conversation)

Adapted from the U.S. Courts’ civil discussion guidelines, this step asks participants to co-create their own norms before a high-stakes discussion, not to receive a list of rules, but to own them.

Step 1: Ask individuals to independently reflect: “What do you need in order to feel safe enough to say something you’re uncertain about?”

Step 2: Share and compile responses as a group. Look for themes.

Step 3: Draft 3–5 shared agreements together. Anchor them in the U.S. Courts’ civil discussion touchstones: differentiate facts from opinions; ask clarifying questions before assuming; moderate your tone; no eye-rolling, sighing, or checking out.

Step 4: Post the agreements where everyone can see them and revisit them if the conversation gets heated.

Standards connection: NCSS Theme X (Civic Ideals and Practices); Center for Civic Education participatory skills: interacting with civility and managing conflict.



Strategy 2: Listen for Values, Not Just Positions (The Finkel Reframe)

This is the core practice from Finkel’s lab adapted for classrooms, faculty meetings, and IEP team conversations.

Step 1: One person shares their position on a topic for 2 minutes, uninterrupted.

Step 2: Their partner does *not* respond to the argument. Instead, they complete this sentence: “What I hear you caring most about is...”

Step 3: The speaker confirms or corrects the reflection. This is not agreement—it’s acknowledgment.

Step 4: Partners switch. Repeat.

Step 5: As a pair, identify one value you share, even if your positions differ. Name it explicitly.

Standards connection: NICD principles: Listening for Understanding; Empathy without abandoning conviction. NCSS Theme IV (Individual Development and Identity).

3

Strategy 3: Structured Deliberation (Practiced Disagreement, Not Debate)

Adapted from the U.S. Courts’ deliberative discussion model and aligned with the Center for Civic Education’s participatory skills framework, structured deliberation asks students to advocate for positions they may not personally hold, then drop the role and find consensus.

Step 1: Introduce a genuine, balanced question on a topic that matters to your students or community.

Step 2: Divide into pairs (Team A and Team B). Team A prepares the strongest case for “yes.” Team B prepares the strongest case for “no.” Each side presents for 2 minutes.

Step 3: Reverse positions. Team A now articulates Team B’s best argument, and vice versa.

Step 4: Drop roles. Each person shares their own actual view, now informed by having genuinely engaged the other side.

Step 5: As a group, search for common ground. Where do both positions share underlying values?

Step 6: Reflect: What did you learn? What surprised you? Did you hear yourself in the other side?

Standards connection: NCSS Theme X; Center for Civic Education: evaluate, take, and defend positions; NICD: Listening for Understanding; U.S. Courts’ deliberation model.

4

Strategy 4: The Bridge Exercise (Finding Common Ground Without Losing Your Island)

A free popup resource accompanying this article, designed by Heather especially for us!



CLICK
HERE!

Standards connection: Center for Civic Education: building coalitions and seeking consensus. NICD: Humility + Empathy. NCSS Theme V (Individuals, Groups, and Institutions).

BONUS



Why This Matters Right Now in Schools

NCSS reminds us that “civic competence rests on a commitment to democratic values, and requires the ability to use knowledge about one’s community, nation, and world.” The Center for Civic Education goes further: civic dispositions, including the willingness to engage difference with humility and good faith, develop slowly, over time, through what students experience in school.

What we model in our classrooms, our faculty meetings, and our leadership teams isn’t just professional behavior. It’s civic education.

Finkel’s research gives us both permission and an obligation to question our own mental model of the people we think we oppose. Not because our convictions are wrong. But because the person sitting across from us almost certainly isn’t the villain we’ve been rehearsing arguments against. And because our students are watching every move we make. The joy is in the journey. Not the one toward agreement, but toward actually seeing the person in front of you. That’s where connection lives. And it’s where transformational learning begins.

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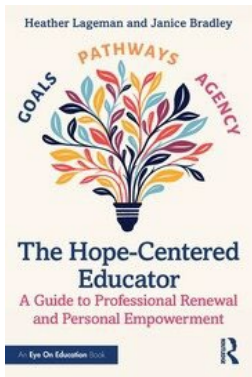
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Heather Lageman is a trusted friend, colleague, and confidante of everyone who knows her. She just published *The Hope-Centered Educator* with co-author Janice Bradley (Routledge, 2026), drawing on Hope Theory and hope-based leadership practices as well as authentic experiences from educators nationwide. She has worked with such notable organizations as Maryland ASCD, Learning Forward, Maryland Codes, and The Council of Educational Administrative and Supervisory Organizations of Maryland, chairs the Maryland Computing Education Steering Committee, and serves on advisory boards for Loyola University Maryland and Hood College. Heather is a founder of *xSELeatED*, which is showcased monthly on The Worthy Educator.  

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FRIENDS
FOREVER**

#edufriends

A page of dedication to those special, longtime friends-and-colleagues without whom our career journeys would not be the same! Longterm, trusting, caring professional relationships are possible! Enjoy reading these testaments to enduring friendship among worthy educators. We'll continue to add new #edufriends as we receive them beyond our initial February celebration and celebrate your stories the end of every week on Best Friends Friday using #BFFriday on social media. Share *your* story and show that longterm, loyal, caring, nurturing, professional friendships are still possible!

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Different by Design with Angela Stockman

**Tuesday
July 28, 2026
4:00–5:00 p.m. e.t.**



Angela Stockman is an independent professional learning facilitator, consultant, and practitioner-researcher with more than three decades in the field, spanning K-16 education and the private sector. She has quietly rebuilt the way she offers and designs her professional learning services. Some of you have noticed, and more than a few friends in facilitation work have reached out to her as they reimagine their own purposes and place in education.

The savviest among us have been reality-testing plans for quite some time now, as tectonic shifts began happening underneath the surface of all of the accomplishments and high-fives that so many tend to share, but few are talking about those more painful shifts openly.

Why? It's a bit terrifying, and it's made everyone more competitive than collaborative. Posturing and performative posting are wearing everyone out (as consumers and producers of such content).

Some of us also have an awful lot to lose. Angela does not, and so she is willing to extend herself in a way that might make some uncomfortable. Everyone can benefit from taking part in this courageous conversation!

Join Angela on Tuesday, July 28th at 4:00 p.m. e.t.!



Leading for Impact: Teacher Leadership that Eschews Burnout

Pete Hall
President & C.E.O.
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Setting

Following the dismissal bell, Tanya, an 11-year veteran teacher, meets up with Marcus, another member of the Greenwell Middle School faculty, for their daily wrap-up conversation.

“How did your fourth-period lesson go? Did the kids eat it up?” Marcus asks.

“Quite literally,” Tanya grins, opening her packed lunch, which often isn’t devoured until after school. “Solving algebraic equations with M&M’s as variables tends to make teenagers salivate.”

Tanya and Marcus have worked together for several years, and they lean on each other often, planning lessons and analyzing data together, exchanging instructional techniques, and providing emotional support through the ups and downs of a school year.

On this particular day, Tanya has something broader on her mind than her math lesson.

“I want to have a greater impact,” she says, putting down her turkey wrap and looking at Marcus. “I want to be a difference-maker in education.”

“Well, I’ve told you,” Marcus says. “Enroll in the educational leadership program with me. You can get your Master’s degree and your administrator’s certificate – then the world is your oyster.”

“I love teaching too much for that,” Tanya says. “I am not interested in focusing solely on curriculum or assessments or discipline. Being an assistant principal, principal, or specialist doesn’t appeal to me. My jam is in the classroom.”

“So what do you really want?” Marcus asks.

“I have a lot to offer,” Tanya says. “The question is, how do I leverage my skills, knowledge, and impact in a leadership capacity while staying predominantly in the classroom...and get compensated fairly for it?”

“That,” Marcus says ruefully, “is the million-dollar question.”

Tanya’s query is similar to one I’ve heard hundreds of times over the past several years. Heck, I even asked it myself at a couple of points in my career. We’ve got throngs of incredible, talented, savvy teachers who have a lot to offer; indeed, their colleagues, preservice teachers, their campuses and communities, and the profession itself can benefit from their expertise...so why isn’t teacher-leadership utilized more often?

Tackling the Conundrum

There’s one giant boulder blocking our path to effective teacher leadership: We don’t view teachers as viable leaders.

Hold on, hold on, before you start lambasting me in the comments, consider this: How do we typically handle the expert teachers in our schools? In most cases, in order to extract the greatest perceived benefit from them, we shuck them out of their classrooms. What a dismal trade-off, right? We take the best of the best teachers and remove them from the setting in which they are making the biggest difference!

Why does this happen? We want to recognize their excellence, and that often means *promoting* them. Is an assistant principal position a promotion? Maybe. Does it automatically mean the expert teacher's influence is multiplied? Perhaps. Do all great teachers become great administrators? No, unfortunately, they don't.

Sometimes we ruin great teachers by separating them from their strengths and passions. Tanya's greatest benefit, and her greatest joy, are found in the day-to-day teaching, learning, relationships, and exquisite cacophony of the classroom. Why promote them away from their position of ultimate impact?

Or we do this (and I've been guilty of all the following as a principal):

- We need a teacher representative to serve on the site leadership team? Ask Tanya.
- Someone needs to coordinate the Read on the Lawn event and facilitate the spelling bee? Ask Tanya.
- The district asks for teacher input on the new curriculum adoption? Ask Tanya.
- We need a facilitator for the book study on the new intervention model? Ask Tanya.
- The faculty lounge desperately needs a makeover? Ask Tanya.
- Someone needs to lead a discussion on powerful lesson hooks? Ask Tanya.

And the "ask" language I use is being generous. Often, Tanya isn't even asked; she's voluntold. And there's no compensation for these additional responsibilities; indeed, they're volunteer roles tacked onto her already-overflowing docket that she accepts out of the goodness of her enormous heart. And what does that do to the incredible, wonderful Tanyas out there? It burns them out, sowing resentment, exhaustion, frustration, and negativity. Why would we do this to our best and brightest stars?

So, let's return to the so-called million-dollar question: *How do we leverage our expert teachers' skills, knowledge, and impact in a leadership capacity while keeping them predominantly in the classroom...and compensating them fairly for it?*



How can Teachers Lead from the Classroom out?

First things first, let's clarify a statement I made earlier: We don't view teachers as viable leaders...because they don't wield *positional authority* over others. So we don't typically treat them as leaders and grant them leadership status.

However, consider this definition:

Leader (noun): One who has followers.

Leaders inspire other people. They provide a standard by which others can be compared. They set the tone, the direction, and the tenacity with which others pursue goals. They impact the mindsets, beliefs, and habits of others. They compel others to take action. One doesn't need positional authority, a title, or a special certificate hanging on the wall to be a leader.

So yeah, teachers are leaders, without question.

There are many ways that teachers lead while maintaining their teaching duties, with boots on the ground, the ears of the people, and the street cred to influence their peers. Below you'll encounter a handful of approaches, sorted into two levels of teacher-leadership.

Level One: Embedded Influence

Can we create opportunities that extend beyond the classroom for Tanya? Absolutely. Are many of them relatively simple to fold into our expert teachers' regular professional responsibilities and duties? Yes, indeed, they are. What can teacher-leaders do to impact a system positively?

Use a leadership voice. Who tends to speak out in faculty meetings, the staff lounge, and the dreaded parking lot? Naysayers. Disenchanted educators. The negative. When those are the voices colleagues hear, the staff becomes fractured, morale plummets, and positive change efforts stall. Instead, teacher-leaders can use their voice to advocate for the common, clear, compelling vision that rallies everyone on campus together. They can speak up, share stories of success, generate positive interactions, and build camaraderie. Through their curated public input, the school culture can transform into a joyous, optimistic, enchanting place to work.

Get comfy being the first follower. When someone else presents a promising idea that addresses our needs and aligns with our vision, teacher-leaders can stand up. Endorse it. Vow to try it. And then follow through by doing it. This holds true no matter who presented the idea in the first place: a colleague, student, administrator, parent, or social-media commenter. When there's a first follower, there'll be a second. Then a third, and on and on. It's not until the **100th monkey** adopts a behavior that it becomes the routine. Until that happens, the promising ideas will remain simply that: ideas.

Be the change you want to see. Good things come to those who wait? Not in education. There's a better expression I've come to embrace: There's no point in walking to preach unless your walking is your preaching. If a campus wishes to have more teacher collaboration, teacher-leaders can roll up their sleeves, go to a colleague, and bring some data and a couple of questions to consider. If the staff wants better feedback on their teaching practices, teacher-leaders can send an invitation to administrators or instructional coaches to visit the classroom with a short list of look-fors. Rather than wait for the stars to align and for someone else to institute a policy to make best practices the norm, teacher-leaders can start doing them, contributing to the professional environment we know works.

Level Two: Compensated Add-On Roles

Let's formalize some teacher-leadership systems and slide Tanya in as she sees fit. Here are some options, with compensation ideas below:

Mentor new teachers. Teaching is one of those professions that seems like anyone could do it. Until you try. Having a sage, supportive guide on the side for new teachers is an essential part of an effective induction program. Through coaching conversations, collaborative discussions, problem-solving sessions, and more, teacher-leaders can serve as the partner and advisor for teacher new to the profession, district, building, and/or assignment.

Facilitate professional-learning experiences. One way to share a teacher-leader's expertise is to invite the teacher to lead professional development sessions for the staff. During team meetings, faculty meetings, designated PD days, and even beyond school hours (if there's a way to compensate attendees as well), the teacher-leader could share promising practices, tips and tricks, and tools to help colleagues deepen their understanding. Sometimes the best PD comes from the teacher down the hall, and creating a structure to encourage that collaboration can go a long way.

Host a model classroom. Another way to share a teacher-leader's expertise is to designate that person's classroom as a "model" setting. Whether the focus is classroom management and routines, clear instructional design and delivery, or any other element of high-quality teaching, the classroom becomes a destination for fellow teachers to visit, observe, and discuss the characteristics, planning, organization, and maintenance of exceptional performance.

Lead an action-research project. Nothing bonds a team of teachers more than the common pursuit of a challenging question. Often referred to as a problem-of-practice, these questions pique the interest and curiosity of a team of teachers, who then scour the research and follow **the Reflective Cycle** together, seeking strategies and approaches that address the problem-of-practice in order to improve the educational outcomes for their students. Leading this process, facilitating discussions, and eventually reporting back to the staff on their findings, can be an empowering role for teacher-leaders.

Chair a committee. Most schools have an abundance of committees designed to keep the ship afloat and moving forward. Staying abreast of the work often takes additional time, energy, and expertise, and our teacher-leaders are in a prime position to influence their peers and the direction of the school in this capacity. Not only does this responsibility carry the weight of facilitating committee meetings, it allows our teacher-leaders to hone their skills of setting direction, strategic planning, coordinating personnel, and managing a dynamic project.



Putting our Money where our Mouth is

For the tasks and projects like the ones at Level two, principals can (and ought to) offer appropriate compensation to reward the time commitment our expert teachers provide. Often, this is regulated by local collective bargaining agreements, and it may include an additional step of posting, interviewing, and selecting individuals to assume the responsibility. In the end, the right people reap the rewards for their contributions to the greater good. Here are some options:

Modest (or not-so-modest, why not?) stipends. Those holding the purse strings often have flexibility in awarding financial stipends for additional responsibilities. Additional pay for additional work just makes sense. This could be divvied up at an hourly rate or a per-project lump sum.

Release (or flex) time. What's the most elusive commodity? Time. Many districts have models that grant release time from contracted days or hours, the opportunity to work from home when possible, or otherwise trade time-for-time.

Portional FTE assignments. In certain circumstances, the additional duties may be so significant and long-lasting that they can be wrapped into a teacher-leader's contract. There are considerable benefits to both parties when a teacher earns 1.1 or 1.2 FTE when the leadership tasks are packaged into their annual contract. Think of the benefits to service time and retirement beyond the short-term boost in income.

The Long and Short of it

The expertise and experience of our best and brightest teachers are often the most valuable (and misutilized) assets within a school. Rather than overburden them with requests and expectations that they'll likely acquiesce to because of their servant nature – which likely leaves them jaded, burned out, and likely to press “eject” and seek employment elsewhere – savvy leaders can identify opportunities for productive teacher-leadership and allocate appropriate compensation for that commitment.

Teacher-leaders thrive when their principals seek their input, honor their perspectives, appreciate their experiences, and value the impact they have on their colleagues, the day-to-day work, and the entire school community.



Six weeks later

Tanya's conversation with Marcus inspired her to take the bull by the proverbial horns. She arranged a “Coffee Talk” session for one morning before school and invited a handful of fellow veteran, expert educators. Together, they brainstormed a list of ways they could share their strengths, flex their leadership muscles, and impact the school community...and, quite importantly, also put together a handful of acceptable compensation options.

That small group of teacher-leaders presented the information as a menu to the administration at Greenwell Middle School, including Marcus (who had begun an internship in the school office through his Master's program).

Marcus was tasked with reaching out to the district's Human Resources department for clarity and guidance, and within two weeks, the administration announced a formal teacher-leadership program for the site.

When Marcus pops his head into Tanya's room after school a month later, the structure of the program is well underway.

“Are you surviving?” Marcus asks.

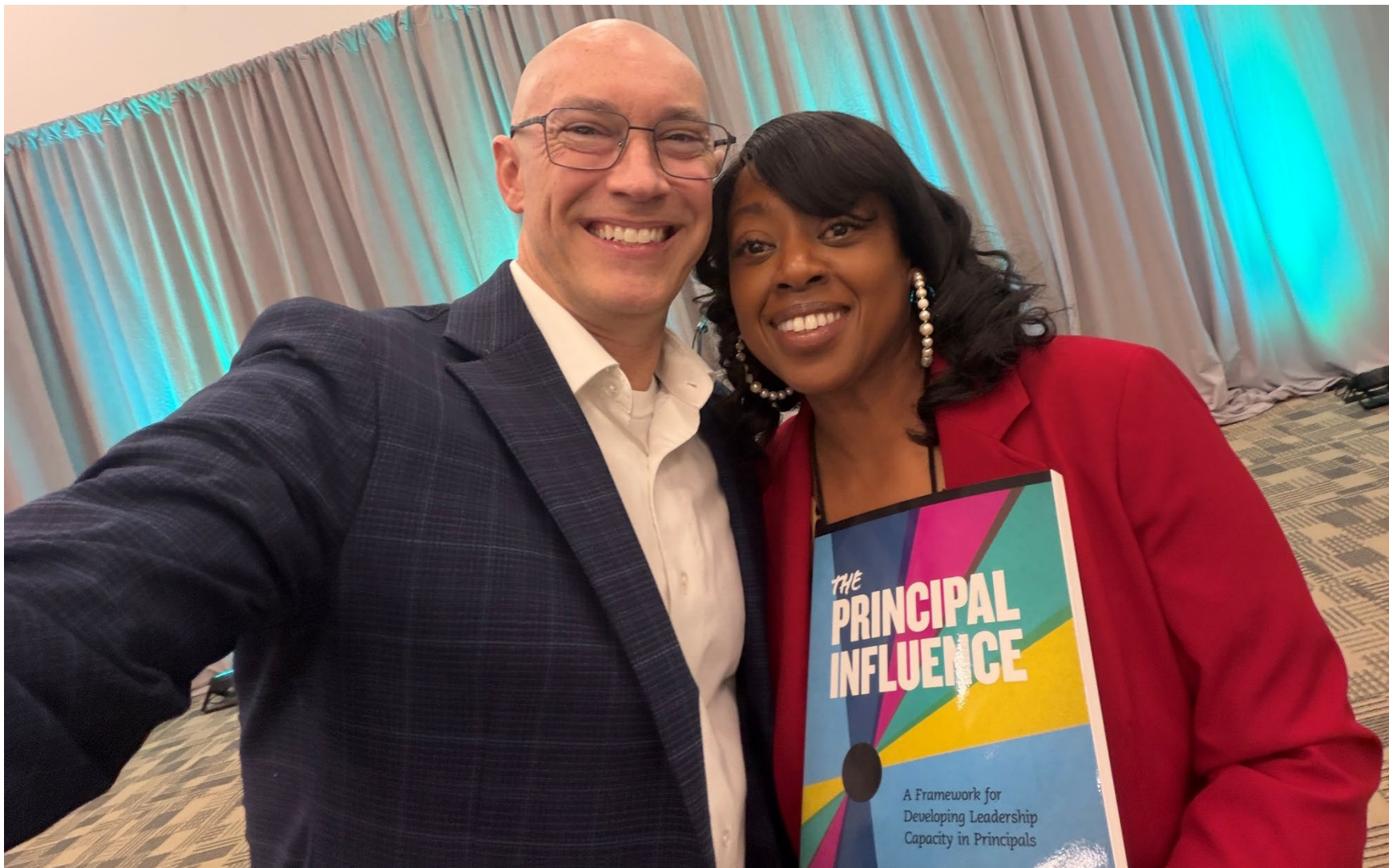
“Not just surviving. Thriving.” Tanya smiles. “I’m so glad we’re doing this.”

“What’s the current leadership project?” Marcus asks.

“We’re in a good spot,” Tanya says. “It looks like I’ll have a district-approved model classroom next year, and I’ll be getting an additional prep period to help with planning and coaching conversations with teachers who visit. Also, we’ve built the skeleton of a new-teacher mentoring program and, thanks to your negotiations with HR, there’s a pretty good pay structure in the plan.”

“Glad to help,” Marcus nods. “But it’s you who’s done all the work. I’m glad we’ve found a way to keep the teacher-leaders fired up and encouraged around here. There’s a good energy on campus.”

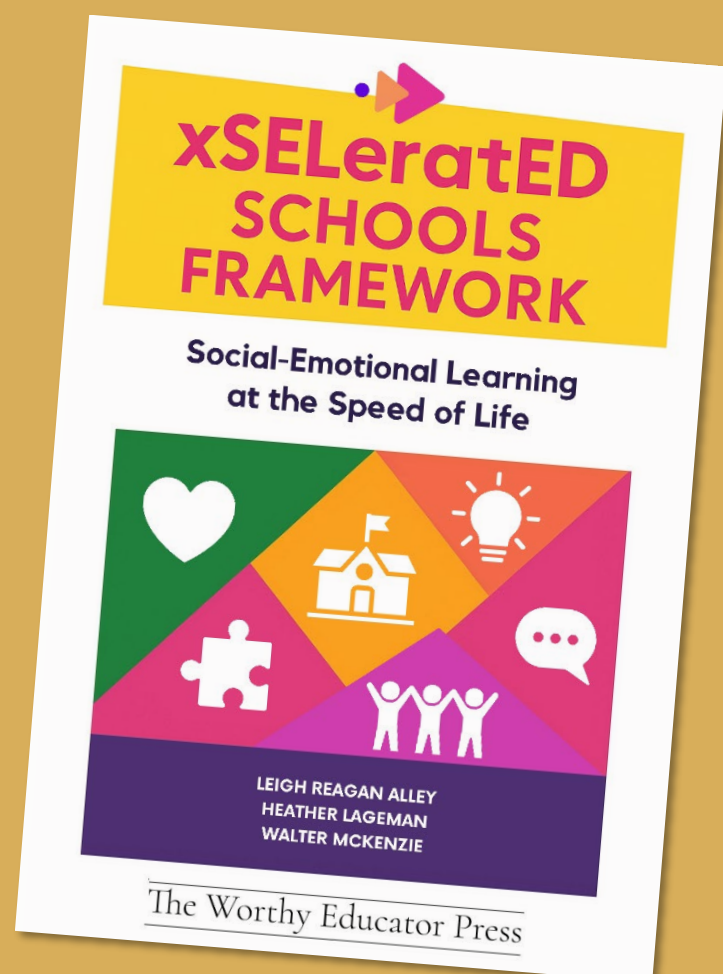
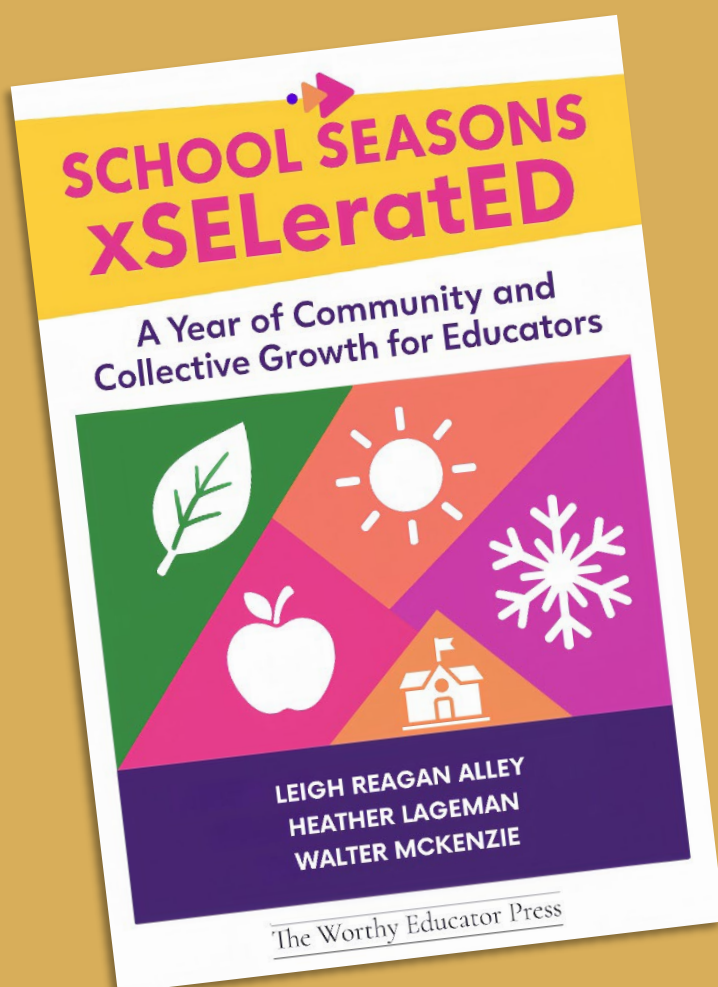
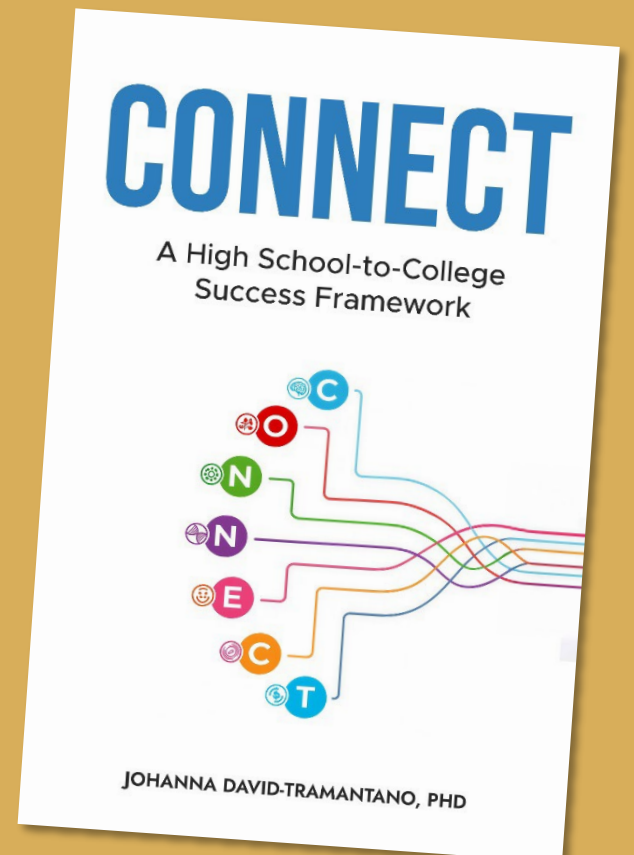
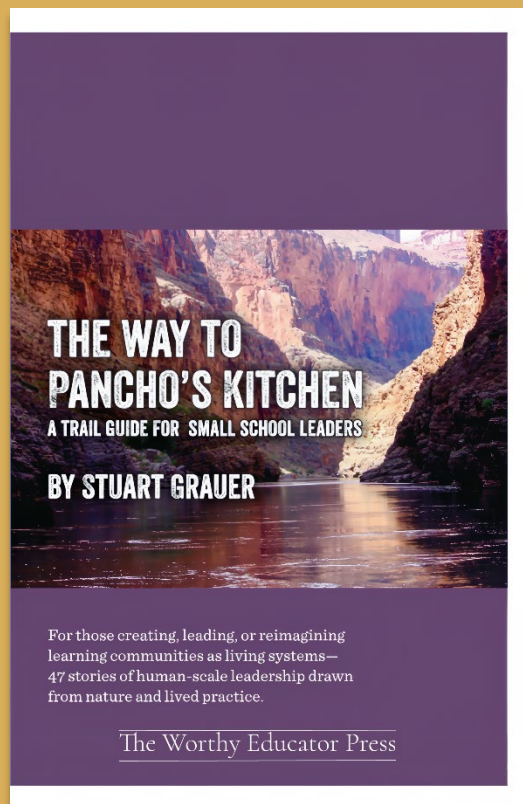
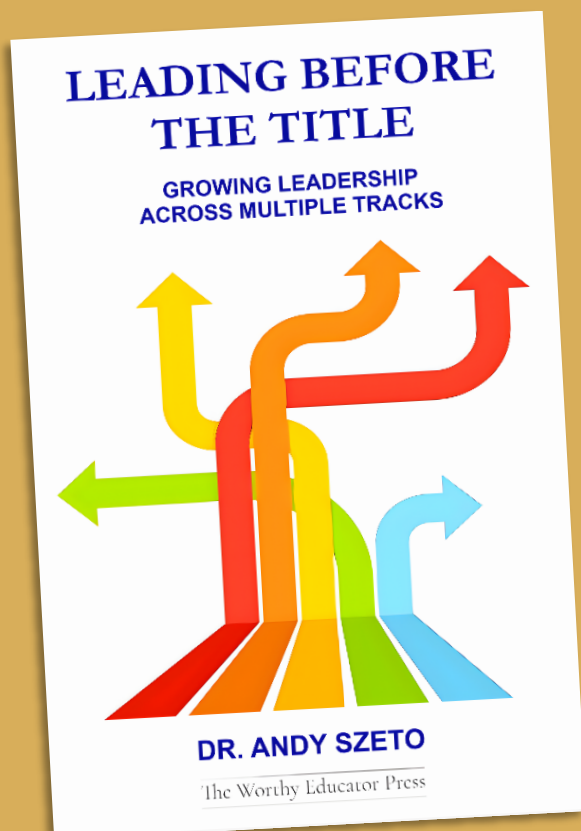
“Yes,” Tanya smiles again, unearthing a sandwich from her bag. “Now if we could just figure out how to actually eat lunch during the school day...”



Pete Hall is an award-winning principal and author of 15 books, including *Always Strive to Be a Better You* and *Reaching and Teaching Kids Who Don’t Fit in the Box*. He is a renowned catalyst and capacity-builder, driven to impact others’ lives in profoundly positive ways. He channels his experiences as a school principal, life coach, and small-business owner into manageable lessons for continuous growth, personal improvement, and positive mindset. Pete shares his optimism, joy, and practical application of strategies for getting the most out of yourself, no matter what your role(s) and goal(s) may be, weaving clear mental shifts into every nook and cranny of his interactions with others. [in](#) [✉](#)

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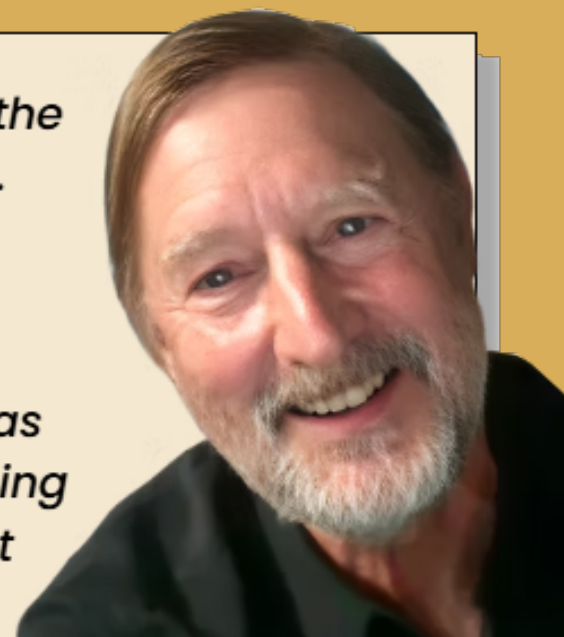


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Just as important is their spirit of the collaboration, responsiveness, encouragement, and big-picture thinking that make the entire process feel not at all like a transaction and but like a shared mission to bring meaningful ideas into the world. I always felt that the book mattered to them personally, and that sense of care and partnership made all the difference. Having now worked with three publishers, I can say that Walter McKenzie brings a rare combination of editorial insight, vision, and generosity to the publishing process. I'm deeply grateful for the professionalism, creativity, and generosity your team brought to the journey, and I'm proud to be part of The Worthy Educator community. -Stuart Grauer, Ed.D.

Our goal for you is to tell your story to educators everywhere without having to shop around to find a publisher, helping you avoid the hassles and heartache we know too well in the commercial marketplace, while providing you with the caring and commitment to excellence you count on from The Worthy Educator. We are fellow educators who understand how important this is to you and to the profession!



AI for New Teachers: A Cautionary Tale

Dr. Andy Szeto

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New York, New York

Meet Mr. Johnson, A New Teacher

Mr. Johnson was a last-minute hire, fresh out of college, and anxious about the work of teaching itself - managing a room, responding in real time, and making learning happen on a clock that doesn't pause. He had student-taught, but this was different: no cooperating teacher, no built-in structure, and no one quietly steering when things went sideways. He was the teacher of record on day one, overwhelmed before he even met his first class.

This was a large high school, and he wasn't alone. The building had hired about 30 new teachers this semester - an entire cohort of newcomers learning the ropes at the same time, all trying to look calm while quietly sprinting.

Because he was hired so late, his "training" was recorded. A digital folder of onboarding videos. A few slide decks. A couple of links. He started the Monday after a long weekend. Which meant his induction was essentially: log in, press play, and then walk into a room full of teenagers who did not care that his orientation was still buffering.

What hit Mr. Johnson first wasn't the students. It was the requirements. He wasn't just learning to plan lessons; he was trying to keep up with format requirements, mandatory components, submission timelines, and template fields - while also navigating accommodation documentation, internal systems, attendance procedures, parent contact logs, and data protocols. It wasn't just "plan a lesson." It was to prove you planned it - in the correct format, with the correct labels, aligned to the correct expectations, uploaded to the correct place. He didn't feel like he was learning to teach; he felt like he was learning to produce paperwork.

The Magical Shortcut

During his first week, a well-meaning colleague showed him an AI lesson-planning platform.

"Just type the topic, the grade, and the standard," they said. "Pick what type of documents you want. Click generate. This is wonderful."

Wonderful indeed. The screen filled almost instantly: lesson objectives, warm-up activities, mini-lesson, guided practice, independent practice, exit ticket, even a rubric. It looked like magic. It also felt like relief.

With one more click, the platform generated a full slide deck to match - beautifully done slide presentations with clean layouts, polished fonts, neatly organized bullet points, and stock images that looked "educational" at first glance. The slides were the kind that look great projected on a screen and screenshot well for walkthroughs.

Mr. Johnson didn't see a draft. He saw something that looked finished.

Mr. Johnson didn't hear, "This is a drafting tool." He heard, "This is how it's done and done right."



The Eight-Page Lesson Plan

By the end of the first week, Mr. Johnson looked impressively prepared on paper. His slides were clean, his handouts were polished, and his lesson plans were meticulously structured with headers, subheaders, and sub-subheaders. If formatting were instruction, his classroom would have been a district model.

Each prep came with an eight-page lesson plan. That's eight pages, per class.

For social studies, Mr. Johnson's subject, the standards alone took up nearly two full pages - unpacked, restated, cross-referenced, and neatly formatted. The plan included historical thinking skills, Tier 2 vocabulary, and a section titled *Primary Source Opportunities* that sounded impressive even when it was mostly a copied excerpt from a speech no one in the room understood. There were suggested scaffolds, anticipated misconceptions, pacing notes, and differentiation options. The document was immaculate. It looked like something you might screenshot for a professional development session slide deck.

It was also created without the students in front of him in mind.

The plans were written for an imaginary class-one that always read the directions, came in ready, asked the "right" questions, and completed the work at the pace of the lesson plan clock. Mr. Johnson hadn't yet learned what his actual students needed, how they responded, where they got stuck, or what would make them lean in. No one had worked with him on examining student work or analyzing formative and summative assessment data.

And people noticed the document before they noticed the disconnect. A few veteran teachers complimented him in the hallway. An assistant principal skimmed the first page, nodded approvingly, and said, "You're doing great. This is exactly what we want to see." No one had visited the class yet.

The paperwork created confidence before the instruction ever had a chance to earn it. The plans looked like strong teaching. So Mr. Johnson assumed the teaching must be strong, too.



Borrowed Language, Borrowed Confidence

Each unit began with AI unpacking the standards. Mr. Johnson typed prompts like:

"Unpack these standards into learning targets, misconceptions, and pacing for high school students." The output looked professional. He pasted it directly into his lesson plan template.

But once the standards were "unpacked," Mr. Johnson didn't know how to use them. Which skill should be the focus today? What should mastery look like in student work? How should today's lesson build toward tomorrow?

So the unpacking lived in a folder. The objective went on the board. The lesson drifted. When students struggled, he added another activity.

AI had given him a map, but no one had taught him how to read it.

Planning Becomes Production

Because he wasn't sure what mattered most instructionally, Mr. Johnson leaned into what felt productive: he generated more. Late one night, he typed a prompt into the platform: *Create a full lesson plan with slides, handouts, an exit ticket, and a rubric for a lesson on the causes of the French Revolution.* Minutes later, a complete package appeared. There was a crisp slide deck with bold headings and tidy bullet points, plus an image of a charging crowd that looked like it belonged on a streaming-series poster called *Revolution: Season One*. He clicked through, nodded to himself, and felt the smallest hint of relief. Good enough.

After that, his days developed a rhythm. Every class began with a packet. Not a handout—a packet: stapled pages with a do-now, vocabulary, a short reading, an excerpt, a graphic organizer, a few checks for understanding, and an exit ticket. Some weeks, the packets marched through revolutions and industrialization. Other weeks, they sprinted through reconstruction and immigration, the usual race to get through “just one more unit” before the next benchmark window. Mr. Johnson got faster and faster at producing them. What once took hours took one evening. Then a lunch period. Eventually, he was generating two weeks’ worth with a few clicks.

He started talking about planning like meal prep: “*I’m set through next Friday.*” And on paper, he was. The packets were coherent, beautifully formatted, and undeniably efficient. Adults who glanced at them saw diligence and organization. But over time, efficiency began to replace intention. He stopped pausing to ask what mattered most: What do I want *these* students to understand? What can they already do? What will trip them up? What will make them care?



A Mountain of Questions, But No Discussion

His first formal observation came in October, and the assistant principal made it clear what they wanted to see: classroom discussion. Mr. Johnson came ready. The lesson plan was eight pages long, aligned to standards, filled with scaffolds, and formatted like a professional document. Afterward, the feedback was both reassuring and unsettling. He was organized. The plan was thorough. The materials were strong. Then came the line that stuck with him: he needed to work on discussion.

Mr. Johnson took that as a solvable problem, like a missing ingredient. That night, he opened his laptop and typed, *Generate 50 higher-order discussion questions for high school students about the causes of World War I.* The list appeared instantly, polished and confident. He copied it, printed it, and walked into class the next day feeling prepared. He started asking the questions one after another. The same two students carried the conversation. Everyone else looked down, suddenly fascinated by their notebooks. When the room went quiet, he filled the silence with another question. The questions sounded rigorous - academic vocabulary, big ideas, plenty of “analyze” and “evaluate.” But they didn’t move the room. They didn’t build momentum. They didn’t help students listen to each other or develop a shared line of thinking.

The discussion became a pattern: teacher asks, a couple of students answer, teacher moves on. Over and over. Students weren’t building ideas together. They were auditioning for the next question. Mr. Johnson had a mountain of prompts, but he still didn’t have the practice of facilitating discussion.

“Differentiation” That Changed the Task

After a few rough days, with some students stuck on the reading and others racing ahead, Mr. Johnson did what he had learned to do when he felt unsure. He went back to the platform. He typed, Create differentiated versions of this reading for three levels and include sentence frames, and watched the options appear as if the problem had been solved.

On paper, it looked thoughtful. There were three versions, neatly labeled. There were sentence starters that sounded academic. There were even supports embedded in the margins. Mr. Johnson printed them, sorted them into stacks, and felt responsible, like he was finally meeting everyone where they were.

But the more he used it, the more something subtle happened. Some students received simplified versions that removed the very complexity they needed to learn how to handle. Others ended up doing tasks that barely resembled what their classmates were doing. A few noticed immediately. “Why is mine different?” one asked, half joking, half alert. Mr. Johnson smiled, said it was to help everyone succeed, and kept moving.

He genuinely wanted to support his students. But without a clear sense of how to preserve rigor while increasing access, differentiation turned into visual variation. Different pages. Different tasks. Different expectations. The work changed. The thinking shrank. The plans looked even better. The gaps grew.

Feedback Without a Teacher's Voice

When grading season arrived, Mr. Johnson faced another familiar wall: time. Stacks of student work, deadlines, and the pressure to return feedback quickly. So he opened AI again and typed, *Generate rubric-based feedback for these student responses.*

The comments were polished, complete sentences with a professional tone, plenty of strengths, and next steps. He pasted them into the document, copied them onto rubrics, and felt relieved that at least students were getting something.

But the feedback landed oddly. Students read it, nodded, and still did not know what to do next. The comments did not point to specific moments in their work. They did not name the misconception he had seen in class. They did not sound like Mr. Johnson's voice or reflect what he had emphasized.

It sounded like someone else had taught the lesson.

The plans were flawless. Student thinking was not improving.

The Part He Never Noticed

By winter, Mr. Johnson felt busy - and, in a quiet way, relieved.

He was ahead on pacing. His plans were done weeks in advance. His slides looked professional. His packets were consistent. His folders were immaculate. He was meeting requirements. He was submitting on time. He was keeping his head above water.

From his vantage point, that felt like success.

In a building this large and with so many new teachers, colleagues circulating past his room saw students working on packets and assumed things were fine. Supervisors were often mesmerized by the documentation: the eight-page plans, the standards alignment, the polished rubrics, the clean formatting. The feedback he received focused on organization and preparation, followed by mild suggestions to "work on discussion" or "push engagement a bit more." Those polished documents covered up the fact that his teaching was ineffective.

And Mr. Johnson didn't realize it - not because he didn't care, but because no one around him disrupted the illusion. No one named the difference between producing instruction and developing instruction. No one intervened early enough, directly enough, to help him build the actual craft.

AI was working. Mr. Johnson was standing still.



Supporting New Teachers With AI Without Skipping the Basics

The core issue in Mr. Johnson's story is not that he used AI. It is that AI showed up before he had the basics of the craft.

Your job as a leader is to make the sequence clear: formation first, acceleration second. Here is what that looks like in practice.



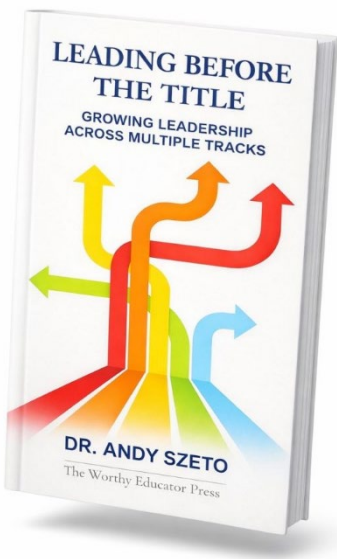
Start With the Standard, Not the Prompt

Have new teachers practice identifying the core skill in a standard, describing what mastery looks like in student work, and mapping how today's lesson builds toward unit outcomes. Then use AI to refine wording, generate examples, and anticipate misconceptions after the teacher has done the initial thinking.

- ② **Design the Learning Path Before Generating Materials**
New teachers should learn how to align objectives, tasks, and evidence of learning. They should learn how to sequence a lesson and plan for misconceptions and pivots. Then AI can assist with slides, handouts, checks for understanding, and exit tickets that match an intentional design.
- ③ **Build Discussion Skill Before Building Question Banks**
Before turning to AI for “50 questions,” make sure new teachers know what quality questions look like and how discussion techniques work in practice. Coach them to distinguish between questions that simply check recall and questions that prompt thinking, evidence, and reasoning. Teach the facilitation moves that make talk productive, including wait time, strategic follow-ups, pressing for evidence, and getting students to respond to each other, not just to the teacher.

Then, and only then, use AI to generate a smaller set of questions that match the discussion structure the teacher already knows how to run, and coach the teacher to select, revise, and sequence them.
- ④ **Teach Support and Feedback Before Automating Them**
Before using AI to differentiate, clarify the difference between scaffolding and lowering the bar, and how to preserve the core thinking task. Before using AI for feedback, coach teachers to reference evidence from student work and name next steps tied to criteria in a voice students recognize. Then allow AI to draft, and require the teacher to revise and personalize.
- ⑤ **Look Past the Artifacts and Coach Early**
Polished plans, clean slides, and organized packets can mask weak instruction. Make student thinking the primary evidence of effectiveness. Coach the judgment behind AI use by asking what the teacher decided first, what AI suggested, and what they changed and why. If speed of production is outpacing growth in practice, intervene early with modeling, co-planning, rehearsals, and quick follow-up observations.

“AI can make teaching faster. Only leadership can make teaching better. The safeguard is the sequence: craft first, tools second.”



Dr. Andy Szeto is a New York City-based educational leader, writer, and professor whose work focuses on instructional leadership, district systems, multilingual learner advocacy, and responsible, practical uses of AI in education. His writing turns complex leadership challenges into usable tools, decision prompts, and implementation-oriented frameworks for school and district leaders. Andy’s work has been published across a range of education outlets, including ASCD, Tech & Learning, eSchoolNews, District Administration, NAESP Communicator, Teaching Social Studies, the Journal for Leadership and Instruction, Faculty Focus, and Getting Smart. He regularly publishes on *Lead Forward*, his exclusive feature for The Worthy Educator. Andy is the author of *Leading Before the Title: Growing Leadership Multiple Tracks* (The Worthy Educator Press, 2025), and he has an upcoming chapter focused on college and career guidance for multilingual learners entitled “AI-Powered Postsecondary Guidance for Multilingual Learners.” His next book focuses on his journey as an English learner, coming out in late 2026. To subscribe to his newsletter, please visit his LinkedIn page or drandyszeto.com.  



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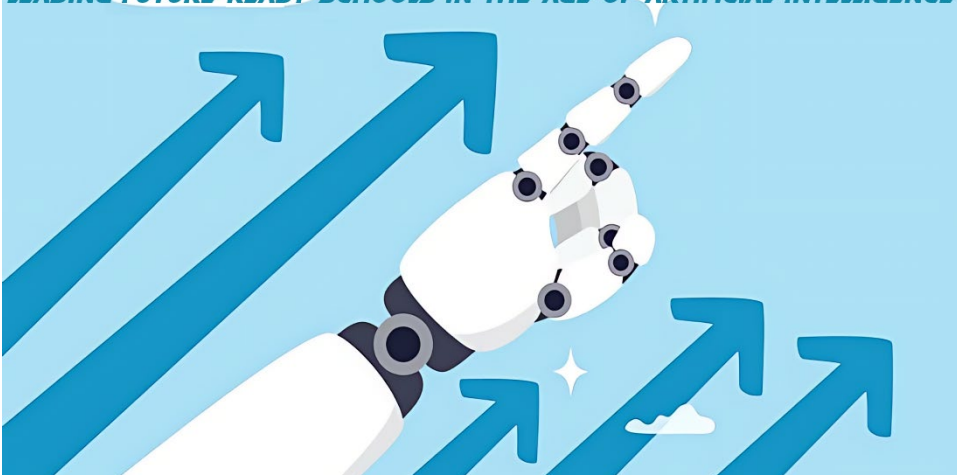
The Future has Arrived

Javeria Rana brings education transformed to life in this exclusive feature for The Worthy Educator, making the case that the future isn't tomorrow, it's *now*!



**STUDENT VOICE IS NOT A DECORATION:
RETHINKING AGENCY IN FUTURE-READY SCHOOLS**

LEADING FUTURE-READY SCHOOLS IN THE AGE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE



**FROM DEBATE CHAMBERS TO GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP:
WHAT MODEL UNITED NATIONS TAUGHT ME ABOUT LEADERSHIP**



WHAT 500 SCHOOLS TAUGHT ME ABOUT EDUCATION

MULTILINGUAL CLASSROOMS AND THE FUTURE OF LITERACY EDUCATION



WHY WOMEN WILL REDEFINE EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP



FUTURE-READY SCHOOLS WITH JAVERIA RANA





The Short Verse: A Teacher's Guide to Building Long Verse Thinkers

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Abstract

Students often respond to complex questions with brief answers that appear disengaged but instead reflect hesitation, risk avoidance, or discomfort with sustained thinking. This article introduces Short Verse / Long Verse, a classroom structure that separates quick, compressed thinking from extended explanation. Students begin with a Short Verse, a single precise sentence, and then expand their reasoning through a Long Verse. Drawing on classroom practice in history and English language development, the article shows how this structure supports productive struggle, builds agency, and helps students engage more deeply with complex ideas in fast-paced classroom environments.

Reclaiming Deep Thought in a Fast-Forward Classroom

Yesterday, I watched a familiar scene unfold in my classroom. We were studying child labor. A slide was projected on the board. The first sentence made a clear claim; the second sentence explained it. I underlined both sentences on the screen. Then I turned the first sentence into a question, adding *how* at the beginning and a question mark at the end, and asked the class to respond. The answer was quite literally written beneath the question. And still, the room went silent. Students stared at the board. No one spoke.

I've taught many of these students before. I've had them for more than a year. This wasn't confusion about content. Eventually, one student said what others were clearly thinking: *"Isn't the answer just right there?"* Another student repeated the sentence aloud. The moment passed, but the pattern did not. Over time, I've come to recognize this pause, not as inability, but as hesitation; a kind of learned waiting. Students often know *where* the answer is, but are unsure whether they are allowed to use it, extend it, or trust their own thinking long enough to say more. In classrooms shaped by speed, coverage, and constant evaluation, responding quickly, or not at all, can feel safer than engaging deeply.

This pattern is what led me to rethink how I was asking students to show their thinking. I wasn't looking to teach sentence structure or grammar in isolation. I wanted to understand how students were processing ideas: what they noticed, what they avoided, where they defaulted to moral judgments or lists instead of explanations, and where complexity caused them to shut down. I needed a structure that slowed thinking without overwhelming students, one that made room for uncertainty, nuance, and sustained attention. That search led me to a simple but powerful classroom practice I call **Short Verse / Long Verse**.

The Hidden Pattern Behind Short Answers

When students respond with brief or minimal answers, it is tempting to read those responses as a lack of effort. And sometimes, to be fair, that is part of the picture. But over time, I've come to see that short answers often reflect something more complicated than laziness. Many students are uncertain about their thinking, unsure how much detail is expected, or hesitant to move beyond yes-no responses into fuller explanations. For some, writing more feels like taking a risk they are not yet ready to take.

In these moments, short answers function as a form of self-protection. They reduce exposure. They limit the chance of being publicly wrong. They allow students to participate without fully committing to their reasoning. This is especially true for students who are still developing academic language, students who have been corrected repeatedly in the past, or students who become dysregulated when ideas grow complex. A single sentence can feel manageable; a paragraph can feel like a trap.



For teachers, this creates a familiar dilemma. When most students struggle to engage with longer responses, we often feel pulled in one of two directions. We either lower expectations, accepting minimal answers in order to keep students moving, or we increase demands, adding more prompts, scaffolds, and requirements in the hope that something will finally unlock deeper thinking. Neither option feels quite right. Grading becomes especially fraught. When students complete the task but do not meaningfully engage with it, assessments often shift from measuring thinking to measuring compliance.

This tension was the context in which Short Verse / Long Verse emerged. What I needed was not better questions or more detailed instructions. I needed a different structure one that acknowledged the risk students experience when explaining their thinking, while still holding space for depth, clarity, and growth. Short Verse / Long Verse was designed to do exactly that.

Introducing Short Verse / Long Verse

Short Verse / Long Verse is a simple structure designed to make student thinking visible without overwhelming them. It separates *precision* from *expansion* and gives students a clear entry point into deeper explanation.

Short Verse is one precise sentence. Its purpose is cognitive compression. Students are asked to identify the core idea what matters most without explanation, justification, or elaboration. A Short Verse is not a paragraph. It is not even a “complete” answer in the traditional sense. It is a distilled thought.

Long Verse comes next. This is where students expand, explain, and make meaning. Long Verse is not about verbosity or filling space; it is about reasoning. Students explain why their Short Verse is accurate, how it connects to evidence, or what it reveals about the topic. The focus remains on thinking, not length.

The naming matters. Calling these responses *verses* rather than sentences or paragraphs helps clarify expectations. In Short Verse, I am not looking for what students usually give me when asked to write a paragraph, which is often very little. I am looking for exactly what they are capable of producing quickly and safely. In Long Verse, I am asking students to stretch that thinking, not to perform academic writing on demand.

I use Short Verse / Long Verse most often in history and English language development classes, particularly with content-heavy texts. The structure allows students to slow down, identify key ideas, and then work deliberately toward explanation. Over time, capacity builds. Short Verses become more precise. Long Verses become more thoughtful. Students begin to take risks they previously avoided.

For many students, this structure also lowers emotional barriers to participation. Short Verse provides a manageable starting point for students who fear being wrong, who carry shame from repeated academic failure, or who become defensive or avoidant when tasks feel too complex. Long Verse then creates space for sustained thought without forcing students to leap immediately into extended writing. In this way, Short Verse / Long Verse supports not only cognitive growth, but also the emotional conditions necessary for learning.



A Simple Classroom Example

The power of the structure is not in the example itself, but in its repeatability. Students know where to begin. Teachers know what to look for. Thinking becomes visible before writing becomes polished:

Prompt: *Why did child labor continue during the Industrial Revolution?*

Short Verse: *Child labor continued because it was profitable for factory owners.*

Long Verse: *Factory owners relied on child labor because children could be paid less, worked long hours, and were less likely to organize or resist. This made child labor an efficient way to increase profits during industrial expansion.*

What Happened When I Tried It

The first time I introduced Short Verse / Long Verse, student reactions were hesitant and uncertain. Many students completed the task, but the Short Verse and Long Verse often looked nearly identical. Students were technically following directions, but not yet differentiating between quick thinking and extended reasoning. That early pattern made something clear: students needed more explicit permission to think *quickly* before they thought *deeply*.

I adjusted the structure slightly. I reframed Short Verse as *quick thinking*, the first idea that comes to mind, written down without overthinking or editing. Long Verse, I explained, was where they could slow down, extend, revise, and explain. Separating those two moments helped students understand that the Short Verse was not a test of correctness, but a starting point. The Long Verse became the space for growth.

I also made a deliberate choice to keep this work paper-and-pencil. I did not use computers. Students needed the physical act of writing, of pausing, tracing ideas, crossing things out, and returning to their thoughts. Paper reduced distraction and removed the pressure of producing something “polished.” The goal was thinking, not performance. Over time, the shifts became visible. Long Verses began to expand, not in length for its own sake, but in clarity and reasoning. Students started noticing cause and effect, consequences, and stakeholders. Their Short Verses became more precise. Perhaps most importantly, students became more willing to revise. That willingness signaled a shift from avoidance to engagement.

Some of the most meaningful changes came from students who had previously struggled to participate. One student who completed very little work the year before began producing thoughtful Long Verses. Another student, disengaged in several classes, consistently completed this work. One student simply commented, “This is interesting.” These were small moments, but they mattered.

As we worked with historical content, Short Verse / Long Verse also helped surface nuance. When examining topics like Reconstruction, students initially framed ideas in binaries: free versus not free, harm versus helpful. The structure created space to trace what existed between those categories. Who benefited? Who was constrained? In what ways were people free in theory but limited in practice? The “trace” between extremes became the site of the richest thinking.

Short Verse / Long Verse did not eliminate struggle. Students still collapsed back into short answers at times. Some defaulted to moral judgments or lists instead of explanations. But the structure made those patterns visible, and, therefore, addressable. It slowed thinking just enough for students to stay with complexity rather than retreat from it.

When Agency Becomes Visible

Student agency becomes visible when students begin to choose the Long Verse. At first, many students complete it because they are asked to. Over time, something more significant happens: they begin to push past the pain zone on their own. They extend their thinking not because of compliance, but because they want to see where the idea leads. This choice matters. Writing a Long Verse requires students to stay with uncertainty, make connections, and risk being incomplete or imperfect. When students do this willingly, they are exercising agency. They are deciding that their thinking is worth developing, even when it feels uncomfortable. This is not about confidence alone; it is about ownership.

I see this shift when students revise without being prompted, add detail after pausing, or return to a Short Verse and refine it for clarity. I see it when students begin to reference stakeholders, consequences, and power dynamics rather than stopping at surface-level identification. These moments signal more than academic growth. They signal a change in how students relate to thinking itself.



This is what I think of as the birth of critical thinking. It does not arrive fully formed. It emerges gradually, through repeated opportunities to struggle productively and persist. Short Verse / Long Verse creates the conditions for that emergence by separating safety from stretch and by making sustained thought feel possible rather than overwhelming.

Agency, in this sense, is not something students are told they have. It is something they practice. Each time a student chooses to stay with a Long Verse, despite the discomfort, they are building the capacity to think deeply, deliberately, and independently.

Try This Tomorrow: Action Steps for the Classroom

Short Verse / Long Verse works best when it is introduced simply and used consistently. It does not require new materials, technology, or extensive preparation. The power of the structure lies in its clarity and repetition.

1» Start with a Focused Prompt

Choose a question that requires explanation rather than recall. The prompt should invite thinking, not listing.

Examples:

- *Why did child labor continue during the Industrial Revolution?*
- *How did Reconstruction change life for formerly enslaved people?*
- *Why do societies create laws that limit certain freedoms?*

Avoid prompts that can be answered with a single fact.

2» Ask for Short Verse First

Tell students: *“Write one sentence. Don’t overthink it. This is your first thought.”*

Give them one to two minutes. Emphasize that this is **quick thinking**, not polished writing. Collecting the Short Verse mentally (or glancing as you circulate) helps you see where students are starting.

3» Pause, then move to Long Verse

Next, say: *“Now extend that idea. Explain it. Add what you didn’t have space to say.”*

Encourage students to:

- explain *why* their Short Verse makes sense
- add cause and effect
- name stakeholders or consequences

This is where the pain zone often appears. Expect hesitation. Give time.

4» Normalize Revision

Invite students to return to their Short Verse after writing the Long Verse: *“Would you change or sharpen your first sentence now?”*

This reinforces that thinking evolves and that revision is part of reasoning, not remediation.

5» Reflect as a Teacher

After the lesson, ask yourself one question: *Where did I step in too soon, and where did I let students stay with the struggle?*

This reflection matters as much as the student work.

What to expect:

- Students will still collapse into Short Verse at times.
- Some will default to moral statements or lists.
- Others will surprise you, especially students who previously disengaged.

This is not failure. It is information.

“Short Verse / Long Verse is most effective when used repeatedly. Over time, students build tolerance for sustained thought, and the pain zone shifts. What once felt difficult becomes manageable. New forms of complexity emerge.”



What This Makes Possible

Short Verse / Long Verse is not a cure-all. It does not eliminate struggle, guarantee engagement, or instantly produce polished writing. What it does offer is something quieter and more durable: a structure that makes deep thinking possible in classrooms shaped by speed, pressure, and performance.

By separating quick thinking from sustained reasoning, Short Verse / Long Verse gives students a way to enter complexity without being overwhelmed by it. It acknowledges the discomfort that comes with thinking deeply and treats that discomfort as a normal, and necessary, part of learning. Over time, students learn that they can stay with an idea longer than they thought, revise their thinking, and push beyond their first response.

For teachers, this shift matters. When students begin choosing to extend their thinking, the classroom changes. Learning becomes less about compliance and more about participation. Assessment becomes more informative. Instruction becomes more responsive. Most importantly, students begin to see themselves not just as answer-givers, but as thinkers.

Reclaiming deep thought does not require abandoning standards, rigor, or accountability. It requires designing spaces where thinking can slow down, take shape, and grow. Short Verse / Long Verse is one way to create that space, one sentence at a time.



Ann DeChenne is a secondary educator teaching U.S. History, World History and English Language Development. Her work examines how language shapes power, agency, and learning, bridging classroom practice with scholarly inquiry into deficit discourse and educational inequity. She writes for both practitioner and academic audiences and has previously been published in [Legacy: Transformation in Action](#).  

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Reflection

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

"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."

-Dr. Joshua Medrano



The Worthy
Educator



-Jill Ireland McPherson



-Jyoti Marwaha



-Melissa Lime



-Marlene



Reflect, Dissect, Choose, Use and Move On

Dr. Amy Mathews-Perez

Founder and Owner

Making Education Special for All (M.E.S.A.)

Bryan, Texas

Be Seen

When I started as a new Principal it was mid-September. The campus had an interim (that was a Principal earlier in her career) that started the school year with them. I was working on the Campus Improvement Plan (CIP) which was due in early October. I was the first Principal that the campus did not select via committee (as was the long-time practice at this campus). For the first time in the history of the campus, it had an “Improvement Required” rating from the state agency.

I was working in my office during a school day trying to figure out how to do a CIP, align it with the District Improvement Plan (DIP), write achievable goals, strategies and progress measurements and do all of this in a software program that I had just gotten access to. Needless to say, I was learning as I go. David, not a classroom teacher, but a Supervisor of Teacher Interns, popped his head in my office and said, *“You know things aren’t going to get better out here as long as you are in here.”* As a new Principal, I found his comment wise. I jumped up and only worked on the CIP after school hours until it was complete and turned in.

I continued this practice (along with the hectic pace of a new Principal and all the things that go with it) throughout the rest of the school year. Keep in mind that the School Board President’s wife was a teacher on my campus. No pressure, right? If staff and students were in the building, I was not in my office unless I had a meeting or parent conference. I was in classrooms, hallways, PLCs, Parent conferences, IEP meetings, student programs/performances and always visible. I absolutely understand that this choice was necessary considering all the variables at play in facilitating success for the campus. I have zero regrets about doing this - after all, being in all of those places with all of those people is where the immediate gratification was. Not to any Principal’s surprise, by summer I was exhausted and empty - no energy, motivation, sense of success or satisfaction.

Then came the hard part - figuring out how to make time to meet all of the needs; those of students, the campus mission/vision, teachers, parents, auxiliary staff, campus culture, cafeteria/food services, transportation as well as district-level expectations. This also included academic needs, maintenance and repairs, playground updates, a wonderful and incredibly committed PTA, campus traditions (re-spark some, maintain some, let some fall by the wayside), hiring new staff, my own needs and more. I had an exceptional Assistant Principal and Instructional Specialist who both worked just like I did that year: visible and accessible during school hours and the rest of the work got done after hours and on weekends.

The three of us sat down for a discuss & cuss session with the goal of creating a plan for the next school year that allowed for more intentional scheduling and less everything else. By this time we felt like we knew each other fairly well but during this process we got to know each other very well. We were authentic about our needs, our communication styles, priorities, what we did well that came naturally, what was hard for each of us, what we wanted to learn, what we needed to learn (and how we could help each other with that), what “success” meant/looked like as well as what made us laugh, what renewed our energy and what the signs were that we needed to take a breath. Needless to say - it took more than one session. Are you relating this to therapy? 100% accurate. It actually took a few lunches, a few walks around the campus, a few Starbucks runs, hundreds of post it notes, vulnerability, trust and bravery. However, we got it done! There was no cement plan, but a flexible approach to what we thought would work based on the previous year’s experience. We made lots of collective decisions, scheduled as many actions as we could (walkthroughs, evaluations, PLC attendance, duty coverage, substitute teacher strategies, team meetings, celebrations and days off.) We agreed that PROGRESS was the focus and then with consistency, SUCCESS would follow.

Be Intentional

Out of respect for making this a short article, I'll only highlight one outcome. I found (after doing it and reflecting about it) that the most effective new action in our plan was our weekly meetings, which looked like this.

- Each Monday morning around 8:30, the three of us met in my office. We followed an agenda and took notes each time.
- We discussed:
 - Walkthrough schedule for the week
 - On and off campus activities
 - Celebrations (literal to do for staff and things that went well as a whole)
 - Problems and brainstorming solutions
 - New things to know
- After we finished, the campus Counselor joined us and she led the discussion. (needs, concerns, questions, etc.)
- Next, the Counselor left and the Data Entry Clerk joined us; she led the discussion. (needs, concerns, questions, etc.)
- Next the Data Clerk left and the campus Secretary joined us; she led the discussion. (needs, concerns, questions, etc.)
- When the Secretary was finished, she left the meeting and the three of us reviewed anything that was shared by those three people that needed action, attention or awareness.

This weekly meeting got more efficient each week and we continued the practice for the next 4 years. After five years as a Principal I moved into a Director position and my Assistant Principal became Principal.

Hopefully you noticed a trend with all of the information above. COLLECTIVE DECISION MAKING and INTENTIONAL TEAM ACTION. No one was a hero; no one tried to do it all or be all things to all people in all situations. And if one of us did - we called each other out in the kindest of ways.



Behind the Scenes

What I discovered that second year as a Principal, and what I consistently practiced with intention throughout the rest of my career, are two “behind the scenes” strategies::

- 1) Visibility and accessibility are not the whole story of success; not for an administrator nor for the campus as a whole. Don't get me wrong, visibility and being accessible to staff are very important. There are times when more of those things are needed. However, David's statement to me during my first month as a Principal lacked an understanding of the whole role of a campus administrator. No fault of David's - his perspective is based on his experience.

I believe this happens frequently, and I want administrators to know how foundationally important it is to consider the perspective and opinions of others, but do not feel obligated to adopt those ideas and opinions as yours or even as facts. **Reflect, dissect, choose, use and move on.** I believe this happens frequently, and I want administrators to know how foundationally important it is to consider the perspective and opinions of others, but to not feel obligated to adopt those ideas and opinions as yours or even as facts. **Reflect, dissect, choose, use and move on.** In the situation I referenced with David, at the time of the event, I was reactive. However, when I intentionally took the time to reflect I was able to dissect his comment, “You know things aren't going to get better out here as long as you are in here.” I found value in his words, no doubt; I learned something very valuable that has continued to serve me well. However, in dissecting it I was able to choose how and when I would use the information to best serve me. From that point on, I made visibility a priority but not at the cost of failing to meet the overall needs of the campus, staff or students. I chose to determine the most important times to be in classrooms and hallways based on needs, circumstances and more. For example, every day that I was on campus I greeted every child that entered the school, which created more fun, better relationships and memories that still make me smile.

2) “Balance” is a verb. The concept of “balance” when I hear people discussing a work/life balance or finding balance is annoying to me. It perpetuates the illusion that at some point (be it brief or longterm) balance will be attained; that balance is achievable, which implies that if you don’t “have this balance” (using balance as a noun) then you have work to do, which implies that you are not being successful. I reiterate: In our line of work, balance is a verb. It is literally a take and give; a matter of knowing which way to strategically “move” to counter the disruption of change - something added to our plate, changes in expectations, etc.



Granted, I tend to live in “grey” versus absolutes or strictly right or wrong. For me, the stress of inflexibility is worse than the stress of options; the stress from here being no context for decisions is worse than the work it takes to work through potential outcomes within the unique context of a situation. Stress is inevitable in any role. Acknowledging that and using it to our benefit - that can be powerful, but it takes practice. For more than 25 years of my career I worked in the arena of special education, so I was lucky to have many, many opportunities to practice this, so I consider myself pretty good at it.

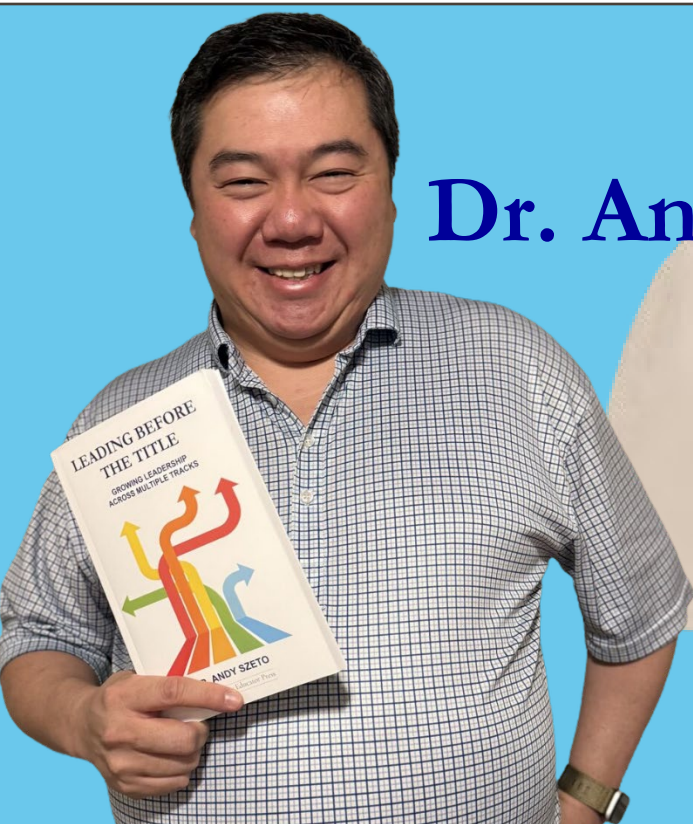
Fluctuations happen. Making fluctuations work for you (instead of you reacting to them) is key. One suggestion is this: Look Inward for reflection then outward for connection. Suspending judgement of yourself and others allows each of us to be more authentic about our needs, gives us space to breathe and it can foster a learning mindset (via a “master” mindset.)

You are evolving as a human, learning as a leader and growing as a person committed to being the best you. You’ve got this for now. When the next change happens, you’ll have it then, too - just differently.

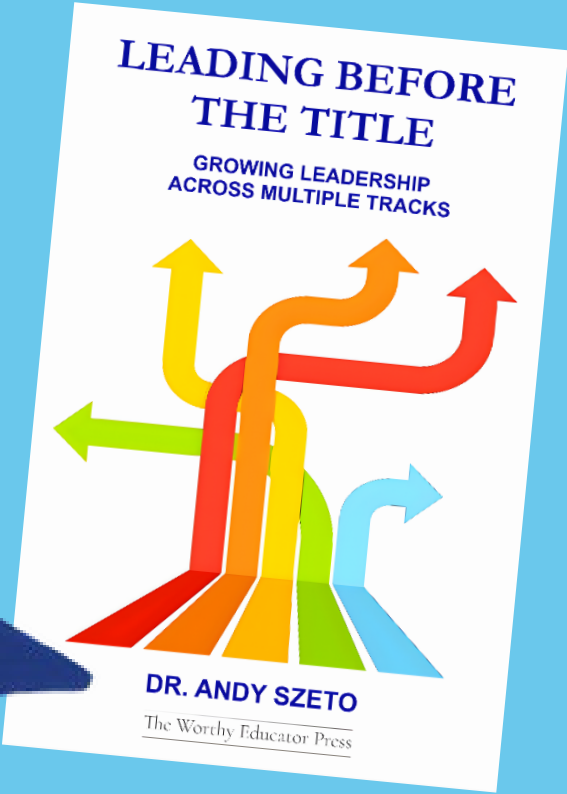


Texas-born & raised, [Dr. Amy Mathews-Perez](#) recently retired from a 34-year career of serving public education. General Ed. Teacher, SLP, Diagnostician, SPED Supervisor, Principal, Assistant Principal & Director of Special Education are roles she’s held. She has also worked in the private sector as a Coordinator of Education for a county alternative school and as an SLP in nursing homes/home health. Amy is the founder of Making Education Special for All (M.E.S.A.) through consulting and speaking. Her passions include communication, laughter, empowerment & authenticity. “Life is short but our influence is never-ending.” Amy finds joy through connections, collective learning and highlighting the potential in others.  

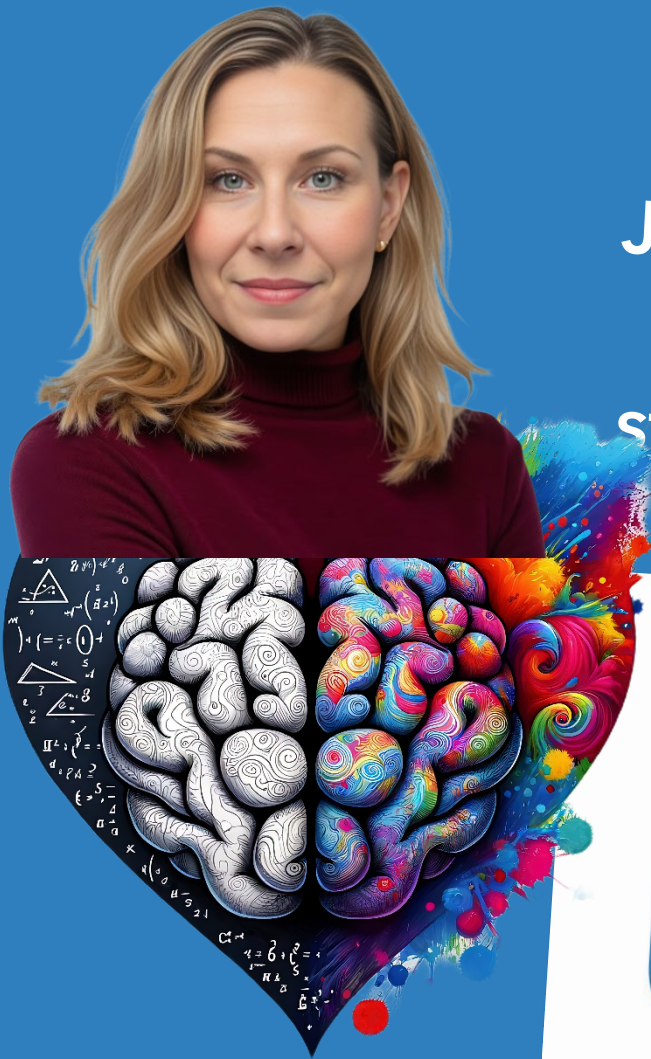
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Dr. Andy Szeto



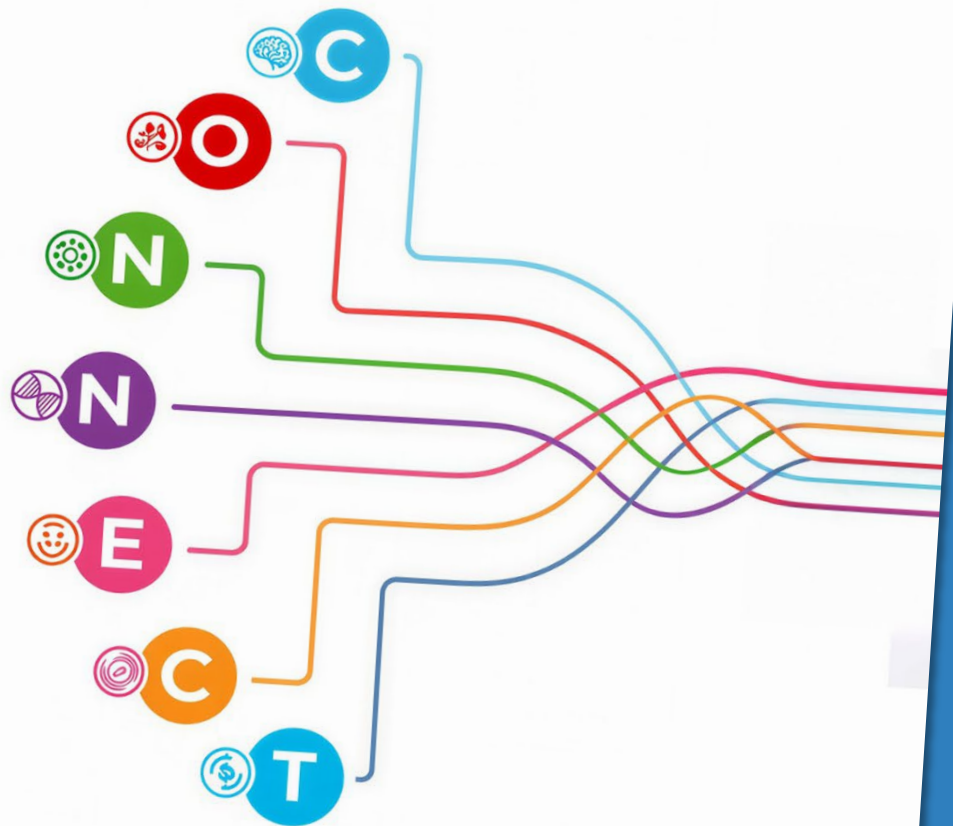
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FUTURING



The Architecture of Future-Ready Schools

Javeria Rana, M.A., M.Ed., M.Phil.
Academic Director, UIES
CEO, Café Learning
Lahore, Pakistan



The future is not something schools enter; it is something schools continuously construct.

Abstract

For more than a century, school improvement has largely followed a familiar script: diagnose a problem, introduce a reform, train educators, monitor implementation, and expect outcomes to improve. This logic emerged from an industrial era that assumed stability, predictability, and relatively slow institutional change. Educational leadership evolved accordingly—emphasizing planning, control, standardization, and efficiency. That world no longer exists.

Today's schools operate within environments shaped by accelerating technological innovation, shifting labor markets, demographic transformation, climate uncertainty, changing public expectations, evolving identities, and increasing complexity in human development. International discussions about the future of education increasingly emphasize that educational systems must prepare learners not merely for known careers but for participation in uncertain and rapidly evolving social and economic contexts (OECD, 2018).

Artificial intelligence alone is not the disruption. It is one visible signal within a broader transition that is altering how knowledge is produced, how authority is distributed, and how learning itself is understood.

Yet many educational systems continue to respond to this new environment with old institutional reflexes: more policies, more reporting structures, more strategic plans, and more implementation cycles. Schools are frequently asked to become innovative while operating through architectures designed for predictability.

This creates a paradox.

Leaders are encouraged to be visionary, but institutions remain structurally resistant to adaptation.

This challenge reflects a broader insight from educational change literature that sustainable improvement emerges less from isolated initiatives and more from coherence-building across institutional systems, relationships, and professional capacity (Fullan, 2023).

Teachers are encouraged to innovate, but systems continue rewarding compliance.

Students are told to become future-ready, while learning environments often remain rooted in assumptions about a world that no longer exists.



This tension suggests a deeper question.

Perhaps the central challenge of educational transformation is not whether leaders are capable enough.

Perhaps the challenge is whether schools themselves are designed to learn.

Educational scholarship increasingly supports this shift in thinking. Systems theorists have long argued that organizations cannot sustainably adapt through isolated interventions because outcomes emerge from interactions among structures, relationships, beliefs, and feedback mechanisms (Senge, 2006). Complexity scholars similarly argue that educational systems behave less like machines and more like living ecosystems characterized by emergence, unpredictability, and interdependence (Uhl-Bien, Marion, & McKelvey, 2007).

If this is true, then leadership alone is insufficient.

Schools must become adaptive institutions.

This broader rethinking aligns with international calls to view education not as a mechanism for preserving existing systems but as a social project requiring renewed institutional imagination, human solidarity, and collective responsibility in shaping future societies (UNESCO, 2021).

This article proposes **Future-Ready School Architecture** as a conceptual model for understanding educational transformation.



5 Layers of Intentional Design

Future-Ready School Architecture refers to the intentional design of interconnected leadership, learning, governance, and adaptation systems that enable schools to remain responsive to change while preserving ethical purpose and human development.

Rather than viewing innovation as isolated initiatives, this model argues that future readiness emerges through the interaction of five architectural layers:

1. *Ethical Foundation*
2. *Leadership Navigation*
3. *Institutional Legitimacy*
4. *Learning Ecosystem*
5. *Adaptive Capacity*

Together, these layers form an integrated approach for building schools capable not merely of surviving change—but of learning through it.

1 Layer 1 Ethical Foundation

The Question Beneath Every Reform

Every educational reform begins with visible questions:

How should we teach?

What technologies should we adopt?

How should assessment change?

But beneath those operational questions lies a more foundational one:

What are schools ultimately for?

Future-ready systems cannot be built on technical efficiency alone. Institutions require moral orientation.

Educational philosopher Gert Biesta (2020) argues that contemporary education increasingly risks becoming dominated by measurement, performance, and optimization while neglecting the larger purposes of human development and democratic participation. Similarly, Paulo Freire (1970) warned that education loses transformative power when it becomes merely technical rather than emancipatory.

This matters because schools are never neutral institutions.

Every scheduling decision reflects values.

Every assessment framework privileges certain forms of knowledge.

Every curriculum decision shapes what societies believe counts as success.

Future readiness without ethical grounding risks becoming acceleration without direction.

Historically, educational leadership often treated ethics as an individual characteristic—a leader’s personal integrity or moral commitment. While these remain important, future-ready institutions require something broader: ethical infrastructure.

Ethical infrastructure means embedding values directly into institutional design.
Examples include:

- allocating resources through equity rather than visibility;
- designing assessment systems that reward growth rather than compliance;
- creating decision-making structures that include educator and student voice;
- evaluating innovation not only by efficiency but by human impact.

Schools designed in this way treat dignity as architecture rather than aspiration.



This layer therefore asks leaders to move beyond the language of outcomes and toward the language of flourishing.

A future-ready school should not simply produce higher-performing graduates. It should cultivate people capable of judgment, contribution, ethical reasoning, and responsible participation in an uncertain world.

This understanding aligns with transformative leadership scholarship, which argues that educational leadership must move beyond organizational effectiveness toward actively advancing equity, inclusion, and social responsibility as core purposes of schooling (Shields, 2010).

Ethical foundations do not slow innovation; they determine whether innovation remains worthy of pursuit.

2 Layer 2 Leadership Navigation

Moving from Control to Orientation

If ethical foundations answer where schools should go, leadership determines how they move. Traditional leadership models often assume environments that are stable enough to permit prediction and control.

Educational leaders set goals.

Teams execute.

Results are monitored.

Adjustments follow.

But contemporary conditions increasingly challenge this assumption.

Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky (2009) distinguish between technical challenges—which can be solved through existing expertise—and adaptive challenges—which require shifts in beliefs, behaviors, relationships, and institutional identity. Most educational issues today belong to the second category.

Teacher retention.

AI integration.

Student disengagement.

Assessment redesign.

Mental wellbeing.

Future skills.

These cannot be solved through technical implementation alone. Future-ready leadership therefore becomes less about possessing answers and more about navigating uncertainty.



To conceptualize this navigation function, I propose the AQ Leadership Compass.

Rather than measuring adaptability as personality, the AQ Leadership Compass frames adaptability as a deliberate leadership practice consisting of four capacities.

Signal Awareness

Adaptive leaders develop disciplined attention.

They monitor weak signals across technology, student experience, labor markets, policy, and social change before disruption becomes visible.

Signal awareness transforms leadership from reactive management into anticipatory design.

Unlearning Agility

Institutions often become attached to practices because they once worked. Yet educational progress frequently requires abandoning approaches that have become performative rather than productive.

Unlearning is not rejection of tradition.

It is disciplined release.

Experimental Governance

Future-ready schools replace large-scale reform dependency with structured experimentation.

Pilot cycles.

Innovation labs.

Rapid feedback.

Iterative improvement.

Adaptive systems learn through controlled exploration.

Ethical Anchoring

Adaptation without ethics becomes opportunism.

Innovation without reflection becomes acceleration.

Ethical anchoring ensures that institutional evolution remains accountable to human wellbeing.

Leadership in this model shifts from command toward orientation.

The leader's role becomes creating conditions through which institutions continuously interpret, test, learn, and redesign.

Future-ready schools do not require leaders who predict the future. They require leaders who help institutions remain capable of learning from futures they did not anticipate.



Figure 1. AQ Leadership Compass.

A conceptual framework illustrating four adaptive capacities that enable educational leaders to navigate uncertainty while sustaining institutional learning and ethical direction: Signal Awareness, Unlearning Agility, Experimental Governance, and Ethical Anchoring. Framework conceptualized by Javeria Rana.

3 Layer 3 Institutional Legitimacy

Why Good Ideas Fail Inside Schools

Educational change literature often focuses on innovation, strategy, and implementation. Yet one recurring reality appears across reform efforts: institutions rarely transform because ideas alone are persuasive. They transform when people consider change legitimate.

One of the most underestimated dimensions of educational leadership is legitimacy—the degree to which stakeholders perceive decisions, structures, and direction as worthy of trust, participation, and commitment.

This distinction matters: Authority may secure compliance; legitimacy generates commitment.

This distinction reflects legitimacy research showing that people are more likely to support and sustain institutional decisions when they perceive processes as fair, trustworthy, and ethically justified rather than merely authoritative (Tyler, 2006).

Schools are social institutions before they are administrative structures. Teachers, students, and families continuously interpret whether decisions feel fair, meaningful, and aligned with shared values. Reform therefore succeeds not simply through technical excellence but through relational credibility.

Research by Bryk and Schneider (2002) demonstrated that relational trust strongly predicts school improvement capacity. Schools with stronger trust cultures showed greater institutional resilience and stronger implementation outcomes than those operating through pressure and compliance mechanisms alone.



To understand this dimension, I propose the Leadership Legitimacy Triangle, consisting of three interacting sources of institutional stability.

Institutional Power

Institutional power emerges from formal structures:

Policy authority.

Governance systems.

Administrative mandates.

Resource allocation.

Schools require institutional authority because educational systems cannot function without coordination and direction. Yet authority alone creates fragile compliance. People may follow instructions without investing emotionally or intellectually in transformation. Future-ready schools therefore treat authority as necessary—but insufficient.

Relational Trust

Trust develops through repeated interactions:

Teachers observe whether leaders listen.

Students observe whether decisions feel fair.

Families observe whether schools communicate with transparency.

Trust is accumulated slowly and depleted rapidly. Relational trust does not eliminate disagreement. Rather, it creates conditions where disagreement remains productive.

Future-ready institutions deliberately design mechanisms that strengthen trust:

- transparent communication structures;
- participatory planning processes;
- teacher leadership pathways;
- structured student voice mechanisms;
- visible responsiveness to feedback.

Trust becomes infrastructure.

Moral Authority

Moral authority represents the deepest layer of legitimacy. Unlike formal authority, moral authority cannot be assigned through title. It emerges when institutions consistently demonstrate ethical coherence between values and action.

When schools speak about equity while reproducing exclusion, moral authority weakens.

When institutions prioritize wellbeing but reward burnout, credibility erodes.

When innovation advances visibility rather than learning, trust deteriorates.

Moral authority allows schools to make difficult decisions without losing collective confidence, and the most effective educational institutions sustain all three dimensions simultaneously.

Power without trust produces bureaucracy.

Trust without authority produces drift.

Authority and trust without ethics produce institutional exhaustion.

Future-ready schools require balance, because the institutions that endure are rarely those that control most effectively; they are those that remain believable.

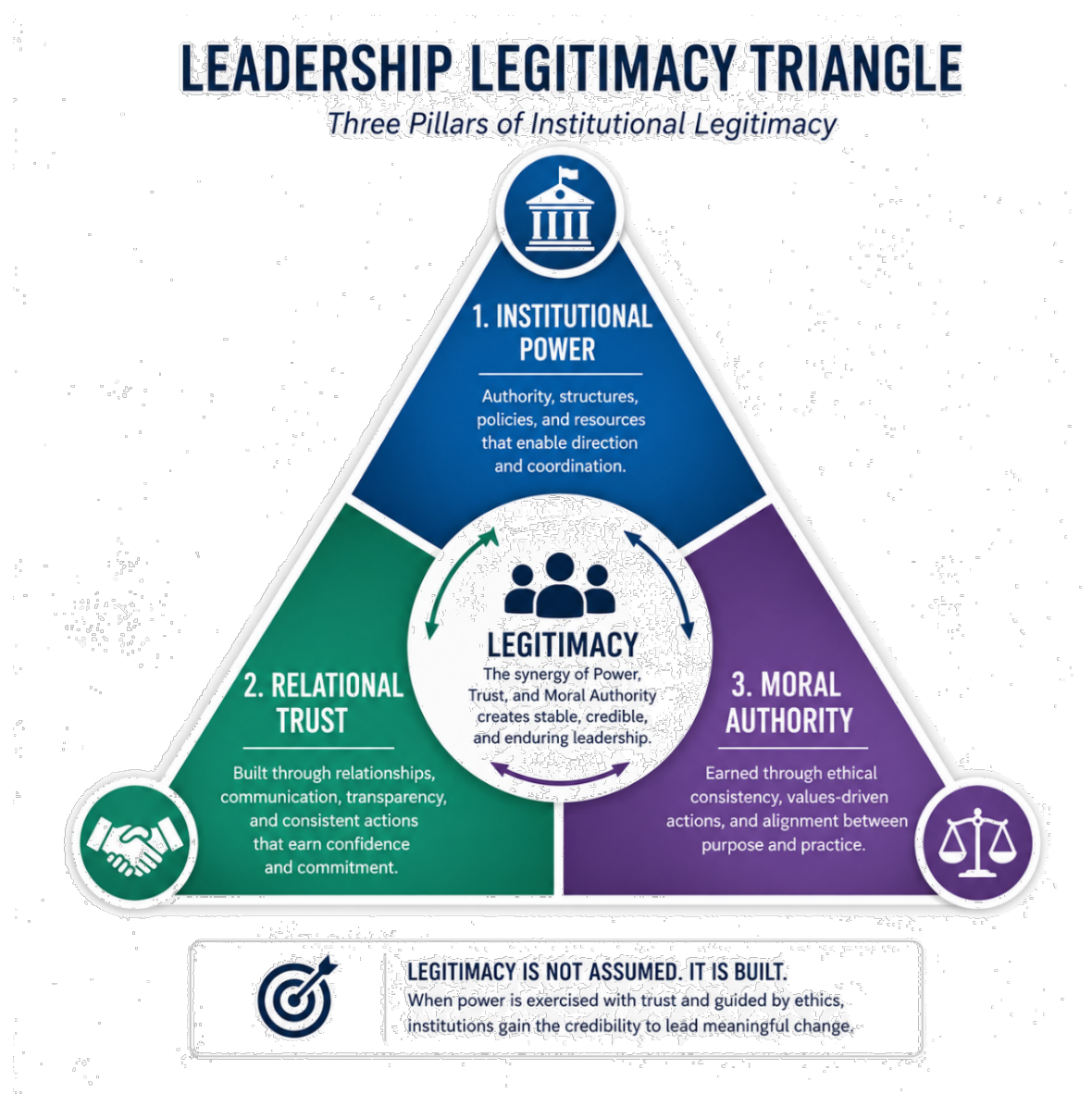


Figure 2. Leadership Legitimacy Triangle.

A conceptual framework illustrating three interacting sources of leadership legitimacy in educational institutions: Institutional Power, Relational Trust, and Moral Authority. The model proposes that sustainable educational transformation emerges when formal authority is balanced with relational credibility and ethical consistency. Framework conceptualized by Javeria Rana.

4 Layer 4 Learning Ecosystem

Designing Conditions Where Presence Becomes Possible

If legitimacy stabilizes institutions, learning architecture determines whether educational transformation reaches classrooms. Contemporary education frequently treats learning as an instructional event.

Curriculum is delivered.

Lessons are completed.

Assessment measures progress.

But this perspective increasingly appears incomplete. Learning emerges not only from teaching quality but from the interaction of design, identity, relationships, expectations, feedback, and agency.

Students may be physically present and intellectually absent.

Teachers may appear engaged while operating in survival mode.

Schools may implement innovation while leaving underlying learning experiences unchanged.

Future-ready architecture therefore requires moving beyond access and participation toward conditions that enable meaningful presence:

Presence differs from attendance.

Attendance confirms location.

Presence reflects engagement of attention, identity, emotion, and intellectual investment.

Educational researchers have long emphasized that meaningful learning requires environments that support autonomy, competence, belonging, and relevance (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). This suggests that future-ready schools should be designed less like delivery systems and more like learning ecosystems. Several design principles emerge.

Design for Intellectual Agency

Students should routinely encounter opportunities to question, investigate, create, and contribute.

Agency develops through repeated experiences of ownership.

Design for Belonging

Belonging cannot remain a climate initiative.

It must become an operational principle shaping language, routines, participation structures, and representation.

Design for Feedback

High-performing learning ecosystems normalize feedback as dialogue rather than judgment.

Students receive opportunities to revise.

Teachers receive opportunities to redesign.

Leaders receive opportunities to listen.



Design for Teacher Learning

Schools cannot produce adaptive learners through static teaching cultures. Teachers require protected conditions for inquiry, experimentation, reflection, and collaborative growth. This perspective aligns with ecological approaches to teacher agency, which argue that professional action emerges not only from individual capability but from the interaction between educators and the institutional conditions in which they work (Priestley, Biesta, & Robinson, 2015). Future-ready schools therefore shift from a transmission model toward an ecosystem model.

The central leadership question changes.

From:

“How do we improve instruction?”

To:

“What conditions make powerful learning more likely?”

5 Layer 5 Adaptive Capacity

Building Schools That Learn Faster Than They Change

The final layer of Future-Ready School Architecture concerns institutional adaptation.

Schools often attempt transformation through episodic reform:

New curriculum.

New technology.

New evaluation systems.

New strategic plans.

But adaptive organizations evolve differently.

Peter Senge (2006) introduced the idea of the learning organization—a system capable of continuously expanding its capacity to create desired outcomes through reflection, feedback, and collective learning. Future-ready schools require similar characteristics.

Adaptive capacity refers to an institution's ability to notice change, interpret signals, redesign practices, and sustain learning over time. This capability cannot depend exclusively on charismatic leadership. It must become structural. Several mechanisms support adaptive capacity.

Innovation Laboratories

Small-scale experimentation environments where educators test ideas before system-wide implementation.

Inquiry Cycles

Short cycles of planning, implementation, evidence gathering, and redesign.

Institutional Reflection Protocols

Regular examination of assumptions, routines, and unintended consequences.

Distributed Expertise

Recognizing that innovation emerges across networks rather than hierarchical positions.

Strategic Slack

Protecting time and cognitive space for thinking, learning, and redesign.



Complexity leadership research suggests that adaptive systems do not eliminate uncertainty. They increase their capacity to respond productively to it (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007).

Future-ready schools become less concerned with maintaining perfect plans and more committed to strengthening institutional learning.

Their advantage is not certainty.

Their advantage is responsiveness.

A Architecture to Action

Practical Strategies for School Leaders

Frameworks matter because they shape how leaders think. But architecture only becomes meaningful when translated into organizational routines, decision structures, and daily practice. Future-ready schools are not created through declarations of innovation; they emerge through repeated leadership behaviors that strengthen adaptability, legitimacy, learning, and ethical decision-making over time.

The integration of the **AQ Leadership Compass** and the **Leadership Legitimacy Triangle** offers a practical pathway for operationalizing Future-Ready School Architecture.

1 Establish a “Signal Radar”: Build institutional awareness before disruption becomes crisis

One of the defining characteristics of adaptive institutions is their ability to notice change early.

Educational organizations often respond after disruption becomes visible: declining engagement, teacher turnover, technological disruption, or shifts in community expectations. Future-ready schools cultivate what complexity scholars describe as environmental sensing—the ability to continuously scan internal and external conditions (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007).

School leaders should establish structured routines for monitoring emerging signals.

Signals may include:

- changes in student participation and motivation;
- teacher workload and wellbeing patterns;
- parent expectations and communication trends;
- AI and educational technology developments;
- curriculum and assessment shifts;
- labor market and future-skills discussions;
- social and cultural changes affecting learners.

One practical approach is to hold a monthly Leadership Signal Review.

Questions may include:

- What emerging patterns are we noticing?
- What assumptions may no longer hold?
- What will become expensive if we ignore it?

Signal awareness transforms leadership from reactive management into anticipatory design.

2 Conduct Organizational Unlearning Reviews: Create institutional space for letting go

Educational institutions often accumulate practices faster than they retire them.

Policies remain long after their original purpose disappears.

Meetings continue because they have always existed.

Reporting expands while learning stagnates.

Future-ready schools therefore require deliberate unlearning.

Organizational unlearning refers to intentionally identifying and releasing routines, assumptions, and structures that no longer contribute to meaningful outcomes (Senge, 2006).

Once each semester, leadership teams should conduct an Institutional Unlearning Review.

Discussion prompts may include:

- Which practices are producing compliance rather than learning?
- Which structures consume energy without creating value?
- Which assumptions about teaching or leadership need revisiting?
- What would we stop doing if we were starting fresh today?

The purpose is not disruption.

It is preserving institutional adaptability.

Schools that never let go eventually lose capacity to grow.



3

Launch Safe-to-Fail Innovation Pilots: Replace large reforms with disciplined experimentation

Many educational reforms fail because implementation moves faster than institutional learning.

Future-ready schools adopt a different approach.

Rather than introducing system-wide initiatives immediately, leaders create safe-to-fail experiments—small, manageable opportunities to test ideas before scaling them.

This approach reflects principles from adaptive and complexity leadership literature, which suggests that innovation emerges through iterative cycles rather than centralized prediction (Heifetz et al., 2009; Uhl-Bien et al., 2007).

Possible pilot areas include:

- AI-supported instructional practices;
- assessment redesign;
- interdisciplinary learning;
- student feedback systems;
- project-based learning;
- teacher inquiry initiatives.

Effective pilots should include:

- limited scope;
- clear success indicators;
- rapid feedback cycles;
- reflection protocols;
- evidence-based scaling decisions.



Future-ready schools learn quickly because they experiment safely.

4

Invest Intentionally in Relational Trust: Build legitimacy before implementation

Educational transformation is often treated as a technical process.

But institutions do not implement change.

People do.

Research consistently shows that relational trust predicts successful school improvement and organizational resilience (Bryk & Schneider, 2002).

Future-ready leaders therefore treat trust as strategic infrastructure rather than interpersonal goodwill.

Practical trust-building mechanisms may include:

- monthly teacher listening forums;
- structured student voice councils;
- parent partnership conversations;
- transparent communication protocols;
- collaborative planning structures;
- leadership reflection sessions.

Before launching major initiatives, leaders should ask:

- Have people been heard?
- Do stakeholders understand the purpose?
- Are concerns visible in implementation plans?

Trust does not eliminate resistance.

It creates the conditions under which difficult change becomes possible.

5

Embed Ethical Reflection into Decision-Making: Ensure innovation remains deeply human

Educational leaders increasingly face decisions that involve competing values.

Efficiency versus wellbeing.

Innovation versus equity.

Personalization versus privacy.

Technology versus human connection.

Future-ready schools therefore require structured ethical reflection.



- Major institutional decisions should include explicit questions such as:
- Who benefits most from this decision?
 - Who may be unintentionally excluded?
 - Does this strengthen or weaken dignity?
 - What unintended consequences may emerge?
 - Does this align with our long-term educational purpose?

One practical tool is an Ethical Reflection Protocol used before major policy decisions.

Ethical reflection slows impulsive decision-making while strengthening moral authority. The goal is not to make decisions more comfortable. The goal is to make them more responsible.



Figure 3. Future-Ready School Architecture.

A conceptual model proposing that schools become future-ready through the integration of five interdependent layers—Ethical Foundation, Leadership Navigation, Institutional Legitimacy, Learning Ecosystem, and Adaptive Capacity. The framework argues that enduring educational transformation emerges not from individual initiatives but from intentionally designed systems capable of learning, adapting, and remaining deeply human in conditions of accelerating change. Framework conceptualized by Javeria Rana.

Conclusion

Schools That Endure Will Be Designed, Not Discovered

Educational transformation is often framed as a search for better leaders, stronger policies, or more effective innovations.

These efforts matter. But they remain incomplete if institutions themselves remain architecturally unchanged.

Future-ready schools are not created through isolated programs or inspirational speeches. They emerge through intentional design.



This article proposes Future-Ready School Architecture as one possible way to think about that work. An architecture:

Grounded in ethical purpose.

Navigated through adaptive leadership.

Stabilized through legitimacy.

Activated through learning ecosystems.

Sustained through adaptive capacity.

The future of education will not be secured by schools that move fastest, by schools that adopt the most technology, nor by schools that preserve tradition most effectively. The schools that endure will be those capable of continuously learning while remaining deeply human.

Perhaps the defining question for educational leaders is no longer: How do we prepare students for the future?

Perhaps it is: How do we build schools capable of becoming what future generations require?

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Javeria Rana is the Director of Academics at Unique International Educational Services (UIES), overseeing more than five-hundred schools, ensuring that quality education reaches thousands of students, always looking for ways to improve teaching methodologies, curriculum design, and leadership in education. She founded Café Learning, inspired by the World Café Method to dismantle traditional barriers, empowering learners and educators to reimagine the future of knowledge-sharing, and she is the creator of Future-Ready Schools, an exclusive feature showcased at The Worth Educator.  

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Empowering the Next Generation: The WISE Student Summit

Iyabo Tinubu
AIELOC Fellow
Accreditation Evaluation Team Member
The Council of International Schools
Dean of Students
The International School of Beijing
Beijing, China

Creating History

Our young people are not just future leaders - they are leaders now. Across international schools, students are already questioning inequities, organising initiatives, and advocating for more just and inclusive communities. Their voices matter in driving meaningful change toward gender equity.

The inaugural WISE Student Summit is created in direct response to this reality. Students are asking important questions about representation, power, and fairness, and they are seeking spaces where those questions can be explored collaboratively and meaningfully. Too often, conversations about gender equity happen *around* students rather than *with* them. This summit intentionally centres student voice, leadership, and lived experience.

The purpose of the summit is to bring together student leaders across South East Asia and beyond to:

- Amplify student-led initiatives focused on gender equity in schools and communities
- Learn from one another's experiences and insights
- Reflect on challenges and opportunities in advancing equity
- Build regional and global connections that support sustained collaboration

Hosted by [Women in International Schools Empowerment \(WISE\)](#) in collaboration with [PeerSphere](#) and [ISS](#), this summit represents a powerful step toward expanding gender equity work beyond adults and into the hands of young changemakers themselves.



What Is the WISE Student Summit?

The WISE Student Summit is an online, student-focused conference designed for young people who are passionate about gender equity and social justice.

WISE is a global organisation committed to advancing equity in international education. While WISE is widely known for supporting women educators and leaders, it also recognises the importance of student agency in creating lasting change.

This summit...

is specifically designed for students...

brings together young changemakers from international schools worldwide...

is hosted online, increasing accessibility and global participation...

creating a shared space where students can connect, learn, and lead together across borders.



Why This Summit Matters

The WISE Student Summit offers a meaningful opportunity for students aged 14–18 who are interested in gender equity and leadership. Participants attend sessions to learn from peers and step into leadership roles by facilitating workshops and presentations.

More importantly, the summit focuses on outcomes, not just activities.

Students...

build confidence and leadership skills in authentic contexts

create real-world impact by sharing and refining equity-focused projects

learn from peers, recognising that leadership does not only come from adults

see themselves as part of a global movement for gender equity.

At its core, this summit is about student agency. It affirms students’ sense of belonging, nurtures purpose-driven leadership, and reinforces the message that young people have both the right and the responsibility to shape more equitable futures.

What Students Experience

The summit is designed to be active, engaging, and student-centred:

- connecting with peers from diverse cultural and regional contexts
- hosting and attending student-led mini-workshops
- showcasing school-based and community initiatives
- learning practical advocacy, collaboration, and leadership skills
- being inspired by our keynote, speaking on equity and justice

Rather than passively consuming information, students co-create the learning experience and contribute meaningfully to the collective dialogue.



Keynote Speaker

The summit featured a keynote address by Margaret Park, an experienced school leader and facilitator of adult and student learning.

Currently a Deputy Principal at Singapore American School, Margaret delivers workshops and keynote addresses at international education conferences worldwide and has served as an education equity consultant to international schools across the globe.

With a strong commitment to leadership development, Margaret’s deep experience in mentoring, coaching, and designing inclusive learning environments shines through an equity and justice lens. Students gain practical insights, thoughtful challenges, and inspiration to lead with purpose and integrity.

Epilogue

On 5 March, students from around the world came together for the WISE Student Summit, sharing powerful ideas and initiatives aimed at advancing gender equity in their communities. We had 50 attendees from nearly 20 international schools across Asia. Our keynote speaker, Margaret Park, delivered a powerful speech and call to action, encouraging all of us to reflect on what may be ingrained in our thinking and to actively challenge bias in all its forms.

We heard from six student groups that delivered workshops on supporting disadvantaged girls, expanding educational opportunities, and working toward more equitable futures. Others explored stereotypes and bias in the media, reflecting on how these shape their everyday experiences and what young people can do to challenge and rise above them. We closed by grounding our thinking in this year's International Women's Day theme, Give to Gain, asking students what they would give to their communities.

It was an honour and a privilege to have co-organised this impactful space for students to courageously share their work, ideas, and perspectives. The future of gender equity is in thoughtful and determined hands. A huge thank you to my co-organiser, Thea Williams, and to our WISE team for their support, and to our partners, Peershare and ISS, for their technical support and expertise.



Lyabo Tinubu is an educator, school leader, student advocate, culturally responsive practitioner, and lifelong learner with over a decade of experience in international education. She currently serves as the Dean of Students at the [International School of Beijing](#), where she works closely with students, families, and teachers to foster inclusive, student-centred learning environments. With additional teaching experience in London, Singapore, and Berlin, Lyabo brings a global perspective to her work in Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Justice (DEIJ) and student leadership. Passionate about empowerment and representation, she is dedicated to ensuring that all students feel valued, seen, and capable of shaping their world. She believes deeply in the power of culturally responsive teaching, leadership development, and strong relationships to create meaningful and transformative learning experiences. Beyond the classroom, Lyabo is an active advocate within the international education community, collaborating with [AIELOC](#), [WomenEd](#), [WISE](#), and wider international DEIJ networks. She has led professional development initiatives, student leadership programmes, and school-wide cultural events, embedding equity and belonging at the heart of school culture. [in](#) [✉](#)

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Navigating Leadership Transitions: Overcoming Guilt, Self-Doubt, and Imposter Syndrome

Dr. Joshua Medrano
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The Context

As a school leader, it's often assumed that leaders either have all the answers or are well-rounded individuals; from balancing day-to-day operations to ensuring emotional balance among the members they lead, this perception is valid. But within those perceptions, leaders may experience the same emotional roller coasters as teachers: guilt, self-doubt, and imposter syndrome. As an educational leader and advocate, I can say I have fallen victim to these emotions during my most recent transition.

Stepping into a new leadership role is often accompanied by a sense of accomplishment and anticipation. Yet beneath the congratulations and family excitement lies a quieter, more complex reality. In 2025, my fiancé and I decided to move our wedding up by a year. In doing so, we discussed my staying at my current job in Temecula and commuting for the 25-26 school year. The plan was set, and we purchased a new car, but months into the new norm, reality slowly crept in, and the relocation cloud loomed. After nine months of commuting 174 miles a day, five days a week, the decision was made to begin searching for a job closer to home.

As an educational leader with years of experience and multiple degrees, the thought of job searching was not frightening, as I was under the impression that I would find something quickly. However, life had a different path. Rejection letters and multi-step hiring processes that took months to complete and ended with "Thank you for your time" began to arrive, with no light at the end of the tunnel. Self-doubt in my skills and education began to settle. But after 15 applications and multiple interviews, a callback and offer were made, and a small shimmer of light began to appear. The congratulatory text message alerts rang my phone, but reality began to hit; I am officially leaving a school community I love.



Leadership transitions are not simply professional shifts; they are deeply personal journeys that challenge identity, confidence, and one's sense of belonging. While these emotional hurdles are common, they are rarely discussed openly. Understanding and addressing them is essential for leaders who want to move beyond survival and lead with clarity, confidence, and purpose.

The Challenge

The day had finally come to begin at my new school. As I parked in the school parking lot in Costa Mesa, California, the thought of being a school admin starting at the end of March was already stressful enough. But what came next was something I had heard many people share, but had little experience with: imposter syndrome. Merriam-Webster defines imposter syndrome as a psychological condition characterized by persistent doubt about one's abilities or accomplishments, accompanied by the fear of being exposed as a fraud despite evidence of ongoing success (Rosenbaum, 2022). While imposter syndrome can affect anyone, it is particularly prevalent during periods of transition and growth. As the first Director of Academics at my new school, my internal imposter thoughts grew as the day continued. Navigating the observation and understanding of multiple team dynamics and organizational operations, and making preemptive decisions, led to feelings of inadequacy, causing me to question my experience and knowledge.

The impact of these internal struggles on leadership effectiveness is significant. Leaders experiencing self-doubt may become overly cautious in decision-making, delaying action to avoid mistakes. Others may overcompensate by working excessively hard, striving for perfection to validate their role. This can lead to burnout, emotional fatigue, and a diminished capacity to think strategically.

However, these challenges are not purely obstacles; they can also serve as powerful catalysts for growth. When approached intentionally, the discomfort associated with leadership transitions can deepen self-awareness and strengthen leadership capacity. One of the most important shifts a leader can make is reframing imposter syndrome not as evidence of inadequacy, but as a signal of growth. Feeling uncertain often means stretching beyond one's comfort zone and developing new skills.



Overcoming Techniques

After several weeks at my new site, I gained confidence in the day-to-day operations, the teachers and staff, and the school's layout. However, I could not shake off the persistent feeling of self-doubt and the growing sense of impostor syndrome. So I put myself in the role of mentee and reached out to support groups and mentors. The following techniques helped me chip away at the links in the chains that were fostering self-doubt.

Self-reflection leads to self-awareness:

Taking time to reflect on your thoughts and emotional patterns can better equip you in managing triggers that lead to moments of self-doubt.

Reframing negative self-talk:

Internal narratives can undermine confidence, such as "I'm not ready," "I don't have enough experience," or "Someone else would do this better." Instead, question these thoughts and replace them with phrases like "I was chosen for this role because of my skills and potential," or "I am still learning, and that is part of leadership" (MCDA, 2023).

Document and internalize success:

Keeping a record of achievements, positive feedback, and meaningful experiences can contribute to the shifting of belief systems, making confidence more grounded and sustainable (MCDA, 2023).

Mentorship & Feedback:

Mentors can provide perspective and offer guidance based on experience. They also provide affirmation of strengths and abilities.

Opportunities for honest feedback will help calibrate self-perception with how others actually perceive them.

Lead with authenticity and vulnerability:

Acknowledging challenges and uncertainties can strengthen trust within teams. Leaders who are transparent about their growth create space for others to do the same, fostering a culture of openness and continuous learning (MCDA, 2023).

Next Steps

As I am now months into the role, I will not say I have overcome my interpersonal challenges, but I have made daily progress. Leadership transitions are as much about identity as they are about skill. The process takes time and intentional reflection. Leaders who anchor themselves in purpose, values, and vision are better equipped to navigate uncertainty.

In the end, effective leadership is not defined by the absence of doubt, but by the ability to lead through it. Guilt, self-doubt, and imposter syndrome are not signs that a leader is failing; they are signs that a leader is growing.



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



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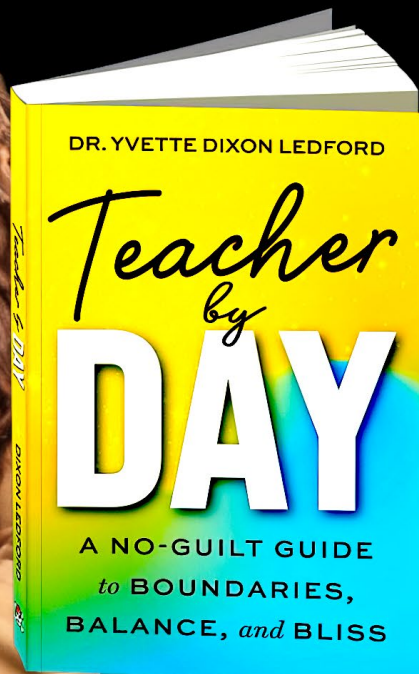
Teacher by Day

with Dr. Yvette Dixon Ledford

Saturday

June 13, 2026

10:00 a.m. e.t.



Dr. Yvette Dixon Ledford blends research-backed strategies with real talk to help teachers protect their peace and reignite their passion, offering a candid, uplifting guide to teacher well-being. Through sharp analogies, unforgettable stories, catchy sayings, and real TLC, she reveals how educators can protect their health, reclaim their worth, and reignite their purpose. Her reflections on being “out here working for food” challenge readers to rethink the value of their labor during the prime of their lives. This essential book is both a mirror and a roadmap for teachers ready to thrive, not just survive

Attending this session with Yvette, you will receive:

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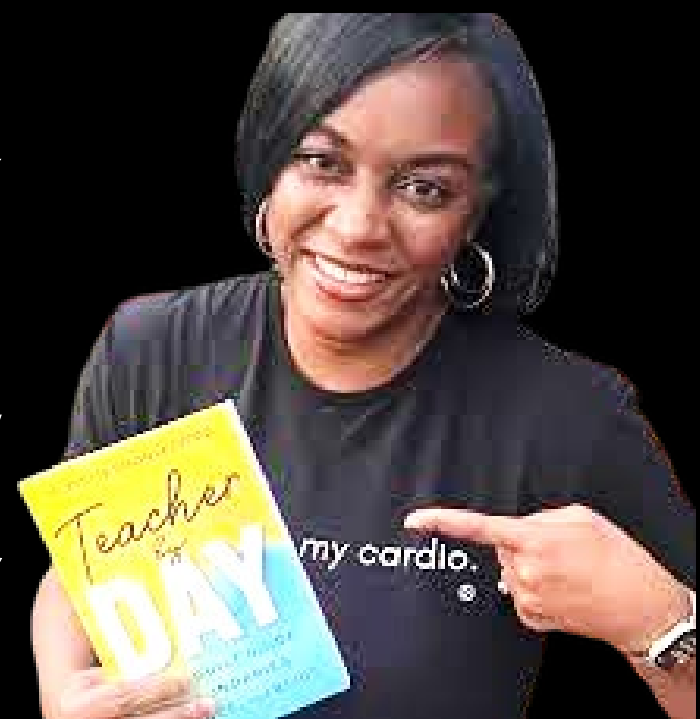
Tools to set boundaries, reduce stress, and rediscover the joy of teaching

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— Natalie P., Educator





**BASED ON
THE BOOK**



Beyond Digital Natives: Teaching the Tech Skills Students Actually Need

Dr. Johanna David-Tramantano

Educator, College Transition Coach and Author

CONNECT: A High School-to-College Success Framework

Host of Professor on Your Side Podcast

Tarrytown, New York

Even Natives Need Skills

A college student sends a text to a friend, turns to their laptop, and freezes as they try to find where their assignment is saved, and how to upload the file to their college LMS. This happens more frequently than educators may realize. Even though current students may have been born into a fully digital world, they might still need help organizing and clarifying their workflow and enhancing their knowledge of technology. In a post-COVID world, our students' needs have also shifted on an academic, executive-functioning, and socio-emotional level. This is reflected at both the high school and college levels, and requires a multi-faceted, nuanced approach.

Current students are faced with unique challenges that previous generations have not encountered before as a result of the influence of technology. Our students are demonstrating significant needs in the areas of executive functioning, task management, academic skills, and social-emotional needs; this is in large part due to the dependence on mobile phones, which is an unexpected outcome of unleashing a technology that essentially provided the world to our youth without guardrails (Haidt, 2024). Generation Z students (Gen Z), born between 1997 and 2012, were born fully into a world with the internet and technology surrounding them. Aside from technological literacy, schools are currently grappling with digital literacy and the proliferation of AI in an ever-evolving educational landscape.

Students are often thought of as "digital natives" (Prensky, 2001). Despite the fact that many students were raised in digital surroundings, there is still a difference in the degree of proficiency and familiarity with technology, depending on both experience and access. For instance, students could be able to utilize an app, but they might not know how to organize documents, make folders, convert a document to a PDF, or access a variety of instructional materials. We must address these obstacles and provide students with the tools they need to take full advantage of the resources at their disposal in order to do this.



Technostress

The technical resources of students with limited resources must also be discussed. Students frequently use mobile devices to obtain and complete assignments, particularly those with low resources (Pew Research Center, 2024). At the high school level, students don't necessarily know how to use a web browser or how to create files on their desktop. While they may be adept at using apps on their phone or using a Google Classroom, for example, technology skills can vary, and we often make assumptions when it comes to the digital literacy of our students. In fact, according to the International Computer and Information Literacy Study, 8th grade students in the United States demonstrated a decline in digital literacy competencies between 2018 and 2023 (Langreo, 2024).

The term "technostress" was first coined by clinical psychologist Craig Brod (1984), defining it as a modern condition brought on by difficulties in adjusting to new computer technology in a healthy way. Since then, researchers have expanded the concept to describe the stress and psychological strain people experience when interacting with technology. This is becoming increasingly relevant in education. In developmental contexts, technostress is characterized by psychological pressure from excessive technology use, constant connectivity, and an inability to "unplug." Despite growing awareness of the need to address "digital wellbeing" in schools, there are still gaps in how policies and approaches are implemented in schools (Mettis et al., 2025). There is thus a need for more guidance and research in effective practices to address this important topic.

Tarafdar and colleagues (2007) identified five primary techno-stressors: techno-overload, techno-invasion, techno-complexity, techno-insecurity, and techno-uncertainty. According to Tarafdar and colleagues, (2007) techno-overload happens when technology requires users to work faster and for longer periods; techno-invasion refers to the breakdown of barriers between one's professional and personal life (as a result of connectivity); techno-complexity refers to increasing sophistication requiring consistent development of skills; techno-insecurity revolves around a fear of being replaced by either the technology itself, or colleagues with greater proficiency; and, finally, techno-uncertainty describes the unsettling state of continuously evolving technological change. While technology may have many benefits, there are evidently challenges that should be acknowledged. Wang and Yao (2025) examined techno-stressors among academics in higher education and found that while technology is beneficial in several regards, it had a negative psychological impact, with techno-invasion as the greatest stressor on psychological well-being.

The concept of technostress can be found in all areas of our lives. At the university level, high levels of technostress are specifically linked to lower academic performance because they reduce motivation and focus on learning objectives (Verde-Avalos et al., 2025). We frequently believe that today's students are "tech-savvy" by nature. However, proficiency with social media or apps does not always translate into proficient use of productivity and academic technologies.



This matters because:

- Students may struggle with foundational tools like word processors or college LMS platforms because these skills may have not been explicitly taught at the secondary levels. Incorporating student trainings through freshman seminars and workshops can help students to develop skills they need so that they can format a document properly, learning how to navigate a learning management system, and use technological tools in an effective way to support their learning.
- Key terminology such as URL vs. website address or file management and folder hierarchies, is not intuitive for many learners, yet these are essential for academic success. Because students may not have been taught about foundational aspects related to computers, terminology should be addressed, so that students develop not just the know-how, but the language associated with the tools.
- Without structured instruction in how to navigate these technologies, students experience technostress, which could potentially detract from learning and engagement.
- With the proliferation of AI, it is also vital for students to be effectively taught about digital literacy skills more broadly, and how to use references effectively to support writing. It is vital that students are taught to evaluate the credibility of sources and develop effective research skills. Research has found that 58% of students admitted to using AI tools to complete assignments dishonestly (Tan & Maravilla, 2024). In addition, an over-reliance by students on AI can impact student engagement and deeper thinking around subject knowledge; however, when used with intentionality, can be used to improve writing fluency (Deep & Chen, 2025).



The EduShift

As educators, we have to shift our expectations from “they already know this” to using formative assessment to identify strengths and areas of need in order to explicitly teach digital skills as part of the curriculum. Not only does this reduce technostress, it also builds confidence and agency; key predictors of academic and professional success.

Educators can use the following to guide instruction:

- Explicitly teach students where and how to save documents and set up organized digital systems at the beginning of the semester.
- Walk students through navigating your learning platform (LMS) step-by-step.
- Model the use of tech tools and then use the gradual release model to have students model it for each other.
- Define essential digital terms and contextualize them within academic tasks.
- Provide practice and feedback on using technology in productive, not just presentational, ways. Help students to understand how they can see feedback on their papers, and also survey students to learn how they want to receive feedback. Many learning management systems have an option for audio feedback, which some students may prefer.
- Build on student strengths by having them share what works for them, and what could be improved or helpful in the future.

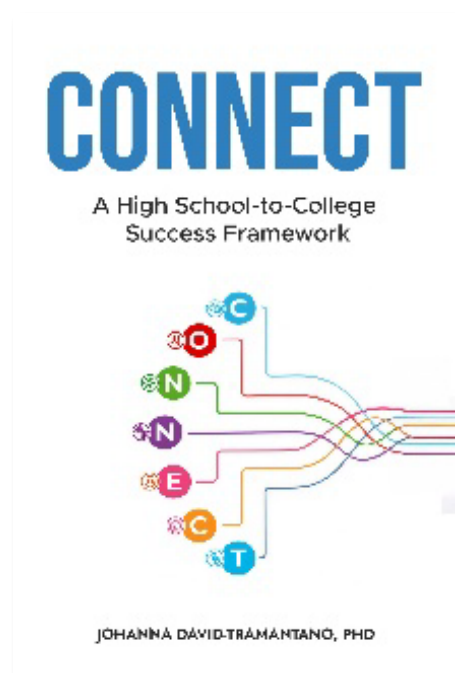
By doing so, we are empowering students to use technology well and with purposeful intention. When students are empowered with the tools and resources to navigate technology with purpose and clarity, the positive effects extend beyond the classroom. I explore these ideas further and offer additional strategies in my upcoming book on the high school to college transition, where I share my C.O.N.N.E.C.T. Framework. Navigating technology is a central component of the framework I present, because navigating technology effectively means students are engaging in communication, organization, and critical thinking in meaningful ways that will serve them long after graduation.

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Dr. Johanna S. David-Tramantano is a career educator and educational leader whose work bridges research and practice to better support students during critical academic transitions. She brings nearly 25 years of experience as a teacher, coach, administrator & professor with a focus on literacy, executive functioning, & college readiness. She is the author of CONNECT: A High School-to-College Success Framework (The Worthy Educator Press, 2026).



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Leadership can be lonely, and the demands of the work can leave us stressed with dwindling personal resources. This became even more evident during the COVID-19 disruption when the needs of staff, students and their families became overwhelming in the quickly-shifting circumstances. Making time for ourselves, our well-being and our professional growth can easily get lost in all of the priorities we are asked to handle.

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The Role of the Educator in the use of Artificial Intelligence: The Tsunami that has taken over the Classrooms

Dr. Lyssette Hawthorne-Wilson
Lecturer & AI Integration in Education Advisor
The Mico University College Professional Studies Department
Kingston, Jamaica



Introduction

Artificial intelligence has moved into education with remarkable speed. Applications that once seemed distant from daily teaching now assist with planning, generate explanations, recommend resources, and even propose assessment responses. Many educators describe the moment as overwhelming. Familiar routines are unsettled, expectations are shifting, and long-held assumptions about expertise are being questioned. Still, technology does not educate students. Teachers do. Tools may expand access to information, but they cannot carry responsibility for human growth, ethical judgment, or the cultivation of understanding. The educator remains the professional who must interpret what is appropriate, what is accurate, and what serves the learner.

Since teaching is primarily an act of interpretation, the contemporary teacher is at the center of the AI moment. This article draws on sensemaking theory, organizational change research, teacher knowledge and professional agency scholarship, to consider how educators might adjust to rapid technological growth without losing their identity or mission.

Educators as Interpreters of Change

When environments become uncertain, individuals attempt to create meaning that allows them to continue working. [Karl E. Weick](#) explains that people enact the realities within which they operate by interpreting cues, constructing explanations, and moving forward on the basis of those interpretations. In schools, this process unfolds daily. Teachers face new applications, unfamiliar outputs, and evolving expectations, yet lessons must still occur and learners must still be supported.

The presence of AI, therefore, intensifies rather than diminishes professional responsibility. Every generated response requires evaluation. Educators ask whether content is correct, whether it aligns with curriculum goals, and whether it supports genuine understanding. Meaning precedes action. The teacher becomes the bridge between technological possibility and educational value.

Interpreting change is only the beginning. Institutions must also learn how to move from awareness toward sustainable practice. Research on transformation led by [John P. Kotter](#) emphasizes that change takes root when communities recognize urgency, develop shared direction, and experience visible progress. These elements are vital in AI adoption. If teachers feel pressured without guidance, anxiety increases. When they see colleagues experimenting successfully, confidence grows. When leadership provides clarity about expectations and celebrates early successes, new practices begin to stabilize. Change becomes collective rather than isolating.

Teacher Knowledge in a Digital Age

Competent use of artificial intelligence requires far more than the ability to operate a platform. It calls for the integration of disciplinary expertise, pedagogical understanding, and technological awareness. The framework articulated by [Punya Mishra and Matthew J. Koehler](#) makes clear that effective teaching resides in the dynamic relationship among these domains. AI does not replace this relationship. Instead, it exposes it. A system may generate an elegant explanation, yet an experienced teacher can immediately perceive that the language is too abstract, the examples too distant, or the assumptions mismatched with learners' prior knowledge. Another educator might reshape a suggested activity to reflect local culture, available resources, or specific developmental needs. In both situations, the technology presents possibilities, but the professional determines suitability.

Judgement becomes the defining feature of expertise. Teachers interpret outputs through understanding of curriculum aims, student readiness, and long-term learning goals. They recognize that accuracy alone is insufficient if meaning is not achieved. The intersection of knowledge domains, therefore, remains the heart of practice. Artificial intelligence can widen the range of options available to educators, but it cannot decide which option best advances understanding in a particular moment. That responsibility continues to rest with the teacher, whose preparation enables adaptation, translation, and refinement. Technology supplies alternatives, while educators design learning.

Caution from Classroom History

Enthusiasm for innovation has accompanied many moments in the history of schooling. Each generation has witnessed technologies heralded as transformative, efficient, and capable of solving persistent challenges. Yet history advises humility. Larry Cuban demonstrated that reforms often produce far less change than anticipated because the complex realities of classrooms are frequently overlooked. Structures may shift while daily practice remains remarkably stable. Access, therefore, is not synonymous with improvement. Teachers work within traditions, expectations, and cultural patterns that shape how tools are interpreted and used. Established routines offer stability in demanding environments, and new initiatives must negotiate this lived terrain. Without attention to these human dimensions, even the most sophisticated technologies risk becoming additions rather than transformations.

This perspective does not diminish the potential of artificial intelligence. Instead, it invites thoughtful engagement. Reflection tempers excitement with responsibility. Educators are encouraged to ask not only what a tool can do, but what it should do within the moral and pedagogical aims of the classroom.

Historical awareness thus becomes a form of professional wisdom. It reminds institutions that progress depends less on novelty and more on the capacity of teachers to align innovation with meaningful educational purposes. When that alignment is present, technology can contribute to genuine growth. When it is absent, promise fades into routine.



Agency, Collaboration, and Moral Purpose

The capacity of educators to respond wisely to artificial intelligence is amplified when it is exercised collectively. Professional agency does not flourish in isolation. It grows within communities where dialogue, critique, and mutual support are normal features of practice. Andy Hargreaves emphasizes that sustainable improvement depends on professional capital, the combination of individual expertise, collaborative strength, and shared responsibility for students. In periods of technological disruption, this insight becomes especially important.

When teachers speak openly about successes and difficulties, uncertainty becomes manageable. One colleague's experiment becomes another's entry point. Strategies are refined, language becomes clearer, and confidence accumulates across the institution. Collaboration transforms innovation from a private burden into a shared endeavour.

Collective work also guards the moral centre of education. Questions surrounding authorship, originality, fairness, and access extend far beyond technical capability. They are ethical matters that demand conversation and reflection. Software cannot determine what integrity requires within a particular learning community. Only educators, attentive to context and committed to the well-being of their students, can exercise that responsibility.

Through collaboration, teachers reaffirm that AI must remain accountable to human purposes. They remind one another that efficiency cannot replace empathy, and that progress must be measured not only by productivity but by the quality of growth experienced by learners. In this way, professional community becomes both a source of strength and a safeguard for moral intention.

Digital Literacy as Judgement

Digital literacy is often misunderstood as technical fluency. The ability to navigate platforms, generate responses, or operate applications represents only the surface of competence. For educators, literacy in a digital age is fundamentally about judgment. It involves recognizing bias, understanding how outputs are produced, questioning reliability, and discerning when efficiency may come at the expense of learning.

This broader view aligns with long-standing warnings from educational research that technology does not improve practice by its mere presence. Larry Cuban observed that the success of innovation depends on the decisions teachers make as they adapt tools to real classroom contexts. Artificial intelligence magnifies this reality. Each prompt, recommendation, or automated suggestion invites professional evaluation.

Teachers, therefore, serve as models of disciplined thinking. They demonstrate how to pause before acceptance, how to compare sources, and how to admit uncertainty when answers require further verification. Such actions communicate powerful lessons about intellectual responsibility. Students learn that authority is not derived from confident language but from careful reasoning.

Digital literacy also requires educators to help learners recognize the boundary between support and substitution. When assistance begins to replace cognitive effort, growth may be compromised. Guiding students through this distinction preserves agency and encourages deeper engagement with ideas.

Within this framework, AI becomes more than a productivity aid. It becomes a setting in which ethical awareness, critical inquiry, and accountability are practiced visibly. By exercising and modelling judgement, educators ensure that technology strengthens rather than diminishes the purposes of education.

Identity and Adaptability

Periods of rapid innovation press educators to reexamine the meaning of their professional selves. When teaching is reduced to the transmission of information, artificial intelligence can appear to challenge relevance and authority. However, when the work of the educator is understood more fully as guiding development, shaping learning environments, cultivating discernment, and sustaining motivation, technology is repositioned. It becomes an instrument within practice rather than a rival to it. Sensemaking research reminds us that identity anchors interpretation. [Karl E. Weick](#) notes that individuals act in ways that are consistent with who they believe they are. A teacher who sees oneself as a mentor, an ethical guide, and a designer of meaningful experiences will approach AI differently from one who views the role primarily as delivering answers. The response to innovation, therefore, is never purely technical. It is deeply personal and professional at the same time.

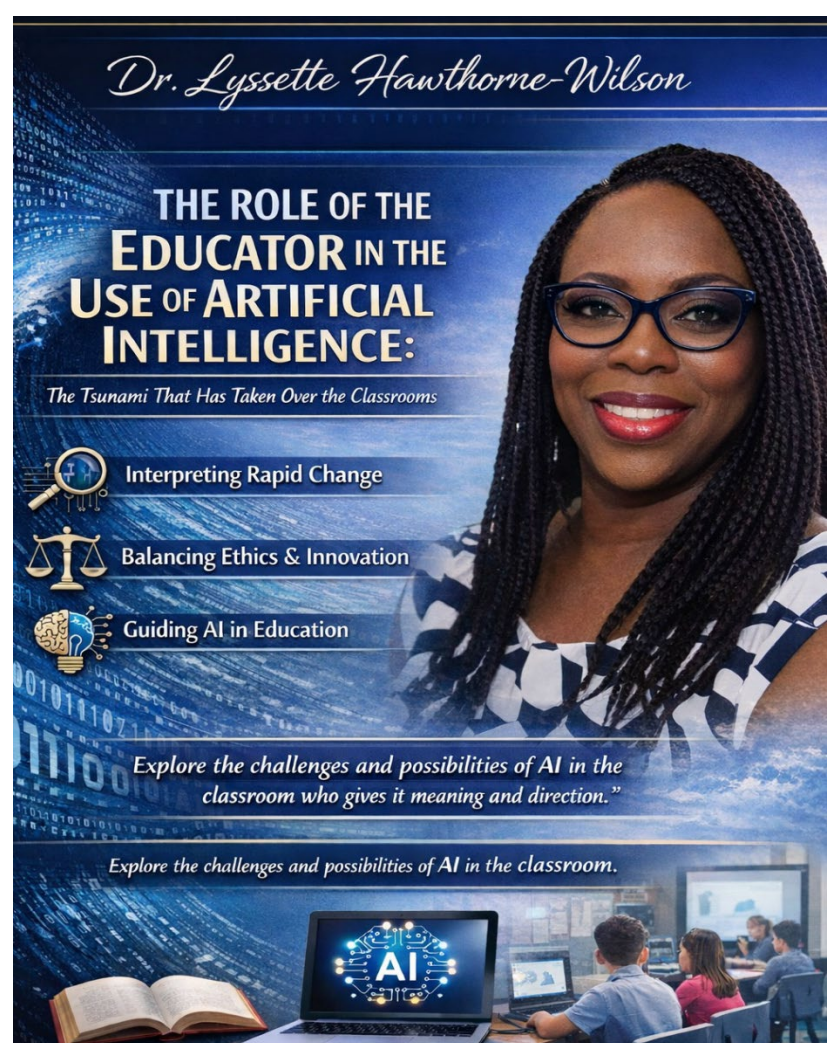
Adaptability grows from clarity of purpose. Educators who are secure in their mission can modify strategies, experiment with tools, and revise routines without feeling displaced. They understand that while methods evolve, responsibility for learners remains constant. In this way, change does not erode professional dignity. Instead, it provides opportunity to demonstrate judgment, creativity, and leadership.

The enduring centre of teaching is human connection. Technologies may expand reach and efficiency, yet the educator continues to model integrity, empathy, and intellectual care. By holding firmly to this core, teachers are able to move forward with confidence, adjusting practice while preserving vocation.

Implications for Educational Leadership

Educational leadership is decisive in determining whether artificial intelligence becomes a source of confusion or a catalyst for growth. Teachers rarely resist innovation because they are unwilling. More often, uncertainty arises when expectations are unclear, support is inconsistent, or experimentation feels risky. Leadership, therefore, establishes the emotional and structural conditions within which confidence can develop. Change scholarship underscores this responsibility. [John P. Kotter](#) argues that transformation gains momentum when people experience shared purpose, practical guidance, and visible evidence that effort leads to improvement. In the context of AI, educators need more than access to software. They require time to explore, opportunities to question, and reassurance that learning includes missteps. Where such conditions exist, curiosity replaces fear.

Professional dialogue is equally important. When teachers are invited to interpret new technologies together, they build common language and mutual trust. Collaborative sensemaking distributes expertise across the institution and prevents individuals from feeling isolated with complex decisions. Leadership that listens strengthens commitment. Durable innovation also depends on recognition. Celebrating small achievements signals that progress matters and that professional growth is valued. Over time, these affirmations help new practices settle into the culture of the organization.



When educators are treated as partners rather than implementers, change becomes intelligent and sustainable. Authority is shared, responsibility is deepened, and the institution moves forward with coherence. In such environments, artificial intelligence can be integrated in ways that honour both technological advancement and the human purposes of education.



Conclusion

Artificial intelligence has entered education with remarkable intensity, altering expectations, expanding capability, and accelerating the pace at which decisions must be made. Its presence is undeniable, and its influence will continue to grow. Yet the trajectory of schooling will never be determined by systems alone. It will be shaped by the educators who interpret their possibilities, evaluate their limits, and guide their application in the service of learners.

Throughout this discussion, teaching has been presented as work grounded in meaning. Drawing on insights from [Karl E. Weick](#), the educator emerges as the professional who constructs direction in moments of ambiguity. Supported by principles of change articulated by [John P. Kotter](#), individual interpretation becomes collective movement when institutions cultivate trust, dialogue, and shared purpose. Perspectives on teacher knowledge, historical caution, and professional capital further confirm that innovation becomes valuable only when human judgment shapes its use.

The essential responsibilities of educators, therefore, remain constant even as tools evolve. Teachers continue to safeguard intellectual integrity, nurture curiosity, and uphold ethical commitment. They decide when assistance strengthens learning and when it risks diminishing effort. They adapt resources while preserving the relational foundation upon which education depends. Artificial intelligence may extend reach and efficiency, but it is the educator who ensures meaning. When professionals engage technology with clarity of identity and moral intention, they transform disruption into opportunity. The wave is powerful, yet wisdom determines where it leads.

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COMING THE END OF AUGUST
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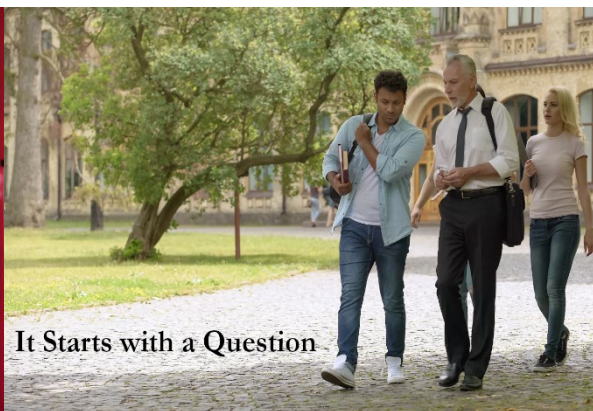


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A Sign of Things to Come:
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Lead
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with Andy Szeto



Belonging is Built in the Margins: How Micro-Interactions became Our Most Powerful Tier 1 Intervention

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It happened in the hallway between third and fourth period. A student lingered just outside a classroom door—backpack half-zipped, eyes fixed on the floor, pretending to retie a sneaker that didn't need adjusting. The bell had already rung. Students streamed past, teachers moved with purpose, the day marching forward as it always does. A teacher passing by slowed down, crouched slightly, and said quietly, "You don't have to go in alone. I'll walk with you." No clipboard. No referral. No behavior chart. Just thirty seconds of noticing.

That moment didn't appear in any data dashboard. It didn't show up in our attendance report, our behavior log, or our MTSS tracker. But it changed the rest of that student's day. And over time, moments like this changed how we understood Tier 1 support in our building.

In education, we spend enormous energy designing initiatives to build belonging. We create assemblies, advisory curricula, posters, slogans, and protocols. We train, retrain, and sometimes overtrain. All of this work is well-intentioned. Much of it is necessary. But somewhere along the way, we began to overlook where culture actually lives. Not in binders. Not in slide decks. Not even in programs. Culture is built in the margins of the day—in the moments between the moments—where adults have discretion, where choices are unscripted, and where students decide, often unconsciously, whether they are safe, seen, and valued.

For years, our building did what many schools do. When student engagement dipped, when behavior escalated, or when students struggled to regulate, we looked outward for solutions. We added programs. We layered initiatives. We asked teachers to do more, often without taking anything away. Belonging became something we tried to *implement* rather than something we tried to *protect*. And while none of these efforts were wrong, the cumulative effect was exhausting. Teachers felt like they were constantly chasing the next fix, and students experienced belonging as something episodic rather than embedded.



The irony is that the most powerful culture-building work was already happening all around us. It was happening when a teacher paused to greet a student by name at the door. When a counselor followed up on a casual hallway conversation. When a paraprofessional noticed a change in demeanor and checked in. When an administrator chose curiosity over correction. These moments were easy to miss precisely because they were ordinary. But they were also the moments students remembered.

The shift for us began not with a new initiative, but with a question: *What if Tier 1 support isn't primarily about what we add, but about what we notice, name, and protect?* That question required us to rethink how we defined intervention. Instead of viewing Tier 1 as a set of universal programs delivered to students, we began to see it as the daily, relational environment students move through—one shaped largely by micro-interactions between adults and students.

This reframing mattered. Micro-interactions are not about being “nice” or lowering expectations. They are about timing, tone, and trust. They happen in hallways, at classroom doors, during transitions, and in brief exchanges that rarely last more than a minute. A nod of acknowledgment. A quiet check-in. A shared joke. A moment of patience instead of urgency. These interactions signal to students whether school is a place where they belong—or a place they must endure.

Importantly, we did not respond to this realization by scripting language or mandating practices. We did not roll out a “micro-interaction framework” or require teachers to document moments of connection. Doing so would have undermined the very agency that made these interactions effective. Instead, we focused on creating the conditions for this work to flourish. We protected time for reflection in team meetings. We elevated stories from staff—not as exemplars to replicate, but as evidence of professional judgment in action. We asked teachers what they were noticing about students and what helped them feel connected to their work.



This was a leadership risk. It meant trusting educators to do what they already knew how to do, even when that work resisted easy measurement. It meant shifting from compliance-driven accountability to relational accountability. And it meant acknowledging that some of the most important outcomes—belonging, trust, emotional safety—do not lend themselves neatly to spreadsheets.

Still, the impact was tangible. As micro-interactions became a shared point of reflection, we began to see changes across the building. Students were more willing to take academic risks, particularly in reading and writing tasks that required vulnerability. Transitions became calmer, not because expectations changed, but because students felt less anonymous. Help-seeking behavior increased. Teachers reported fewer power struggles and more productive conversations with students who previously shut down.

These shifts mattered for literacy in particular. Reading and writing demand cognitive stamina, emotional regulation, and a willingness to be wrong in public. Students who feel unseen or unsafe rarely engage deeply with complex texts. But when students trust the adults around them, they are more likely to persist, to revise, and to participate. Belonging, we came to understand, is not a soft outcome. It is a prerequisite for learning.

None of this was easily quantifiable. We could point to trends—fewer referrals during certain times of day, improved engagement during independent work—but we could not isolate micro-interactions as a single causal variable. That discomfort was real. In a field increasingly driven by data, choosing to value work that resists precise measurement can feel professionally risky. But leadership is not only about what can be measured; it is also about what is worth standing behind. We had to decide whether we trusted our educators’ professional judgment enough to center it.

This work also reshaped how we thought about educator wellness and efficacy. Too often, wellness initiatives are positioned as something separate from the work itself—an add-on designed to help educators survive unsustainable systems. Focusing on micro-interactions did the opposite. It affirmed that the relational work teachers do is not extra; it is core. It reminded educators that their instincts matter, that their small decisions carry weight, and that they are not interchangeable parts in a system, but skilled professionals shaping daily experiences for students.



There were lessons learned along the way. We learned that protecting this work requires restraint. Every new initiative competes for attention, time, and emotional energy. Saying no—or not yet—became an act of advocacy for educators. We learned that modeling matters. When leaders engage in the same micro-interactions with staff—listening, acknowledging, following up—it reinforces the culture we hope to see with students. And we learned that belonging cannot be mandated, but it can be cultivated when leaders create space for it.

For schools interested in doing this work, the entry points are deceptively simple. Start by auditing the margins of the day. Pay attention to arrival, transitions, and dismissal. Ask students where they feel most seen—and where they don't. Collect stories from staff about moments that felt meaningful, not just moments that met a metric. Resist the urge to standardize what should remain human. And before adding something new, ask what might need protecting instead. The hallway moment that opened this piece lasted less than a minute. It required no funding, no training module, and no approval process. But it reflected a choice—one made thousands of times a day by educators across our building. When those choices are noticed, valued, and supported, they become more than isolated acts of kindness. They become the foundation of a Tier 1 system rooted in dignity, trust, and belonging.

The most powerful work in schools often happens when no one is watching. Our responsibility as leaders is to notice it, honor it, and ensure it has room to breathe.



Tim Montalvo is an assistant principal at [Fox Lane Middle School](#) in Bedford, New York, where his leadership focuses on instructional equity, belonging, literacy, MTSS, and responsive support for multilingual learners. With more than a decade of experience in adolescent education, teacher development, and school leadership, he works closely with educators to strengthen Tier 1 instruction, scaffold access to learning, and create school cultures where students feel connected and capable. He also teaches undergraduate and graduate courses in education, psychology, and human services at [Iona University](#) and the [College of Westchester](#). Across his work, Montalvo bridges K-12 and higher education through practical, relationship-centered approaches that support students, educators, and adult learners.



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Kimberly Bradley & Erica Glenn



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Erica Glenn and Kimberly Bradley, co-founders of Max Results, are ardent champions for early childhood education, and prekindergarten, in particular. Through their work in public education, community outreach, and partnering with likeminded organizations, their voices speak with the authority of educators doing the real work.

Based on the article of the same title featured in the spring 2026 issue of Legacy, Transformation in Action Erica and Kimberly will delve into the implications for starting STEM instructional design with our youngest learners using these three considerations:

- Presence and Instructional Attention
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