

AUTUMN 2025

LEGACY

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The Worthy Educator

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AUTUMN 2025

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Legacy is the official journal of The Worthy Educator, elevating the good work being done by leaders in education working to change the narrative on the profession and actively impacting the 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 build the future.

Submissions are accepted on a rolling basis from educators who are implementing new and innovative approaches to this work. Guidelines including an archive of past successful submissions, specifications and instructions can be found on the [Legacy: Transformation in Action site](https://theworthyeducator.com).

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Good Things are Happening

Welcome to the first issue in volume two of our journal! As it has always been my experience, when you are in the positive flow of your life's work, doors open and good things happen:

We are celebrating surpassing 800 educators strong in our community.

We are launching the publishing arm of The Worthy Educator, releasing our first title this fall.

We are completing the last modules of our Advocacy Microcredential in October.

We are deep into our work constructing Roadmap 2030 as a blueprint for the future of education.

We are rewarding one lucky Worthy Educator with Christmas at the beach.

And in this moment, we present to you the best issue of Legacy: Transformation in Action, yet.

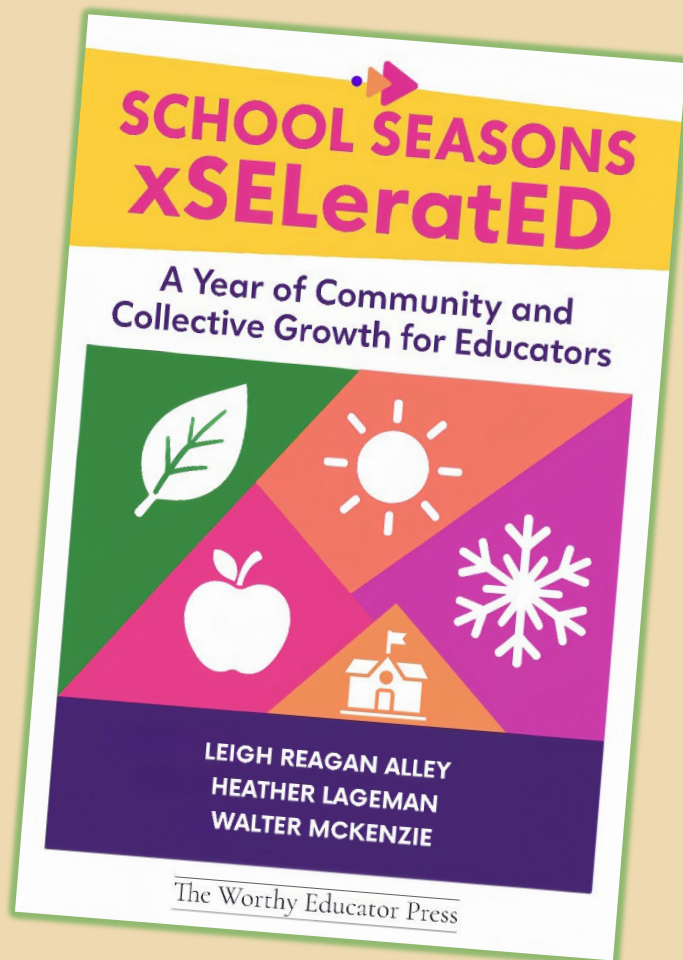
Thank you for being a part of this movement to transform our profession. Let us know how we can support you in building your legacy!

Walter McKenzie



The deadline for submissions for our Winter 2025 issue is Monday, December 1st.

The Worthy Educator Press



Our first title, hot off the press this fall from our publishing arm!

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Twisting the Taxonomy: Teaching With Our Möbius Strip Model

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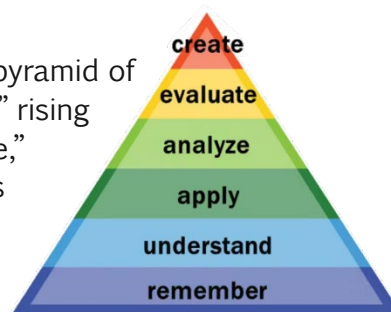
Abstract

Since its publication in 1956, Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives has become one of the most widely used frameworks in teaching, curriculum design, and assessment. Despite revisions, its core assumption - that learning progresses in a linear hierarchy from remembering to creating - has remained intact. This article critiques Bloom's taxonomy as a relic of industrial-era thinking, designed more for organizational convenience than fidelity to how learning actually occurs. Drawing on research in psychology, neuroscience,

and systems theory, we demonstrate that learning is recursive, affective, and contextual rather than sequential or compartmentalized. Emotional arousal, attachment, and autonomy shape cognition simultaneously, while complexity theory reveals classrooms as dynamic, adaptive systems resistant to linear categorization. Language acquisition and moral development likewise show that evaluation and creation emerge in tandem with remembering and applying. The persistence of Bloom's taxonomy, we argue, reflects its utility for accountability and role-preparation rather than its accuracy as a model of learning. As an alternative, we propose the Möbius strip as a metaphor for recursive, looping learning that integrates creation, reflection, emotion, and application in continuous interplay. Implications for curriculum design, assessment, and teacher education are discussed, with a call to shift from hierarchical taxonomies to systemic, recursive models that honor the realities of human development.

Introduction: The Enduring Pyramid

Nearly every educator has encountered it: the pyramid of learning objectives. At its base lies "Remember," rising upward through "Understand," "Apply," "Analyze," "Evaluate," and culminating in "Create." Bloom's Taxonomy, first published in 1956, has become the lingua franca of educational planning. It appears in teacher training syllabi, curriculum guides, professional development workshops, and lesson plans around the globe. Few frameworks in education have had such staying power.



And yet, its persistence invites scrutiny. Despite revisions, Bloom's taxonomy has remained remarkably consistent in its underlying assumptions: that learning is hierarchical, that learners progress step by step through neatly bounded categories, and that mastery can be universally represented on a single ladder. What has changed is not the framework itself, but the context in which it operates. Education today is shaped by shifting paradigms - constructivism, learner-centered pedagogy, trauma-informed practice, systems thinking - that highlight the complexity and nonlinearity of learning.

In light of these shifts, Bloom's taxonomy appears less like a faithful representation of learning and more like a relic of mid-20th-century industrial thinking. It is convenient, yes. It is easy to map, to plan around, to measure. But convenience is not the same as accuracy. If we wish to understand learning as it actually happens, and design education that honors it, we must question whether Bloom's framework is adequate - or whether it has become a monument to a bygone era.

The Taxonomic Impulse

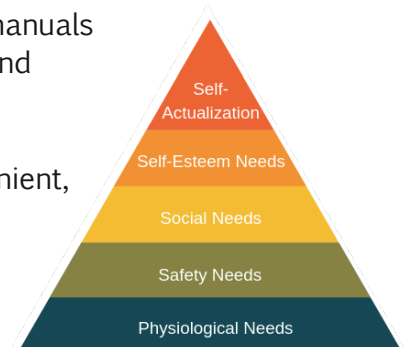
Bloom's taxonomy did not emerge in a vacuum. It reflected a broader cultural moment in which classification was seen as synonymous with understanding. The Enlightenment's natural historians - Carl Linnaeus, Jean-Baptiste Lamarck, Georges Cuvier - organized plants and animals into neat categories. The industrial age prized efficiency, vertical integration, and uniform production. Bloom and his colleagues, working in the postwar United States, brought that same impulse into education: knowledge could be dissected, sorted, and stacked into levels.



But taxonomies are not neutral. They encode the values and priorities of their time. Linnaeus's biological categories, for example, were later used to justify social hierarchies. Bloom's categories have served the purposes of accountability systems, standardization, and efficiency. The replacement of "Evaluate" with "Create" in the 2001 revision was not the discovery of a new cognitive truth - it was a cultural adjustment, reflecting economic and political emphasis on creativity as a competitive advantage in the global marketplace.

This arbitrariness is not unique to Bloom. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, another staple of teacher preparation, has been criticized for presenting human motivation as a neat ladder. Later research demonstrated that needs are real, but not sequential: belonging, for instance, is as fundamental as food and shelter. Yet the tidy pyramid persists in training manuals because it is simple to visualize, easy to teach, and convenient to reference.

The danger is that such taxonomies, while convenient, distort reality. They take the messy, recursive processes of human development and flatten them into steps. They substitute what is easy to diagram for what is true.





Interrogating the Taxonomic Tradition

Bloom's Taxonomy has served as a dominant organizing framework in education since its publication in 1956. Its neat hierarchy - remembering, understanding, applying, analyzing, evaluating, and creating - continues to shape lesson planning, assessment, and professional development. Yet scholars have long pointed out its limitations. The central critique is that Bloom's model presents learning as a linear progression of discrete steps, whereas human learning is recursive, affective, and context-dependent ([Case, 2013](#); [Maiorana, 2015](#)). Case (2013) argued that Bloom's framework, instead of lifting expectations, has sometimes encouraged teachers to aim lower, channeling weaker students into simplified objectives and thereby limiting access to richer opportunities for critical and creative thinking.

Research in psychology and neuroscience further complicates Bloom's sequential model. [Seymour Epstein's Cognitive-Experiential Self-Theory](#) demonstrates that cognition is shaped by two parallel systems: an analytical-rational system and an intuitive-experiential system. These do not function in sequence but in constant interaction, jointly influencing learning and decisionmaking ([Epstein, 1994](#)). Likewise, research on emotion and memory shows that emotionally significant experiences are more strongly encoded and remembered than neutral ones. [McGaugh \(2000\)](#) established that emotional arousal activates biochemical processes that consolidate long-term memory.

Later studies confirmed that arousal sharpens attention and enhances selectivity in perception and recall ([Mather, Clewett, Sakaki & Harley, 2015](#)). [Tyng and colleagues \(2017\)](#) reinforced this, demonstrating that emotion is not a distraction from learning but a precondition for it, deeply shaping attention, encoding, and retrieval. These findings show that learning cannot be meaningfully separated into "affective" and "cognitive" domains - contradicting Bloom's taxonomic division.

The lens of complexity science also challenges the hierarchical assumptions of Bloom. Classrooms function as complex adaptive systems: dynamic, recursive, and non-linear. Feedback loops, emergent relationships, and interdependence among learners shape outcomes in ways that cannot be reduced to a stepwise progression. [Saqr et al. \(2025\)](#) argue that educational research and practice must embrace complexity thinking, acknowledging that small shifts in context or relationships can have outsized effects on learning. In such systems, categorization into rigid levels is not only inadequate but misleading.

Finally, developmental perspectives offer additional challenges. Psychodynamic theory emphasizes the simultaneous development of attachment and autonomy in children, showing that emotional experience structures cognition in recursive ways (Epstein, 1994). Similarly, studies in language acquisition demonstrate that children create, evaluate, and apply knowledge simultaneously, often through error and play, rather than by climbing a cognitive ladder in sequence. These findings suggest that learning processes are not linear escalations but rather looping, iterative engagements with the world.

Taken together, the literature reveals a consistent theme: Bloom's taxonomy has utility as a framework for organizing objectives and assessments, but it fails to capture the realities of human learning. Advances in psychology, neuroscience, and systems theory underscore that learning is non-linear, affective, embodied, and emergent. The persistence of Bloom's taxonomy, then, may reflect its convenience for accountability systems more than its fidelity to human development.



Education as a Complex System

Complexity theory and chaos theory offer a very different picture. They describe systems that are dynamic, non-linear, and adaptive. In such systems, elements interact in rich, unpredictable ways. Small causes can produce outsized effects. Feedback loops create constant adaptation. Outcomes emerge from interaction rather than from linear progression.

Education fits this description well. A classroom is a complex adaptive system: learners influence one another, teachers adapt to the dynamics of the group, environmental and cultural factors shape outcomes. Learning itself behaves like a complex system - recursive, contextual, deeply interdependent.

And yet, our most enduring educational framework insists on hierarchy and linearity. This is not only conceptually inaccurate; it may also be counterproductive. If teachers are trained to see learning as stepwise, they may overlook the recursive, affective, and relational processes through which their learners actually grow.

Lessons from Psychology and Neuroscience

Psychodynamic theory underscores the inadequacy of rigid taxonomies. Early development is shaped by two simultaneous needs: attachment and autonomy. Children seek belonging while also striving for independence. These twin drives are not sequential - they develop in tandem. Emotional experience structures cognition; meaning-making arises from the interplay of sensation, affect, and symbol.

Neuroscience reinforces this view. The amygdala, seat of emotional memory, does not wait for cognition to “catch up.” Emotion and reason operate together, shaping memory and learning. When a child hears the word “no,” it is first felt as a rupture in attachment; only later does it become embedded as a concept in a moral framework. In other words, cognition does not build on emotion - it builds *with* emotion.

Bloom’s taxonomy, by contrast, suggests that affective, psychomotor, and cognitive domains can be separated, each with its own hierarchy. But the evidence shows otherwise: they are inseparable, recursive, constantly interacting.



What Language Acquisition Teaches Us

Language acquisition further undermines the notion of linear progression. Children do not first master “remembering” before “creating.” They create constantly: experimenting with words, overgeneralizing rules (“I goed”), and refining categories. They test hypotheses through play, receiving feedback from caregivers and peers. Their errors are not failures of sequencing but signs of the recursive, creative nature of learning.

The process is messy, but it works. Children evaluate as they create, create as they apply, and apply as they remember. There is no clear order. Learning is looping, recursive, and adaptive.

The Social Function of Taxonomies



Why, then, does Bloom (or any number of the other similar taxonomies introduced since its conceptualization) persist? The answer may lie less in learning than in power. As Michel Foucault argued, knowledge and power are intertwined. What counts as “knowledge” is determined by those who hold power, and in turn justifies their authority (Foucault, 1970).

Education serves a social purpose: producing adults who can fill roles in the economy and society. Taxonomies like Bloom’s provide a structure for that purpose. They make learning measurable. They allow for standardization, accountability, and assessment. In effect, they align teaching with testing.

This is not inherently bad. Societies need role preparation. But if we mistake this social function for authentic learning, we risk narrowing education to what is easily measured rather than what is deeply transformative. Bloom’s taxonomy, then, may function less as a learning tool than as a social tool - useful for system-level management, but misleading for understanding the learner.

Contemporary Alternatives: Growth, Habits, and Grit

Over the past two decades, new frameworks have emerged that shift attention from cognition to disposition. Costa and Kallick’s Habits of Mind emphasize problem-solving dispositions like persistence, flexibility, and curiosity. Carol Dweck’s Growth Mindset highlights the power of beliefs about intelligence in shaping motivation and achievement. Angela Duckworth’s research on Grit focuses on perseverance over time.

These models recognize what Bloom underplays: that attitudes and behaviors matter deeply for learning. They affirm that success depends not only on knowledge acquisition but on motivation, resilience, and creativity. Yet these models, too, risk simplification. “Growth Mindset” can become a

poster slogan rather than a pedagogical practice. “Grit” can be reduced to a checkbox on a rubric, ignoring the contextual factors that shape perseverance. Habits of Mind can be treated as discrete skills rather than cultivated dispositions. The same taxonomic impulse threatens to tame their complexity into lists and levels.

Still, their rise signals a recognition that Bloom’s categories are not enough. Educators are searching for models that honor the whole learner - cognitive, emotional, and social.



Twisting the Taxonomy: The Möbius Strip

If Bloom’s pyramid no longer serves, what image might replace it? We propose a **Möbius strip**, a surface with only one side and one boundary. As you trace your finger along it, inside becomes outside, beginning becomes end. It is continuous, recursive, and paradoxical. It resists neat separation.

Learning is like this. Students do not “finish” remembering before beginning to create; they remember through creating, and create through remembering. Evaluation is not a final step but a constant companion to application. Affect, cognition, and behavior interweave. The process is recursive, adaptive, and ongoing.

This metaphor suggests a pedagogy that:

- Designs experiences rather than marching through objectives.
- Honors affect as central to cognition.
- Creates space for creativity before mastery.
- Embraces unpredictability and emergence.

It is a less convenient model but a truer one.

IMPACT

Positioning Our Möbius Strip Model in the Literature

Several influential models in education have gestured toward the recursive nature of learning, but none have fully captured its paradoxical, continuous character. Our Möbius Strip Model acknowledges and appreciates these traditions while addressing their limitations and seeking to further improve upon the important innovations of those models.

Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle (1984) is perhaps the closest precedent. Kolb proposed that learning occurs through a four-stage cycle: Concrete Experience > Reflective Observation > Abstract Conceptualization > Active Experimentation. His cycle highlights the iterative movement between experience and reflection. However, Kolb's model retains a sequential structure and a sense of closure at the end of each loop. In contrast, our Möbius Strip Model of Learning emphasizes that learning, like the strip itself, is non-orientable - there is no true "start" or "finish." Creation and reflection fold into one another continuously, without fixed boundaries.

Bruner's Spiral Curriculum (1960) similarly acknowledges the need to revisit concepts at increasing levels of sophistication. The spiral suggests that learners circle back to core ideas as they advance. Yet the spiral still implies hierarchy: each return is "higher" than the last. Our Möbius Strip Model, by contrast, resists such verticality. It insists that remembering, applying, evaluating, and creating are not higher or lower orders of thought but recursive modes of engagement, always in play.

Recent critiques have further revealed the conceptual fragility of Bloom's framework. Larsen, Endo, Yee, Do, and Lo (2022) conducted an empirical analysis of the revised taxonomy and found that its two central dimensions—knowledge type and cognitive process—cannot be meaningfully treated as independent. Further, they demonstrated that the common reliance on action verbs as proxies for cognitive complexity is methodologically unsound. Taken together, their findings indicate that the structural assumptions underlying Bloom's revision risk distorting, rather than clarifying, the dynamics of actual classroom learning. These findings weaken the foundation of the taxonomy itself, showing that attempts to classify learning objectives into neat,

hierarchical boxes often misrepresent the complexity of classroom practice. Larsen et al. (2022), diagnose the limitations of Bloom's paradigm without proposing a systemic alternative. Our Möbius Strip Model takes the next step, rejecting classification altogether in favor of recursion.

In a complementary direction, **Dabney and Eid (2024)** appraise Fink's Taxonomy of Significant Learning, which aims to integrate affective, cognitive, and metacognitive dimensions in a more holistic way. Dabney and Eid illustrate how this framework responds to one of Bloom's greatest shortcomings - its neglect of emotion, motivation, and transfer. However, Fink's model (**Fink, 2013**), like Bloom's, remains a taxonomy: it preserves the classificatory impulse, though its categories are more inclusive and interconnected. Dabney and Eid's work underscores the need to move beyond even "better" taxonomies. A true paradigm shift requires rejecting categorical hierarchies altogether, adopting instead a recursive, looping metaphor that reflects the lived reality of learning, as with our Möbius Strip Model.



Marzano's New Taxonomy (2000, 2007) improves upon Bloom's Taxonomy by integrating the cognitive, metacognitive, and self-systems, explicitly recognizing that motivation, beliefs, and affect are inseparable from thinking and performance. This represents a significant advance beyond Bloom's narrow focus on cognitive skills. However, despite its broader scope, Marzano's work remains within the taxonomic tradition: it categorizes learning into structured, discrete systems. Marzano's taxonomy illustrates the profession's growing recognition of complexity and affect, but it still relies on the classificatory impulse that underlies Bloom. Our Möbius Strip Model offers a more radical departure - rejecting categories altogether and conceptualizing learning as recursive, non-orientable, and inseparable in its cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions.

Insights from complexity and systems theory (Cilliers, 1998; Jörg, Davis, & Nickmans, 2007; Saqr et al., 2025) reinforce the need for such a model. Education, like other complex adaptive systems, is dynamic, emergent, and sensitive to context. Feedback loops, self-organization, and nonlinear interactions define both classrooms and individual learning processes. Our

Möbius Strip Model of Learning aligns closely with these principles while offering a concrete, visual, and tactile representation that can be readily grasped by educators and learners alike.

Finally, research in **psychology and neuroscience** provides empirical support for a model that resists linear sequencing. Dual-process theories (Epstein, 1994; Kahneman, 2011) demonstrate that intuition and analysis operate simultaneously. Studies on emotion and cognition (McGaugh, 2000; Tynj et al., 2017) show that affect and reasoning are co-constitutive, not sequential. Our Möbius Strip Model integrates these findings by rejecting any separation between domains and framing learning as a seamless interplay of emotion, cognition, and action.

In sum, while Kolb, Bruner, Larsen, Dabney and Eid, Marzano, and systems theorists have advanced the field toward more dynamic and integrative models, our Möbius Strip Model represents a distinctive further leap. Its value lies not only in theoretical accuracy but also in the accessibility of its metaphor: a strip of paper twisted once and taped, a reminder that learning is looping, continuous, and inseparable in its parts.

Implications for Practice

If educators are to apply our Möbius Strip Model, what follows?

- Curriculum Design: Move beyond objectives that build sequentially toward higher-order thinking. Instead, design recursive experiences where remembering, creating, and evaluating intertwine.
- Assessment: Shift from linear rubrics to portfolios, performances, and narratives that capture learning as process rather than product.
- Teacher Education: Prepare teachers to design for complexity - to see classrooms as systems where emotion, relationship, and context matter as much as content.
- Policy: Recognize the distinction between education's social function (role preparation) and its deeper purpose (human learning). Align accountability with authentic learning, not just measurable outcomes.

Consider the following examples and templates.

Bloom's Taxonomy vs. Alley-Rosen Möbius Strip Model of Learning

Feature	Bloom's Taxonomy (Pyramid/Hierarchy)	Möbius Strip Model (Loop/Continuum)
Structure	Linear, hierarchical steps; learners "climb" from remembering to creating.	Continuous loop with no beginning or end; learners enter and move fluidly.
Flow of Learning	Sequential	Recursive: remembering, creating, evaluating, and applying can happen simultaneously.
Domains	Divided into separate categories (cognitive, affective, psychomotor).	Interwoven: emotion, cognition, and behavior unfold together in every cycle.
View of Mastery	Aim to "reach the top" (e.g., "Create").	Mastery is an illusion; learning is ongoing, adaptive, and unending
Emotion & Context	Affective domain exists but is often treated as separate or secondary.	Emotion and context are central, shaping every stage of learning.
Utility	Convenient for organizing objectives and assessments; aligns with accountability systems.	Truer to how learning actually happens; guides design of recursive, experiential learning.
Classroom Implication	Teachers deliver structured progression	Teachers design experiences; learners create, test, and reflect in iterative cycles.
Metaphor	A pyramid or ladder - stable, ordered, linear.	A Möbius strip - fluid, paradoxical, endlessly looping.

TEACHING

The Möbius Strip Model Unit Design Framework

Purpose: To guide teachers in designing learning units where knowledge, skills, and dispositions emerge through looping cycles of **Experience > Sense-Making > Application > Reflection**

Essential Question / Anchor Problem

- State the **grapple-worthy, divergent, “loopable” question or problem** that will guide the unit.
- This question should invite **multiple loops** of exploration, not a single “answer.”
- *Example (Science):* How do ecosystems adapt to change?
- *Example (ELA):* How do stories help us understand identity?

Learning Loop Structure

Each **loop** in the unit is a cycle of:

1. Experience / Creation

- Learners encounter a phenomenon, text, or problem.
- Activities: inquiry labs, case studies, primary sources, simulations, design challenges.
- Key questions: *What do you notice? What do you wonder? What could you try?*

2. Sense-Making / Remembering

- Learners connect new experiences to prior knowledge.
- Teacher introduces vocabulary, concepts, models, or historical context **after** the experience.
- Activities: discussions, concept mapping, targeted mini-lessons.

3. Application / Analysis

- Learners test ideas or use knowledge in new ways.
- Activities: problem-solving, peer teaching, debates, real-world tasks.
- Key questions: *Where else could this idea fit? How does this model hold up?*

4. Reflection / Evaluation

- Learners evaluate their work, revise, and plan next steps.
- Activities: self-assessments, peer critiques, reflective journals, portfolio check-ins.
- Key questions: *What worked? What would you change? How does this shape your next attempt?*

The Reflection stage always loops back into a new Experience.

Example: 3-Loop Unit (Middle School Social Studies)

Essential Question: How do societies respond to crises?

- **Loop 1:**
 - *Experience:* Learners analyze primary sources from the Black Death.
 - *Sense-Making:* Learn about medieval medicine, trade, and religion.
 - *Application:* Map how the plague spread across Europe.
 - *Reflection:* Discuss what people understood vs. misunderstood.
- **Loop 2:**
 - *Experience:* Examine oral histories from the Great Depression.
 - *Sense-Making:* Introduce economic concepts (supply/demand, unemployment).
 - *Application:* Role-play policy proposals for recovery.
 - *Reflection:* Compare responses to medieval crisis.
- **Loop 3:**
 - *Experience:* Analyze recent pandemic responses.
 - *Sense-Making:* Introduce systems thinking and public health strategies.
 - *Application:* Design a crisis-response plan for a fictional town.
 - *Reflection:* Evaluate which lessons from history apply today.

Teacher Planning Template

Unit Title:

Loopable Question/Problem:

Target Standards / Guiding Principles:

Loop	Experience / Creation	Sense-Making / Remembering	Application / Analysis	Reflection / Evaluation
Loop 1				
Loop 2				
Loop 3				

(Add more loops as needed)

Key Design Reminders

- **Entry Point Flexibility:** Learners may enter at any loop; no one “starting point.”
- **Emotion as Driver:** Curiosity, wonder, and empathy fuel engagement.
- **Iteration over Mastery:** Depth comes from cycles of trying, revising, and reapplying.
- **Transfer Across Loops:** Each loop should broaden or deepen understanding, not just repeat.
- **Link Back to Essential Questions:** Reflection should always tie learning to the loopable question/problem.

Lesson Title:

Grade/Span/Content Area:

Date/Duration:

Loopable Question / Problem:

Experience / Creation

(Learners begin by exploring, trying, or making - even before they “know.”)

- Activity / Task:
- Learner Role:
- Emotional Hook / Curiosity Prompt:
- Sense-Making / Remembering

(Learners connect new experiences to prior knowledge and vocabulary.)

- Concepts / Knowledge to Introduce:
- Strategies (mini-lesson, discussion, modeling):
- How learners make meaning:

Application / Analysis

(Learners test, use, and adapt knowledge in new or extended contexts.)

- Application Task:
- Problem-Solving Strategies / Skills:
- Evidence of Understanding to Collect:

Reflection / Evaluation

(Learners critique, revise, and loop back into new learning.)

- Reflection Prompt(s):
- Peer / Self-Evaluation Opportunities:
- How Reflection Loops to Next Lesson:

Integration of Emotion, Context, & Collaboration

(Identify the affective and relational dimensions of learning.)

- How emotions drive attention/engagement:
- Collaborative structures (pairs, groups, whole-class):
- Connection to learners' culture, home, or lived experience:
- Evidence of Recursive Learning
- Where will learners **create before they remember**?
- Where will they **loop back** to revise or reapply?
- How will reflection become the **entry point** for tomorrow's lesson?

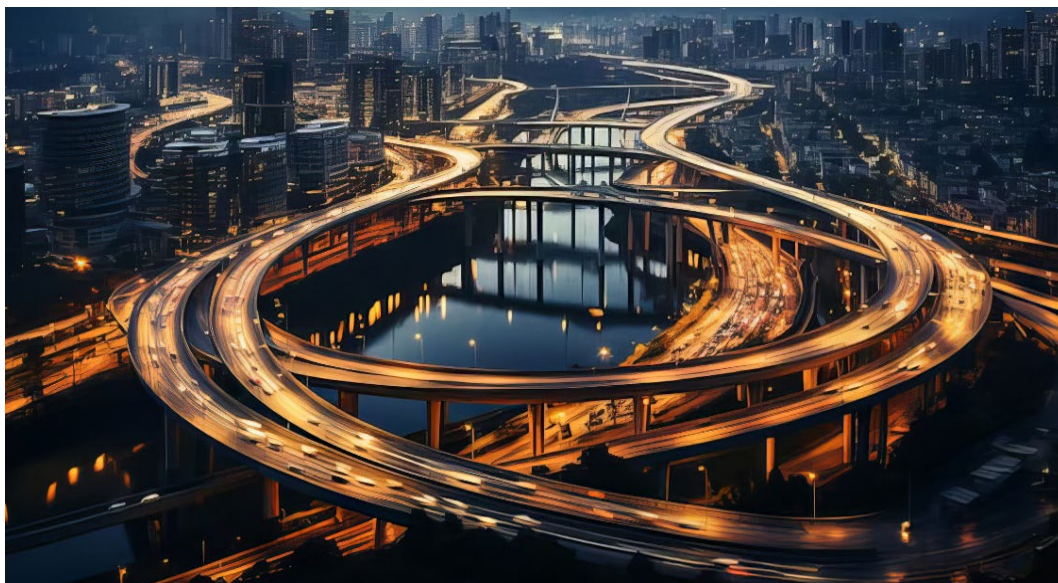


Assessment: The Möbius Strip Model Rubric

Purpose: To assess learning as a recursive process where each pass through the loop deepens understanding, rather than serves as a linear march to mastery.

Dimension	First Loop (Initial Attempt)	Second Loop (Revision /Re-application)	Third Loop (Expansion / Transfer)	Ongoing Loop (Sustained Growth & Innovation)
Creation & Experimentation	Generates an idea, product, or solution with limited detail; shows willingness to try.	Revises or expands original creation with feedback; greater detail or complexity emerges.	Applies creation to a new context or problem; shows adaptability and deeper connections.	Sustains creative process over time; introduces original innovations or integrates multiple disciplines.
Sense-Making & Understanding	Identifies surface-level concepts or recalls information with limited connections.	Clarifies meaning; connects new knowledge to prior experience; begins to analyze relationships.	Demonstrates deeper conceptual understanding; integrates multiple sources or perspectives.	Consistently synthesizes knowledge; produces original insights that extend beyond classroom contexts.

Application & Problem-Solving	Applies knowledge in a guided task with support; accuracy may be inconsistent.	Applies knowledge with increasing independence ; demonstrates problem-solving strategies.	Applies knowledge flexibly in new or unfamiliar situations; selects strategies purposefully.	Anticipates challenges, adapts strategies, and contributes solutions that influence peers or broader contexts.
Reflection & Evaluation	Offers simple reflections (e.g., “This was easy/hard”); limited self-correction.	Identifies strengths and weaknesses; begins to revise based on reflection.	Uses reflection to guide new approaches; evaluates both process and outcome critically.	Embraces reflection as an ongoing practice; uses insights to drive continuous improvement and innovation.
Emotion, Engagement, & Collaboration	Shows curiosity or interest but engagement is inconsistent; relies on teacher direction.	Engages more consistently; collaborates with peers; emotions fuel effort.	Demonstrates sustained engagement; manages emotions productively in collaborative work.	Models resilience and empathy; inspires peers through engagement, reflection, and co-learning.



Conclusion: Past the Pyramid

Bloom's Taxonomy remains one of the most recognizable tools in education. Its endurance, however, has less to do with its fidelity to the reality of learning than with its convenience for systems of schooling. By offering a clear structure, it supports accountability, standardization, and assessment. But as **Foucault (1970)** reminds us, knowledge and power are intertwined: what counts as “knowledge” in schools often reflects broader social priorities rather than the authentic ways in which humans develop and learn.

The evidence from psychology and neuroscience is clear: learning is not linear. Emotion and cognition operate together, not in sequence (**McGaugh, 2000; Tyng et al., 2017**). Attention, memory, and meaning are shaped by arousal and affect (**Mather, 2015**). Developmental theory shows that attachment and autonomy emerge simultaneously, forming the foundation for knowledge-making (**Epstein, 1994**). Complexity science underscores that education, like other adaptive systems, is dynamic, recursive, and emergent (**Saqr, et al., 2025**). In short, learning is messy, looping, embodied, and relational.

To continue treating Bloom's taxonomy as the definitive map of learning risks flattening this complexity into something artificial. Instead, educators should adopt models that reflect the recursive, adaptive nature of real classrooms. Our Möbius Strip Model offers such a metaphor: one continuous surface where inside and outside blur, beginning and end fold into each other. Learning, like the Möbius strip, has no fixed entry point and no final summit. Remembering and creating, applying and evaluating, feeling and knowing - all fold together in dynamic interplay.

This does not mean discarding Bloom altogether. His taxonomy remains a useful organizing tool for objectives and assessments. But educators should be careful not to mistake a tool for a truth. As [Case \(2013\)](#) argues, frameworks such as Bloom's are most valuable when used critically, not dogmatically.

If our goal is to prepare learners for a world of uncertainty, complexity, and constant change, then our frameworks must mirror those realities. Education must equip learners not to climb a pyramid, but to thrive within a Möbius strip - recursive, adaptive, endlessly alive, and iterative.

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We Have the Power to Invent the Future



Dr. Chris Dede, Senior Research Fellow
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Education, Cambridge, Massachusetts

*"You who are on the road
Must have a code that you can live by
And so become yourself
Because the past is just a good-bye.
Teach your children well..."*

- Graham Nash

Preamble

Shortly after the Pandemic began in 2020, I wrote two blog posts: the first was about what children should master to cope with an uncertain, turbulent, and dangerous future; the second discussed how better methods of assessment were needed to provide a compass for this journey of learning. Walter McKenzie kindly offered to publish this combined, updated, and extended reflection that builds on those two posts. My thoughts have evolved in the past five years, a chaotic period of profound worldwide discontinuities: the culmination of the pandemic, the advent of generative AI, and the rise of authoritarianism across the globe. That said, my fundamental assertion is unaltered: Learning is a journey, not a destination and, like all travel, the settings through which one passes shape what is important to master.

An Illustrative Profound Worldwide Shift

*Full fathom five thy father lies;
Of his bones are coral made;
Those are pearls that were his eyes;
Nothing of him that doth fade,
But doth suffer a sea-change
Into something rich and strange*
-William Shakespeare
The Tempest, second stanza of 'Ariel's song'

***The storm caused by the pandemic created conditions
for change in how we teach and how students learn.***

In Dede (2022) I wrote:

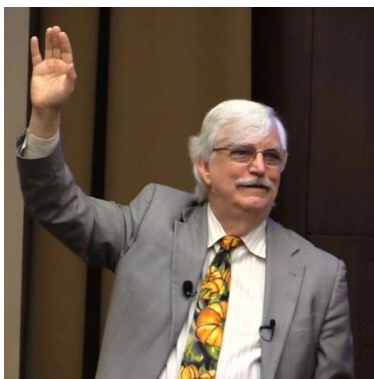
All stakeholders in schooling, including teacher educators, are slowly realizing that the pandemic has created a sea-change rather than a temporary discontinuity. The pandemic-as-endemic world is neither a return to pre-pandemic normal nor a new-normal; the world is now irreversibly hybrid... Businesses, civic organizations, entertainment venues, and social relationships that used to be primarily face-to-face are now often or even predominantly online. Many people and organizations value the new opportunities this presents. Most employees who have the option of working from home part or all of the time are delighted by this new flexibility. Workers who accept new jobs far from their current location can now negotiate to avoid relocating by instead working across distance. Businesses that can accommodate remote work find their expenses for physical offices declining, increasing profits by reducing costs. Many workers have shifted to occupations providing remote services that previously were face-to-face, and quite a few find their new form of employment better than their old job. Older people and those with comorbidities to COVID appreciate having their meals and groceries delivered. Politicians, pundits, and entertainers delight in the scope and reach of social media with global impact via enhanced digital infrastructures. Through mobile apps, families can keep close contact with remote friends and relatives...

From now on, when students leave the shelter of classrooms to interact with the world beyond schooling, they must have skills for adept hybrid performance both face-to-face and across distance. Schools, colleges, regions, and countries that force all teaching and learning to be face-to-face are dooming their graduates to reduced agency in every other aspect of life. We are now in Oz rather than Kansas, and - contrary to what some parents, many politicians, and all technophobes are hoping - no magical red slippers can bring us back to where we were...

We have all the infrastructure and insight we need to develop [a massive learning ecosystem at global scale](#) but, unlike every other sector of society, many educators refuse to acknowledge the value of hybrid.

What Children Should Master Given our Chaotic, Troubled Global Economy and Civilization

Every generation has its struggles. Certainly, I grew up in a troubled time: the nuclear arms race, the Vietnam War, the Civil Rights movement. I was grateful for my parents' clear advice about learning:



Achieve high marks in school and outstanding scores on the high-stakes tests. Get into a top-ranked college, and attain excellent grades there, then gain admission to an elite graduate school. That path will enable you to become a professor, as you have always wanted. Don't let war and injustice and the threat of imminent death distract or lure you into neglecting your education.

At that time, this was good guidance. I participated in anti-war activities and civil rights marches, but I followed my parents' blueprint for educational success until I graduated from college. After that, I ignored my family's counsel and invented my own future - but that shift was empowered by the solid foundation of knowledge I had mastered.

Although this path worked for me, I give my children radically different advice about learning, because they are growing up in a world my parents would find incomprehensible, a context in which their blueprint is no longer a guarantee of success. As [Preparing Students for a Lifelong Disruptive Future: The 60-Year](#)

Curriculum discusses, the future will be quite different than the immediate past. We and our children face a world-wide interdependent civilization shaped by economic turbulence from artificial intelligence and globalization, failure to reach the UN Sustainability Goals, climate change, disease and famine, widespread and profound shifts in political ideology, and advanced social and immersive media. We stand on the brink of an epic half-century, equivalent in its challenges and opportunities to those faced by the Greatest Generation.

Education is our most powerful lever for systemically shaping the future. However, typical classrooms at every level are now dominated by one-size-fits-all presentational/assimilative instruction. Beyond literacy and numeracy, curriculum standards include far too much information easy to memorize and measure, but of little use in a workplace of search engines and artificial intelligence. In a schooling system dominated by drive-by summative assessments, our children cannot learn capabilities and dispositions vital for the disruptions they must overcome. Strengths such as resilience, perseverance, self-regulation, collaboration, conflict resolution, and forging opportunity from uncertainty cannot be attained in classrooms where compliance, ideological purity, and not-making-waves are the central behaviors demanded of teachers. The non-academic passions and accomplishments of students, which could be foundational for motivation and learning, are often ignored, nor are students provided with scaffolds to help transfer what they learn in school to its application in the real world.

GENERATIVE AI

Generative AI (GenAI) is Reshaping this Educational Mission

I am Co-Principal Investigator and Associate Director of Research for the National AI Institute in Adult Learning and Online Education (AI-ALOE). Our Institute develops AI learning and teaching assistants to enhance the proficiency of adult reskilling and upskilling, thereby improving workforce entry and lifelong learning. The AI assistants are based on known problems in online education for reskilling/upskilling and help personalize adult learning for workforce development. AI-ALOE develops new AI models and techniques for self-explanation, machine teaching, and mutual theory of mind to make the AI assistants usable, learnable, teachable, and scalable. AI-ALOE is also developing a data architecture for deploying and evaluating the AI assistants, collecting and analyzing data, and personalizing learning at scale. (Goel, Dede, Garn, & Ou, 2024).

One example of our tools is SMART for Concept Learning. Concept maps are graphical representations of concepts and relations among them. The Student Mental Model Analyzer for Research and Teaching (SMART) developed by Min Kyu Kim and his team at Georgia State University helps students build concept maps from text and provides feedback to help the students revise their maps. Recent studies engaging hundreds of students in multiple classes in English and Biology indicate that SMART helps students build better and deeper concept maps, demonstrating improved mastery of complex phenomena. SMART and our other tools are examples of Intelligence Augmentation (IA). AI changes the division of labor in most jobs, driving a need for workforce development to shift towards uniquely human skills. Specifically, AI is becoming increasingly proficient at calculation, computation, and prediction (“reckoning”) skills. **As a result, we will see increased demand for human “judgment” skills such as decision-making under conditions of uncertainty, ethics, and practical knowing.** Continuing to focus on reckoning, the heart of current curricula, guarantees our students will ineffectively duplicate what AI is taking over. In today’s workplace, people are increasingly working with AI-based partners who do reckoning (calculative prediction) in support of human judgment (practical wisdom), enabling Intelligence Augmentation (IA) in which people working in complement with smart machines accomplish more than either can unaided (Dede, Etemadi, & Forshaw, 2021).



As an illustration, cancer specialists have access to reckoning systems that provide estimates of life expectancy and best treatment for a particular patient, based on massive amounts of data synthesized from various sources and calculated through predictive analytics. However, healthcare workers counseling cancer patients need far more than this because real world decisions require considering quality of life versus life expectancy, tolerance for pain, personal and cultural beliefs about death, family circumstances, spiritual beliefs, and other things that no AI system can understand. The education of those workers must focus on judgment, as AI increasingly handles the reckoning. Cao & Dede (2023) discusses how teaching and learning should shift to emphasize judgment, and Dede (2023) delineates why GenAI is structurally incapable of evolving to Artificial General Intelligence (AGI), which would enable some forms of machine-based judgment.

Unfortunately, we often measure educational success using high-stakes tests. However, as described in Luckin's 2018 book, [Machine Learning and Human Intelligence](#), such an approach prepares students for reckoning-based jobs deskilled by artificial intelligence (AI). Instead, as discussed in Fadel's 2024 book, [Education for the Age of AI](#), children should learn what AI cannot do, preparing themselves to judgment-based roles. upscaled. Since judgment skills are performance-based and cannot be accurately assessed by psychometric tests, developing new types of assessments is essential.

Immersive Authentic Simulations as a New Compass for Assessment and Transfer

Imagine a doctor who has only two forms of feedback on whether her treatments are helping patients. First, she can take direct measurements (e.g., body temperature), but no one collects this data when she is not with the patient. Also, the doctor has no way to order repeated lab tests (e.g., changes in liver function); as a result, she has little diagnostic information on which to base her interventions.

Second, if patients die, the doctor can get an autopsy report on what killed them; if they get well and leave the hospital, she can get a medical workup about their condition on release. However, both of these assessments come far too late to improve treatment. Without multi-dimensional, frequent, longitudinal, diagnostic data that enable formative shifts in her therapies, this doctor is severely handicapped in curing her patients.



Of course, this is the difficult challenge teachers face every day. They lack what medical staff have: frequent diagnostic assessments that include real-time guidance about appropriate individual interventions. In education, well-designed diagnostic measures can provide formative feedback that helps students and teachers improve, as well as generating learning trajectories of performance gains over time to inform parents, school administrators, policy makers, and other stakeholders.

Rather than frequently interrupting learning with benchmarking tests, “[stealth assessments](#)” provide guidance just-in-time, which means many students will do better when high-stakes summative tests are administered. These diagnostic assessments are not substitutes for psychometrically reliable and valid summative tests, but they can accomplish useful functions not offered by those high-stakes measures. Using assessment as a compass for learning and transfer of skills, beliefs, and dispositions related to judgment requires these complementary approaches.



Personalizing learning is important in preparing students for the next half century, as is inculcating knowledge, skills, and dispositions whose learning trajectories are easier to measure with longitudinal diagnostic assessments than with snapshot summative psychometric tests. Creative teachers have developed classroom assessments that accomplish some of these important objectives; the pandemic has underscored the importance of sharing those innovations across the world, as we do with the [Silver Lining for Learning podcast](#) I co-founded. However, given the many responsibilities teachers have, asking them to develop their own fair and valid diagnostic assessments interwoven with learning is as unrealistic as expecting them to develop their own curriculum from scratch.

Despite expert support and validation, over the decades this evaluative model for stealth assessment has never achieved [scale](#). Some of the barriers are financial, others institutional, and the dead hand of past tradition is always an obstacle to any educational improvement. Further, parents, school leaders, policymakers, and admissions officers want a single numerical score that determines who won in education's competition for valedictorians, National Merit scholars, and admittees to elite colleges. Just as it would be in medicine, this simplistic, one-sided approach has a high long-term cost in ineffective instruction, suboptimal learning, and wasted human talent.

As an illustration, Bondie and Dede (2023) developed and studied [immersive authentic simulations](#) to help teachers develop cognitive, interpersonal, and intrapersonal skills for leading equitable, substantive classroom discussions. In our work, which was before GenAI, student avatars, controlled by a human simulation specialist, respond to teaching practices and may also initiate challenges, feedback, and coaching. Teaching practices learned through experiences in the virtual classroom build confidence and skills that transfer to interactions with real students.

Beyond learning, these simulations provide a standardized experience for assessing growth in skills. Every teacher utterance can be coded based on the language used to communicate the teacher's intentions during simulations, identified as spoken to individual students, and organized by time elapsed and duration. By leveraging the technology's affordances (e.g., online access, immersive learning, standard challenges, and pausing or restarting), these simulations can redefine and transform field experiences by increasing opportunities for differentiated instruction, personalization, and formative assessments in ways not possible through in-person field experiences.



I and other scholars are now [augmenting immersive authentic simulations with GenAI](#) and refining these stealth assessment measures and methods through proof-of-concept [design-based implementation research studies](#). Developing assessment practices such as these is vital to helping learners to master capabilities and dispositions vital for the disruptions they must overcome as adults., because we know for certain that what we choose to measure are the learning outcomes we will get.

Moving Beyond Regression to the Past to Shaping the Future

Many educators are now heroically surmounting these challenges to realize transformational opportunities. In doing so, they are transcending our collective denial, the first stage of grief for a cherished past that is no longer sustainable. We must accept that we are moving into an historically unprecedented, continuously disrupted present in which self-directed lifelong learning is essential for success. We must unlearn our habits and assumptions, shifting our vision beyond the mirage of high grades and elite schools leading to guaranteed success in life.

In his 1969 book, *The Future of the Future*, John McHale coined this epigram:

***“The future of the past is in the future
The future of the present is in the past
The future of the future is in the present”***

While those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it, the first line indicates that we are constantly reinterpreting history; for example, in many localities Columbus Day has shifted to Indigenous Peoples Day. The second line acknowledges that trends and structures from the past, such as the traditional school curriculum, constrain what we can do in the present. But the third line highlights that we have the power to invent the future, rather than simply see it as an extension of the past and present. In the shadow of the pandemic, which has undercut the dead hand of the past and the compliance mentality of the present, we should seize the opportunity to focus on the future of the future. The best way to predict the future is to invent it.



I tell my children we need a younger generation of heroes to shape the coming half-century:

As advised in Georgia Tech’s 2018 report, Deliberate Innovation, Lifetime Education, declare goals for your life rather than a major based on fields and disciplines. Focus your learning on what is meaningful; don’t be distracted by what is tested. Given that you will have five to seven careers, think of yourself as an evolving suite of skills rather than as a role; Dr. Ed Dieterle models how this can help you find your Compass.

I try to walk my talk, seeing myself not only as a faculty member, but aspirationally as someone who is adept at explaining complex things to a wide variety of people, a mentor with decades of experience to share, someone with social capital to connect and convene, and a researcher who, in collaboration with colleagues, is able to inspire through [creative designs and scholarly insights](#). Any stakeholder in education can similarly apply their unique perspectives and insights to contribute to improved strategies of teaching, learning, and assessment via a process similar to the [story of “stone soup,”](#) a tale of a community coming together to add tasty offerings to what began as a pot of stones and hot water, resulting in innovative and delicious nourishment for all (Dede, 2020).

Of course, my children don’t pay much attention to my advice; that is a perennial challenge for parents, yet consistent with young adults taking authority and responsibility for their decisions. More than my guidance, I hope my children are implicitly influenced by what I model in my attitudes and behaviors. In these troubled times, I do my best to project resilience and tenacity, finding opportunity in uncertainty, and inventing a bright future that transcends the mistakes and injustices of our recent history.

Because the future is undetermined, the core curriculum in and out of school should provide a new framework for what children should learn, so they can invent and shape our epic journey into a future we together invent. Carpe Diem!

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In addition, [my website](#) is a repository of many interrelated resources.



Chris Dede is a Senior Research Fellow at the [Harvard Graduate School of Education](#) and was for 22 years its Timothy E. Wirth Professor in Learning Technologies. His fields of scholarship include emerging technologies, policy, and leadership. Internationally. In 2020 he co-founded the [Silver Lining for Learning](#) series, hosted by himself, Curt Bonk, Lydia Cao, Punya Mishra and Yong Zhao.  

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21st Century Economies: A Transformative New Beginning for Sustainable Development

Eng. Alfonso Navarro Carvallo,
CEO, CSO and Educator, EliteSDGs
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Avoiding the mistakes of the past to build a resilient, inclusive future aligned with the 1.5°C target.

The interconnectedness of modern economies also creates new systemic risks. A disruption in the supply chain in one region can trigger cascading effects globally within days, as was evidenced during the pandemic. This represents a qualitative shift in how economic shocks propagate.

After the pandemic, experts adopted a new economic perspective, based on access to a vast amount of information. However, this increase in information also gave rise to misinformation. Therefore, it is necessary for us to be agents of economic transformation to ensure that no one is left behind.

While human nature and certain market dynamics remain constant, the global coordination challenges we face, driven by technologies such as artificial intelligence, suggest that we are in genuinely uncharted economic territory, even if we are repeating some ancestral patterns. Therefore, we must focus on

how we transform economies, including the green economy, which integrates economic, social, environmental, and governance dimensions.

At the global level, economies are in a situation where “future” changes are promised without concrete actions in the present. Despite political discourse, current policies are not delivering results. We see how national leaders, both from government and opposition, repeat the same solutions with different words, yet the problems persist.

Post Pandemic Realities

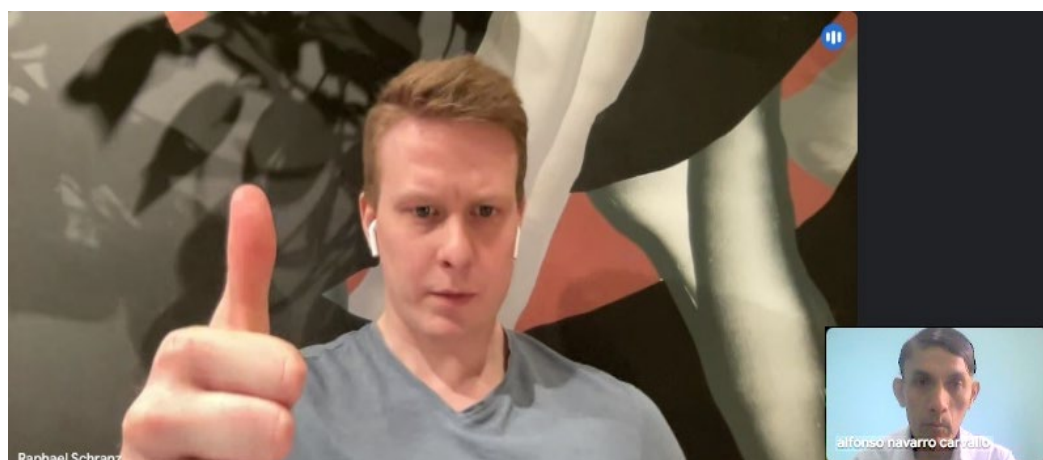
After the pandemic, poverty and unemployment have worsened. Climate change is intensifying, and at the outset of COP30, the same actors repeat their speeches, yet economies remain stagnant. What improves in one place deteriorates in another, highlighting the lack of a coherent and sustainable global strategy.

The gap between political promises and economic reality is becoming increasingly evident. Despite international commitments, such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), many countries are falling behind. The lack of implementation of effective policies is due to several factors, including the prioritization of short-term interests, the absence of political will, and insufficient investment in key sectors such as education, health, and affordable and clean energy. Challenges such as climate change, poverty, and unemployment cannot be solved in isolation. Greater cooperation is needed among countries, international organizations, and the private sector. Policies must be designed to generate a direct impact on people’s lives, promoting the creation of decent jobs, reducing inequality, and fostering innovation.



It is essential that economic growth be decoupled from environmental degradation. The transition toward a green economy and the optimization of resources represents an opportunity to generate new jobs and enhance competitiveness. Leaders must be held accountable for their actions, and promises must be verifiable. Citizens and civil society must play an active role in monitoring the implementation of policies.

Moving to an intermediate level with concrete but limited actions demonstrate a lack of commitment and sustainable understanding. We attempt to solve problems as quickly as possible, skipping crucial steps, yet words are carried away by the wind. The lack of collaborative work at the international, national, and local levels is evident. This raises the question of whether current experts truly have the capacity to transform economies, or if their learning has stagnated. Although artificial intelligence expands our knowledge, it also produces errors that must be corrected in the process.



From Rhetoric to Action

In a world that demands change in order to reach the 1.5°C target, it is crucial to move from rhetoric to action. Instead of seeking quick fixes, we must build solid and lasting progress. This requires aligning economic policies with environmental and social objectives, while promoting resilience and equity. Global challenges such as climate change and inequality cannot be addressed by a single entity. Collaboration among governments, the private sector, civil society, and academia is indispensable to create comprehensive solutions. Artificial intelligence can be a powerful tool to analyze data, identify patterns, and accelerate decision-making. However, its use must be ethical, ensuring that biases are not perpetuated and that the benefits of technology are shared equitably.

At the highest level, solutions must empower others. It is crucial that curricula be continuously transformed rather than stagnating, as sound decisions are scarce. We continue to witness deforestation and oil spills, problems that have persisted for many years. Despite the presence of professionals with advanced qualifications (diplomas, master's degrees, doctorates), long-standing errors remain unresolved. Data is available, yet the knowledge to generate sustainable solutions is limited. Education, starting from schools, must be a fundamental pillar in this transformation, since universities alone are not enough.

We need learning that goes beyond theory and focuses on the practical application of sustainable solutions. Study programs must be flexible and adapt to global challenges and beyond, such as climate change and social inequality. This requires integrating sustainability, ethics, and innovation from an early age. It is essential to move from memorization to the resolution of real-world problems. This can be achieved through collaborative projects, case studies, and community-based practices that allow students to understand the complexity of issues and develop viable solutions.



Experienced professionals and young students must work together. This collaboration allows accumulated knowledge to be combined with new perspectives and innovative approaches, which can accelerate the development of sustainable solutions.

True sustainable innovators seek solutions that minimize systemic risks. Creating ten new problems in the process is neither a solution nor an innovation; it is irresponsibility disguised as progress. Economies must be transformed, as resources are becoming increasingly scarce. The circular economy has yet to focus on generating more jobs, largely due to a lack of deep understanding. We continue to discard products that could have a second life through sustainable processes, which would help protect the environment.

Education for Change

To find solutions to these unresolved issues, collaborative work among schools, universities, and businesses is essential. The goal is to discover how to return to the planet what we have wrongly taken away, whether due to poor processing or inadequate use. Products should be designed from the outset to be durable, easy to repair, and, at the end of their life cycle, made of materials that can be readily reused. Companies can cooperate so that the waste of one becomes the raw materials of another, to close production cycles.



The transformation toward a truly sustainable economy requires a shift in mindset across all sectors, from education to production. It is not only about implementing green technologies or increasing recycling; it is about fundamentally rethinking how we generate value, use resources, and measure success.

For this transformation to take place, the education system must be the first pillar to change. Current curricula, often fragmented and focused on theoretical knowledge, must evolve toward holistic, systemic, and critical learning, based on sustainable projects. This means that students, from an early age, must be exposed to the interconnectedness of global challenges such as climate change, poverty, and inequality.

In production, the shift in mindset implies going beyond the circular economy, which often focuses only on recycling. The real change lies in adopting the concept of regenerative design, where products are created not only to minimize harm but also to restore and regenerate natural systems.

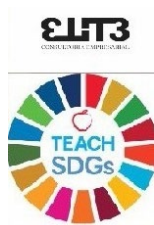
Transformation cannot occur in silos. Collaboration between the private sector, government, academia, and civil society is essential. Businesses can contribute their technical expertise, universities can provide cutting-edge research, governments can create regulatory frameworks that incentivize sustainability, and civil society can ensure that the transition is just and equitable for all.

Current curricula fail because they lack a logical sequence. We are in a circular economy where only 10% is recycled globally, and yet we aim to move toward a green economy, which is much more complex and requires holistic, systemic, and critical thinking. Moreover, we are missing the connection with the blue economy, which is also interconnected. The 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the 2030 Agenda and their indicators show that many countries will not achieve them. This demonstrates that the knowledge economy has fallen behind due to stagnant learning. In practice, policies are labeled as “sustainable” or “green,” but without a clear understanding of the foundations. There is an attempt to reach the end without having understood the beginning. Learning must be for all, to leave no one behind. A solution may have benefits in some economies, but its implementation process could be harmful to others, which is why a thorough analysis of each step is required.



Seeing the Big Picture

From a holistic vision to a limited approach, the situation is similar to that of a drone scanning an entire area, observing all the details from an elevated perspective. Those of us on the ground cannot see with the same ease. We lack an integral vision that considers the interconnections among the different types of economies (circular, green, blue) and how they affect one another. We must review educational curricula to focus on systems thinking and problem-solving, connecting concepts from the beginning to the end of the value chain. We need to foster local, national, and international collaboration to create spaces where experts from different fields (scientists, economists, community leaders) can work together to analyze solutions from multiple perspectives. To assess impacts, before implementing a solution, it is necessary to evaluate its potential effects on all parties, ensuring that the benefit for some does not translate into harm for others.



Alfonso Navarro Carvalho is CEO, CSO and educator at **EliteSDGs Business Consulting** in Tacna, Perú and Chile. He is kind, tenacious, warm and compassionate in his work to implement the **United Nations (U.N.) Sustainable Development Goals** (SDGs), placing a high value on his work with and through people to get the job done.  



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THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS



The 2025 Worthy Educator Advocacy Survey Results!

*Thank you to everyone who participated!
We now have our way forward for 2025-26!*

You Spoke - We Listened!
OUR 5th ED ADVOCACY PRIORITIES FOR 2025-26

- 1. Professional Learning and Leadership**
Providing the conditions, supports and experiences that prepare educators for the future of teaching, learning and education as an institution.
- 2. Social Justice**
Honoring diversity in all of its forms, providing equity of access to resources and inclusion for everyone in our schools and communities to opportunities.
- 3. Preparing Students for their Future**
Serving as advocates for our children's future, providing them with the skills, understandings and dispositions they will need to be successful.
- 4. Artificial Intelligence**
Implementing AI in humane and ethical ways that support students in their current learning and in its use as future responsible, contributing adults.
- 5. Well-Being and Belonging**
Creating safe, supportive, welcoming environments that promote the social, emotional and mental wellness necessary to be healthy, happy, engaged global citizens.

Join us in advancing these priorities at theworthyeducator.com

Years	Degree	Role	Current pr	Current jo	Optimism	Top 5 Prior	Ranked	Top Priority	Staying?	Terms for	Locate
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The Worthy Educator

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

August 10, 2025 Contact: Walter McKenzie, walter@theworthyeducator.com

The Worthy Educator Unveils the Results of its 2025-2026 Survey of Ed Advocacy Priorities

WASHINGTON, DC (8/10/25) -The Worthy Educator, a mission-driven nonprofit community dedicated to mid-to-late career educators working to have impact and build legacies that inform and transform the future of education announces the results of its second annual survey of educator advocacy priorities.

The survey was administered during the month of July, inviting educators everywhere to share their priorities in advocating for what is best for children, and for what is best for education as a public institution and a cornerstone of democracy. "The response this year was five times greater than this time last year," shared Walter McKenzie, founder of The Worthy Educator. "We are only a month old a year ago," he added, "so we've had time to establish ourselves and catch the attention of a wider swath of the profession."

Areas of emphasis among respondents included twenty-seven distinct hot topics in education, including Accountability, Assessment, Burnout, Class Size, Community Support, Compensation and Benefits, Federal Oversight, Funding and Resources, Parent Engagement, Pre-service Teacher Preparation, Regressive Policies, Respect and Recognition, Safety, Staffing and Shortages and Vouchers for Private Schools, and Workload.

"The top five priorities communicated by Worthy Educators," McKenzie said, "are Professional Learning and Leadership, DEI and Social Justice, Preparing Students for their Future, the Staff and Students, in that order." Ranking is determined by the frequency with which each item occurs in educator responses, both from predetermined lists and open-ended questions.

These findings indicate some shift from last year's results, where preparing students was first overall, with regressive policies, mental health, professional learning and staffing shortages rounding out the top five. "We see this as the continued progression from our post-pandemic reality to addressing AI and the future our students will inherit," McKenzie explained. "This really aligns with the work we are doing in our [Roadmap 2030](#) project."

Additional narrative responses are listed beginning on page 2 of this release. Visit the Worthy Educator [Advocacy](#) and [EDInfluencers](#) pages to learn more and get involved.

The Worthy Educator is an incorporated 501(c)(3) nonprofit community dedicated to serving mid-to-late career educators working to build legacies of success. To learn more about how you can become a part of this thriving, caring community, visit theworthyeducator.com.

...the final day of your career, when you close your office door for the last time, what do you want your legacy to be?

theworthyeducator.com/advocacy



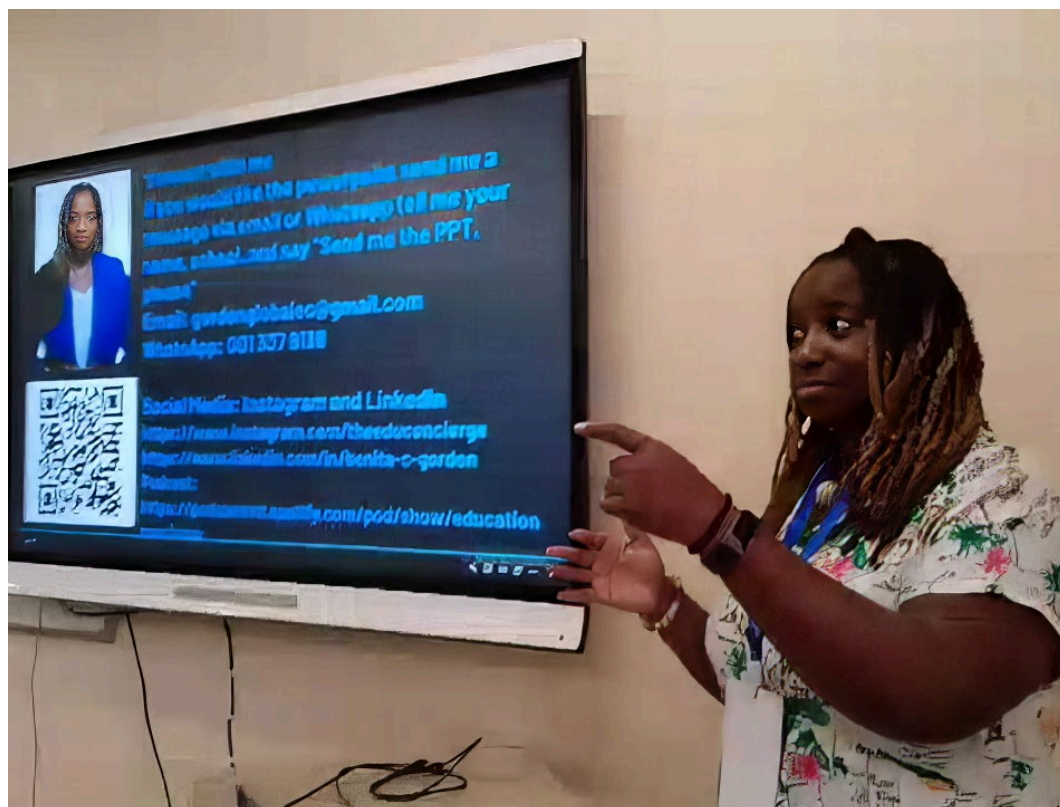
Before the Blueprint: Aligning with Families to Build the Future of Education

Benita C. Gordon,
Founder, MicroLearn Hub,
Host, Global Education Concierge,
Memphis, Tennessee

Before we sketch the schedule, choose the tech stack, or map the curriculum, have we sat down and asked, "Who are we building this for?" In the race to innovate, education often skips a vital step: alignment. Not just logistics, but real, relational alignment with those who know students best, families. At Global Education Concierge, we train educators, school leaders, and founders to understand that co-creation isn't just about inclusion; it's about accuracy. The most transformative educational spaces don't just reflect innovation; they reflect the community's heartbeat. Before the blueprint, we must listen. Before we build, we must align. Only then does transformation become sustainable.

The Flawed Foundation of "Build First, Ask Later"

Too often, well-meaning schools and systems jump straight to strategy. They launch new models, programs, or microschools without ever asking the community its needs, wants and dreams. I've seen it firsthand in schools I've supported across the South - places with good intentions but fractured trust.



A moment of realization came from a teacher I trained. During our session on community engagement, she said, "I'm not sure my students' parents even want to engage. Every time I've tried before, I felt ignored." She wasn't bitter, just weary. We encouraged her to try again, differently - one phone call, one porch conversation, one co-created project. A few weeks later, she came back with tears in her eyes: "I asked a parent how their child learns best. They lit up. I tried their idea the next day, and it worked. That child beamed. I cried in the car afterward."

Connection, not perfection, created progress. By the end of the year, she had built a circle of support around her students - and herself.

Co-Creation: Beyond the Buzzword

At Global Education Concierge, we teach that co-creation is more than a trendy word. It is a shared leadership practice that transforms schools from places of compliance to communities of belonging. True co-creation happens when families, educators, and students work together to design, not just approve, the learning experience.

We define three levels of engagement:

Informing ("Here's what we're doing.")

Consulting ("What do you think about this?")

Co-Creating ("Let's build this together.")

Many schools operate in the first two tiers. The transformation comes when they move into the third.

Practical Steps: Aligning Before You Design

Here are five practical, powerful steps we train and model for leaders who want to build something *with* their communities:



Host Community Listening Sessions

Skip the auditorium. Meet at the barbershop, library, or park. Ask questions like, "What do you wish your child's school understood about your family?" and listen.



Create Co-Design Circles

Bring parents, educators, and even students into small group sessions with sticky notes, markers, and sample schedules. Let everyone sketch their vision for a meaningful school day.



Do Asset Mapping Together

Families aren't just support systems, they're partners. Ask, "What skills, connections, or traditions could you share with our students?" Then build your programming around the answers.



Build Feedback Loops That Matter

Don't wait for complaints. Use tools like WhatsApp, Google Forms, or QR code surveys and follow up regularly. The key is not just asking, it's showing that their input shapes outcomes.



Make the Wins Visible

Highlight family contributions. Post stories in newsletters: "You asked for more flexible pickup, here's how we adjusted." Let them see their voice in your systems.

What Happens When We Get It Right

When we design with families, students feel seen. Teachers feel supported. Leaders feel less isolated. And the school becomes a living, breathing organism that reflects its community's values.

One of our clients used these practices to redesign their after-school programming. Instead of guessing, they invited parents and students to co-create it. The result? Increased attendance, fewer behavior issues, and a line of parents wanting to volunteer.

This is what happens when alignment comes first.

Call to Action

Innovation without alignment is just noise. At Global Education Concierge, we don't just deliver PD and strategies, we help reframe what's possible by leading with listening. When we slow down to co-create, we build schools that last. Use this [Community Co-Creation Checklist](#) to help you plan for success.

So here's your challenge: Before the next initiative, pause. Before the next plan, ask. Then open the door wider, pull up a few more chairs, and build together. Because of the blueprint for the future? It starts with trust.



Watch Benita share her brilliance on our July 28, 2025 Worthy Town Hall Panel, building our Roadmap 2030,

☀ Bonus Reflection: What Co-Creation Feels Like

Use this quick litmus test with your team:

- 💛 Are families **seen as partners**, not passive participants?
- 🎯 Is feedback **influencing real decisions**?
- 🌱 Are you learning *from* the community—not just about it?
- 🔔 Are you **sharing power** or simply delegating tasks?

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Benita C. Gordon is the CEO of the [MicroLearn Hub](#) and the [Global Education Concierge](#), and the host of [The Education Concierge Podcast](#), a strong voice for finding paths forward in this era of disruption. She has served as a panelist for The worthy Educator's [Transforming Education](#) series, and on our [Roadmap 2030 Town Halls](#).  



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enter our christmas beach house giveaway!



The Worthy Educator is excited to offer this drawing for Christmas week 2025 at a beachfront cottage on the Outer Banks of North Carolina! Members of The Worthy Educator community who participate in three or more of our activities by October 28, 2025 are automatically entered. You can increase your chances by participating in more activities and having your name entered multiple times for the drawing! See the descriptions, rules and disclosures for full details!

theworthyeducator.com/yuletide



Beyond the Building: Formulating 100%

Dr. Catherine V. Addor,
Founder and Principal,
Addor-ation Innovation Services,
Poughquag, New York

“Students spend about 2% of their lifetime in school. The other 98% holds the key to engagement, relevance, and shared responsibility for learning.”

The Myth of the 100% School Day

For generations, our educational systems have been shaped by an illusion: that schools are where students spend the majority of their time and where the majority of their learning takes place. The truth is both more sobering and more liberating: children spend only about 2% of their lives inside school buildings. The remaining 98% unfolds elsewhere; at home, in neighborhoods, in community centers, and increasingly, in digital spaces.

Understanding this fact has radical implications for how we engage families and communities. If we continue to frame student success around what happens solely within the school walls, we are designing solutions for just a sliver of a child’s life. If we choose to widen our lens and include the complete 100% of a child’s ecosystem, we open up possibilities for support, growth, and a sense of belonging.

This article builds on research from a narrative inquiry on family engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic, combines the 2% concept with fresh thinking about community partnerships, and offers a call to action for educational leaders to frame engagement as an ecological, whole-child endeavor.

Family Involvement Was Never Engagement

For decades, "parent involvement" has been associated with school-centric activities, including attending back-to-school nights, assisting with homework, and participating in parent-teacher conferences. During the COVID-19 pandemic, that model collapsed. Families were thrust into roles as co-teachers, tech support, emotional anchors, and curriculum designers.

Through in-depth interviews with parents and caregivers during this time, a clear shift emerged: from involvement (reacting to what schools ask) to engagement (actively shaping and supporting a child's learning life). Parents created routines, set up learning spaces, navigated IEP meetings, and found their support networks outside the school system. Engagement was contextual, creative, and deeply personal.



This shift must not be lost in the "return to normal." It is a blueprint for the future. As the American Institutes for Research (2023) notes, "Returning to pre-pandemic practices risks missing an opportunity to transform how schools partner with families." Schools that want to strengthen student outcomes must see families as engaged partners, not peripheral supporters.

"Engagement is relational, not transactional. It grows in the spaces between formal school activities; in how we communicate, invite, listen, and co-create."

The 2% Reality And Why It Matters

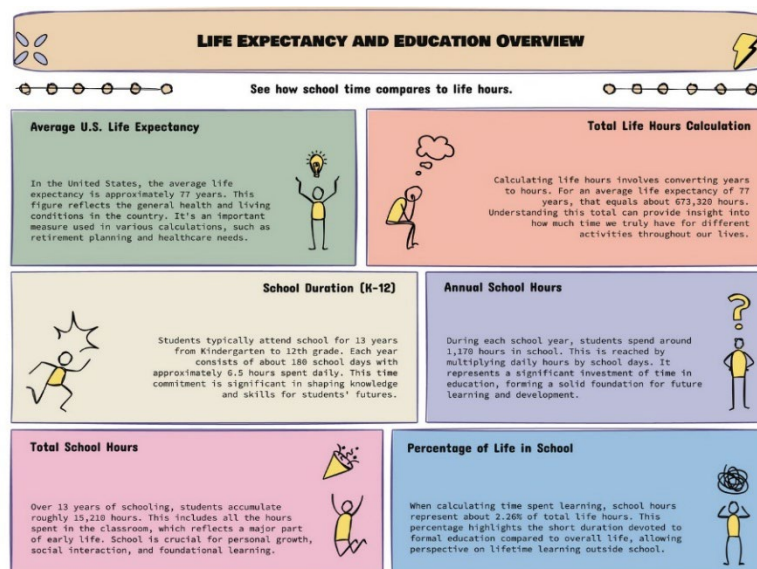
When you zoom out to consider a human lifespan, the time students spend in school is minimal, accounting for approximately 2% of their lives. That means 98% of their lives will unfold beyond the classroom: in homes, workplaces, neighborhoods, and communities. Our systems often operate as if that narrow window of formal education is the whole story. Education isn't the destination; it's the preparation. It's how we equip students to navigate, contribute to, and thrive in the 98% of life that follows. We must shift our perspective: school is not the center of a student's life, but a catalyst for the rest of it.

This does not diminish the importance of the 2%. School plays a vital role in a young person's life. It offers structure, access to academic content, exposure to diverse perspectives, and a foundation for critical thinking. It provides consistent adult relationships, opportunities for identity development, and ideally, a safe environment where students are seen, supported, and challenged. The impact of that time can be profound.

We must be clear-eyed about its limitations. The other 98% of a child's life is where values are practiced, habits are formed, identities take shape, and real-world learning is reinforced or disrupted. It is in those hours (at home, in neighborhoods, in faith communities, online spaces, and social networks) that students navigate the complexities of daily life. They observe how adults respond to stress, how families prioritize time, how language is used, and how culture is lived.

When school systems are designed only for the hours we manage, we risk preparing students to succeed in classrooms, rather than in life. Leadership today must be rooted in the understanding that education is not confined to a single building or set of standards. Our systems must be intentionally designed to reflect, respect, and respond to the entirety of a child's lived experience. That means elevating partnerships with families, connecting learning to students' real lives, and designing structures that support development beyond the school day. Whole-child education demands whole-community thinking.

“Stop optimizing only for classroom hours. Start designing ecosystems of learning that reach into homes, communities, and digital spaces.”



Click to enlarge

Shifting the Frame: Families as Co-Educators

The old model of engagement is performative. It checks boxes. It relies on events, forms, and attendance sheets. Engagement is often treated as a task to complete (a bake sale here, a curriculum night there), with little consideration of whether these experiences build trust, deepen understanding, or meet families where they are. Families are asked to attend school activities on the school's terms, at the school's convenience, as designed by the school. In this model, communication tends to be one-way: information is pushed out, but little is taken in.



The model that creates lasting impact is reciprocal, flexible, and rooted in relationships. Families are not add-ons to the educational process; they are co-educators whose insight, presence, and experience directly influence student success. This approach is grounded in curiosity, humility, and shared purpose. It invites more profound questions:

- What do families know about their children that educators need to understand?
- How are we designing engagement strategies that honor the realities of caregivers' lives, whether they are balancing work schedules, speaking multiple languages, supporting family transitions, or navigating complex challenges?
- What strengths, knowledge, and lived experiences already exist in our community, and how are we actively inviting them into the life of the school in ways that are visible, valued, and sustained?

During the pandemic, schools were called to return to the core of what meaningful engagement looks like. In the absence of traditional structures, many rediscovered more authentic and responsive ways to connect with families. What emerged wasn't new; it was a return to relationship-driven practices rooted in empathy, flexibility, and trust. The most impactful strategies didn't come from mandates, but from the creativity and compassion of educators who understood that connection comes first:

- Teachers recorded short videos in multiple languages rather than relying on written newsletters filled with educational jargon.
- Schools hosted virtual office hours outside the typical 9-to-5 window, opening up space for working caregivers to ask questions and feel heard.
- Instead of treating families as passive recipients, many leaders opened decision-making spaces, inviting parents into advisory councils, planning sessions, and feedback loops.

The shifts weren't temporary crisis responses. They were glimpses into what an authentic, equity-centered partnership can look like when school systems are willing to listen, adapt, and share power. They offered a mirror to our assumptions and a map toward something more enduring.



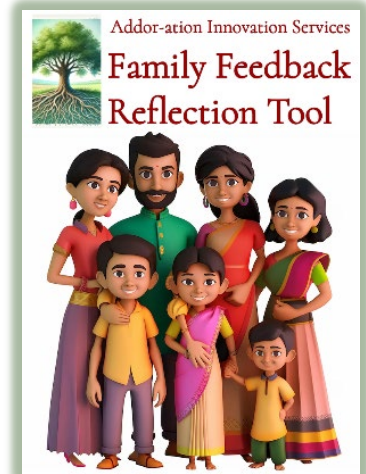
These moments revealed something powerful: when families are treated as thought partners and not spectators, engagement becomes a culture. A culture where trust is mutual, communication flows in both directions, and the expertise of families is recognized as essential to student success.

Sustaining that culture requires more than good intentions. It calls for deliberate systems, policies, and leadership practices that reinforce partnership at every level, from the classroom to the district office. It means designing with families, not around them. It means valuing lived experience as much as credentials. It means understanding that engagement is not a one-time effort; it is an ongoing relationship built over time, grounded in respect, responsiveness, and shared purpose. This is the work that endures beyond any crisis. This is the work that transforms schools.

Leadership Action Step

Conduct a comprehensive audit of your school or district's family engagement practices using the **Family Feedback Reflection Tool**. This is not about compliance, it's about clarity. Take a hard, honest look at who your current systems serve well, and who may be left at the margins.

Reflect on the following:



Who is consistently included and who isn't?

Look beyond event attendance and consider who is invited into meaningful conversations and decision-making spaces.

Which families feel empowered to speak and which feel like they must stay silent?

Examine language access, cultural responsiveness, and the interpersonal dynamics that shape who feels safe and welcome to contribute.

How often do families shape the agenda, not simply respond to it?

Engagement should not be reactive or event-driven. Are there formal structures that invite family voice into school improvement efforts, curriculum design, or student wellness planning?

Are your practices reflective of your whole community, not just the most visible or vocal parts?

Analyze whose stories are told, whose values are centered, and whose assets are leveraged.



Take a moment to reflect on whether your engagement strategies genuinely embody the principles of inclusion, reciprocity, and trust. Go beyond counting attendance and consider the quality of the experiences you're offering. Are there multiple, culturally responsive entry points for families to engage, not just in school events, but in the life of the school as a whole? Are your systems designed with flexibility, so that caregivers with varied schedules, languages, and responsibilities can still participate meaningfully? Examine how feedback is gathered, how decisions are communicated, and whether families see their input reflected in the school's subsequent actions. Engagement with impact is defined by how families feel when they are seen, valued, and heard.

Genuine engagement grows from shared ownership and mutual respect. The goal isn't to increase participation for its own sake, but to reshape systems so that families are collaborators in shaping what school can be. As a leader, your responsibility is to create structures that reflect the lived realities of your students and their families, structures that invite contributions, acknowledge expertise, and affirm a sense of belonging. Structures that can sustain generations of students. Let your audit be more than an exercise; let it be a catalyst for building a culture where every family sees themselves as a vital part of the school's purpose and progress.

Engagement Evolved: A Vision for Deep Community Partnership

Much like family engagement, community engagement has often been symbolic in nature. A business sponsors the science fair. A nonprofit provides backpacks in September. A local official speaks at graduation. These gestures matter, but transactional partnerships don't build ecosystems. They don't sustain students. They fail to create a connection between what is taught in

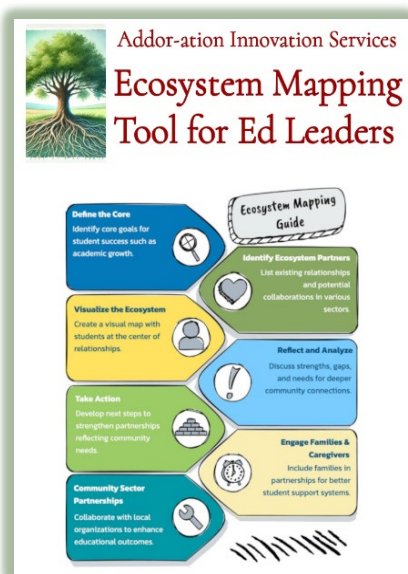
school and what is experienced in daily life. They don't reflect the full potential of what a community can offer when it is actively integrated.

To move toward something more meaningful, we must reframe the purpose of community engagement entirely. The goal is not visibility. It's alignment.

Imagine a model of engagement that:

- Moves beyond the glossy language of the Portrait of a Graduate to focus on the real-world knowledge, skills, and experiences students need to navigate the lives they're living, not the ones we imagine for them.
- Taps into the expertise and presence of community members as mentors, coaches, storytellers, and role models, helping students build identity and agency through authentic connections.
- Integrates local history, culture, geography, and industries into the curriculum so that learning feels rooted, relevant, and responsive to where students live and who they are becoming.

The shift begins when we stop viewing community partners as external. They are not guests in this work. They are co-authors of the learning journey. They are already shaping the 98%. Our responsibility is to acknowledge, honor, and engage that influence within the school's design. Community is not a stakeholder group to consult. It is part of the child's 100%.



Leadership Action Step:

Use the **Ecosystem Mapping Tool for Education Leaders** to map out your school or district. Include families, local leaders, faith-based institutions, libraries, arts organizations, healthcare providers, cultural centers, youth programs, and businesses. Identify the relationships that already exist. Where are the strong ties? Then ask: Where are the missed opportunities? Where do gaps exist between what students need and what your broader community could provide?

Use this map as more than a directory. Let it become a living blueprint for partnership; one that positions community as a vital thread in the fabric of learning.

Leadership Tools for Relevance and Connection

Reimagining engagement isn't a theoretical exercise; it's a leadership responsibility. If we want to build schools that reflect the whole lives our students are living, we need tools that help us pause, assess, and redesign with intention. These three practices are designed to bring the 100% mindset into daily leadership work. They are ways of seeing, questioning, and reconnecting with purpose.

1. The 100% Pie Model

Start with a simple visual: a pie chart representing a child's life. Shade in the 2% of time they spend in school. Then gather your team and reflect:

- What's happening in the 98% we don't see?
- Who influences students outside of school?
- Where do we have meaningful connections, and where are we missing them?

This activity grounds your planning in reality. It's a reminder that the work doesn't end when the bell rings. It helps educators see the bigger picture and invites deeper conversations about the purpose of school.

2. Relevance Reflection for Curriculum

Relevance is a bridge. It connects the content we teach to the lives our students are living. Without it, learning stays on one side, abstract, disconnected, and easily forgotten. With it, students can cross into more profound understanding, personal meaning, and lasting engagement. Invite educators to ask: "Does this lesson connect to the world my students live in?"

Use that question to examine:

- Whether content reflects students' lived experiences and identities
- How local culture, current events, or student interests are represented
- Where there are opportunities for students to apply their learning in their real lives

This is about making learning matter. A curriculum that connects is a curriculum that sticks. Building the bridge means anchoring one side in curriculum goals and the other in students' lived experiences: their cultures, communities, languages, and questions about the world. The strongest bridges are designed with both ends in mind.

3. Family/Community Integration Planner

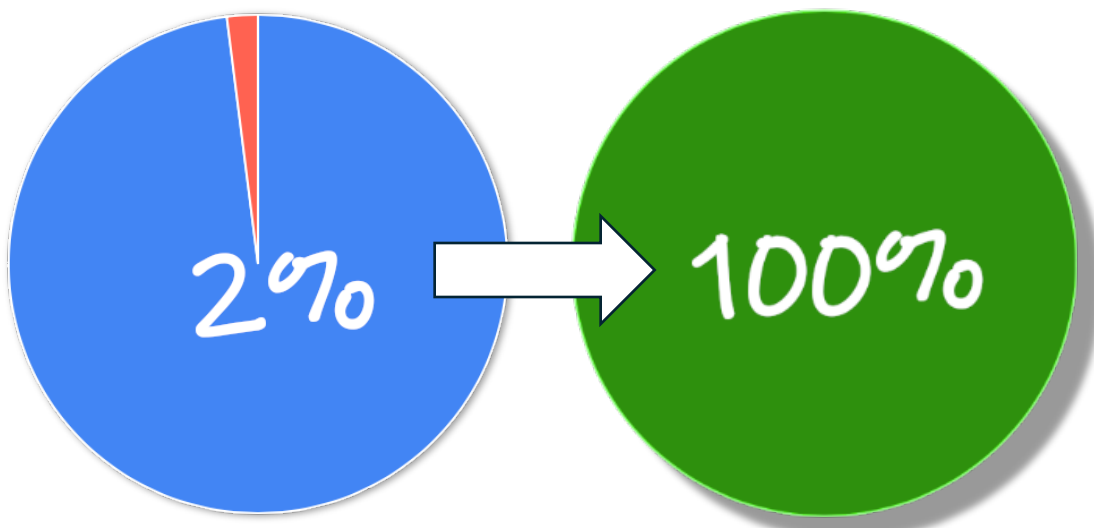
For every unit, event, or initiative, bring a new lens: How can we build this with (not just for) our families and community?

Consider:

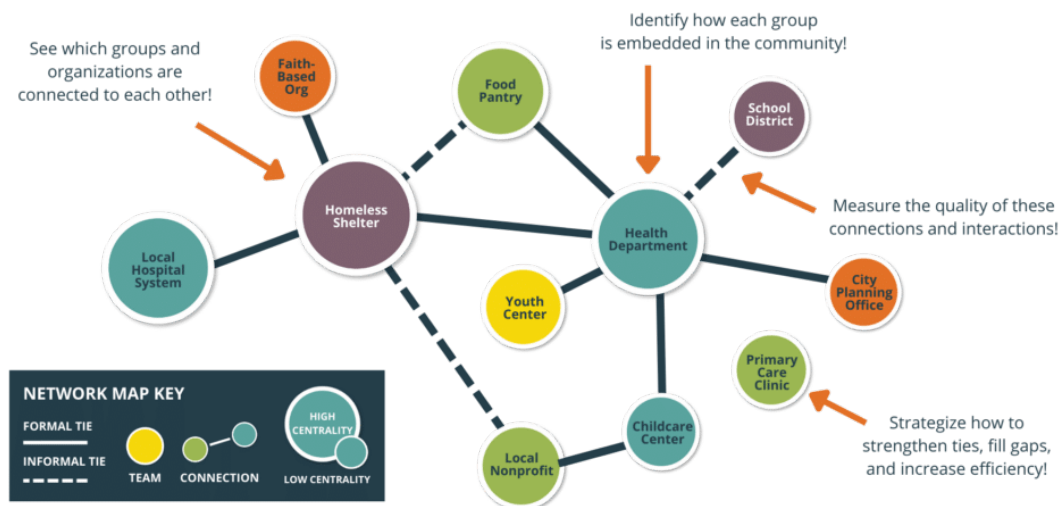
- Is there a role for families to contribute meaningfully?
- Could a local organization, business, or cultural group help deepen or contextualize the learning?
- Are we effectively communicating the purpose and value of this work to all families?

This practice ensures that engagement isn't an afterthought or add-on. It becomes part of the design process. When schools plan with families and communities in mind from the outset, the result is a more inclusive, relevant, and lasting experience.

These tools are starting points. They will help reframe how we approach leadership, learning, and connection. **Relevance is more than a strategy. It's a commitment to honoring the full story of every child.**



MAPPING A COMMUNITY ECOSYSTEM



Questions for Leadership Teams

Reflection must come before change. Reflection challenges assumptions, uncovers blind spots, and supports the design of school systems that reflect the whole lives of students, families, and communities. The following questions are designed to guide deeper conversations among leadership teams, instructional coaches, and decision-makers. Use them to pause and align your practices with a 100% mindset, one that honors the complete ecosystem of each student.

- Are we building systems that reflect a child's whole experience, or are we still designing for the 2% we directly manage?
- In what ways do our schedules, policies, and curriculum invite families and communities in, and where might they unintentionally keep them out?
- What underlying beliefs shape our definition of family engagement, and how might they be limited by bias or tradition?
- How are we ensuring that our engagement practices reflect the full diversity of the families we serve, or are they navigating systems not built with them in mind?
- How are we building trust with families before asking for participation or input, and what signals are we sending about whose voices matter?

These questions won't lead to easy answers, but they can open the door to real, lasting change. The goal is perspective. When we lead with curiosity and humility, we create space for schools that serve the 100%.

A Call to Educational Leaders

Transformational outcomes begin with transformational engagement. That kind of change doesn't come from checklists or convenience.

This is about starting with intention.

- Create space for listening, not information delivery.
- Co-design your calendar and events *with* families, not *for* them.
- Invite caregivers into the rooms where decisions are made, making sure their voices carry weight.
- Bring the culture, language, and wisdom of your community into the curriculum, where students can see themselves reflected and respected.



The 2% of time we share with students matters. It shapes, challenges, and supports their growth. It will never be the whole story.

Leadership today means understanding that our responsibility isn't limited to the time inside the building. Our role is to steward the connection between the time we have and the world our students live in. To build bridges between

school and life. To honor the expertise of families. To treat engagement as the connective tissue that holds meaningful education together.

When we lead for the 100% we're standing in service of who our students are, where they come from, and who they are becoming.

Engagement Is an Ecosystem

No child grows in isolation. No educator teaches in isolation. No school thrives in isolation. Learning is not confined to a classroom, nor is it sustained solely by the curriculum. It's shaped by relationships, rooted in lived experience, and nurtured through the ecosystems that surround every student.

When we reframe engagement as the intentional weaving together of school, family, and community, we move beyond outreach and into partnership. We move closer to equity by beginning to recognize and respond to the different starting points and strengths each family brings. We move deeper into relevance because we acknowledge that students live whole lives outside the classroom, and those lives hold knowledge worth honoring. We move closer to the reality of who our students are, not who we assume them to be, nor how we label them.

This shift requires us to stop asking families and communities to adapt to systems that evolved away from having them in mind. We must commit to redesigning those systems (structures, schedules, expectations, and definitions of success) to reflect and respond to the diverse realities of the people we serve.

That is what leadership for the 100% looks like. It's about seeing more, listening more, and partnering differently. It's about having the courage to build schools that truly belong to the communities they serve.

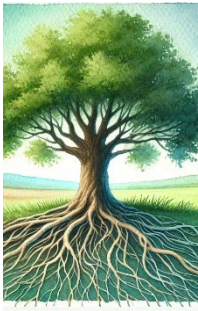


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Dr. Catherine V. Addor is the founder of **Addor-ation Innovation Services**, dedicated to advancing curriculum development, instructional excellence, and professional learning for educators. She earned her doctorate from **Manhattanville University**, examining parent and caregiver engagement in K-12 education during extreme crises, utilizing qualitative narrative inquiry framed by Urie Bronfenbrenner’s **Ecological Systems Theory**.  

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PRINCIPLES OF EDUCATOR AGENCY AND EFFICACY



 The Worthy Educator theworthyeducator.com		On the final day of your career, when you close your office door that is last time, what do you want your agency to be?
Principles of Educator Agency and Efficacy		
In an age of societal shifts, educators play a critical role preparing children for the future. Stakeholders can support us by honoring these twelve principles so that we thrive and not merely survive:		
Vision	Work with us to craft a vision for education that matches the needs of this age of digital transformation	
Impact	Demonstrate value for the individual professional impact each of us chooses to pursue across our careers	
Growth	Create contexts that support our learning through sharing, collaboration and action research	
Dignity	Provide the conditions for us to learn, teach and lead without compromising or sacrificing our honor	
Passion	Acknowledge and nurture the reasons we entered the profession and help us fan those flames	
Support	Allocate programs, services and resources that feed our bodies, our minds and our souls	
Respect	Treat us with the esteem, regard and consideration accorded to those who teach our children	
Integrity	Engage us in our work without commercialization, politicization or any other cynical agenda	
Wellness	Prioritize our health and well-being over the endless demands of the institutional status quo	
Innovation	Ensure safe, supportive environments that promote experimentation, rigor and risk-taking	
Recognition	Celebrate our learning, growth and success as we model the journey on which we launch our students	
Accountability	Expect everyone at the table to hold everyone else accountable for the good of the profession	

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Navigating the Slingshot: Reimagining Educational Leadership and Wellness in Times of Uncertainty

Dr. Lateshia Woodley, LPC, NCC,
Chief Executive Officer,
Dynamic Achievement Solutions,
Atlanta, Georgia

In this current era marked by political volatility and profound institutional instability, educational leaders are increasingly called to navigate environments characterized by rapid change and uncertainty.

The dismantling of equity-driven federal education policies, coupled with significant budgetary constraints, poses existential challenges to the public education system. Within this context, school leaders must not merely serve as administrators but as transformational agents capable of fostering systemic resilience and institutional wellness.

This article offers a praxis-informed reflection on educational leadership during turbulent times, emphasizing the imperative to lead from within, and offers actionable insights for leaders committed to making a difference.

The conceptual metaphor of the slingshot, adapted from my book *Navigating Life Sling Shots and Leading From Within*, is not just symbolic - it is strategic. A slingshot, when pulled back, stores energy that, upon release, propels forward. Similarly, the adversity educational leaders face today can be harnessed as momentum for breakthrough innovations. From my journey growing up in Alabama, becoming a teenage mother and alternative education student to serving as a principal, assistant superintendent and now CEO of a global counseling and educational consulting firm, the slingshot serves as a lens through which we explore resilience, equity, and purposeful leadership.

Key Takeaway #1: Use Adversity as Acceleration

Setbacks - be they political, financial, or personal - can be leveraged as accelerants for change. Rather than seeing obstacles as deterrents, leaders must ask, "What is this challenge preparing me for?"

During the COVID-19 pandemic, schools became more than instructional spaces; they transformed into lifelines. As the assistant superintendent of student support services, I led district-wide responses that redefined the role of schools: integrating trauma-informed practices, expanding mental health services, and embracing culturally responsive strategies. This moment illustrated that educational leadership must be holistic, equity-centered, and community-driven.

Today, we face a different kind of crisis - one shaped by political polarization, legislative constraints on curriculum content, rising mental health challenges, and widening resource gaps. Leaders are once again being stretched, as funding is slashed for social-emotional learning and culturally affirming programs, while community needs are rising. Applying the slingshot concept in this context means recognizing that every setback - whether it be book bans, staff shortages, or disenfranchised school boards - presents an opportunity to reimagine systems. Leaders must use this moment to advocate boldly, design support systems innovatively, and build coalitions that center equity. The question becomes not only "What is this challenge preparing me for?" but also "How can this challenge transform our institution for the better?"



Key Takeaway #2: Redefine Leadership as Healing Work

True leadership is not just about metrics and mandates. It is about creating spaces where students and staff can heal, grow, and thrive. This requires reframing leadership through a wellness and justice lens.

Historically marginalized leaders, particularly Black women, often confront the dual burden of navigating systemic racism and gendered expectations. When I was cautioned against "legacy-building," despite documented success, it became clear that excellence in leadership can itself be seen as a disruption. Leaders must persist nonetheless - unapologetically.



Today, as debates over diversity, equity, and inclusion rage across school boards and state legislatures, leaders must act with clarity and compassion. Healing work in this era means standing firmly for inclusive policies, ensuring psychological safety for all students, and modeling vulnerability and authenticity in leadership practice. It requires actively resisting policies that invalidate student identities and advocating

for culturally sustaining pedagogy and trauma-informed care as essential - not optional - elements of school transformation.

Key Takeaway #3: Your Lived Experience is Leadership Data

Every challenge survived, every barrier overcome, is a source of wisdom. Educational leaders must center their lived experiences as legitimate frameworks for decision-making and system design.

In today's climate, as student needs diversify and distrust in public education intensifies, leaders who have personally experienced adversity are uniquely positioned to craft responsive, equitable policies. Rather than concealing personal histories, leaders should share their journeys to model resilience and cultivate trust. Whether navigating underfunded districts or responding to increased student trauma, leaders must draw on empathy honed from experience to implement systems that affirm every learner's worth.

Institutional wellness is not optional - it is foundational. It must include reflective supervision, trauma-responsive policies, equitable workloads, and leadership pipelines that do not penalize caregiving or illness. If we expect educators to show up for students, systems must first show up for educators.

Key Takeaway #4: Build Cultures of Collective Care

Self-care cannot be the sole strategy. Educational systems must embed wellness into their operational fabric - from policy to practice.

As educators increasingly report high rates of burnout and secondary trauma, building cultures of collective care is a moral imperative. This means rethinking how time is used, who carries emotional labor, and what supports are truly accessible to staff. Leaders must push for systems where mental health days are normalized, peer support structures are funded, and compassion is codified into everyday operations.



Transformation is not theoretical. My work turning a dropout factory into a nationally recognized model school - with on-site healthcare, flexible schedules, and job training - demonstrates what's possible when leaders dream boldly and implement strategically. The outcomes were undeniable: graduation rates tripled, students secured employment, and community trust deepened.

Key Takeaway #5: Innovation Grows in Community

No leader transforms a school alone. Visionary outcomes require community partnerships, student voice, and collective ownership.



In an era where polarization has eroded communal trust, fostering authentic relationships is more crucial than ever. Innovation rooted in community means co-constructing solutions with students, families, and staff - not for them. It means elevating student advisory boards, engaging local organizations in program design, and treating parents as partners rather than liabilities. By anchoring change in collective wisdom, leaders ensure sustainability and relevance in all they do.

However, the cost of transformation must also be acknowledged. The physical and emotional toll of leadership - especially when systems fail to support it - requires open dialogue and structural change. Work-life integration, not just balance, must become a norm. When my health faltered due to relentless overwork, it was a wake-up call: educators cannot lead effectively from depletion.

Key Takeaway #6: Sustainability Requires Boundaries

Impact must be pursued in alignment with wellness. Burnout serves no one - not students, not staff, not systems.

Present-day challenges, including chronic staffing shortages and unrealistic performance expectations, make the need for boundaries even more pressing. Leaders must model healthy workload management, push back against unsustainable directives, and create cultures that respect time and humanity. Sustainability is not about doing less - it's about doing what matters most without losing ourselves in the process.

The metaphor of the slingshot is more than illustrative - it is instructional. Every moment of tension, every policy rollback, every misstep by governing bodies like the U.S. Department of Education, can be the pulling back that precedes a powerful release. But only if leaders are willing to reflect, recalibrate, and recommit.

Key Takeaway #7: Resilience is a Leadership Muscle

We don't avoid the stretch - we master it. Resilience isn't about surviving chaos; it's about transforming through it.



In conclusion, educational leadership today demands more than technical expertise. It requires moral courage, authentic storytelling, and systems-thinking that centers community wellness. By embracing the slingshot - not resisting it - leaders can launch themselves and their schools into futures grounded in justice, equity, and human dignity.

Let this be a call to those navigating the chaos: lead from within. Let your setbacks shape your strategy. Let your story power your leadership. Let your schools become sanctuaries for both learning and healing. And when the world pulls back, be ready to soar.



Watch Latshia's interview for our Worthy Speakers Bureau!

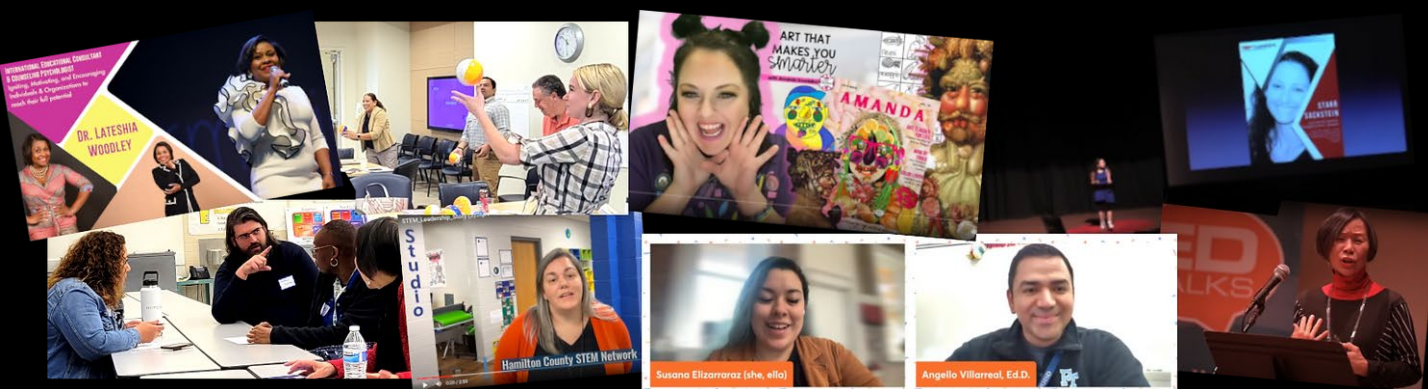


*Lateshia Woodley is a turnaround leader helping to bring about positive changes in some of the lowest performing schools in Georgia and Missouri. She is CEO of **Dynamic Achievement Solutions, LLC** an International Counseling & Educational Consulting Firm where she is helping leaders transform schools around the world and working to develop trauma informed communities around the country. She is the author of four books on this important work, including **Navigating Life's Sling Shots & Leading From Within: A Woman's Leadership Journey**.*



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Leading at the Intersections: Reflections from a Multi-Track Journey

Dr. Andy Szeto, District Leader,
New York City Public Schools,
Adjunct Professor, Educational
Leadership and Teacher Education,
New York, New York

A Leadership Life in Four Tracks

Years ago, I came across an article in the Harvard Business Review titled “Why You Should Have (at Least) Two Careers.” Kabir Sehgal argued that cultivating more than one professional identity can deepen clarity, creativity, and resilience. That insight helped me reframe my own path - I wasn’t splintering my focus; I was building coherence. Over time, four distinct yet connected tracks emerged - not as separate roles, but as an integrated model of leadership shaped by purpose, relationships, and responsiveness.

Today’s urban educational leadership demands more than operational expertise or positional authority. It calls for adaptability, a commitment to equity, and a willingness to lead across boundaries of role, system, and identity. Over the course of my career, I’ve come to understand leadership not as a single lane but as a constellation of interconnected commitments that inform, stretch, and sustain one another; what I’ve

come to call “multi-track leadership,” shaped by my experiences across four professional domains: system-level instructional leadership, educator preparation, advocacy, and public thought leadership. Each role emerged not from a master plan but from a series of questions, needs, and opportunities that invited me to lead in new ways.

Today, I lead across these four domains. I support schools and districts as a system-level instructional leader. I teach and mentor aspiring educators in graduate programs. I advocate for underrepresented educators and multilingual learners. And I contribute to public discourse through writing and reflection. These are not separate careers; they are extensions of the same core commitment: to lead with purpose, responsiveness, and care.

Must every leader follow these exact tracks to be effective? Not at all. Rather, I offer my experience as one example of how leadership can evolve over time, shaped by values, community, and opportunity. Your leadership journey may take different forms, and the key is to remain open to where you are most needed and where your work can have the greatest impact. Let’s look at each track in more depth.

Track One: Instructional and System Leadership

Like many educators, my journey began in the classroom, teaching in an urban school system, immersing myself in curriculum, assessment, and culturally responsive pedagogy. Early on, I also contributed to curriculum and test development projects, which deepened my understanding of how system-level decisions influence student access and equity.

Work in an evening high school program serving overage and under-credited students further shaped my leadership perspective. It became clear how traditional structures can fail those who need more support. When an administrative opportunity arose, I stepped into leadership, eager to build systems that better serve both students and staff.

Over time, the path led from assistant principal to principal, and eventually to my current full-time role at the district level. In this capacity, I support schools with instructional coaching and planning, conduct audits, and guide school improvement efforts. What grounds me in every facet of this work is the conviction that instructional leadership, rooted in student learning, teacher development, and equity that drives meaningful and lasting school transformation.



Track Two: Teaching and Mentorship

My second track centers on higher education and educator preparation. Over the years, I've taught a range of graduate-level courses in leadership, supervision, curriculum design, research, and instructional methods for adolescent learners. These include topics such as instructional leadership, data literacy, equity-focused curriculum development, and the use of research to inform educational change. In addition to teaching, I serve as a fieldwork and dissertation mentor, supporting emerging leaders and educators as they develop their practice in real-world contexts. Whether I'm reviewing a capstone project or facilitating a seminar on adaptive leadership, I see this work as a partnership grounded in reflection, growth, and purpose.

I am also a strong advocate for college and career readiness, including pathways such as the Career Development and Occupational Studies (CDOS) credential in New York State. These align closely with the Portrait of a Graduate framework, which encourages schools to prepare students not only academically, but also personally and professionally.

In my leadership courses, we now also explore how AI can be used to streamline school operations, support instructional planning, and improve communication, while weighing the ethical implications for students, particularly multilingual learners. These discussions equip future leaders to navigate complex and evolving educational systems with clarity and care. This work matters because the quality of our schools tomorrow depends on the preparation, values, and imagination of the educators and leaders we invest in today.

Track Three: Advocacy and Representation

Union work has always felt deeply personal to me because I've seen how critical it is to the well-being of our schools. When we support and empower school leaders, we strengthen the entire school community. As President of the Asian American Association of the Council of School Supervisors and Administrators (A3 of CSA), I support the advancement, visibility, and empowerment of Asian American educators.

Through A3, I've had the opportunity to advocate not only for individual colleagues but also for the shared conditions that enable all of us to lead with integrity, equity, and purpose. A3 exists to unite and strengthen Asian American school leaders through strategic networks, mentorship, and professional learning opportunities. Our mission is to build community, foster pathways to success, and promote inclusive policies that elevate AAPI voices while championing multilingual learners.

As President of A3, I've had the privilege of working with a passionate team of leaders, hosting leadership panels that spotlight AAPI principals and district leaders, creating professional learning experiences that center equity and culturally responsive leadership, building a mentorship network for aspiring Asian American administrators, and advising on curriculum efforts that include and reflect AAPI histories, voices, and contributions.

This work is both professional and personal. As an AAPI educator, I understand how powerful it is to see your identity reflected - and how isolating it can feel when it is not. At A3, we strive to ensure that Asian American leaders are not only represented but also supported, celebrated, and connected. By building that visibility and community, we help dismantle stereotypes and widen the pathway for others to lead with confidence and purpose.



Track Four: Public Thought Leadership

The fourth track is a newer venture centered on public writing and reflection. I write for journals, blogs, and professional outlets, and I share short reflections through my Class Talk series on LinkedIn. I explore instructional leadership, trust, equity, AI, and the hidden demands of school leadership.

Writing helps me reflect and connect. I don't offer easy answers but I bring to the surface questions that matter and pay forward the mentorship I've received. This public work sharpens my practice and connects me to a broader community committed to transparent, purpose-driven leadership.



These four tracks are deeply interconnected. My district work informs my teaching. My advocacy shapes how I coach and mentor. My writing helps me synthesize and share ideas. When one lane is heavy, another offers perspective and energy. This kind of leadership calls for perspective and adaptability. Leadership scholar Ron Heifetz reminds us of the importance of stepping onto the “balcony” - creating distance from the day-to-day action to see patterns, relationships, and deeper challenges more clearly. While technical work solves known problems, adaptive leadership invites us to rethink assumptions, shift mindsets, and grow alongside our communities.

Multi-track leadership is not about doing more; it is about doing work aligned with values, requiring boundaries, reflection, and discipline - and offering renewal, clarity, and deeper impact.

The Way Forward

Many aspiring leaders assume leadership begins only after a title is earned. In truth, impactful leaders start leading well before holding formal authority. In a previous piece, “Leading at the Intersections”, I shared how my multi-track journey shaped my growth across instruction, advocacy, and mentorship. In this piece, I turn to the aspiring leader and share how leadership can begin early - grounded in three key principles: Curiosity over Control, Contribution over Credit, and Coherence over Chaos.



Curiosity over Control

Great leaders don't need to have all the answers. They need to ask the right questions. Curiosity over Control means approaching new situations with an open mind, a learner's stance, and a willingness to step into the unknown. When I was asked to support a literacy initiative across multiple grade levels, the curriculum was still in development and the intended outcomes were only loosely defined. Rather than wait for a perfect plan, I began by asking questions, gathering input from teachers, and focusing on small, achievable steps. That process of learning my way forward ultimately taught me more about systems change than any formal training ever had. Especially in today's fast-changing school environments, this mindset allows leaders to adapt and lead with humility, not just expertise. It's also why I prioritize professional learning experiences that spark curiosity, because staying curious keeps leaders responsive, reflective, and ready to grow.



Contribution over Credit

Early leadership work often happens out of the spotlight: in committee meetings, hallway conversations, and quiet moments of support. Contribution over Credit is the commitment to serve the mission, not your résumé. It's about showing up consistently, helping the team move forward, and putting student success ahead of personal recognition. Often, it's these moments of quiet contribution that help establish credibility, forge relationships, and build momentum for lasting change. I've seen students lead major initiatives with no title - simply because they stepped in where there was a need and followed through with care and consistency.



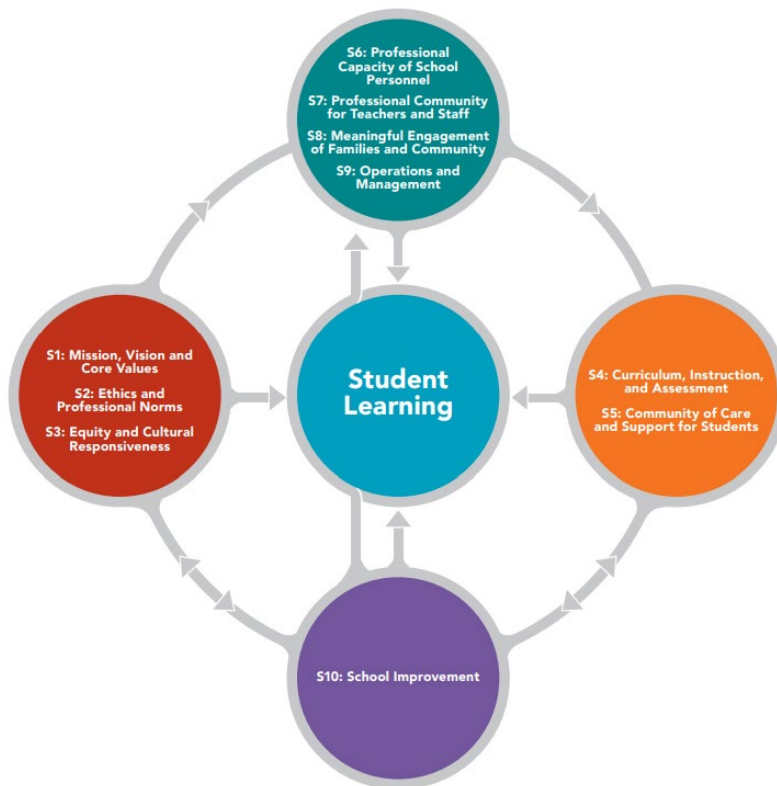
Coherence over Chaos

When everything feels urgent, purposeful leaders learn to prioritize. Coherence over Chaos means aligning your time and energy with what matters most - your values, your goals, and your vision for equity and impact. It also means letting go of roles or commitments that no longer serve your development. I once volunteered to reorganize the book depository at my old high school and help with departmental computer inventory. While those tasks weren't without value, I later had to ask myself whether they aligned with my goals. Part of growing as a leader is learning not just what to take on, but what to release. Over time, discernment becomes just as important as dedication.

Lead from Where You Are

A student once shared a curriculum-writing opportunity for the Office of Food and Nutrition. I encouraged others to consider it - not just for the compensation, but because it offered collaboration, experience, and insight into an overlooked department. Informal roles like these often shape a trajectory long before a title does. Another student asked me, “How do I know if something is worth saying yes to?” I encouraged them to go back to the three principles. Does it spark your curiosity? Does it allow you to contribute your voice and skills? Does it align with your goals and growth? If it checks even one of these boxes, it may be worth exploring.

To help students develop this kind of discernment, I often recommend a gap analysis using the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL). It’s a reflective process that reveals where you’re already strong and where you still need to grow. The goal isn’t to check off boxes, but to act with intention - to focus on learning, not just doing. Leadership is less about having a roadmap and more about navigating with clarity and purpose, wherever you happen to start.



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Some of the most meaningful growth in my own journey came from stepping into spaces that were overlooked or undefined. I joined committees on curriculum revisions, testing logistics, and school programming. I served as a testing coordinator. I wrote PD plans. I worked on affinity groups and led mentorship efforts. I contributed to projects I didn't design but was proud to advance. These weren't glamorous tasks, but they deepened my knowledge of pedagogy, systems, operations, collaboration, and equity.

These efforts didn't lead immediately to promotions or titles, but they positioned me to lead from day one when opportunities came. And that's the key - what you do now is what prepares you for what comes next. You don't need to wait for a job to start leading. You need to look for where your skills and values intersect with real needs. When you act with purpose, leadership will follow.

Final Thought: Grow with Intention, Not Anxiety

Not everyone will land a leadership role right away. The landscape is competitive, but what you do in the meantime still matters. Informal leadership, coalition building, and strategic contributions are how you grow into the leader you hope to become. Don't wait to be asked. Don't stop because you haven't yet arrived.



One of the best pieces of advice I ever received was this: "Don't worry whether what you're doing yields immediate results. If it promotes your growth, it's worth doing." Multi-track leadership isn't about doing everything. It's about leading with curiosity, contributing with purpose, and choosing with coherence. Every role teaches you something. Keep asking where you're most needed - and how you can grow to meet that moment. If you ask that question often and act on the answers, you're already leading.

If you are early in your leadership journey or seeking what comes next, consider that leadership may not always be linear. Powerful growth often comes from stepping outward - joining working groups, mentoring peers, publishing reflections, or attending conferences. You don't need multiple titles to lead in multiple tracks. You need curiosity, conviction, and the courage to ask the question: Where am I needed most?



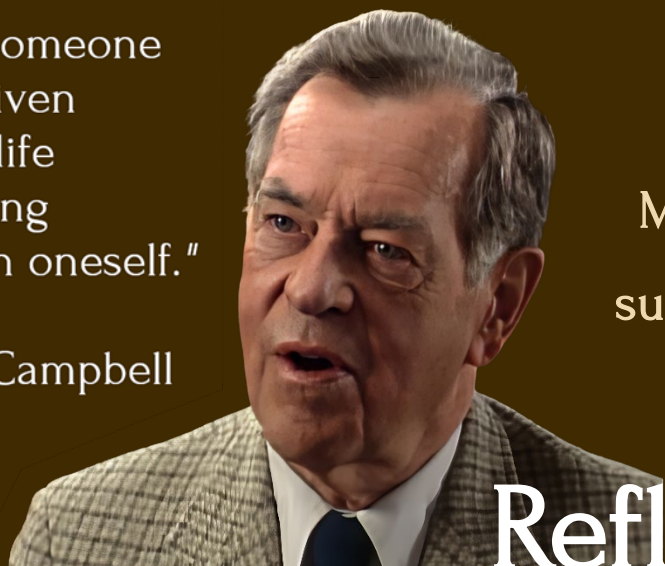
Dr. Andy Szeto currently serves as an Education Administrator for the New York City Public Schools, where he focuses on academic policy and performance for overage and under-credited students. Additionally, he is an adjunct assistant professor specializing in educational leadership, teacher education, TESOL, and adult education at multiple colleges in the NYC metropolitan area. Previously, Andy was a school leader within NYC Public Schools, where he led initiatives to improve instructional practices and student outcomes, with a focus on meeting the needs of diverse and historically underserved student populations.  

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- Joseph Campbell

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10 Toxins That Undermine a Pedagogy of Voice

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Shane Safir, Author and Founder,
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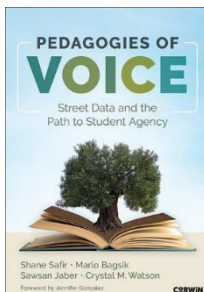


Marlo Bagsik, District Professional Learning
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Sawsan Jaber, PhD, Founder and Lead,
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Crystal M. Watson, Principal,
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This is an excerpt from [Pedagogies of Voice: Street Data and the Path to Student Agency](#) (Corwin, 2025) developed using the Equity Transformation Cycle introduced in the bestselling [Street Data: A Next-Generation Model for Equity, Pedagogy, and School Transformation](#) and informed by conversations with educators across North America, presenting a compelling framework for creating schools that affirm every learner while dismantling systems of oppression.

Teaching Tales: When Toxins Seep In



Marlo's Story: "In my third year of teaching, I took a job as the ninth-grade English teacher for a well-known charter high school that I thought matched my values. The school claimed to serve marginalized populations by ensuring that students would receive a "rigorous education" with tools to succeed in post-secondary life. I quickly bought into the charter network's training and values while failing to realize that I was being coerced into controlling my students in almost every way. I became their poster child as my routines were filmed and used as exemplars in training modules. At the time, this visibility made me proud because I had swallowed the belief that "engagement" means every student is doing the same exact thing at the same time - producing! I felt I was becoming a better teacher. While there were moments of joy in my classroom, I look back and shiver to think of how I functioned as an instrument of dominance and control. My biggest concern was how uniform my classes and my students' behavior felt - were the kids sitting up, listening, asking and answering questions, nodding and tracking the speaker? My classes were so predictable and routinized that there was no space for me and my students to get to know each other. I was the teacher who didn't "crack a smile before Thanksgiving."

Sawsan's Story: "Five years ago, I was teaching 11th-grade English at a multiracial, multiethnic high school. I had transformed American Literature into a social justice course that would interrogate systems of oppression and develop students' capacity to become scholar activists. We read a diverse range of texts, and students shared their thoughts through critical conversations, creating their own original texts, and journaling about the authors' values, messages, and structural choices. A few months after the murder of George Floyd, we read a novel centering the contemporary Black American experience. The class had many opinions about police brutality and how we had reached this point as a nation, but it never occurred to me that I needed to offer a different processing space for students whose lived experiences mirrored that of the characters in the text. Lacking a racial affinity space, Black students were vulnerable to emotional harm from peers who were early in their equity journeys. One Black learner wrote a reflective essay about how difficult it was to sit in classes and feel any sense of belonging while listening to her non-Black peers make ignorant claims and anti-Black comments with little awareness of their impact. Reading her journal, I found it hard to breathe. The harm my lesson design had caused was right there in the Street Data of her written voice."





Awakenings: Crystal's Corner

What toxic or problematic assumptions appear in each of the preceding teaching stories?

What pedagogical pitfalls did each educator fall into?

Think of a time when you experienced a pedagogical pitfall that separated you from your intentions as an educator. What was the impact on learner(s) at the margins?

For an olive tree to grow, thrive, and bear fruit, it must be rooted in clean, healthy soil. This soil is the invisible ethos of our classrooms. It's the feeling in our bodies every time we enter a classroom and *sense* what students are experiencing. Our nervous systems know what's up, mirroring the vibration of the learning space. In a decolonized environment that is rooted in holistic, relational values, our bodies drop into the **parasympathetic nervous system** - that "rest and digest" network of nerves that relaxes after confronting stress or danger to once again experience safety. In such moments, we may smile, laugh, or breathe more deeply as our heart rate slows and the knots in our muscles untangle. On the flip side, walking into a classroom characterized by oppressive norms can activate our **sympathetic nervous system**, designed to protect us by initiating a fight, flight, or freeze response to danger. In these moments, our bodies mirror what students may be feeling: anxious, disconnected, silenced, even fearful. In some ways, the soil is also *us*...it's the energy we infuse into the learning space, consciously or unconsciously.



In the last chapter, we grounded ourselves in core concepts from *Street Data*, which sits as a foundation for Pedagogies of Voice. We thought about the various levels of data we can collect to inform our pedagogy, dynamic ways to gather Street Data, and what it means to choose the margins of our classrooms. We surveyed existing data to identify the margins and hone an equity-centered inquiry question to guide our learning. As we get ready to enter the Pedagogies of Voice Seed Store in Chapters 5 to 8, we must first prepare the soil of our learning spaces for planting. This requires *detoxification*, the focus of this chapter, and *soil replacement*, the focus of Chapter 4.

No matter who we are, how we identify, or how committed we are to the pursuit of equity and inclusion, we have all been conditioned inside a colonial education system that has survived through the reproduction of dominant cultural ways of knowing and being. Marie Battiste, a Mi'kmaw scholar from Potlotek First Nations, unpacks the features of a **colonial education**, rooted in the “racial logic” of white supremacy, including forced assimilation, a Eurocentric chokehold on knowledge and curriculum, privileging “English-only” initiatives while banishing other languages, and white-washing of the mind (Battiste, 2013). In this chapter, we examine the micro-ecology of the classroom to discern how power operates in subtle and not-so-subtle ways, enacting systems of control over learners and sustaining oppressive, often invisible norms. For the coherence of our central metaphor, the olive tree, we are calling these norms *soil toxins* that



make the classroom an unsafe and unhealthy place for students and educators to grow together. No matter who we are, how we identify, or how committed we are to the pursuit of equity and inclusion, we have all been conditioned inside a colonial education system that has survived through the reproduction of dominant cultural ways of knowing and being.

Decolonizing Our Classrooms

In Chapter 5 of *Street Data*, Shane described a **pedagogy of compliance** that dominates many classrooms, particularly at a secondary level, and is characterized by lecture-style instruction, Eurocentric bias, students in rows looking toward the teacher as expert, and teachers carrying the cognitive load. This model minimizes dialogue between teacher and student and among students. In a similar vein, Paolo Freire detailed a **banking model of education**, which positions the teacher as subject and active participant and the students as passive objects. Banking education is a process of depositing knowledge into students' brains, with little attention to their preexisting knowledge and schema. The reality that students come with “funds of knowledge” (Gonzalez et al., 2005) and deep cultural wealth - all fertile sources of Street Data - is actively disregarded in this model. Instead, it aims to develop students into “adaptable, manageable beings...the more completely they accept the passive role imposed on them, the more they tend simply to adapt to the world as it is and to the fragmented view of reality deposited in them” (Freire, 1970). Compliance is the end game.

TABLE 3.1 Shifting From a Pedagogy of Compliance to a Pedagogy of Voice

	FROM A PEDAGOGY OF COMPLIANCE . . .	. . . TO A PEDAGOGY OF VOICE
Primary Form of Data	Tests and quizzes (traditional assessments)	Street data (formative assessments, performance-based assessments)
Core Belief	Hierarchy of power: teacher wields expertise and distributes “content”	Democratization of power: teacher and students build knowledge together
Core Instructional Approach	Lecture-style dissemination of information	Active learning through inquiry, dialogue, projects, simulations, etc.
Roots in Critical Pedagogy	Freire’s banking model of education	Freire’s problem-posing model of education
Roots in Culturally Responsive Education	Rests on invisible norms of dominant culture (quiet, compliant, task oriented, individualistic) Views marginalized students through a deficit lens: <i>What gaps can I fill?</i>	Rests on foundation of collectivist cultures (collaborative, interdependent, relational) and includes students’ cultural references in all aspects of learning Views marginalized students through an asset lens: <i>What gifts do you bring?</i>
Views Students as...	Vessels to fill with information	Culturally grounded critical learners

Source: Street Data: A Next-Generation Model for Equity, Pedagogy, and School Transformation by Shane Safir and Jamila Dugan. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, Inc.

With this book, we are aspiring to create the conditions for a Pedagogy of Voice to flourish so that our beautiful grove of olive trees can bear the fruit of deep learning. In order to shed a pedagogy of compliance, we must actively decolonize our classrooms by rooting out the toxins polluting the soil. This requires acknowledging that “the modern educational system was created to maintain the identity, language, and culture of a colonial society” (Battiste, 2013). Decolonization is a conscious process of uplifting learner voice while systematically expunging toxic and dehumanizing forces, including the following:

- Eurocentric assumptions around knowledge and data
- Ideologies rooted in hierarchy, ranking, and domination
- Learning conditions that position students as passive receivers of educator expertise
- Normalized pedagogical “moves” that harm and silence learners

In this chapter, Sawsan and Shane unpack 10 Toxins that can infect our classrooms and undermine a Pedagogy of Voice. The toxins, collectively, work to suppress student and teacher voice by forcing compliance with policies, practices, and behavioral norms that perpetuate existing power dynamics and inequities. They are the product of a system designed to privilege the dominant majority by suppressing the voices and spirits of those at the margins. We hope that by seeing them clearly - making visible what is often invisible - you can attune to their presence in your learning environment and begin to consciously disrupt them.

A pedagogy of compliance will stubbornly reinvent itself into new images, rhetoric, and mechanisms of control. Think of the histories of residential schools, cultural and linguistic assimilation, English-only programs, test-and-punish initiatives, and punitive teacher evaluation systems. The latest wave of compliance-focused policies, including the banning of books and silencing of conversations about race, sexuality, and gender identity, not only detracts from instructional decision-making, but harms students in the process. Sometimes those with positional power cleverly coopt language, claiming to pursue “equity” while perpetuating oppressive practices.



10 Toxins

“All the bad words said about a community that occupy the space, that have gone on said, stay in there and if you breathe those things in deep enough, they become so toxic that they taint your visions of possibilities of doing something for young folks in their lives, and you have to be able to take stock of that data...the data that is unseen, that is in the air. And the reason why some classes feel good is because somebody’s done the work to clear the space. And some classes feel bad because somebody has not addressed what’s in that space and no matter how good they think they are, no matter where their graduate school of education is, no matter what their background is that they think they are equipped to do the work, but you ain’t cleared the space, Beloved, and if you ain’t cleared the space, you gonna inherit somebody else’s trauma and wonder why the kids ain’t learning from you.”

-Christopher Emdin, Episode 2, [Street Data Pod](#)

Because of the shape-shifting nature of oppressive policies and practices and the “gaslighting” language used to justify them, we have to get sharper and smarter in our analytics while finding our locus of control. This chapter offers language to notice and name what’s at play, alongside Street Data in the form of *signature practices* and *discourses* that carry these toxins. (See Table 3.2 for a thumbnail sketch.)

TABLE 3.2 Signature Practices and Discourse of the 10 Toxins		
TOXIN	SIGNATURE PRACTICES	DISCOURSE
1. Teacher-as-expert	Over-reliance on lecturing Planning a year of curriculum over summer with no room for student input Content gatekeeping	“I know what’s best for you.” “I have chosen the texts for our course; I’m sure you’ll enjoy them.” “This is what we need to learn this year. No negotiations.” “I have chosen this book for you because it represents your experience.”

2. Binary thinking	Closed-ended quizzes Behavior charts or red, yellow, green cards for behavior management “Good kid/bad kid” labeling in teacher meetings before school year	“This student <i>can’t</i> learn.” “I <i>can’t</i> serve this child. She’s just not a strong student.” “Here is the answer. Copy it down.” “These kids are just different. Nothing I do works with them.”
3. Deficit ideology	Racialized grouping and tracking Negative language or thinking about students/families at the margins Justifying low-rigor or highly rigid curriculum as “what the students need”	“He doesn’t even try! So why should I try to help him?” “These parents/kids don’t care.” “She clearly has better things to do than study.” “Their culture expects <i>x</i> or <i>y</i> .” “If he was not in my class, it would solve so many problems!”
4. Power over	Teacher at the front, students in rows Classroom rules with no student voice Grading behavior for compliance	“You are speaking out of turn.” “I gave you the grade you deserve...take it or leave it.” “No, you can’t just use any bathroom/pronouns that you want to.” “This is <i>my</i> classroom, and you will follow the rules or leave.” “You can’t join that program. You’re not Honors material.”
5. Competitiveness and rugged individualism	Overemphasis on individual tasks Overemphasis on homework Barring students from helping each other work on tasks Class ranking and/or appointment of valedictorians	“You’ve gotta learn how to solve this problem on your own.” “In the ‘real world,’ no one is gonna hold your hand.”
6. Containment	Sit-and-get modes of instruction Banning movement in the classroom Sending students out of class who get up and move about the room Absence of field trips, field study, and/or land-based learning	“Stop moving around the room! You’re distracting the class.” “No, we can’t go outside during class. That’s what lunch is for.” “We need to put your son in an intervention class for ‘at-risk’ learners.”

7. Performing over learning	Standardization of curriculum (one-size-fits-all curriculum) Pacing guides Emphasis on “bell-to-bell” instruction Grading on a curve	“We don’t have time for questions; we are behind in the curriculum.” “Your priority is preparing for the test.”
8. One-and-done assessment	Banning revisions and retakes Overemphasis on summative tests Absence of regular wise feedback	“There will be no retakes of this quiz. If you’re not ready, it’s on you.” “Let’s see who got the right answer.” “If you had paid attention . . .” “Stop asking for concessions and retakes. In the real world, there are no second chances, and it’s unfair to your peers.”
9. Scarcity mindset	Pull-out interventions Rote instruction to “boost skills” Eliminating rigor to make learning more accessible” Content coverage: more is more	“We have a lot to cover so please sit quietly and take notes.” “No matter what we do, students have so many gaps we can never catch up.” “It’s not my fault that they’re coming to me five levels below their grade. What am I supposed to do with that?”
10. Ego	Gatekeeping content/ choosing texts (or “real-world” tasks) based on teacher interests Defensiveness to student feedback	“When you’ve put in the work like me to get a degree and a job, you get to be the one to make decisions.” “This is the way I learned it, and kids need to know about it!” “There are some things kids just need to know because they don’t know better.” “I already passed __ grade. <i>You</i> need this content, not me.”

Note that since this manuscript was drafted, these types of statements are now enshrined in federal policy and backed up by executive orders.

1. **Teacher-as-expert:** Sawsan remembers her first university lecture hall experience: 365 students in a women's studies class. She was a 16-year-old freshman, having graduated from high school early - nervous and not knowing what to expect. Her teacher had assigned a novella with a female Arab protagonist and directed students to read it by the next class. Sawsan was thrilled to *finally* read a book with a mirror of her reality, but in fact, the text was chock-full of insulting stereotypes and patently offensive. In the middle of the next class lecture, the teacher singled her out and said, "I want to know what *you* think because I am sure you could relate to her more than anyone else here." Sawsan was dumbfounded and speechless. She could not find her voice.

When we assume the role of teacher-as-expert, we become gatekeepers of student experience - what they learn and don't learn and the shaping of their **self-concept**, or how they view themselves personally and in relation to the stigmas of external, societal perceptions. We make grave mistakes - like this professor who thought that she understood Sawsan's lived experiences. Most tragically, we neglect to see our students as a living, breathing resource that we can learn from every day. So many teachers have been conditioned to believe we have to be the experts in the classroom space, and "expert"-laden practices like talking *at* students and pre-recording lessons became even more popular post-COVID pandemic with the frenzy around "learning loss."

In her instructional coaching, Sawsan often asks teachers to choose *one* period in which to track their minutes of talk time versus the time they provide students to exchange in discourse. Try gathering this type of Street Data for a week and examine what it indicates about who you view as the experts in the room. It can be illuminating! What if every student felt like they were an expert too? How would this shift not only the culture of schooling but students' self-concepts? This is particularly important for learners at the margins who have often had their voices silenced or who have been spoken *for* by adults. If Sawsan's professor had allowed her to be the expert of her own lived experience, she might have felt empowered to show her peers how problematic the novel was. Instead, she folded into herself and chose not to speak at all.

2. **Binary thinking:** Colonial education is rooted in the toxic soil of binary thinking. Learners are ranked and sorted into categories like "good" and "bad" or "high" and "low;" answers are deemed "right" or "wrong," and educational policies like grading and discipline are shaped around these dichotomies. As institutions designed to assimilate students into the dominant culture, schools often perpetuate binary modes of thinking about knowledge, success, and behavior. Sawsan remembers being a nervous first-year teacher, just 19 herself, preparing to teach 18-year-old seniors. Her mentor teacher had taught many of Sawsan's students the prior year, so the mentor printed the class roster and began

reading their names out loud, labeling each student as either a “good kid” or a “bad kid.” Sawsan recalls walking into the first day of class with her guard up, worried about all of the supposedly “bad kids” she would meet (mostly boys, incidentally). She set up strict rules to “hold the kids accountable,” but this approach failed miserably. With time, she learned that establishing authentic relationships and finding common ground with students would deem her the coolest, youngest teacher in the school and that in fact, there are no “bad kids.” That very idea stems from a colonial mindset aimed at excluding those who aren’t docile and compliant.

Binary thinking¹ - for example, having students shade a bubble from a narrow band of answers, insisting students identify as “male” or “female,” or using behavior charts to code student behavior as “good” or “bad” - results in erasing the complexity of human experience and constricting how learners are allowed to be and express themselves in the classroom. This may seem innocuous at face value, perhaps even coded as “effective classroom management,” but it can cause great harm and shame to a child’s budding self-concept. How can



there be one right answer when there are ten ways to explain a response? How can a teacher guess what a student was thinking when they shaded a bubble if the student has no opportunity to explain their choice? Why can’t children self-identify across a gender spectrum when *countless* cultures throughout history have seen gender as dynamic and fluid? Can’t a learner have both positive *and* challenging attributes?

People are not two-dimensional. If we commit to awakening student agency, we must view students in their full dimensionality and invite them to share their lived experiences, views, values, and identities. Sawsan begins each year telling her students that there are no wrong answers as long as they can ground their work in a “why.” Binary thinking is a barrier to understanding nuance, ambiguity, and shades of gray - precisely the skills needed to navigate a complex world.

3. **Deficit ideology:** With the numbers of multilingual learners growing in her district, Sawsan has spent a lot of time this year thinking about how her English department can shift its practices to better serve this population. So many of their remediation courses are overpopulated with brown students who are multilingual learners (MLs), many of whom are dually labeled as special education. Like many schools, Sawsan’s has failed to differentiate between

4. English language development and academic ability, which has resulted in the disproportionate placement of MLs in courses with low academic rigor. How often do our perceptions of academic “readiness” get distorted by deficit-based views of MLs and students with learning differences? Similarly, how often do we blame Black and brown students for a lack of “engagement” when *we* have failed to plan culturally relevant and sustaining learning experiences that speak to their interests and identities?

Think about the ways in which our education system justifies the unequal distribution of opportunity through deficit narratives. Examples abound, such as grading policies, reserving rigorous instruction for our most privileged students, and course tracking systems that wind up foreclosing access to higher education for learners in lower “tracks.” Similarly, how often do we show respect for children who don’t fit the norms of a compliant, so-called “good student”? How often do we affirm their *strengths* by witnessing qualities that are undervalued by current measures, such as bravery, creativity, resourcefulness, resilience, or simply the ability to survive a toxic system that was never designed to serve them in the first place? How can we rid ourselves of deficit-based narratives about learners at the margins? It is no surprise that Black, brown, multilingual, and students with learning differences are grossly overrepresented in “lower” tracks and intervention programs and that the lack of student achievement in those spaces is then attributed to the failure of students and their families! This is a vicious, toxic cycle that we must commit to disrupt as we decolonize our practice. When we begin to recognize and acknowledge the funds of knowledge our students bring to the learning space, we make space for their voices.



Think about a student in your class who concerns you the most - the student who appears to be the most *disengaged* or who others have labeled “at risk.” Rather than thinking about what this student *lacks*, focus on what you perceive as their strengths. If you’re not sure, write down three asset-based questions to ask them in an empathy interview, such as *What do you love about yourself? What do you admire about your community, culture, and/or family? What are your hopes and dreams for yourself?* They may not fit the conventional trope of “good student,” but what might you discover if you free yourself from such preconceptions? Such small shifts in our thinking become the basis of decolonization.

5. **Power over:** Students will always ask for our “why”: *Why do we have to learn this? Why this book? Why is this math skill important?* In observing colleagues, Sawsan can’t count how many times those legitimate “why” questions from students were met with, “Because I said so.” This response points to a culture of domination and a form of marginalization permeating so many classrooms. Leticia Nieto defines “power over” as a normative type of power that is largely unconscious and systemic, built on force, coercion, domination and control, and motivating change through fear (Nieto, 2010; personal communication, December 2024). The power over toxin not only strips students of voice and choice, it hinders them from actively engaging in their learning. Why should they engage in something for which they have no rationale or stake in its relevance? As an educational consultant in addition to being a classroom teacher, Sawsan walks through schools all around the world. It never fails to surprise her how many classrooms are physically organized to assert the power of the teacher *over* learners by placing students in rows with the teacher at the front. (The pedagogy of Circle Up in Chapter 6 is a powerful antidote to this tendency.) By extension, instructional practices that posit there is only one “right” answer or way to approach a problem (see Binary Thinking) convey to learners that the teacher’s perspective reigns supreme. Such manifestations of power may disenfranchise students in the moment, but think about the *cumulative* impact on children and adolescents during their formative years. How does the ongoing absence of voice and agency influence personality development and self-confidence? In what ways are we setting children up to be compliant or submissive in other areas of their lives?

Examples of power *over* students are not limited to pedagogical practices; they are evident in our choice of materials. As a curriculum director, Sawsan often found herself saying to teachers, “Even if you love this text, we need to consider removing it if the students cannot relate to it. How can we gather Street Data on *their* perspectives?” In many schools, students are still steeped in reading canonical texts that portray historically marginalized groups through a deficit frame. How does this experience impact students’ self-concepts and perceptions of *others* in the world? In STEM classrooms, teachers may march through a prescribed curriculum instead of reimagining the content for mathematical or scientific relevance by anchoring in student experience, the community, and/or the land. (See the integrative case study at the end of the book for a holistic example of land-based learning.) Many teachers spend a disproportionate amount of time on their favorite topic because it feels comfortable to teach when, in fact, it translates into little **real-world** relevance for students.

6. **Competitiveness and rugged individualism:** Competitiveness and rugged individualism is a prevailing mindset in many classrooms and schools that prioritize individual achievement and success over collaboration, community,

and collective well-being. These values act as a toxin by fostering environments where students are pitted *against* one another rather than encouraged to work together, share perspectives, and engage in co-constructed learning experiences.

This toxic focus on individualism stifles collaboration, hinders authentic self-expression, and limits opportunities for students to exercise agency in shaping their learning experiences. At the same time, it effaces the fact that many



learners from racialized² backgrounds come from cultures that celebrate **communalism** - social organization on the basis of community and interdependence. Indigenous and Black traditions across the diaspora, for example, weave communalism with an appreciation and valuing of the ancestors to form the foundations of family, education, government, and virtually all social structures.

As an Arab, your last name holds more value than your first name because it ties you to community and history, indicating your lineage and ancestry. This is one of many reasons Sawsan struggled as a young student with the emphasis on the self-centered “I” in schooling and why so many of her peers could not understand her constant and frequent interactions with her large extended Arab family. Growing up in the diverse world of 1980s Brooklyn, New York, she prided herself on the internal and external communities that she belonged to, but they also made her stand out in her school community, offering more reasons to be seen and labeled as “the other.” Whenever she had a dance festival or a graduation, the entire Jaber clan showed up.

Sawsan’s cultural wealth also enabled her to be successful in school when working as a member of a group, team, or larger community. She thrived when asked to consider how her work on a project or task would impact others beyond herself. However, most of her learning experiences glorified individualism. From the exaltation of the American dream to the emphasis on individual grades, schooling seemed rooted in *personal* gain and benefit rather than an ethos of community. The American philosophy of the rugged individual crossing the frontier, intertwined with the ideology of Manifest Destiny³, continues to show up in classroom cultures rife with isolation and competition. When we place more value on what students can accomplish *individually* than on what they can achieve *collectively*, these subliminal messages find their way into society beyond schools.



PoV PD Resource



QR Code 7
<https://qrs.ly/slq99ld>

Listen to Sawsan's student Shivesh share his counterstory about navigating collectivist and individualistic cultural norms as a South Asian young person.

- 7. Containment:** The containment toxin is the physical embodiment of colonial education. Just as Indigenous, Black, and other communities of color have historically been displaced, dispossessed, enslaved, and confined to increasingly small spaces, our classrooms - especially in marginalized communities - often act as microcosms of this larger system of control. In compliance-centered school buildings, students frequently have to enter through metal detectors and are subjected to bag searches. In compliance-centered classrooms, learners are confined to their seats for most of the class period. Instruction is “contained” inside the four walls of the classroom. Assessment is “contained” within a quiz, test, or bubble sheet, and the only learning that “counts” is contained within the school building. We miss infinite opportunities to cultivate student voice and agency when we default to this incarcerated view of learning, one that misses the forest for the trees. In truth, learning happens everywhere!

Shane remembers her first years as a teacher in southeast San Francisco when she tried to grab every opportunity she could to take her students beyond the school building. They sat outside in circles to read and discuss articles. They traveled to Angel Island to study the history of Chinese immigration and detention. In the pre-law course she had an opportunity to design from scratch, her students visited four Bay Area schools - public and private, suburban and urban - to investigate structural inequities in education. Each time they left the building together, she felt the weight of the social scripts of “teacher” and “student” melt away as the class built deeper connections. Not only did her students’ cognitive development and schema-building benefit from activating the world as their text, their relationships and class community grew stronger. She stays in touch with many of these former students and hosted two on *Street Data Pod*. Visit <https://qrs.ly/oxg99ly> to listen to “Connecting Present to Past: The Impact of Critical Pedagogy,” in which Shane’s former students talk about the lasting impact of their high school experiences (Safir & Mumby, 2022c).

In an era in which teachers are increasingly attacked and micromanaged for inclusive curricular choices and holding discussions on “controversial” topics, staying inside the safety of the classroom and scripted lesson plans is understandably seductive. We may subject our students to long lectures to ensure we “cover” all the content. We may skip a compelling field trip so that we don’t “fall behind” on a unit of instruction. We may ask students to work at their solitary desks because we are anxious about their performance on an upcoming test. The invitation here is to notice the subtle ways in which the containment toxin has seeped into your mindset and practices and to start to root it out. Give yourself, and by extension your learners, room to breathe, grow, and literally stretch your bodies! Expand outward into the vast terrain of learning beyond the classroom, and you’ll see student voice sprout up organically in ways you never anticipated.

8. **Performing over learning:** Standardized testing represents the tip of the colonial iceberg, a visible toxin that emphasizes student “performance” over growth and learning. Even as the testing regime weakens, many districts and classrooms remain trapped inside its wicked imagination. Take, for example, a district leadership meeting that Shane facilitated in which urban district leaders made claims such as “Kids still need to know how to take tests for college” and “You’ll have to take tests at every phase of life” to argue for continuing a test-centered assessment model. Aside from the fact that these assertions represent a retrograde version of “college” and “life,” scholar Linda Darling-Hammond reminds us in Episode 10 of *Street Data Pod* that most real-world jobs don’t operate in a multiple-choice model, asking listeners to consider, “What kind of job gives you five options and says, ‘Now pick one?’” (Safir & Mumby, 2023a).



PoV PD Resource



QR Code 8
<https://qrs.ly/kxg99oc>

In this clip from Episode 10 of *Street Data Pod*, thought leader and policymaker Linda Darling-Hammond defines performance-based assessment and challenges the ongoing obsession with multiple-choice assessment models.



Awakenings: Crystal's Corner

What stands out from Dr. Darling-Hammond's description of this form of assessment?

How have you seen assessment act as a toxin and barrier to student voice and agency?

What are small ways you could move in this direction in your classroom?

A focus on performing over learning leads to a standardization of curriculum, stripping teachers and students of agency, as well as to a pervasive fear of making mistakes. In the face of narrow and rigid definitions of success, students don't want to take risks or activate their creativity. Mistakes become stigmatized, and learners who struggle to fit the dominant mold enter cycles of shame and self-blame. The same students who feel frustrated with their lack of academic success may become "frequent flyers" with disciplinary referrals to the main office. For teachers, the anxiety associated with performance pressures can lead to a doubling down on tools like pacing guides, "bell-to-bell instruction," and content gatekeeping. When teachers are driven by carrot and stick measures in the interest of student gains on narrowly designed assessments, both teacher and student voice suffer. Only students who know how to "do school" in a compliance-driven way will survive in this toxic milieu.

Decolonizing our practice means building a culture that centers *learning* over performing and rewards mistake-making as a vehicle *for* learning. By rooting out the performative aspects of learning, we reorient the larger purpose of schooling: preparing students to become active citizens in a global world. Authentic public learning assessments, profiled in Chapter 8, produce a sort of "curriculum equity" (Safir & Mumby, 2023c) by providing all learners access to high levels of attainment.

9. **One-and-done assessment:** Whenever Sawsan talks to teacher teams about assessment, she asks, *Why* are we assessing? A colonial mindset views assessment through a punitive lens: If kids "know" the content (we can debate whether knowledge exists in such a finite way), we reward them, and if they don't, we punish them. But this still doesn't answer the "why" question. Ask yourself this: why do we want kids to come to school anyway? Some may argue that we want them to gain skills for the job market. Even if that were the case, ask yourself whether the actual content you are assessing provides them with

the skills that today's employers claim they want students to have, such as creativity, communication, and interpersonal skills. You can visit <https://qrs.ly/f2g99p7> to read *Ed Week's* article on "5 Things Big Businesses Want Students to Learn for the Future of Work" to learn more on this topic (Davis, 2020).

Unfortunately, the educational obsession with rugged individualism and perfectionism has led to a predominance of closed-ended, one-and-done assessments that limit students' opportunities to learn, grow, and develop their voices. Schools have the power to reshape society by cultivating global citizens, expansive thinkers, and scholar activists who can interrogate the world and make it better. If that is our mission, how can we better align assessment toward this North Star?

A decolonized approach to assessment includes students demonstrating and reflecting on what they know, understand, and care about as they step into positions of agency. This is operationalized through dynamic moments of *making learning public* before an audience, a focal pedagogy we will explore in Chapter 8. Such an expansive approach to assessment generates rich Street Data on student



learning so that as we listen to students, we can determine responsive pedagogical moves. Decolonizing assessment means that we commit to disrupt the one-and-done mentality, which signals to learners that if they didn't "get it" the first time, too bad and move on. Many teachers will argue that retests and revisions take too much time and work. But think of how much *less* work we would have to do if students mastered key concepts and skills over time through a spiraling approach that values exploration and iteration. Think of the long-term return when this happens over a span of years. Allowing for multiple revisions and retakes until a child fully grasps the content would shift education completely. It would elevate the conversation from "filling gaps" in learning to providing opportunities for students to show what they know in increasingly complex ways. It would elevate student agency through the critical question, What can learners actually *do* with the content we have been studying?

10. Scarcity mindset: Since the pandemic, our field has been riddled with conversations about how much students “fell behind” in the COVID-19 era. An alarmist, scarcity-based undercurrent shapes this discourse. Here is Sawsan’s read, based on her own students and the hundreds of students she has listened to in focus groups: Before COVID, traditional teaching didn’t serve children at the margins. After COVID, traditional teaching didn’t serve *anyone*. We are finally paying attention to the ineffectiveness of a pedagogy of compliance, but instead of getting to the root of the problem and transforming our approaches, we are placing a “learning loss Band-Aid” on it, hoping for a quick fix. Learning loss is the contemporary embodiment of a scarcity mindset, positing that we must race to fill gaps rather than slow down to adjust our methods.

This discussion begs the question, *What constitutes learning anyway, and how do we measure it?* Sawsan wagers that students came back from COVID much more aware of world events after all they had witnessed, including the public execution of George Floyd. While Floyd was far from the first Black man to be murdered by police, his death transpired during a time when people were confined to their homes and locked into their screens. As international criticism rose around the inaction of our governing bodies, many students began to cultivate a deep curiosity about justice. They read and researched and came back to school armed with critical questions, ready to engage in thoughtful speaking and listening. She cannot recall a period of time in her twenty-plus years of teaching when reading and writing had more meaning. What if we simply asked students, “What do you learn outside of school that has personal or cultural value to you?” The big idea here is that we need to constantly redefine what we consider valid ways of knowing and learning.

To hear more from students about what they feel they learned during the pandemic, visit <https://qrs.ly/fw99pq> (Kirshner et al., 2021). If your school or district is feeling stuck in the “learning loss” discourse, this article can help to reframe the conversation.

Our students may have lost some ground in terms of traditional skills, but what about all the learning that is *gained* through time with family, elders, and in community? In truth, it’s impossible to quantify the many “life lessons” that children receive outside of school - some painful and others less so, but all important. Measuring learning in narrow, standardized ways has resulted in so many students being placed into the hamster wheel of interventions - over tested, pulled out, placed in isolating remediation bubbles where they get trapped. So-called “learning loss” structures replace much-needed electives and even study halls in a time when, more than anything, we need to cultivate students’ learning *love*.

11. Ego: In the context of teaching, ego has a particular meaning: When a teacher's sense of self-importance and need to be perceived as the "expert in the room" actually inhibits their students' opportunities to learn. Sawsan will never forget the day a student in her then-primarily white district announced in front of the whole class: "My father says you are a terrorist." This was during the first Trump era, and Sawsan was the only Muslim, hijabi⁴ teacher in the entire district. For the most part, students in this district had only interacted with people who looked like her through a screen, and much of the media coverage at the time focused on criminalizing Arabs and Muslims. She knew this student was voicing a perception shared by many of his peers and their families. Luckily, her classroom desks were always arranged in a circle for this very purpose. As she sat down with the students, she said, "Let us talk about where these ideas may have come from." They had an amazing critical conversation that lasted for two days and resulted in a collective class understanding: We fear what we don't know or understand. At the culmination of the two days, she invited the students to "ask me what you want to know about me. Ask me anything." She answered their questions and encouraged them to go home and share their conversation with their parents. Two days later, the boy's father called her to apologize.

When Sawsan shares that story with fellow teachers, she often hears remarks like, "That student should have been written up!" or "That would have been straight to the Dean's office if it were me." However, she chose to put her ego aside in that moment to enable a much more powerful learning experience to occur for all of her students. That series of conversations transformed the culture of the class and changed the hearts and minds of many parents who had probably never met someone who looked like her before. At the end of the year, the students in that school voted her Teacher of the Year. She became their role model, even though she looked nothing like them.



Ego is such a potent toxin, and we need regular practices to curb its influence. Part of Sawsan's discipline as an educator - which she also promotes with teachers in her work as a coach, administrator, and consultant - is the importance of gathering student feedback on our practices, Street Data! How do we invite students to become our partners in the classroom if we are not constantly soliciting their feedback and asking them what they want and need? (This is the essence of the Street Data framework featured in Chapter 2, which undergirds a Pedagogy of Voice.) Opening ourselves to feedback can be scary and even hurt sometimes. However, Sawsan has learned to sit with and reflect on the negative feedback she receives with even more seriousness than the positive. She has learned to take the time she needs to metabolize it so she can

get to the other side and respond to what learners need. If being the recipient of such feedback makes you anxious, think about how it feels for young people to *give* us feedback. It takes a lot for children and adolescents to tell their teachers they can do better. When we set aside our egos, we create space for students to actively participate in all facets of the class and become fellow stewards of the learning environment. At the end of the day, we must remember that we are educators for one purpose: to serve the students. This humbling reminder keeps Sawsan grounded in the message that “I am here for you and only you. Your feedback is the most important feedback I’ll ever receive.”

Closing Reflections

Here is an acknowledgment as we close this chapter: We *all* have trace elements of these toxins in our practice. No one is exempt from the effects of colonialist and white supremacist thinking in education, but each of us has the capacity to notice and challenge those effects. This chapter is not a treatise on purism or an attempt to separate the “good teachers”



from the “bad” - that would be slipping into the very binary, deficit thinking we want to curtail! Instead, we invite you to engage in a reflective process of examining your practice and interrogating the ways in which we all have perpetuated harm, even when we didn’t intend to. This takes courage and emotional stamina as we commit to decolonizing our pedagogy.

To model the iterative process of teaching, let’s return to this chapter’s opening vignettes as Marlo and Sawsan share their reflections on what they learned.



Marlo’s reflections: I look back at my charter school experience with painful awareness of how I embodied *binary thinking* and *power over* as I fell into the trap of complying with the norms of an oppressive culture. Students don’t need to be policed at every turn; they should be guided by their educators to develop agency and mine their untapped brilliance. Nowadays, I’m driven to constantly explore the ways in which these toxins live in me and my practice.

Sawsan's reflections: When I reflect on my decision to hold a whole-class discussion after the murder of George Floyd, I understand the harmful consequences of the *power over* and *teacher-as-expert* toxins. I meant well, sure, but my intentions did not negate the harmful impact I caused. From this experience, I have learned to create more space for students to journal and process their feelings about injustice *individually* before engaging in class conversations. The Street Data I collect this way helps me gauge where students are at emotionally and then decide whether to begin class in affinity spaces or a whole-group dialogue.



As we transition to Chapter 4, we invite you to acknowledge an uncomfortable truth: Education systems are built to reward teachers who toe the line of a pedagogy of compliance by prioritizing quiet classrooms, rewarding obedient students, and celebrating high scores on culturally biased, “inch-deep” standardized tests. If we are courageous enough to acknowledge what it means to teach inside an oppressive system, we can begin to enact subversive micro moves every single day. We can begin to truly prioritize children’s needs and individual learner profiles over the demands of the system. This begins with embracing 10 Ways of Being that flow from a place of radical love, exactly where we are headed.



Awakenings: Crystal's Corner

As you read through the 10 Toxins, did you notice any defensive, physical or somatic response? If so, which of the 10 Toxins prompted that response? How did that feel in your body? What narratives surfaced in its wake?

Take a moment to reflect on how the toxins show up in your teaching practices and how they might affect your students. In your journey to eliminate these toxins, is there one that you want to start with?

When thinking about your diverse learners, are there specific toxins that feel more salient for you? How might you approach those?

Centering the Margins: To what extent did you experience these toxins as a child in school? In what ways might the toxins affect children who have been historically marginalized and oppressed compared with those who have not?

Notes:

¹ There are countless examples of cultures in which gender is understood on a fluid spectrum rather than as a binary. Many Indigenous cultures in North America recognize two-spirit people, a term encompassing a variety of gender roles and identities among different nations. The Hijra in South Asian countries, including India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, are recognized as a third gender and hold a unique socio-cultural role, often engaging in rituals and blessings as well as performances. Fa'afafine individuals in Samoa are assigned male at birth but embody both masculine and feminine traits. They are deeply respected within Samoan culture, often taking on specific social roles. And the Gurjira in some West African cultures are individuals who embody both male and female characteristics, positioned in important communal roles that defy strict gender norms.

² The word “racialized” connotes the ways in which language is used to colonize, racialize, and commodify the other, or the person or learner who has the least power in the space.

³ Manifest Destiny was a 19th century ideology that the United States was pre-destined to expand across North America. Coined in 1845, this term and belief system was used to justify the forced removal and genocide of Indigenous peoples from their homes.

⁴ A hijabi is a Muslim woman or girl who wears the head covering called a hijab.



Watch Marlo and Sawsan share their passion for the Pedagogies of Voice work on our August 16, 2025 Worthy Incubator!



Shane Safir has worked in public education for over 25 years. She provides coaching, professional learning, and technical assistance to schools and organizations seeking a transformational approach to creating equity and opportunity for every child.



Marlo Bagsik is the District Professional Learning Coordinator for the [San Mateo Union High School District](#), with expertise in English language arts, restorative justice, and trauma-informed care.



Dr. Sawsan Jaber is a global educator, author, presenter, equity strategist and the founder of [Education Unfiltered](#), dedicated to transforming education one student, one classroom, and one school at a time.



Dr. Crystal M. Watson is an Elementary Principal with the [Cincinnati Public Schools](#) and an innovative, passionate, and authentic mathematics educator and life-long learner who always asks, "What do the students think?"



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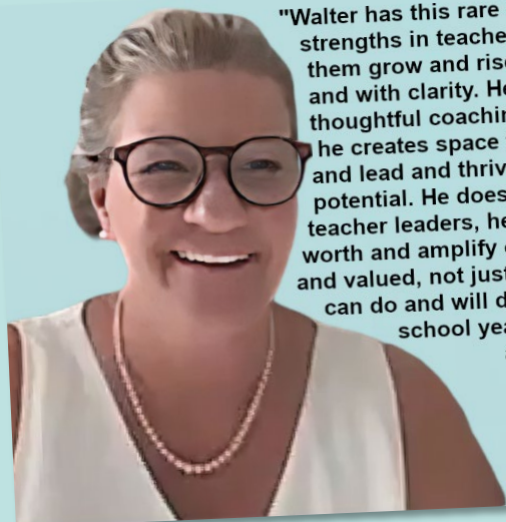
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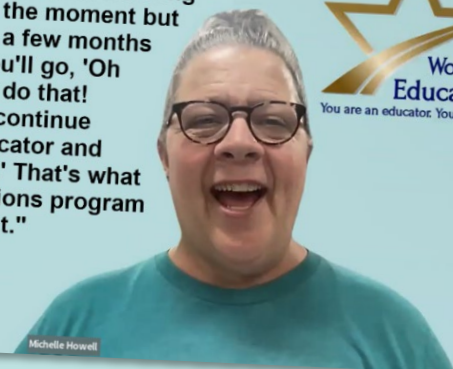
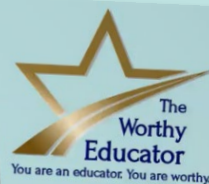
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"Walter has this rare gift for seeing the strengths in teacher leaders and helping them grow and rise with purpose and with clarity. He has this thoughtful coaching demeanor where he creates space for you to grow and lead and thrive and find your potential. He doesn't just support teacher leaders, he really empowers us to see our own worth and amplify our impact. He makes me feel seen and valued, not just for what I do currently, but what I can do and will do in the future. I'm entering this new school year with such enthusiasm and purpose and joy, and I attribute that a lot to the Champions program and Walter."



"I recommend trying this out. You will meet people who will push your thinking and maybe not in the moment but in a few weeks or a few months it'll hit you and you'll go, 'Oh yeah, I can totally do that! That's how I can continue to grow as an educator and as a person, even!' That's what makes the Champions program worth checking out."

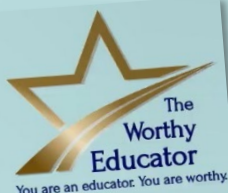


Michelle Howell

"What is the thing that's going to give me the direction and dictate my own internal compass? With The Worthy Educator coming into my life, it really helped me to figure out all of those things that I might not have been able to put into words but I knew inherently in my gut is the direction I needed to head in. Doing this work with Walter & Gretchen is really helpful!"

Deanna Lough

Deanna Lough



"The most valuable piece for me is in making the connections and to be able to network with people from different aspects of work and in life. It provides a space to reflect and grow with colleagues from across education. You should grasp this opportunity - it doesn't come along every day!"

Tasheen Qureshi

Tasheen Qureshi



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Reimagining Assessment: Addressing Exam Anxiety and Well-Being in College Students

Shellon Samuels-White, Student
Assessment Officer and Learning
Facilitator, The Mico University
College, Kingston, Jamaica



Assessment is a core feature of academic life, yet for many students, it remains a significant source of anxiety. A 2024 institutional survey conducted at a Jamaican teacher training college revealed that of the 178 participants, 30% reported low levels of exam anxiety (levels 1–2), 49% reported moderate levels (levels 3–4), and 21% experienced severe anxiety (level 5). Using a 5-point Likert scale, the survey identified key contributors to anxiety, including poor study habits, limited preparation time, perceived misalignment between course content and exam questions, and overlapping assignment deadlines. Students recommended interventions such as stress management workshops, better coordination of assessment scheduling across courses, and clearer study guides. These findings are consistent with research by Khoshhal et al. (2017), who noted that exam anxiety affects 20–35% of university students, particularly younger populations, and often manifests as excessive worry, nervousness, and even depression related to assessment outcomes. Such anxiety is frequently amplified by stressful academic environments.

For teacher trainees, many of whom are first-generation college students, the pressure is compounded. They are required to manage their own mental well-being while simultaneously preparing to support the emotional and academic needs of future learners. Supporting aspiring teachers through assessment reform is therefore both a pedagogical necessity and a moral imperative. This article presents an integrated response: the A.S.S.E.S.S. model - a suite of student-centered strategies designed to reduce exam anxiety and foster assessment practices that promote both learning and wellness. These strategies are grounded in institutional survey findings and informed by qualitative research on how school leaders support students' mental health, making them highly relevant for tertiary teacher education contexts.



The A.S.S.E.S.S. Model: A Student-Centered Response to Exam Anxiety

Increased exam anxiety among tertiary students calls for responsive and compassionate assessment reform. The A.S.S.E.S.S. Model offers a practical, student-centered framework designed to address the emotional and systemic challenges associated with high-stakes assessment. The model outlines six key strategies: *Acknowledge Anxiety*, *Structure Support Around Assessment*, *Stagger and Synchronize Workloads*, *Embed Emotional Wellness*, *Shift Toward Balanced Assessment Practices*, and *Sustain Systemic Support*. Together, these strategies promote more equitable, wellness-oriented assessment environments that enable students to thrive both academically and emotionally.

A: Acknowledge Anxiety



Anxiety thrives in silence. In the survey 70% of students experience moderate to severe levels of exam anxiety. Findings suggested that anxiety was often linked to fear of failure, unclear assessment expectations, and low academic self-confidence. When such emotions are left unacknowledged, they can silently undermine students' ability to focus, retain information, and perform. However, neuroscience shows us that emotions are not distractions from learning, they are fundamental to it. Immordino-Yang and Damasio (2007) argue that

cognition and emotion are intertwined, and that processes such as memory, attention, and decision-making, are subsumed within the processes of emotion. In fact learning depends on students' emotional states and their ability to interpret and respond to emotionally significant situations, like exams.

Therefore, facilitators can start courses or exam periods with brief, intentional conversations about stress and coping. Emotional check-ins such as simply asking, “*How are you feeling about the upcoming exam?*”, help normalize these experiences and activate *emotional thought*, allowing students to process their anxiety constructively. According to Immordino-Yang and Damasio (2007), when students feel emotionally safe and acknowledged, they are better able to access and apply their cognitive abilities in meaningful ways. This is not just about being kind; it is about supporting the emotional-cognitive processes that underlie true learning. When students feel seen and supported, their anxiety is less likely to derail their focus, and their trust in the learning environment increases. This emotional validation is a critical first step in promoting resilience, engagement, and academic success.

S: Structure Support Around Assessment



The survey data revealed important insights into the types of support students found most helpful. Students consistently emphasized the need for both practical and emotional resources to manage the pressures associated with assessments. Key strategies they identified include access to counselling and stress management services, participation in test-taking strategy workshops, and better management of assignment deadlines through staggering due dates across courses. Additionally, students expressed a strong desire for more study time, clearer alignment between course content and exam expectations, and the provision of study guides to help focus their preparation. These findings highlight that exam anxiety is a multifaceted challenge that can significantly impact student success.

Interestingly, the survey also revealed that higher study hours do not necessarily equate to lower anxiety. In fact, students who reported longer, intense study periods often experienced greater exam anxiety. This can be better understood through the lens of Cognitive Load Theory (CLT). CLT integrates cognitive psychology and instructional design principles to optimize learning, particularly emphasizing the limits of working memory capacity and information processing. In today's information-rich learning environments, learners face increasing cognitive demands and a continuous influx of stimuli, which can overwhelm working memory and lead to cognitive overload. This overload not only impairs learning efficiency but also exacerbates stress and anxiety.

(Ouwehand et al., 2025). In addition, long study marathons may unintentionally contribute to this overload by bombarding students with excessive information. Such study habits can increase mental fatigue and reduce the ability to filter and focus on relevant material, reinforcing the anxiety that students seek to reduce.

In light of these insights, faculty members play a vital role in creating assessment environments that reduce anxiety and promote effective learning. One of the most effective approaches is to increase assessment literacy among students by offering workshops or sessions that clearly explain grading rubrics, criteria, and expectations. When students understand how their work will be evaluated, they experience less uncertainty, which can alleviate anxiety and empower them to engage more confidently with assessments. By adopting these recommendations, faculty can create equitable and supportive learning environments that reduce anxiety, increase academic confidence, and foster resilience. Ultimately, such efforts not only improve immediate academic outcomes but also equip students with lifelong skills for managing stress and learning effectively beyond their university experience.

S: Stagger and Synchronize Workloads



Another key finding from the student survey was that overlapping deadlines across courses contributed to stress and exam anxiety. Students expressed that having major assignments or exams due in the same week made it difficult to prioritize effectively and often led to last-minute cramming, sleep deprivation, and emotional exhaustion.

This feedback highlights a critical structural issue in how assessments are scheduled across the programs. To address this, faculty could collaborate within departments and across programs to synchronize assessment schedules where possible. This way students are better able to manage their time, engage more deeply with content, and reduce the cognitive and emotional overload that results from multiple simultaneous demands. When students are faced with competing tasks that require simultaneous attention, such as multiple assessments due at once, their ability to effectively process and retain information diminishes, resulting in poorer academic outcomes and greater stress. Cognitive load theory suggests that managing the timing and distribution of learning tasks is essential for avoiding overload in the working memory, which can impair learning and increase anxiety (Misra & Castillo, 2004; Ouwehand et al., 2025). Coordinated assessment planning can therefore reduce these stressors and enhance both performance and well-being.

E: Embed Emotional Wellness



A consistent theme in the student survey was the need for more emotional support structures during the exam period. Many students identified stress and emotional fatigue as major contributor to their exam anxiety, with several specifically recommending access to counselling services and wellness strategies integrated into their academic routines. This suggests that emotional wellness should not be seen as separate from academic success, but rather as an essential foundation for it. Emotional regulation and well-being are central to effective learning. As Immordino-Yang and Damasio (2007) argue, *“We feel, therefore we learn.”* Emotions are deeply interwoven with cognitive functioning, decision-making, and memory. When students are emotionally overwhelmed, their ability to process information, focus, and perform under pressure is compromised. Therefore, intentionally embedding emotional wellness practices into assessment preparation can foster healthier academic engagement and reduce the physiological symptoms associated with exam stress.

This approach is supported by research. A meta-analysis by Zoogman et al. (2015) found that mindfulness-based interventions significantly reduced anxiety and improved psychological well-being among college students. Likewise, Bamber and Schneider (2016) reported that brief, embedded mindfulness practices in academic settings improved focus and decreased stress, particularly during high-pressure periods like exams. Integrating these strategies within academic routines not only reduces anxiety but also promotes a growth-oriented academic mindset where students can see assessments not as threats, but as opportunities for reflection and progress.

The embedding of wellness practices should be proactive rather than reactive. Faculty can model and encourage these strategies during the semester by incorporating wellness check-ins during class, offering self-care reminders during exam preparation, and creating space for emotional validation around assessment periods. Ultimately, embedding emotional wellness within assessment processes is not just about reducing anxiety, it is about transforming the culture of assessment itself. By addressing the emotional dimensions of academic life, institutions can support student well-being, increase academic resilience, and create more humane and effective educational environments.



S: Shift Toward Balanced Assessment Practices



Student feedback from the survey and performance data from a 15-course audit pointed to the limitations of relying heavily on high-stakes exams. The audit showed that in most courses, there was a negative correlation between coursework and exam scores - students generally performed better on coursework than on final exams. This suggests that the current practice of incorporating more coursework and performance-based assessments within the assessment framework provides students with multiple, low-pressure opportunities to demonstrate understanding over time - an approach that can mitigate anxiety and promote deeper learning.

Formative assessments such as quizzes, in-class activities, reflective tasks, and peer reviews not only diversify evaluation but also serve as rehearsal for higher-stakes assessments. These regular, lower-pressure tasks help students build confidence, strengthen content mastery, and develop time management and test-taking skills in a supportive context. By the time students face final exams, they are better prepared, to think critically under pressure, regulate stress and approach the assessment with confidence.

In response to these insights, faculty have been encouraged to balance summative assessments with diverse, formative tasks. These assessment types allow students to showcase their learning in varied ways that align with different strengths. At the same time, support for exam preparation remains essential. Strategies such as offering study skills sessions, clarifying exam expectations, and explicitly teaching test-taking strategies help reduce uncertainty and build students' confidence before high-stakes assessments. Rather than eliminating exams altogether, this balanced model promotes preparation, resilience, and academic success without compromising students' mental wellbeing.

S - Sustain Systemic Support



For assessment reform to be meaningful and lasting, it must be embedded within institutional systems instead of being left up to individual instructors. Survey responses highlighted the need for ongoing mental health support, accessible academic coaching, and more responsive institutional practices. Academic leadership plays a crucial role in driving this change. This includes embedding wellness initiatives into curriculum design, incorporating student feedback on assessment into formal quality assurance processes, and training faculty in **trauma-informed pedagogy** and **equitable grading practices**. Such

training enables faculty to better recognize the emotional and cognitive impacts of stress on learning and performance - especially among teacher trainees preparing for professional practice under high pressure.

Further, tertiary institutions can adapt strategies such as **expanded guidance counselling services, social-emotional learning (SEL) integration, and school-wide frameworks**. These serve a dual purpose: supporting current trainees and modelling best practices that these future educators can replicate in their own classrooms. Sustaining these supports across systems ensures that assessment reform is not a temporary fix but a **permanent shift toward more inclusive, supportive, and effective learning environments**.

Our Response: Mission Exam Possible

Informed by student survey results and course audit data, the institution's Assessment Unit launched a comprehensive campaign titled ***Mission: Exam Possible***. This semesterly initiative, rolled out the month leading up to final exams, is grounded in the **A.S.S.E.S.S. Framework**, which emphasizes structural support, emotional wellness, balanced assessment practices, and systemic alignment to improve student outcomes.

Key components of the initiative included:

Weekly Study & Mindfulness Tips (Weeks 1–4): Curated strategies were sent to both students and academic staff, promoting steady exam preparation, stress management, and wellness habits.

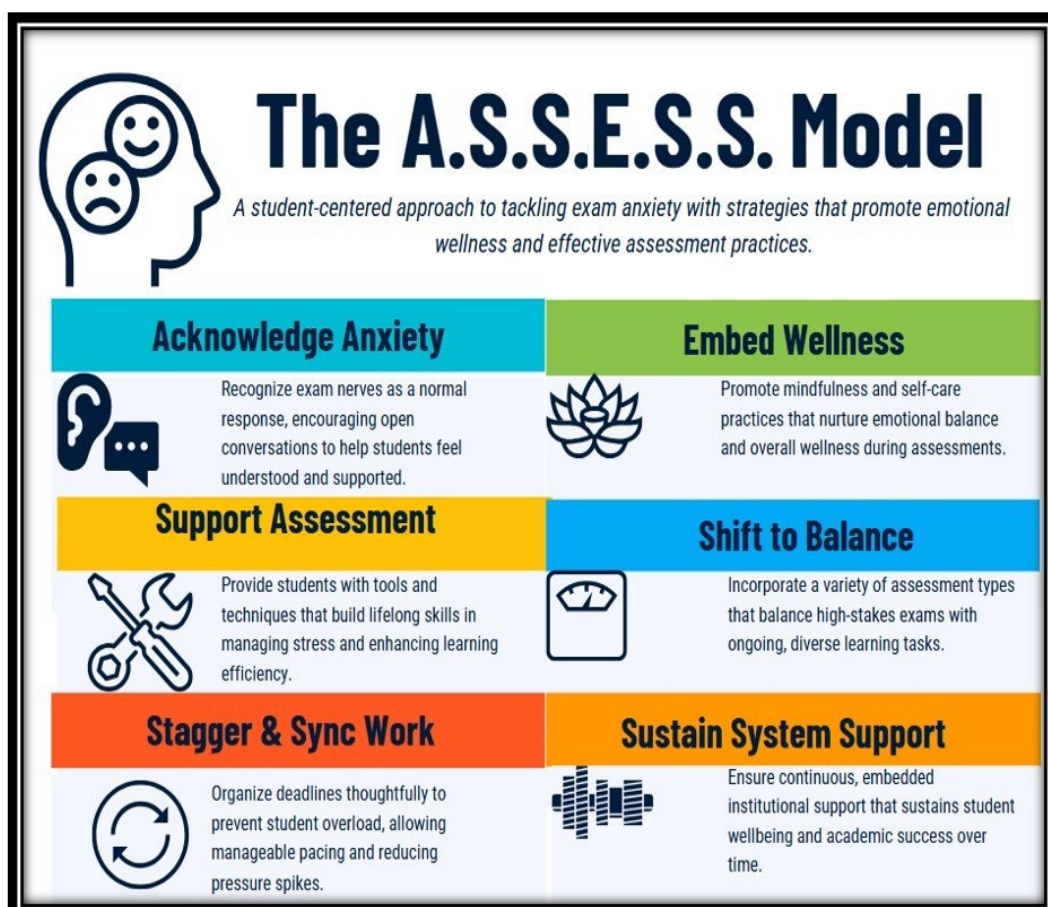
Exam Preparation Webinar – “Answer Like a Pro: Mastering Exam Questions & Busting Test Anxiety!” This interactive session equipped students with practical tools for success, including test-taking strategies, guidance on interpreting common exam verbs, and evidence-based anxiety-reduction techniques.

Faculty Newsletter: Distributed to academic staff, this bulletin shared key findings from the student survey and offered actionable suggestions for reducing student stress through improved assessment design and communication.

Faculty Training Videos: A series of concise, practical videos were created to support faculty in developing equitable, inclusive, and balanced assessments -spanning both coursework and exams. These resources were aligned with best practices and directly responsive to students' expressed needs.

Together, these initiatives reflect a systemic, research-informed approach to assessment reform. By equipping both students and faculty with the tools they need, *Mission: Exam Possible* embodies our commitment to reducing exam anxiety and fostering academic success through supportive, student-centered practices.

“The A.S.S.E.S.S. model reframes academic evaluation not merely as a grading mechanism but as a critical opportunity to foster well-being. Assessment reform is not only a pedagogical improvement; it is a moral and systemic responsibility. Future educators deserve to learn in environments where assessment practices model the empathy and equity they are expected to bring to their own classrooms.”



The Mico University College Student Assessment Unit

The Mico University College Student Assessment Unit, under the leadership of Dr. Valri Morgan, (Director) and Shellon Samuels-White (Student Assessment Officer), is setting the stage for a new era of academic quality and integrity. The Unit is responsible for auditing institutional assessment systems to ensure full compliance with the Institution's quality assurance framework. From reviewing grading practices and moderating results to training faculty in effective item design, it is establishing a strong foundation for fairness and accountability in teaching and learning.

In addition, the unit systematically collects and analyzes information to improve student learning and to enable instructors to measure the effectiveness of their teaching. By ensuring that goals and student learning outcomes are clearly documented, it empowers faculty to institutionalize effective strategies while refining those that are less successful. Guided by its commitment to Validity, Reliability & Transparency, the Student Assessment Unit is driving innovation in assessment and securing a future where teaching and learning at The Mico University College continuously evolve with excellence.

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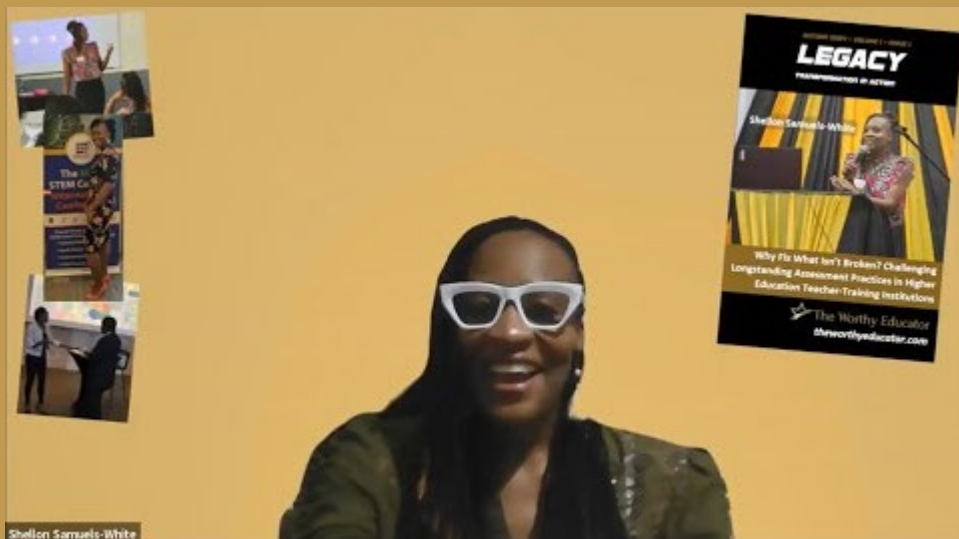
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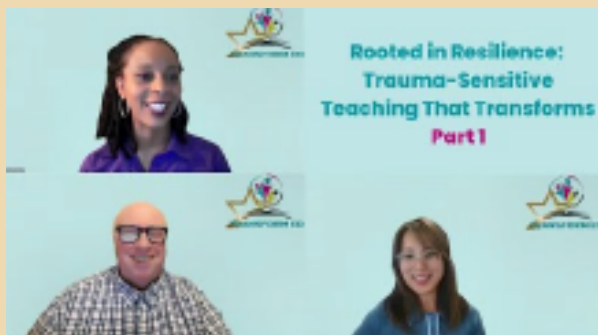


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The Academic Elephant in our Students' Pockets

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As educators, we have sat in on many meetings, and there are two topics that are recurring. One: how do we get our students to engage and love learning? Two: how can that result in better academic outcomes? Often, solutions are discussed from a skills standpoint: how do you help a student decode words, build up academic vocabulary, or identify the primary source of a text? These skills are incredibly important for college enrolment, scholarships, yet scores keep dropping nationwide (Schwartz, 2025).

So what are we missing? It might be as simple as looking down, and addressing the elephant in our students' pockets. The elephant that buzzes, distracts, makes noise and demands attention. Teachers often express frustration at managing the elephant. They try to create policies, manage its usage, but often lose those battles. But this is not just a classroom management problem, it is a structural issue. It is time to have a conversation about how our kids' focus is being stolen, and how we get it back. Focus and test scores, while incredibly important, are not all that is at stake. Social and emotional health is plummeting in ways that can no longer be ignored.



Disconnected, Dependent, and Struggling

Data shows that a student's positive connection to their school leads to higher attendance and improved performance (Henebery, 2022). So, in simple terms, students with friends or a connection to the school are generally present and do well. Yet, by all metrics, student mental health is regressing. A recent study showed that 57% of high school girls reported experiencing "persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness in the past year," up from 36% in 2011. while suicide rates for young men continue to rise as well (Englander/McCoy, 2025). There is so little discussion at the school level on how phones lead to a social disconnect among peers and, in turn, their relationship with the school. Bullying, while not unprecedented, is reaching new levels that are hard to fathom. This isn't happening in a vacuum, it's a direct result of cell phone use.

Bullying, while not a new phenomenon, feels different in 2025. In the past, bullying might have concluded at the end of the school day. Now, our kids live in a world where bullying continues online 24/7. Students coordinate Instagram posts, and when they're back at school, group chats strategize how to intrude on other students' peace with coordinated real time attacks or verbal assaults in classrooms or hallways (Singer, 2024). This constant surveillance rewards kids who take the initiative to bully with likes and reposts; the more shocking, the better. It also pushes students to avoid scrutiny by refusing to participate actively in school, staying under the radar to avoid becoming a next target. The result? A school culture that's filled with fear and distraction, where students are less willing to take risks and grow.

The Reality of Cell Phones in Schools

Cell phones in schools are the antithesis of social and academic student goals. We have for years been conditioned into thinking tech can improve the learning experience. Maybe a student can use their phone to look up a fact? In theory, that sounds great. But the reality is that a phone is not a learning tool, it is a “mobile slot machine” (Andersson, 2018) that many students can access 24 hours a day (including school time). Keep in mind that phone applications were designed to be addictive, with founders of apps like Facebook admitting that they set out to take up “as much consumer time as possible” (Andersson, 2018). Students regularly confess to going to bed at 2 am or later because they stayed up late scrolling. Daily screen times that we have witnessed can teeter anywhere from 12-15 hours a day, though the average is around 7-8 hours.



The evidence is clear. Phones are atrophying our children's mental health at an alarming rate and outcomes are lagging worldwide, leading to nationwide classroom phone bans in countries across the world (Chadwick, 2024). In the United States, twenty one states have passed a statewide phone ban in schools (Prothero, 2024). This is a great start, but it is not enough. We need enforcement mechanisms that empower public school teachers nationwide. When we do that, we can restore that classroom as a place of learning and emotional safety.

Without decisive action, we leave our kids' brains in the hands of tech companies who don't have their best interests at heart. It's time to confront the elephant in our pockets, honestly.

Practical Solution for Reducing Classroom Phone Use

Here are some practical solutions to help reduce or manage high school students' use of cell phones in classes. One is to require students to place phones in a pouch (some are lockable) or a designated storage area at the start of class. Of course, teachers and administrators need to be sensitive when taking students' property out of their hands. Losing a phone by such actions can be quite problematic and create a tense situation.

Write clear and consistent policies. As a faculty, establish a school-wide phone policy (e.g., "no phones during instructional time") with clear consequences. Individual teachers can set phone expectations for their classrooms if a school-wide policy isn't in place. Many school districts have written such policies.

Teaching about phone dependency (often referred to as problematic smartphone use) can be a powerful and relevant topic for high school. Have students create a debate: "Are Smartphones Hurting Us?" The objective would be to develop critical thinking and argumentation skills. Divide students into pro and con teams. Research and debate the impact of phones on health, social life, and productivity. This can help students be more responsible for building intrinsic motivation.

Another way to decrease cell phone use is to involve students in policy-making. When students help set guidelines, they're more likely to respect them. Communicate expectations to parents and enlist their support to minimize texting/communication during school hours.

Some schools use apps or systems that lock access to certain apps/sites during school hours. Designate specific times/places where phones can be used, so students know when it's acceptable. Create a phone-zone and reinforce its use. A mix of physical, behavioral, and educational approaches usually works best. Relying solely on rules or punishment often isn't sustainable without student and parent cooperation.



The Phone Policy Legal Landscape

Though structured policy is helpful, school administrators need legal backing from the state board of education to ensure their policies don't face parent pushback. In Illinois, Senate Bill 2427 (SB2427, 2025) aims to enhance the educational environment by mandating that all public school districts and charter schools in Illinois develop and implement policies restricting the use of wireless communication devices during instructional time by the 2026–2027 school year. This includes devices such as cell phones, tablets, laptops, and gaming devices.



By limiting the use of personal electronic devices during instructional time, the bill seeks to minimize distractions, thereby promoting better concentration and academic performance among students. The bill includes provisions for exceptions, allowing device use for medical reasons, as part of individualized education programs, or for English learners needing access to learning materials. This ensures that the policy accommodates the diverse needs of students.

The bill prohibits enforcement of the policy through fees, fines, or involvement of law enforcement, focusing instead on educational approaches to policy adherence.

Overall, SB2427 represents a proactive approach to addressing the challenges posed by personal electronic devices in educational settings, aiming to create more focused and equitable learning environments across Illinois schools



Conclusion

Many studies and experts, including organizations like the American Psychological Association, Pew Research Center, and researchers like Jean Twenge (Twenge, 2018), agree that minimizing cell phone distractions in schools has been shown to improve students' mental health and reduce bullying. Several schools have implemented strict phone bans, leading to positive outcomes. Students reported feeling less depressed and isolated, attributing their improved mental health to the reduction in screen time and social media use during school hours. This change allowed for more genuine social interactions and decreased exposure to online bullying.

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* What is the biggest pain point in your career right now?

* What are your career goals for the next year?

* What are your career goals for the next year?

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- ☐ Leadership Opportunities
- ☐ Presenting My Work
- ☐ Professional Learning
- ☐ Publishing
- ☐ Thought Leadership
- ☐ Other

* What scheduling best suits your busy life?

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- ☐ Full-Day In-Person Learning
- ☐ Two-Day In-Person Learning
- ☐ Half-Day Virtual Learning
- ☐ One Hour Virtual Learning
- ☐ Half Hour Virtual Learning
- ☐ 15 Minute Check-Ins
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Fitting the Pieces Together: Student Services in the Big Picture

Sweety Patel, Director,
School Counseling Services,
Carteret, New Jersey Public Schools



Sometimes convincing people of the truth behind an idea is the biggest challenge. As a Director of School Counseling Services, I spend a lot of time trying to see how support services can fit into the larger system. It is often like putting together a puzzle, trying to find where priorities match and fit together. Traditionally, communities see student services as separate from the larger system; an ever-evolving societal myth that keeps us all from benefitting from a complete picture. Divided. By who? Often by administrators who do not comprehend or understand our role because they have never had the need to use student services as a student themselves. Everyone wants everything to fit together in a tidy package, but if you want the puzzle to come together nicely, you have to see how all the pieces fit. Think about jigsaw puzzles, whether enlarged 24-piece puzzles or teeny-tiny 1500-piece puzzles, every piece means something. Missing even one and the picture is incomplete. And when we start puzzles, many of us start with the borders, creating a frame. We know from experience that without it, it can be harder to make sense of the rest of the picture. Also the perimeter pieces have at least one flat edge, so they are easier to figure out and piece together. This framing is fundamental to success. It is the context for all the rest of the pieces.

This is an excellent metaphor for support services, from social and emotional learning and mental health to college and career readiness and post-secondary planning. The ties to families, communities, cultures and social networks – the gravitational pull of relationships – are all pieces that fall into place in the student service realm. We often measure school and district success by graduation rates, test scores, grade point averages and other numerical data – which I understand - all of the data matters. But the reality is that, without the support services, a lot of those numbers cannot improve - and some may not even exist. Take attendance, for example. Without the motivation to come to school, there are no test scores to measure, no performances to report. And that motivation can be the connection with a teacher, a counselor, a nurse, a social worker, an attendance officer, a dean, a case manager, anyone who makes a difference by providing support that frames the picture for academic success and beyond.

Academic instruction is an important traditional piece of the education puzzle, but social instruction - the rise of wisdom in a child - needs love, attention and supports, too. Support services teams intentionally plan for this to happen. Although sometimes on the edges – the frame of the puzzle – it is so critical, and often the backdoor impetus for all these rates that people are looking to grow for their school and district success.



Putting the Pieces Together

Consider these ways to maximize your student services department:

1. Make Student Services Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) just as urgent, data-driven and reviewed as those based in academic departments. There should be a schedule of meetings with agendas focusing on particular relevant topics, primarily geared towards proactive approaches. For instance, one of the major concerns that affect most schools is bullying. This is an area where a lot of preventative work can be done. Although schools have Climate and Culture Committees, it may behoove some districts to use the language and frequency of a PLC in exploring how to deter bullying. Consider the support staff that works on preventing as well as responding to bullying incidents for PLC meetings with bullying as the main agenda item. This can be extremely helpful to your school culture and climate. Perhaps this becomes multiple meetings that also include follow-ups for support staff and instructional staff with an administrator, as well. Meetings can also revolve around historical patterns, evaluating what has taken place in your school in the past and inviting PLC planning and agendas based on these issues and concerns. Thinking about instructional elements and curricula to enhance social emotional learning is another excellent use of PLCs. Looking at bullying on a global level instead of only by incidents is important – PLCs can spend time identifying national and international trends and finding creative ways to respond to them.
2. Make sure each student service department has a team element so that no staff member feels alone in their work:
 - a. Subcommittees and committees (maybe of various staff members, including instructional and administrative staff; you can even go so far as to invite a central office administrator or community member/parent)
 - b. Coordinators (perhaps a lead social worker who can also recruit the help of a community agency liaison)
 - c. Pair school counselors together: a veteran with a rookie
3. Summertime should include time to plan student service calendars of tasks and events (with responsibilities assigned – including deadlines) based on the vision of the department at the school level. Be proactive and positive! There are so many templates and milestone dates available online to serve as resources so you do not have to start from scratch. You just have to assess the priorities for your school and match them to the resources available.



4. Keep looking for professional development (PD) – use your supervisors and directors for this. Promote the PD – let support staff know they are not abandoning their work to go to PD – the PD is necessary for their work, for their practices to refine. PD *is* their work. There are many local, state and national associations for school counselors, school social workers, school psychologists, school nurses, child study team members and specialists and many other support staff personnel. Research these organizations and find out if there is a way to pay for (or a way to start paying for) memberships and conference registrations. There are also PD opportunities and targeted trainings connected to specific programs, such as restorative practices, peer leadership and mentoring. Figure out where your school needs the help and kick off receiving and giving the training that is needed to make impact. Often, performance reviews are tied into professional development and growth, so strengthen your PD game and own it!

5. Support staff evaluations are just as important as teacher evaluations. Ensure that the right models and frameworks are in place with pertinent, updated rubrics and examples. Continue receiving training and remain current on standards in your field. Many districts already use existing frameworks, so subscribe to the communications channels of those in your role and learn from them. If there is some convincing that needs to be done through your central office or board of education, ask colleagues how they sought and won approval. Also, learn from the organizations that created the frameworks as baselines of competencies and then use your power of persuasion to develop strategic goals for your school and yourself.
6. Find likeminded stakeholders who love support services as much as you do and add them to your network! Social media, social media, social media. Even if you do not enjoy it personally, the professional gains are worth the time and effort. There are plenty of people watching your story and rooting for you, so seek their wisdom and find resources within the virtual universe.

Filling out the Puzzle

We often hear that support staff work in silos and not always in conjunction with teachers. The key to alleviating this disconnect is to ensure that the administrators place just as much importance on support staff as teaching staff, implementing systems that centralize and streamline support staff functions. Do referral systems accommodate the needs of support staff and teachers for their ease of use? Are there PLCs that bring teachers and support staff together inclusively? Does programming synchronize and maximize the efforts of teachers and support staff? We often wonder why support staff work in silos, but should we also wonder if teachers do, too? Teachers are on the front line because they see students more frequently and witness firsthand what students reveal, but are they handling this information and relaying it the best way possible through the established processes and protocols?

With the way the world is moving, it is clear to see that more and more families will continue to need support in the community (often played out at school), and that those needs will become more intricate. The school is an integral part of the community, so even if community agencies can do deeper work, the school has an essential responsibility to respond to calls for help and create pathways to healing and success. Sometime school is the most comfortable place for families to seek out help. Do we have the right training to handle all of this? Is our training updated and realistic? Are we really learning to work in teams?



These are critical questions we must answer in order to create the forms, procedures and protocols that help better identify and address the myriad of social and emotional needs that students experience in this day and age. Conduct a studious analysis of the past and a thorough review of the present so that we can begin hopeful, responsive planning for the future!



Sweetie Patel is the Director of School Counseling Services for the Carteret, New Jersey Public Schools. Prior to this, she served as a School Counselor for the Jersey City Public Schools. Sweetie believes in the service of students and the community, in spite of all challenges that may come. Everything she does is in the name of social justice in schools and learning for all.



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Prioritize People to Solve School Challenges



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Point Christian Academy,
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If you're in education long enough, you realize most school challenges aren't due to a lack of strategy; they're due to a lack of people-centered problem-solving.

Schools are navigating waves of challenges: teacher retention, student achievement gaps, disengagement, burnout, and initiative overload. Leaders are asking, How do we solve problems without burning people out? How do we get real traction on student outcomes without making school miserable for staff and students?

*“Our answer: Prioritize people first.
Then solve the problem together.
We have to include teachers in
our innovations!”*

At ISTE + ASCD 2025, we had the joy of sharing how school leaders can make our schools truly irresistible - not by adding another initiative, but by re-centering the people who make school work. The key? Prioritize people to solve problems. In this article, we'll share the core of our ISTE+ASCD 2025 Conference session: a practical, people-centered problem-solving process that school leaders can start using tomorrow.



Why Prioritize People?

Too often, school improvement is approached like this:

A school leader sitting alone in his/her office mulling over a challenge. It could be an operational issue, an instructional obstacle, or data that doesn't hit the mark. Feeling the sense of urgency, s/he decides to address the challenge. Then the school leader shares the solution with others and wants it to happen. When challenges are approached in this manner, staff feel like passive participants who are being told what to do and are expected to make it happen without a voice or support. This also provides staff with an "out". They have no ownership or investment in the solution. When it doesn't work, they can sit back and say, "Your idea didn't work. What's next, boss?"

We're proposing a reframe grounded in implementation science: Start with your people. Empathize. Build trust. Design WITH them, not FOR them. This doesn't mean ignoring data or lowering expectations. It means using a structured yet flexible approach, like the SCALE Implementation Leadership Framework, where you involve the right voices, set a clear vision, and move forward with strategic design and intentional implementation to create sustainable improvement.



Modify design thinking by integrating the SCALE model to prioritize people and solve challenges.

To bring Implementation Science to life, we align each phase of design thinking with the **SCALE Model** - a five-step leadership framework that supports collaborative, sustainable school improvement:

S – Set the Vision & Team

C – Create the Script

A – Act & Communicate

L – Learn, Listen & Reflect

E – Empower & Elevate

Let's walk through how all of this looks in practice.

1 Step 1: Identify and refine the problem

(S - Set the Vision and Team)

We began our session by sharing a common challenge: “We are not getting the academic results we want.” But vague problems lead to vague solutions. So instead of stopping there, we dig deeper: What grade level? What subject? What's the pattern?

For example, we might land on: “Our 6th grade math scores are not where we want them to be.” Now we have a defined problem, which becomes the starting point for thoughtful, targeted action.

Begin with clarity and inclusion. What is the challenge? What do we want to be true when we're successful? And - crucially - who will help us get there?

Narrowing the focus lets us get specific. It also helps us identify who is most involved and most impacted - teachers, students, interventionists, even families. Those people should be part of the process.
Now we can ask: Who needs to be on the team?

This is where SCALE begins - with setting the vision and forming a diverse implementation team that includes those most affected and those best positioned to influence change. Implementation research shows that including stakeholders early builds buy-in and improves the quality of solutions. Teachers, families, and even students become essential contributors.

2 **Step 2: Empathize. Prioritize People** (Continue to Set the Vision & Team) Ask: “Who should be involved?”

We lean into design thinking, not as a buzzword but as a practical structure rooted in empathy. We start by listening. Before rushing to solve anything, we gather voices from all sides - those directly involved and those indirectly impacted. In our 6th grade math example, this might include:

- 6th grade math teachers
- Students
- EXED and ELL teachers
- RTI specialists
- Families
- School leaders
(administrators, instructional coaches, department chairs)
- Even 5th and 7th grade math teachers



Each perspective adds depth to our understanding. We ask: What do they see? What are their pain points? What are their ideas? Empathy prevents us from making assumptions and fosters trust. This may also help to continue refining the identified challenge. With real insights in hand, we narrow the focus.

Instead of saying, “math scores are low,” we might define the challenge as “Students struggle to retain and apply fraction concepts introduced in 5th grade when they encounter them again in 6th grade.”

That’s a much clearer, more solvable challenge.



3

Step 3: Vision Casting

(C - Create the Script)

Ask: “What will people be saying if this works?”

SCALE’s second step is about creating the script - and that starts with a shared vision. Use co-constructed language to define what success looks like. Build a path that includes professional learning, time to collaborate, and checkpoints for progress. Be very specific when collaborating on what this will look like so everyone involved in the initiative is crystal clear what it should look like.

Create a script that includes:

- Professional learning tailored to the challenge
- Capacity-building strategies (e.g., coaching, planning time, collaboration protocols)
- Fidelity tools, such as checklists or rubrics
- Clear metrics for success and systems to measure progress

Too often, leaders skip this step. Implementation science tells us that successful change requires more than vision; it needs clarity, planning, and support structures. Teachers can’t carry a plan they don’t understand or didn’t help build. This stage is about making the plan visible and doable.

Implementation Science tells us that setting short- and long-term goals, with clearly defined roles and responsibilities, increases fidelity and sustainability. Without this script, even the best ideas struggle to take root.

Lead with vision, not mandates. Every successful initiative begins with clarity: What do we want to be true? What do we want the outcome to be? What do we want to hear people saying if we are successful?

4 **Step 4: Ideate** (Combines Create the Script and A - Act and Communicate) Ask: “Are there other schools succeeding here?” and “How might we...”

Now we brainstorm. What could we do to address this challenge? Are there schools seeing success in this area? What are they doing differently?

We cast a wide net, gathering ideas from all stakeholders. The goal here is quantity, not perfection. Innovation thrives when people feel free to imagine - and when their ideas are genuinely heard. Ideate solutions based on models of success and local context or construct a new solution.

Now we begin testing ideas, but not in isolation. In the SCALE model, acting means collaborative action. Gather ideas from the team and encourage innovative thinking. The school leaders need to do more listening than speaking.

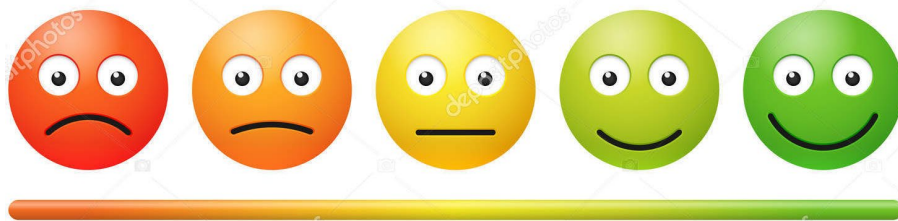


Don't skip communication: keep everyone informed as you act. Leaders must be visible in implementation, not as directors, but as facilitators. Use shared language, celebrate early wins, and model adaptability. Now, implementation begins. But this is not a firehose of change. Instead, use communication as a tool for alignment and motivation.

- Regularly share progress and celebrate wins
- Keep the team informed on adjustments
- Use multiple formats: staff meetings, newsletters, shout-outs, informal check-ins

This step corresponds with the initial implementation phase in implementation science - when people begin doing the work and leaders provide responsive support. When educators are involved from the start and know they're supported, change doesn't feel like something being done to them, but with them.

Implementation Science emphasizes “active implementation” - not just launching a program but coordinating supports, removing barriers, and engaging staff in real time.



5

Step 5: Get Feedback.

(L- Learn, Listen, and Linger)

Implementation is rarely perfect the first time. That's why this step is so powerful.

- Use data - but also listen deeply to feedback
- Linger in classrooms and conversations
- Ask what's working and what's not
- Refine the plan based on what you're hearing

This is the continuous improvement stage of implementation science. Feedback loops (both formal and informal) allow leaders to adapt with integrity. When principals show up, listen, and iterate, they build trust - and that trust fuels momentum.

Ask: “What am I not thinking about?” and “How can we improve this idea before trying it?”

While feedback is listed here, it should happen throughout the design thinking process - and especially as you begin to implement - it becomes your greatest resource.

We often treat feedback as a final step, but it should be baked into every phase of the work. Whether you're in the middle of piloting a new strategy or scaling a successful one, real-time feedback helps you adapt with integrity.

Feedback is an ongoing mindset. In SCALE, we deliberately pause to learn from the field. Reflect with your team. Listen to teachers. Survey families.

This phase requires humility. Implementation often fails because we skip reflection or avoid hard conversations. Build reflection into every meeting. Ask, “What’s working?” and “What needs to change?” - and then act on what you hear.

This builds a culture of trust and collaboration where teachers feel heard, supported, and willing to keep innovating. We recommend a process we call “Feedback with a Peer.” Bring your ideas, your plans, even your half-formed solutions to a trusted colleague.



Ask:

- “What am I missing?”
- “Does this align with what you’re hearing from others?”
- “If you were part of this team, what would you need to feel successful?”

Then - really listen.

Gather informal feedback from students (“What helped you today?”), from families (“How is homework feeling at home?”), and from teachers (“What made this easier - or harder - for you?”). The best implementation plans stay open to input and evolve over time.

When feedback is frequent, non-punitive, and woven into the culture, it builds ownership, trust, and results that last.



6

Step 6: Prototype & Test

(Continue Learn, Listen, & Linger, include E - Empower and Elevate)

Ask: “What is reasonable and feasible to try?”

Choose one or two promising ideas and try them on a small scale. Maybe it’s a targeted co-teaching model. Maybe it’s spiral review work built into daily lessons. Maybe it’s a shift in when and how fractions are introduced.

The prototype phase is about learning, not perfecting. You’re testing the concept before investing fully. Once you try something, reflect honestly. What’s working? What needs adjusting? Gather feedback, observe classrooms, and ask students and teachers how it feels. Then revise. Keep what’s effective. Rethink what’s not. And if needed, prototype again.

Then we empower the people who helped develop the idea to lead its next phase. Support teacher-leaders to scale the work, train peers, and own the process. This is the heart of SCALE’s final step: Empower & Elevate.



Celebration matters here. Highlight growth, not just results. Sustain success by building systems: onboarding tools, leadership pipelines, and embedded reflection. That's how you create long-term, people-powered transformation.

This final step is where sustainability lives.

- Celebrate individual and team successes
- Build leadership capacity so others can own the work
- Embed the initiative into your school improvement plan, budget, and onboarding processes
- Create leadership pipelines among teachers and staff

This is the sustainability phase. Implementation science shows that success isn't just about launching new practices; it's about embedding them in the system and transferring ownership. Empowering teachers and staff to lead the next iteration ensures long-term impact.



So What Does This Look Like in Action? Let's revisit our 6th grade math challenge.

Set the Vision and the Team:

You assemble a team of 5th and 6th grade math teachers, interventionists, and an instructional coach. Together, you craft a goal: By spring, 80% of students will demonstrate proficiency on fraction applications that span both grade levels.

Create the Script:

Align your PD to focus on conceptual understanding of fractions, add 15 minutes of collaborative planning each week, and introduce a simple fraction spiral review into morning work.



Act and Communicate:

Update families on what students are learning and why. You highlight teacher efforts at staff meetings. You post fraction strategy posters in every classroom.

Learn, Listen, and Linger:

Visit classrooms weekly, check in with students, and gather anonymous feedback from teachers. You tweak the pacing and adjust instructional support based on what you learn. Then meet back with your Implementation Team to share what you've discovered and ask them their insights.

Empower and Elevate:

Invite a teacher to lead the next round of PD. You create a video series on successful strategies. And at the end of the year, you celebrate the team's efforts publicly, naming the impact and spotlighting the leadership of those involved.

Why SCALE Works

Unlike top-down initiatives, the SCALE model honors the science of change management and the human side of leadership. It turns implementation from something leaders do to people into something leaders do with people.

This model draws directly from Implementation Science principles:

- Co-creation builds buy-in
- Clear vision and roles guide implementation
- Active communication supports execution
- Ongoing feedback refines efforts
- Celebration and shared ownership sustain change

When applied thoughtfully, SCALE ensures your initiatives aren't just well-designed, they're well-lived by the people who matter most.

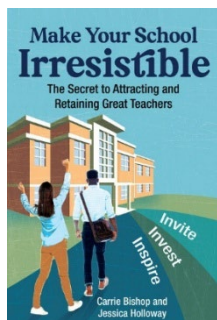
Want to go deeper? Our books, *Make Your School Irresistible: The Secret to Attracting and Retaining Great Teachers* by Carrie Bishop and Jessica Holloway, and *Leading Change That Lasts: 5 Steps to SCALE Your Vision Into Successful Implementation* by Kelly Hastings, expand on these strategies with examples and resources.

For now, we challenge you:

- What's one problem of practice in your building?
- Who are the people you'll prioritize to solve it?
- And how will you SCALE your solution?

Final Thought

Transformation is possible when we lead with people in mind. If you're leading a school, remember this: The answer to your toughest problems is already in your building. Your teachers, your students, and your families hold the insight, the ideas, and the energy you need. Put these practices in place and continue to listen. The best leaders don't solve problems for people. They solve them with people. That's how we make schools irresistible.



Carrie and Jessica are the authors of [Make Your School Irresistible: The Secret to Attracting and Retaining Great Teachers](#) (ASCD, 2025), a practical guide for attracting and retaining talented faculty by inviting them into your school community, investing in their careers, and inspiring them to advance in their profession.



Carrie Bishop is Head of School at [Point Christian Academy](#) in Chattanooga, a servant leader who empowers teachers and students to achieve their full potential. She has been twice honored as the Hamilton County, Tennessee Teacher of the Year. [in](#) [✉](#)



Kelly Hastings is a former public school teacher and principal in Dallas, Texas and the founder of [Enlightening Leadership](#), supporting school and district leaders with real-world experience using the SCALE framework to lead with clarity. [in](#) [✉](#)



Jessica Holloway is an instructional coach in [Chattanooga, Tennessee](#) who believes in the rich human potential to make the future a promising place for our children. She is a member of the Worthy Speakers Bureau and a champion for educational technology. [in](#) [✉](#)

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