

SPRING 2025

# LEGACY

TRANSFORMATION IN ACTION

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Climbing New Summits:  
A Journey of Passion  
and Purpose



The Worthy Educator

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## TRANSFORMATION IN ACTION

### Climbing New Summits: A Journey of Passion and Purpose

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#### The Quiet Whispers

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



#### The First Summit

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

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

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

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

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

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





## A New Direction

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

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

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



## Turning Around and Starting Over

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

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



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

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




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

The start of a new trail is exhilarating.

### Questions to Consider for Aligning Passion and Purpose

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



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

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

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