

WINTER 2026

# LEGACY

TRANSFORMATION IN ACTION



The Worthy Educator

[theworthyeducator.com](http://theworthyeducator.com)

WINTER 2025

®

# LEGACY

## TRANSFORMATION IN ACTION

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

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

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

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## Following the Energy

From the inception of The Worthy Educator eighteen months ago, we have followed the energy of the mid-to-late educators we serve. No canned business models or marketing plans. If anything, we strive to be the antithesis of those things. From live events to town halls to focus features, we launch and gauge the interest in content and programs based on what you tell us and show us. The Worthy Educator is a living, breathing, evolving call to action where educators – not staff – are making the call.

As a result, there is a clear progression in our efforts to support you through our offerings. What have we learned?

Synchronous professional learning is valued but hard to attend live. Recordings and follow-up asynchronous content gives educators more return on their investment of time.

Advocacy work is critical but demanding on educator time and professional capital. Providing opportunities to learn and practice promising advocate practices is best delivered in bite-size chunks that can be consumed on the fly as needed.

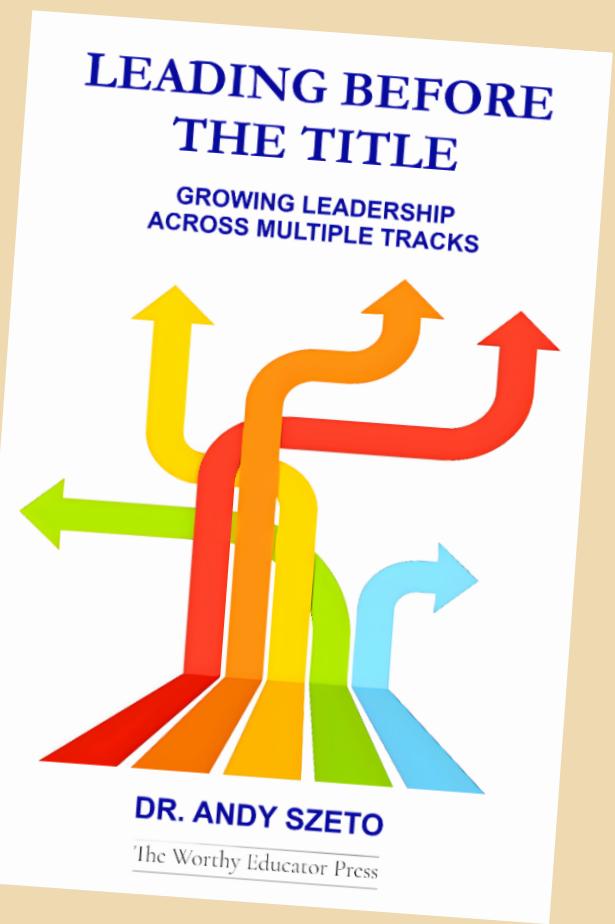
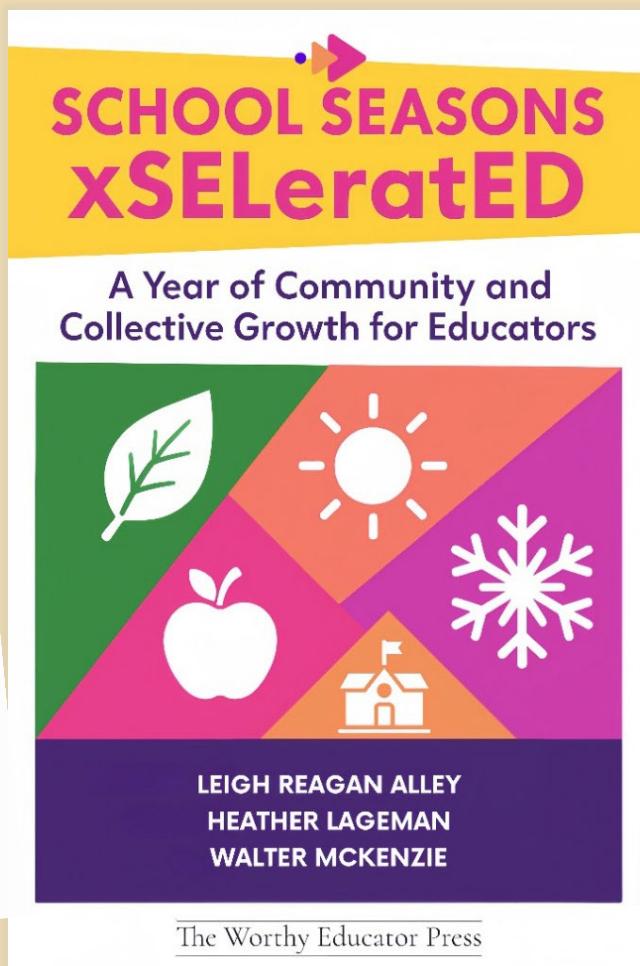
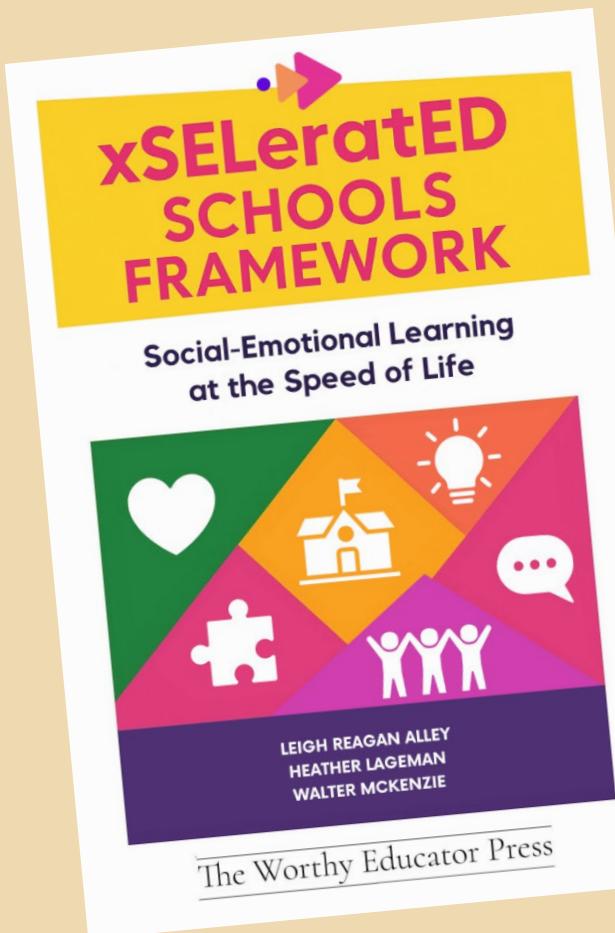
While community and coaching are key, content is still king. Our [blog](#), [journal](#) and [book publishing](#) efforts offer world-class thought leadership and practitioner expertise in formats that educators make the most of as just-in-time professional learning is where the energy is leading us in the new year.

Whether you are consuming our content or contributing your authentic voice into the mix, we are proud to serve you as education continues its most turbulent era in memory. It's a critical time in our profession, and the opportunities to transform public as we come out the other end of this period of disruption and dismantling are about to start popping. While we did not sign up for any of this, we are ready and able to rise to the challenge. Join us as we continue to build our [Roadmap to 2030](#) and beyond!

*Wes*

# The Worthy Educator Press

Publishing the original work of Worthy Educators!



We professionally produce a few select books a year to elevate and amplify the work of dreamers and doers who are ready to share their story. Whether you are looking for a positive, supportive first-time publishing experience, or you are a veteran published author who is simply tired of getting the run-around from big publishing houses, you will find the entire experience here to be a highly rewarding, iterative process where you are treated with the respect and attention you and your work deserve!

*"Creating School Seasons xSELeratED with Walter and Leigh transformed my understanding of what's possible when we move from ME to WE - when brilliant minds unite around our shared commitment to making education more human, more healing, and more whole. This isn't just a book we wrote together; it's a testament to the power of authentic collaboration and the magic that happens when educators dare to bring their full selves to the work that matters most."*

-Heather Lageman, author



*"Thank you Walter McKenzie and The Worthy Educator Press for believing in me and providing the platform. Leading Before the Title is out now on Amazon in print and Kindle and in bookstores! All proceeds from this book will be donated to a very 'Worthy' cause."*

-Dr. Andy Szeto, author

Let us join you on your reading and publishing journey!

# LEG TRANSFORMAT

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*You are the captain and the poet of your own destiny!*



**Register now for a fresh leadership start in the New Year!  
Discover Your Unique Leader Within with Jennifer Johnson  
Wednesday, January 14th at 7:00 p.m. e.t.**

**Register Now!**

**Registration  
is FREE!**

***Join Jennifer and discover your inner Captain and Poet!***

The challenges in education today require us to draw on our inner resources more than ever. What would your school be like if every teacher were empowered to ignite their own unique expression of leadership? Everyone has a captain and a poet within. The Captain is the part of us that goes us out into the world and navigates challenges, sets goals, makes decisions and takes us on new adventures. The Poet is everything that stirs deep inside of us: our emotions, imagination, values, aspirations, dreams and more.



As a parent, former educator, entrepreneur, and passionate change-maker, Jennifer Johnson is on a mission to empower young people, and the adults who serve them, to be their best selves. She holds an M.A. in Education in Curriculum, Teaching, and Organizational Learning from OISE, University of Toronto, is a seasoned leader in both education and the corporate world, a Board Member of Resilient Kids Canada, a CTI-trained coach, and holds a leadership certificate from Harvard Business School. As a parent of two, Jennifer is committed to nurturing self-leadership skills and the ability to navigate an increasingly dynamic world with authenticity, compassion, and resilience.

## Courageous Integrity: Leading Through Uncertainty by Investing in People



Karen "Dr.K" Baptiste  
 Founder & CEO of Pioneering Possibilities and Company  
 Director of the Emmy® Award-winning Preschool to Prison (2024)  
 Bronx, New York

*"Transparency builds trust, even when the truth is uncomfortable." -Dr. K*

### The Sunday Night Email

I received an email late one Sunday night. It was short, almost abrupt: *"We've just learned our funding will be reduced mid-year. More details to follow."*

By Monday morning, the principal of a mid-sized urban school I was working with had a full day of meetings, dozens of unanswered questions from her staff, and a knot in her stomach. She knew the funding cut would mean more than just trimming a budget line; it would touch classrooms, staff workloads, and perhaps most painfully, the morale of a team that had already weathered years of change.

She had two choices. She could quietly go into survival mode, focusing solely on logistics and compliance. Or she could step forward with what I call courageous integrity, choosing transparency, compassion, and action in the face of discomfort.

### What Courageous Integrity Means

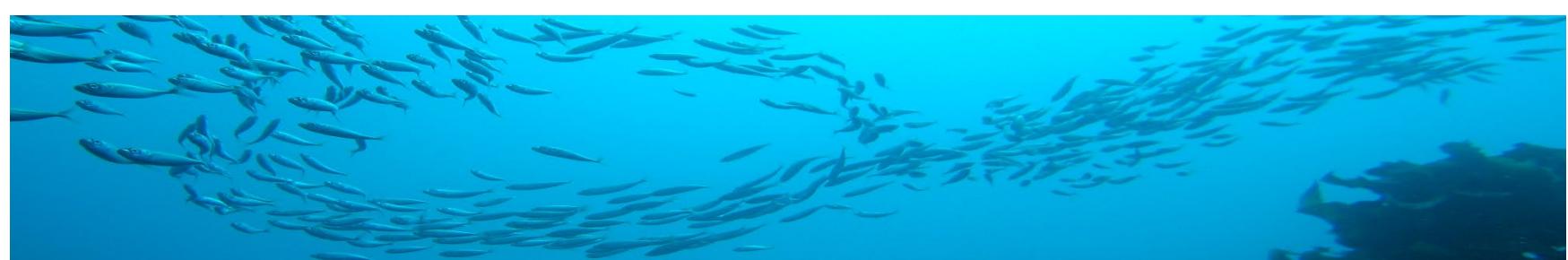
In education, uncertainty isn't an occasional guest, it's a frequent, sometimes disruptive, visitor. Policy changes, staffing shortages, oversized classrooms, shifting funding priorities, and community pressures can derail even the best-laid plans.

Courageous integrity is the difference between *managing through a crisis* and *leading through one*. It's about naming and addressing the realities others would rather ignore, especially the undercurrents that shape trust, morale, and ultimately, student achievement.

### The Invisible Undercurrents

Undercurrents refer to an unspoken feeling or influence, especially one that is contrary to the prevailing atmosphere and is not openly expressed.

Before those undercurrents become visible, they are there as subtle tensions, unspoken frustrations, uneven expectations, and even quiet disengagement. These patterns are usually hidden beneath daily routines, masked by professionalism or a sense of urgency, yet they silently shape how teams relate, how decisions are received, and how much emotional energy is available for students. Recognizing these invisible forces early allows leaders to respond with empathy and purpose before the effects ripple through the entire system.



Results of the Undercurrents may look like:

- A high-performing teacher suddenly disengages
- Staff quietly shouldering inequitable workloads
- Frustration building over policies that feel out of touch with classroom realities
- School leaders and teachers operating in silos, with limited trust or shared purpose
- Educators feeling alone in their efforts, as partnerships with parents give way to distance and misunderstanding

These things may be invisible to the public eye, but left unaddressed, they can erode the most valuable resource any school has: its human capital, the expertise, creativity, and emotional investment of its people.

### Four Ways Leaders Can Spot the Undercurrents Early

Ask Directly – Schedule intentional conversations with staff to learn what they are feeling and why. Do not assume.

See the Story in the Data – Analyze trends in turnover, absenteeism, and performance dips.

Audit Equity – Check for fairness in workload, opportunities, and recognition.

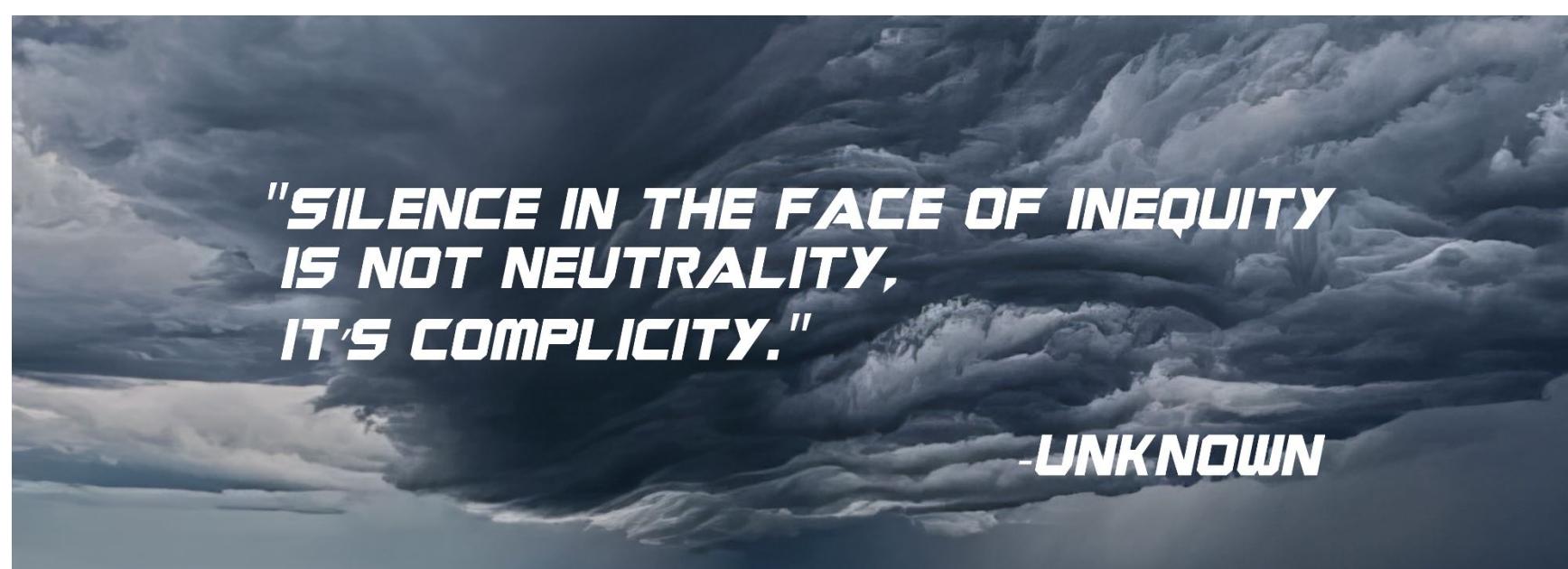
Acknowledge the External – Recognize how community tensions, political pressure, and policy changes affect climate.

### Why Human Capital Is a Non-Negotiable

It's no secret that when educators feel seen, valued, and supported, they are more capable of sustaining quality instruction and nurturing students, even in challenging environments.

This requires leaders to look beyond operational and key performance metrics to address:

- Emotional well-being
- Equitable professional development opportunities
- Meaningful recognition of contributions



### Acting with Courageous Integrity

Once you've identified the undercurrents, courageous integrity demands you act in ways that stretch your comfort zone. This may mean:

#### Advocating for Policy Shifts

Reallocating resources to address inequities. I worked with one leader who conducted a Stop/Start/Sustain sprint to free up ten percent of her staff's time from low-yield tasks by reinvesting it in planning time with students.

- Inquire about your staff's interests outside of work and support them in integrating those into their pedagogy.
- Publicly stand with staff under political or community pressure. For example, leaders can issue a values-forward statement that says what you will protect and why.
- Partner with Community-Based Organizations (CBOs) to provide holistic services like mental health counseling, after-school programs, mentoring, family engagement, and other areas where schools alone may not have the capacity.

Leaders who embody courageous integrity understand it's a learned trait, not an innate one. You build it the way you build any leadership muscle...through deliberate practice, even in micro-transparency; structured feedback loops; and consistent, effective routines.

#### Transparency Builds Trust

The leaders I work with who act with courageous integrity share the *why* behind their decisions, what's known and unknown. They establish predictable update cadences and deliver "truth bombs" early, with a plan in place for how they will mitigate the impact as a leadership team and a schoolwide team.

#### Staff Well-Being Impacts Student Success

Protect time and psychological safety so adults can do high-quality work. This means rebalancing duty loads, keeping planning blocks sacred, and normalizing pulse checks to detect overload before it hits classrooms. Key indicators to watch include protected planning minutes per week, absenteeism trends, substitute fill rates, behavioral incidents, and retention rates of high-impact teachers.

#### Silence Erodes Credibility.

As a leader, if you don't fill in the blanks, the people will. Rumors fill the vacuum. Acknowledge issues within 24-48 hours by naming the constraints and sharing the decision-making process and timeline. Don't focus on being right, focus on doing right.



#### Self-Check: Are You Leading with Courageous Integrity?

Ask yourself:

- Have I addressed unspoken concerns in the last 30 days?
- What barriers can I remove so my team can focus on teaching?
- Do I choose the right path over the easy one?
- How am I creating growth opportunities despite constraints?
- How do my actions demonstrate to my staff they're valued partners?

#### Try it:

Choose one activity (e.g. bell schedule, arrival/dismissal flow, duty roster, etc.) and work through the five questions above using this sample template and a Likert scale of 1 (needs to be developed) to 5 (showing excellence by example):

Question	Rating 1-5	Evidence to support rating (see/hear)	Root Cause	Next Steps	By When	Owner
Unspoken concerns addressed?						
Barriers removed so teaching can happen?						
Choosing right path over easy one?						
Growth opportunities created despite constraints?						
Actions that show staff are valued partners?						

Courageous integrity remains one of my core values because it's a habit built through small, consistent actions. By choosing one activity and walking it through these five questions, you turn unspoken concerns into concrete actions, protect instructional time, and signal that people matter more than optics. Continue this cycle with other areas you want to measure. Over time, these brief cycles compound into a culture where clarity, fairness, and follow-through become the norm for staff and students.

## The Call to Leadership

The principal from that Sunday-night email chose courageous integrity. She gathered her team, shared what she knew, acknowledged the uncertainty, and invited their ideas. She didn't have all the answers, but she had something more powerful: trust.

Uncertainty is inevitable. How you lead through it is not. These skills: naming undercurrents, communicating with candor, and investing in people, are critical when resources are shrinking and public education is under political attack. Practiced consistently, they protect classrooms, preserve dignity, and keep adults focused on what matters most.

**"In uncertain times, courageous integrity means listening for what's unspoken, naming the truth, and investing in people, because the health of your team determines the success of your students."**

—Dr. K



I hold a stubborn hope that once we course-correct past the disruption and dismantling, schools will emerge more humane and effective. Funding aligned with teacher and student development needs policies grounded in humanity and classroom reality, where educators are respected as experts while feeling safe, seen, and inspired. That future is a product of today's choices.

Suppose you're ready to uncover and address the undercurrents in your own school or district. In that case, my [Mindsets & Undercurrents](#) leadership workshop and coaching series provide the tools you need to strengthen trust, increase engagement and morale, and align your team's energy with your mission.

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Dr. Karen Baptiste (aka Dr.K), is an educator, filmmaker, journalist, and advocate deeply committed to juvenile justice reform, leadership development, igniting women's leadership, and restoring humanity. She is the founder of Pioneering Possibilities & Company, supporting leaders in unlocking the human potential within their organizations and activating possibilities. Dr. K grew up in The Bronx, where she developed a lifelong passion for investigative journalism. She went on to study Journalism at Morrisville State University in New York and later pursued a career in teaching. Her personal experiences, combined with her work in education, inspired her to direct and produce her Emmy® Award-winning documentary, *Preschool to Prison*, now streaming on Amazon Prime. [in](#) [envelope](#)



# A Menu for Serving Every Student Academic Acceleration with Dr. Sonya L. Murray



**Saturday, January 10, 2026 | 11:00 a.m. e.t.**

Ready to transform how you approach academic acceleration? Join [Dr. Sonya L. Murray](#) for an interactive webinar that serves up a proven framework for accelerating learning while centering equity and student success, based on her book, [Serving Educational Equity: A Five-Course Framework for Accelerated Learning!](#)

This session uses an innovative five-course meal metaphor to guide you through the Murray & Turner Framework for Accelerated Learning. This practical approach helps educators move from remediation to acceleration, ensuring all students have access to grade-level content and thrive.



What's on the menu:



**Course 1:**

Soup – Ground yourself in equity-centered student interactions



**Course 2:**

Appetizer – Use data and curriculum strategically to meet diverse needs



**Course 3:**

Salad – Cultivate authentic student voice and agency



**Course 4:**

Entree – Deliver instruction that accelerates learning for all



**Course 5:**

Dessert – Sustain engagement and momentum

**Join Sonya on Saturday, January 10th at 11:00 a.m. e.t.!**

*Please note: this is a live, interactive event.*

*AI bots and automated attendees will not be admitted.*

[Register Now!](#)

## From Resolutions to Revolution: Creating Your Best Year Yet with Your Inner Captain and Poet

Jennifer Johnson  
Co-Founder and CEO  
Captains & Poets  
Toronto, Ontario

Educators are, by nature, lifelong learners. And when a new year invites a fresh start, one where we grow – not through external expectations and demands – but through inner expansion, we want to ensure we hit those personal learning outcomes. It's not just about what we want to accomplish, but who we want to become as educators and leaders navigating an evolving educational landscape.

In a world marked by change and challenge, the most powerful leadership you can offer is not the leadership bestowed by a title, but the leadership that emerges from within. **The educator who believes they are still becoming, still evolving, still learning is the essence of the lifelong learner.** And perhaps this is the greatest thing we can model for students in a complex world.

In the context of the Captain and Poet, lifelong learning isn't a commitment to mastering more content or skills. It's a commitment to yourself. To your ongoing growth, self-awareness, and agency. To your willingness to meet each moment with curiosity, courage, and presence. And it is this inner work – quiet, personal, and deeply human – that has the potential to fuel transformation in our schools.

As you step into 2026, I invite you to engage your inner Captain, your inner Poet, and ultimately, your Leader Within – the integrated self who can ignite transformation from the inside out. They are right there waiting for you!

### The Captain and the Poet: Your Pathways to Becoming

Within each of us lives a dynamic partnership: Your Captain leads with action, direction, and courage. Your Poet leads with meaning, imagination, and heart.

Your Captain is the part of you that takes charge. It helps you step forward when things feel uncertain. It organizes, plans, motivates, and perseveres. It thrives on purpose, momentum, and a sense of direction. It constantly stretches you out of your comfort zone to become the next best version of you.

Your Poet is the part of you that holds your vision and values. It feels deeply and finds new and expanding ways to connect



with the world around you. It fuels your imagination and reminds you of the values that led you into this profession. The Poet is where your humanity lives: your compassion, your creativity, your ideals, your intuition.

Together, the Captain and the Poet form a dynamic partnership. The Captain brings your Poet's dreams to life. The Poet guides your Captain's actions. When they're in sync, you feel it – you are energized, focused, connected. And when they're out of balance you feel it, too. The language of Captain and Poet enables us to reorient ourselves toward what is in front of us to see the challenges in front of us as opportunities for self-expression and thriving.

The Captain moves you forward. The Poet helps you understand where you're going and why. Together, they form the architecture of the Leader Within – your most authentic, aligned, and impactful self.

In 2026, these inner guides can help you deepen your lifelong learning journey and shape the transformation you wish to see in yourself, in your school and in your community. The only resolution they prescribe is a more energized version of you.

But first, let's examine why resolutions don't work and how the Captain and Poet can help with that!



## Why Resolutions Don't Work (and What Does)

Every January, many of us set resolutions with the hope that a new year will inspire new habits, or at least new motivation. But traditional resolutions rarely lead to lasting change. In fact, research shows that most resolutions fade within weeks, not because we lack willpower, but because resolutions are simply *not designed* for how humans grow.

Resolutions focus on OUTCOMES, not IDENTITY. They tell us what we should *do*, but not who we are becoming. They tend to be too big, vague, or unrealistic. And they often emerge from pressure – comparison, guilt, or a sense of “not enough” – rather than from purpose or alignment.

Most importantly, resolutions ask for rigid consistency in a world that is dynamic and unpredictable. They offer no room for recalibration, reflection, or self-compassion – traits that are essential for authentic growth, especially in a profession as emotionally demanding as education.

*“Resolutions are often Captain-only: task-oriented, ambitious, externally focused. But lasting transformation requires the Poet, too—meaning, intuition, imagination, emotional courage.”*



When we engage only one part of ourselves, our efforts become imbalanced and unsustainable. But when the Captain and Poet work in partnership, something deeper emerges: the *Leader Within* – our integrated, grounded, and resilient self who can initiate meaningful change from a place of alignment rather than obligation.

This is why, instead of setting traditional resolutions in 2026, we are inviting you to set **INTENTIONS** – to cultivate inner guidelines that help us grow from the inside out. Change that begins within is change that lasts. It is more human, authentic, and sustainable. It honors who we are and who we are becoming. Instead of drawing from extrinsic motivators like pressure, it draws from intrinsic motivators like possibility.

Let's explore the biggest reasons resolutions tend to fall flat:

### ***They Focus on Outcomes, Not Identity***

Most resolutions sound like this:

- “I will...”
- “I should...”
- “I need to...”

But lasting change doesn't come from behavior alone. It comes from **identity shifts**. People don't stick with “I will exercise more.” They stick with “I am someone who prioritizes my wellbeing.” When resolutions don't connect to who we *are becoming*, we relate to them as external demands rather than internal commitments.

- It is the interplay between Captain and Poet that forms our identity. As Dr. Jean Clinton says, “the doing follows the being.”

### *They're Usually Built on Pressure, Not Purpose*

Many resolutions come from a sense of not being enough. But pressure creates resistance. Purpose creates momentum. Without a deep “why,” a resolution has no anchor.

- As Elias from our [youth documentary](#) captures, “If I’m a car, my Poet is the gas. It’s the fuel that drives my passions. It’s the fuel that actually keeps me going internally. It’s not the thing that you see every day, but it is the thing that you constantly need. It’s the thing that you constantly need to add to keep going.”

### *They're Too Big, Too Vague, or Too Unrealistic*

Resolutions like “be healthier,” “be more patient,” or “get organized” aren’t goals—they’re *wishes*. Without clarity, the brain doesn’t know what to do with them. And the more unrealistic they are, the more they trigger self-criticism rather than growth.

- Notice the emphasis on the state you want to achieve and not the action. The Poet represents the *being* side of us but the Captain activates the *doing* side. We need both in balance to show up as our best selves.

### *They Don't Account for the Reality of Being Human*

Sustainable change intersects with:

- messy days
- low-energy seasons
- imperfect effort
- flexibility

We need to have more compassion for ourselves. Enter the Poet. Resolutions tend to be rigid. Humans are not. We can master something one day and fail the next. When we inevitably slip, we interpret it as failure rather than feedback.

- Our Captain and Poet are there to remind us that when we go too far one way or the other, we can come back to centre again and balance the two. None of us will truly master any one skill in our lives. We are human.

### *They Don't Integrate Reflection and Evolution*

A resolution is static. Life is not. Resolutions rarely invite this ongoing relationship with growth. Change happens when we allow space to:

- check in
- recalibrate
- adjust
- pivot
- respond to what’s happening as we go along

Without the Poet’s input the Captain loses steam.



## They Rely on Willpower Instead of Systems and Support

Willpower is short-lived. Systems are sustainable. Resolutions collapse when:

- routines aren't aligned
- environments don't support the change
- stress overrides intentions

The brain defaults to what's easiest, not what's ideal.

- Here we can lean on the Captain to bring structure and discipline.

## The Bottom Line: Resolutions Aren't Effective Because They're Not Designed for How Humans Grow

Without the Poet – meaning, reflection, imagination, emotional resonance – there is no depth, no internal alignment, no sense of *why this matters*.

We grow through:

- identity shifts
- meaningful purpose
- aligned action
- self-awareness
- curiosity
- self-compassion
- ongoing reflection
- small, consistent steps
- supportive environments
- inner integration of experience

Not through one big annual declaration.



This is why the Captain & Poet lens is so powerful.

Instead of "resolutions," the Captain and Poet enable us to:

- listen inward
- align purpose with action
- embrace lifelong learning
- evolve who we are
- grow from within
- choose identity over obligation
- integrate heart and courage

This is the kind of change that sticks. Because it's not a resolution. It's an evolution.

A Captain-only resolution burns out quickly. A Captain + Poet intention leads us to transformation.

## Top 10 Lists!

To support your growth this year, here are three “Top Ten Lists” to choose from: one from your Captain, one from your Poet, and one from the integrated *Leader Within* who emerges when they work in harmony. Try using them as a checklist to assess where you are out of balance and where you can take more ground on your learning journey of personal mastery and self-expression in the year ahead.



### Top 10 Resolutions of Your Inner Captain

#### 1. Set a Clear North Star

Choose one defining goal for the year and commit to it wholeheartedly. Measure progress along the way.

#### 2. Take Bold, Decisive Action

Identify where hesitation holds you back and take a step that moves you forward with purpose. It is usually the small ones that are the hardest.

#### 3. Strengthen Your Boundaries

Protect your energy, time, and focus. Say “yes” to things that energize you and “no” where you feel you are compromising your path or diluting your impact by spreading yourself thin. Remember, someone else’s Leader Within may be perfect for that other initiative. ☺

#### 4. Build What Matters Most

Channel effort into projects and relationships that align with your values and long-term vision.

#### 5. Lead with Confidence

Trust your competence. Let your voice and choices reflect your inner authority.

#### 6. Practice Strategic Discipline

Create routines and systems that support consistency without rigidity. Sometimes your Captain needs to take a detour.

#### 7. Speak Truth with Clarity

Communicate directly and firmly (with a little dose of Poet in their for kindness).

#### 8. Move Through Fear

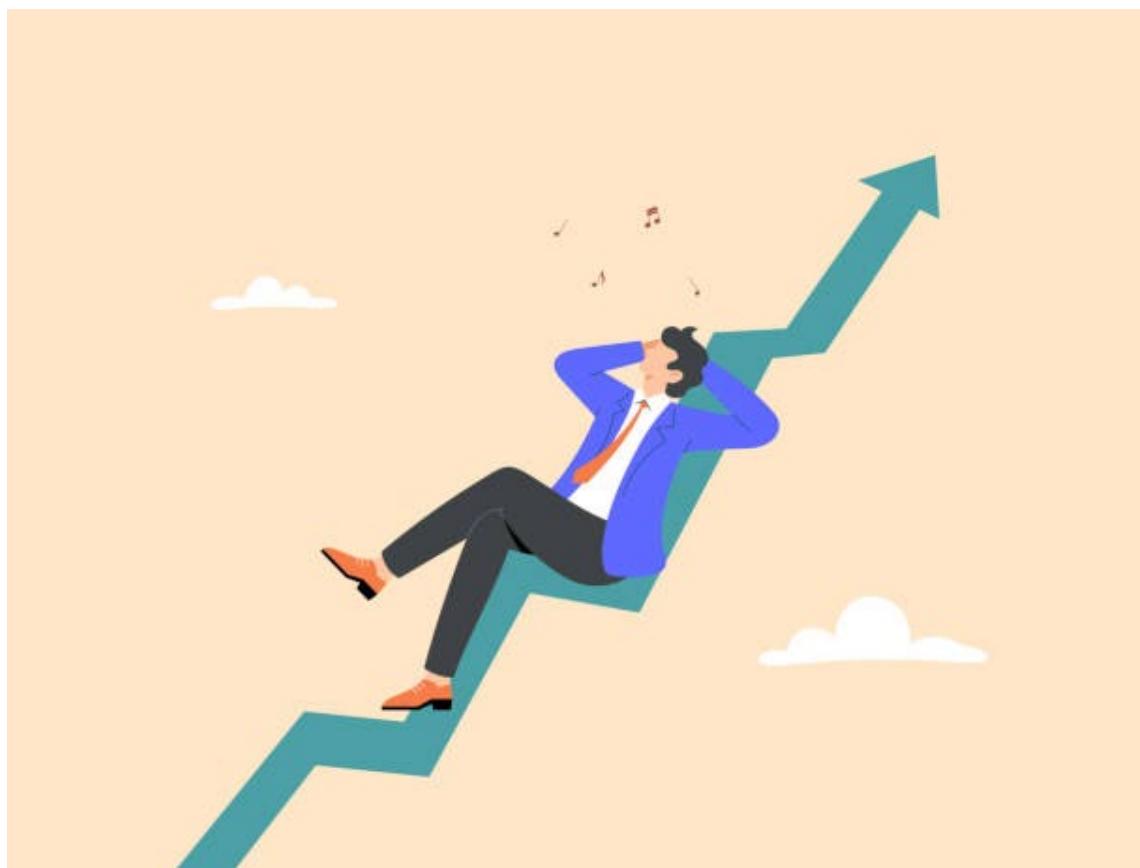
Fear will only dissipate when you move through it. That’s what your Captain is there for. Draw on what’s in your (Poet’s) heart for fuel.

#### 9. Strengthen Your Physical Vessel

Leadership begins with self-leadership. Foster healthy habits that build your strength and resilience when you encounter stormy seas.

#### 10. Celebrate Small Achievements Boldly

Give yourself a gold star on the little things. Acknowledge what you accomplish as you go to stay grounded in your mission. Live from inspired action as you choose the actions and activities that move you forward amidst the noise.



## Top 10 Resolutions of Your Inner Poet

### 1. Make Room for Wonder

It's the start of a new year. Pay attention to what sparks awe in you and let it round out your days.

### 2. Listen to Your Inner Voice

Prioritize intuitive knowing. Let quiet truth guide your choices. We never regret those decisions. Also, the truth doesn't need to be spoken loudly to resonate.

### 3. Entertain Your Emotions

Feel what arises without judgement instead of pushing it aside (the formula for burnout). Emotions are energy in motion. What is surfacing (especially if it is a repeated emotion) is often a clue to your next learning edge. What action do you need to take? What needs to change?

### 4. Nurture Soulful Connections

Invest in relationships that invite depth, meaning, and presence and reflect the things you love most about yourself.

### 5. Cultivate Stillness and Reflection

Allow pauses. Let rest, beauty, and attention become sacred practices – even if it's just on your daily commute! Make time for journaling, meditation, or quiet observation.

### 6. Express Yourself Authentically

Write, speak, dress, move, or create in ways that reflect your inner landscape and who you want to become. It's the new "dress for success".

### 7. Practice Compassion – for Self and Others

Choose gentleness. Soften criticism. Offer yourself and others grace. We are all on a learning journey.

### 8. Tap into the Vision you have for our World

Create a vision board for yourself and find ways to share your vision with others. If we can imagine it, it's possible and when we share it it becomes more real.

### 9. Honor Your Sensitivity as Strength

See your attunement as wisdom, not fragility. See your overwhelm as a thwarted desire to be an active agent in change. See your deep feeling as an inner knowing that we have the ability to create a better world and that it's already in us.

### 10. Celebrate Your Becoming with Grace

Recognize your growth in subtle shifts, changes in mindsets, and deepening of conviction – not just big changes. Acknowledge yourself the way you do your students to validate and empower them. Find opportunities, and the emotional courage, to be seen more.



## Top 10 Resolutions of Your Leader Within

The *Leader Within* is the powerful, aligned expression of both archetypes – your inner compass for 2026.

### 1. Live From Inner Alignment

Before acting, pause long enough to check: *Is this true to who I am?* Let your choices arise from inner coherence, not external pressure.

### 2. Lead With Presence, Not Performance

Show up as your authentic self. Presence inspires trust more deeply than perfection ever could.

### 3. Honor Both Decisiveness and Discernment

Make decisions from both logic and intuition. And when the answers aren't outside of you, go within to get anchored in what matters.

### 4. Cultivate Emotional Intelligence as a Daily Practice

Notice your emotions. Name them to tame them. See them as clues and learn from them. Respond rather than react, and let empathy inform your leadership.

### 5. Move With Courage, Even When the Path Isn't Fully Lit

You don't need the entire map, just the next step. Lean in and the path will get clearer because you are creating it.

### 6. Build Relationships Rooted in Respect and Reciprocity

Lead in ways that promote others' strengths. Make it a priority to make people feel seen. Then watch the magic happen.

### 7. Hold Boundaries as Acts of Integrity

Boundaries aren't walls, they are clarity. Lead with a strong yes and an honest no.

### 8. Integrate Reflection and Action

The *Leader Within* learns, adjusts, and evolves in an iterative way. You don't have to have all the answers before exploring what is possible.

### 9. Replace Burnout with Regeneration

The burnout cycle is predictable. Your Captain and Poet are out of sync in these situations. Instead, keep your inner flame alive. Notice what you are engaging in that is NOT energizing you. Be selfish to have the most impact. Protect the energy that fuels your vision.

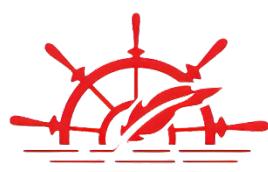
### 10. Lead and Live from Purpose

When you operate from your *Leader Within* and share your gifts with the world you will be naturally fulfilling your purpose. View the challenges in front of you as happening "for you and not to you" to refine and hone who you are becoming. Leadership is not just your role or what you achieve or even where you fail – it's who you become along the way.

*“Most of all, be inspired by all you have to offer the world. 2026 has the potential to be a year of new beginnings, planting seeds, and reinventing yourself in authentic ways. Here’s to a year of learning, becoming, and igniting transformation from within!”*



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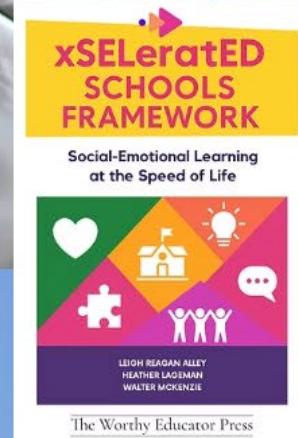


CAPTAINS & POETS

Jennifer Johnson is the CEO and Co-Founder of Captains & Poets. As a parent, former educator, entrepreneur, and passionate change-maker, Jennifer is on a mission to empower young people, and the adults who serve them, to be their best selves. She holds an M.A. in Education in Curriculum, Teaching, and Organizational Learning from OISE, is a seasoned leader in both education and the corporate world, a former Board Member of Resilient Kids Canada, a CTI-trained coach, and holds a leadership certificate from Harvard Business School. As a parent of two, Jennifer is committed to nurturing self-leadership skills and the ability to navigate an increasingly dynamic world with authenticity, compassion, and resilience. A proud hockey mom, she is also invested in fostering positive cultures in sports for athletes, coaches, and parents—creating environments that promote Positive Youth Development in challenging times. [in](#) [envelope](#)

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# xSELeratED SCHOOLS FRAMEWORK



## xSELeratED Schools Framework: Social-Emotional Learning at the Speed of Life

Leigh Reagan Alley  
Heather Lageman  
Walter McKenzie

Language English  
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The xSELeratED Schools series is a wholeness-centered collection of resources designed to help schools build cultures of belonging, healing, and shared responsibility. Across the series, a common framework anchors the work in five core competencies: Understanding Myself, Nurturing Myself, Understanding Others, Nurturing Others, and Building a Better World. It translates these competencies into concrete practices, routines, and reflections that honor the humanity of both educators and students, recognizing that adult healing and growth are inseparable from student success.

This [xSELeratED Schools Framework](#) provides big-picture architecture and shared language for this work, supporting educators, leaders, and teams to move from isolated strategies to an integrated, schoolwide approach centering relationships, repairing harm, and providing everyday opportunities for everyone to be seen, valued, and understood.

Designed for PK-12 teachers, leaders, counselors, teacher-educators, and others, this framework helps school communities speak one SEL language, notice growth, and respond with care—together. Use a page tomorrow or plan a yearlong arc. Start small and build. The work is big; the steps are clear. We walk them together.

Many thoughtful frameworks have made SEL visible and measurable. What sets the [xSELeratED Schools Framework](#) apart is its fit: human language, modular tools, seasonal pacing, and mirrored resources that make implementation lighter, not heavier. Our framework scales readily from a single grade level to an entire district and even a university educator-preparation program. Belonging, repair, and contribution aren't extras. They are the heart of the school and, done right, the center that holds.

## Ordering



# The Worthy Educator Press

## A Parasympathetic School System

Stuart Grauer, Ed.D.  
 Founder and Head of School Emeritus  
 The Grauer School  
 Encinitas, California

i.

The year was 2021. Required COVID masks were coming off all year, and groups were re-forming. Like schools everywhere, we were in recovery. Anxious and exhausted, but maybe out of the woods at last.

A seventh grader stumbled on a pornographic image and forwarded it to his class chat group. Within hours, it was everywhere—students, parents, even donors. What once would have been a private schoolyard antic had spiraled into viral, public crisis.



Our leaders braced themselves. The ubiquitous media was a spiritual contagion, an insidious virus infiltrating the essence of our school community, the souls of our kids, and the fears of our parents. And we understood: hardly a campus in the world was immune.

We understood that this was not about a single student, parent, text message, or electronic device. We took a breath and searched our own souls first, which is what leaders and leadership teams do. First look in.

That year, following a year sequestered with their kids home alone, record numbers of anxious parents were already obsessing about their children's health and safety. Aside from COVID, school shootings, media addiction, obesity, loneliness, depression, and suicide were all at record levels, becoming prominent topics of discussion in media and policy debates everywhere you looked, from school faculty rooms to congressional chambers.

How did we get here, so disconnected, so exposed? How could we get through and out, together?

The great school is a heartbeat. A school campus is the "central nervous system" of an educational community, coordinating and regulating its various functions. During this post-pandemic year, external stressors were like toxins disrupting our neural pathways.

Just as stress hormones like cortisol flood our bodies when we're anxious or threatened, disrupting our natural state of balance, so too do external challenges like aberrant or threatening behaviors moving through the gateway, activating the schoolwide "stress response system." This is more than a metaphor. Just like in a human body, negative stressors and threats cause our campus to feel more rigid, less open and open-minded, more stuck, and less free.



Disrupted schools react as if jolted by a sudden clap of thunder: classes go outside less, teachers worry more, students become less creative, and concentration falters. In the wake of increasing gun violence, such as the Columbine High School massacre in 1999 or the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting in 2012, leaders witness how traumatic disruptions create permanent shifts in community and culture, demanding a new kind of leadership—one rooted in an enduring commitment to healing. To being a healer, first. And then to find opportunity. New growth, maybe in unexpected places.

As we study the balance of nature, we often overlook its capacity for violence or trauma, and the profound ways they can shape our growth, whether as students or leaders. In times of crisis, the leader's calling is to restore balance and stability, guiding their community through lasting, compassionate change. And yet, though shocked into awareness by crisis, this is the calling of all leaders, pretty much all the time. Violence and tragedy, illness and injury, and even fruitful opposition may be our most compelling, powerful, and perhaps necessary teachers in leadership.

ii.

Like a body, every school strives for balance—homeostasis. When its subsystems (admissions, faculty, curriculum, parent body) are aligned, the whole feels resilient. When they're not, the whole falters. That interdependence is one of the great advantages of a small school.

In a healthy body, heart and brain are in constant communication, fine-tuning rhythm and response. Under threat, that communication frays. Stress hormones surge, blood pressure rises, and learning shuts down as survival mode takes over.

The same thing happens in schools. Culture is the nervous system. When fear, discord, or misuse of technology enters, it triggers a kind of inflammation: the curriculum stops reflecting the culture, teachers lose perspective. Students lose creativity.



In 2022, post-pandemic, many schools lived in this inflammatory state. Absences soared. Teachers felt flooded, like a body awash in cortisol—narrowed vision, scanning only for the way out. But no school is immune in any time.

The antidote is the same as in the body: to activate the parasympathetic response. To help the whole system shift from urgency back to calm, from tunnel vision back to creativity. That is the leader's work.

By far most teachers and students I ask or survey describe nature, not classrooms, as their favorite places. What would it take for a classroom to feel as alive as a grove or a garden?

How could we make the school campus emulate the natural world people long for, embodying its amazing properties for receptivity and learning? How can leaders reclaim the tranquility stolen by pandemic, too much time indoors, too many hours staring into digital screens, and other stressors and toxins? What if we re-envisioned campuses blooming with life—gardens teeming with biodiversity, well-chosen pets, hallway speakers echoing with nature's symphony, and naturalistic classrooms illuminated with serene landscapes on posters or large flatscreens showing nature feeds—even wall colors from the natural world? What if we could collect and store cellphones, a top distraction according to our students—would students be open to giving that a trial run into a more sacred space? In each corner of the classroom, plants—small pieces of the wild—remind us of growth, resilience, and the balance we knew we must reclaim? What if school bells were replaced with chimes or ocean wave sounds (a program I have called “Zenbells”).

What if teachers felt free to hold class in a school greenery, nearby forest, or even treehouse classrooms? Flowers and produce from our garden could be handed out at drop-off and pick-up times. By making the school boundaries more permeable, we could transform the educational environment into an interactive community space where learning more seamlessly integrates with the natural world. This openness would encourage a deeper connection between students, teachers, and the environment—and between the mind and body—that extends beyond traditional classroom walls.

The parasympathetic school derives its palette from the ecosystem in which it was planted. Just as these natural environments, tones, and images soothe and relax our bodies' own nervous systems, they can offer peace and well-being to a school campus and community. The calming influence of the natural world puts teachers and parents at ease. Teens will still make outrageous mistakes. We treat them one at a time and, dwarfed by the scale of the natural world of which they are a part, we can keep them in perspective: teens need wide open space and judgment-free room to make their mistakes. Unamplified.

In most countries, we tend to evaluate schools based upon the scholastic performance of students and a number of other factors, such as donations and graduation rates. And yet, now, we can evaluate schools based upon their nurturing connections and sense of safety and belonging—the information is available. Connection, safety, engagement are reliably measurable. So measure them. We can even rank them that way if we insist—and we must. We must evaluate our schools on their wellness.

We have a way to go and some fantastic work lying ahead in evaluating how to make students and teachers maintain a joyful, safe, and healthy homeostasis in this fragile ecosystem we call school. We only need to look back to the Orwellian removal of windows, seen as a distraction, from classrooms in the 1970s to see how possible change is and how far we have come.

Near the end of our third long, pandemic year, I lay in bed with COVID, and writing two alumni obituaries, unaware of all that was emergent in my field, gathering. Our kind board chair said, "You have to look after yourself first."



"You've got to be kidding," I replied along with, I assumed, thousands of school leaders, and then caught myself. I understood then that in order to lead others, the leaders must first nourish their own nervous systems—to prioritize calm, perspective, and mindfulness. From there, that ethos can enter the gateway and spread across campus.

That summer, we went all in: small gardens sprouted, nature sounds filled the hallways, classes spilled outdoors, art retook the walls. Teachers reshaped lessons for creativity and self-direction, the van pool ran constantly to serene little spots for study, and our counselor opened wider doors for drop-ins and resilience. It was exhausting—and it was proof: leaders can pivot fast when survival depends on it.

By fall, the ecosystem was alive again. Attendance rose, test scores and homework steadied, and well-being climbed—because we chose to measure it. Better evidence still: picnic blankets on the quad, every day. More than any time in three years, the school felt like a sanctuary. Before long, new school entrepreneurs would be emerging and new school leadership models would begin sprouting up.

This balance wasn't a luxury add-on. It was the nervous system of the school coming back online. If you don't design for parasympathetic balance—calm, creativity, connection—you are, by default, designing for a random state of health, if not the anxiety we've all heard too much about.

The naturalist campus we were creating and that enabled us to return from a global pandemic is what needed creating all along. For the first time in three years, the school parasympathetic nervous system was back in balance and our campus felt like a sanctuary.



#### For Further Reading

Grauer, S. (2025, September 3). ["Keeping Admission on Mission"](#) *Independent School Magazine* (NAIS)

Grauer, S. (2022, April). ["Climate Change: The Thief of Childhood"](#) *Phi Delta Kappan*, 103(7).

[The Grauer School](#)

[Small Schools Coalition](#)

[Fearless Teaching Blog](#)

[Community Works Journal](#)



Stuart Grauer, Ed.D., is Founder and Head of School Emeritus of [The Grauer School](#) in Encinitas, California, and Founder of the [Small Schools Coalition](#), a global network advocating for human-scale, expeditionary education. An internationally recognized educational leader and storyteller, Dr. Grauer has spent five decades teaching, writing, and consulting on school leadership, naturalist education, and community building. A recipient of the [Author E. Hughes Career Achievement Award](#) from the [University of San Diego](#), Dr. Grauer continues to write, consult, and speak internationally on educational leadership, nature-based learning, and the art of keeping schools true to their mission. His essays have appeared in *Independent School Magazine*, *Phi Delta Kappan*, *ASCD SmartBrief*, and *Community Works Journal*. His books include [Real Teachers: True Stories of Renegade Educators](#) and [Fearless Teaching: Collected Stories](#), with *The Way to Pancho's Kitchen: Founding and Leading Small Schools with Heart, Purpose, and the Wisdom of the Natural World* forthcoming in 2026, published by [The Worthy Educator Press](#).

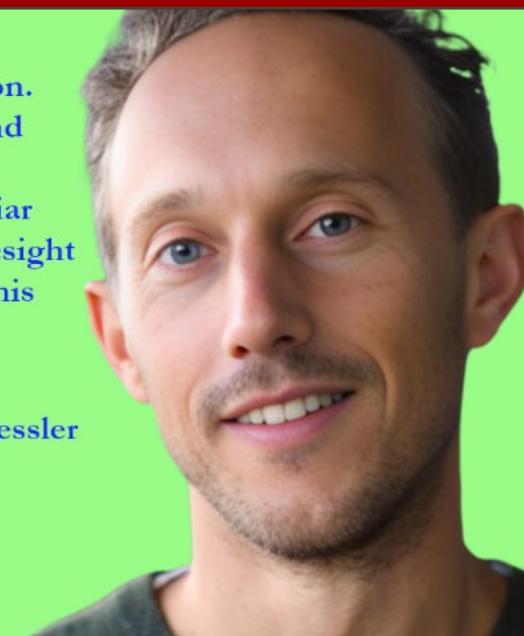


# Every Monday The Worthy Educator Reflection



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

- Ari Gerzon-Kessler





## Seeking Your Input on these 15 Points to Further Develop the Next Draft of the Roadmap!

What is worth keeping and measuring from past practice?

How will adults ensure that students aren't put in performative or unsafe positions. Some mentions of structures to make participation safe, authentic, and sustainable would strengthen this vision.

Explain how feedback loops use metrics to cycle back into teaching practices. The roadmap outlines what good instruction is, but it stops short of addressing how teachers will know that learning is translating into student growth, equity, and belongingness. Teachers thrive on knowing their efforts matter. What does that feedback loop look like?

More clearly connect each metric to its larger purpose, whether it's about learning, belonging, or future readiness. That way, everyone sees the "Why".

Share how educators track their own growth journeys with examples of portfolios, peer coaching cycles and rubrics that help teachers envision how to make their progress visible.

Develop a more distributed leadership model that uses mentorships and PLCs to co-design curricula and guide policy conversations with formal leaders.

Community engagement is described well for schools, but less as part of teacher professional learning. Embed learning opportunities with families, elders, and local organizations will strengthen cultural responsiveness.

While equity is named, the practices lean more toward inclusion in spirit than in guardrails. Share explicit strategies for representation, access supports, and anti-tokenism.

Qualitative and street data are rightly elevated, but the framework stops short of addressing how these become measures of progress. Add how indicators and review cycles demonstrate real change beyond symbolism.

Discuss strategies for navigating controversy, mediating conflict, and psychological safety when challenges arise.

The focus on the local is an incredible strength. Add how grassroots energy to systems-level levers translates to more durable change.

Focus on systems transformation, both the scalability of innovation and the ecosystem of partnerships necessary to fully integrate and embody this kind of learning.

This is a wonderful document. I would like to see it address scalability in relation to the following:

- Funding models that support flexibility and innovation.
- Policy reforms for assessments, accreditation, and teacher licensure.
- Competency, micro-credentials, and AQ indexes.
- What structures ensure validity, reliability, and portability of new forms of credentials?
- How to prevent inequities in recognition (e.g., "badges" from elite schools valued more than others)?

Address the realities of teacher workloads:

- Managing AI tools, portfolios, co-created rubrics, and continuous pivots requires significant time.
- Mental health, community care, and protections against burnout for educators themselves.
- How teachers' evolving roles are recognized and rewarded over time.

Develop the path forward for teacher and leader capacity, specifically:

- professional learning, and
- leadership models

## The Worthy Interview: The Future of Work in An Age of Disruption

Tanguy Dulac  
 CEO and Founder  
 PeopleCentrix  
 Geneva, Switzerland

On June 16<sup>th</sup>, The Worthy Educator (TWE) had the pleasure of meeting online with Tanguy Dulac (TD), the Editor-in-Chief of the We Are Human At Work newsletter, Chief Executive Officer of PeopleCentrix, and a strong voice asking important questions about what the future holds for all of us in the not-too-distant future as society and technology continue to morph in new ways, both in his realm of human resources and our field of education. This transcript of the original discussion reveals that, while he offers the caveat that he does not have an education background, Tanguy offers thoughtful insights into the future of our profession!

Listen to the full interview [here](#).



TWE: Welcome Tanguy, it's good to have you with us

TD: Thank you. I'm looking forward to the conversation.

TWE: The information that you're synthesizing is coming out of Deloitte's 2025 global human capital trends report.

TD: Yes, I've been working for them almost 15 years.

TWE: Amazing, and you made the statement recently that the average worker faces 10 major changes a year up from just two 10 years ago. What's facilitating that?

TD: We all feel the pressure and the fast pace in everything happening.

TWE: But is it technologically driven? What is it that's making everything change so quickly?

TD: Well according to me, it's not only technological. It's the world we live in really being disrupted. I don't know if you know the **PESTEL** framework which is political, environmental, sociological, technological and legal, and we have all of these components in the world today that are evolving quite fast. When I started to work in consulting you had like one big major transformation within Human Resources every 3 to 5 years. Now it is an ongoing change. My biggest concern is change fatigue and the readiness by recipients of change.

TWE: Yes, absolutely. We're seeing a lot of burnout in our profession. There's no time left to reflect and be deliberate and thoughtful about the changes that are happening.

None of this seems coincidental; these things are happening for a reason. We've come to a time in human history where disruption is imminent. Is that a fair way to understand this?

**TD:** Yes, it's quite concerning, especially if you look at the statistics on health and wellness and the well-being of newer generations entering the workforce. They are evolving in a very insecure environment. We've been hearing a lot from the younger generations talking about anxiety and depression due to environmental changes. It's a lot that we put on them and it's clear that when you see that the highest proportion of the workforce that is being touched by health and wellbeing issues it is the new generation entering the workforce that is most effected. It's quite concerning.

On the other hand, when I look at the research on the skills for the future, it's about agility and resilience. For me, the key question is ultimately how we accompany people in building resilience and agility. We cannot just throw them into this new reality and ask them just be resilient and agile. I think employer has a responsibility in helping the workforce to succeed where the new rules are not necessarily that clear.

**TWE:** It's so true. When I realize that these younger generations are being defined by disruption and the resulting anxiety. In education there's a lot of focus now on wellness because we need to take care of people. We cannot assume they come in whole and ready to fit into a system.

You talk a lot about value as you continue to build out this case for the future of work; that nearly half of workers time is spent on tasks that don't create value. We refer to this as busy work, where we need to file things and follow through on things and be accountable for certain routines, but they're not adding value in ways that create this kind of resilience. How do we get past this being seen as cogs and not actually doing meaningful work?

**TD:** It's a good question. One thing would be to review and remove all non-value-added tasks and activities. That's where I believe AI can really help. But when it comes to having a sense of value, do you have the feeling that you have a meaningful job and do you feel that you are contributing to a broader purpose?

Secondly, it's a problem if I feel that my time is not valued or I don't have focus time. You mentioned the fact that the average employee experiences up to ten organizational changes a year, which means an employee may experience up to one-hundred distractions a day. You absolutely need to put in your calendar space and time for focus work. If I'm doing one task at a time and I finish my day totally drained, that's not a fulfilling day. But if I'm blocking two hours of time for things that really matter to me, I will want to do well and I'll have a greater sense of fulfillment. Having that greater sense of doing valued work with meaning and fulfillment is connected to well-being. It isn't necessarily the rigor of the job. It's that we feel like we're contributing in meaningful ways and making a difference.

**TWE:** It's fascinating. And when you factor in the arrival of artificial intelligence (AI), you make this wonderful statement where you ask, "Would you stay in a job where your value is shrinking while your machine coworker is thriving?" That is the crux of what so many of us are feeling. We understand artificial intelligence can create efficiency and it is here to stay, but it feels like it's pushing up against our sense of our work being meaningful and creating value, and undermining our well-being as humans.

## **"DO YOU WANT TO BE THE ONE DISRUPTING OR BEING DISRUPTED?"**

**TD:** For me, ultimately, do you want to be the one disrupting or being disrupted? AI is a given and it will likely impact your job. The extent to which it impacts your job really depends on the nature of the tasks. But I believe you either wait and see how technology will impact you and you will be very concerned and anxious, or you're actually thinking about the ways AI can potentially be embedded in your work so that you help determine where and how it happens. Let's be curious. Ultimately the question of AI is a question of mindset. Are you considering AI as an opportunity or as a threat? I do understand the point of view that there's a very high potential of becoming obsolete, but I'm a big fan of the concept of learning agility through curiosity. We need to understand that the world is evolving and we need to grasp what's happening. You don't need to be an expert, but you do need to play with the new technologies to really understand what they do what they don't do.

At the same time, reviewing new AI apps coming out on a daily basis is totally overwhelming. So the challenge is to really try to find the right balance between keeping on trends and keeping perspective. I was facilitating a conference last week with Human Resources (HR) leaders about the forthcoming human capital trends in the field and we asked, "Are you following trends on a daily or weekly or monthly basis?" A couple of people said, "I'm actually following the trends on a daily basis on LinkedIn." I responded that I'm following trends on a yearly basis, like global human capital trends, and even then I need to cut through the noise because I believe those trends are overhyped. As an individual I need to apply critical thinking to ask, "Okay that's what the analysts are seeing externally, but I need to understand the relevancy to my actual world." Are they relevant trends? I want to tackle those trends that makes perfect sense to me.

**TWE:** The organizations that exist now that were successful in the twentieth century that built and grew and are now fully mature sustainable organizations that need to start looking at how to change work in order to create value and allow employees to contribute. For those organizations, creating value is it almost antithetical as it goes against how they became successful in the industrial age. Before we say to them they need to start removing tasks that no longer add value, do we first need to define what adding value looks like in the 21st century?

**TD:** I think you just need to be open to redefine your overall products and services and how you are actually delivering them. We see that the most successful companies are the ones that are actually able to reinvent themselves. The pace of replacement of the Fortune 500 companies over the past ten or fifteen years is going faster. For me one of the keys is their ability to redefine success. We've been very successful but it's time for us to evolve. For me, that's why it's very important to challenge the statue quo and be open to taking risks and making mistakes. I'm a big fan of design thinking, which is about creating prototypes which may not be perfect, but it is with the understanding that sometimes you will fail, but you will learn and you will improve. In most companies this mindset is not there yet. We see a lot of studies around psychological safety saying workers don't feel they have a voice. Today we need cultures where it's safe to speak up and to challenge and actually disrupt the way organizations think and behave. so it clearly requires a change in the way we lead organizations.

**TWE:** It's true, and workers in their 20s or 30s are shopping around for employers that give them that safe space to take risks and create value and grow. They're not going to stick around if you're doing things in a way that make you out of date and unable to adapt and be agile. When you think about this in an HR sense, how do young workers build their personal brand and how long do we expect them to stay at any one company - even a forward-looking company that is adapting and trying to evolve? Is it just not realistic that young people are going to invest in a company brand when they're cultivating their own personal brand?

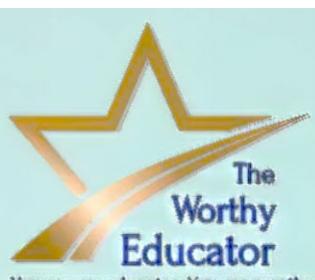
**TD:** Well I would say it's still possible for the new generation of workers to enter and stay with an organization, but the challenge is for the organization to adapt to employees' needs and preferences and to acknowledge that the people they hired two years ago may now have different needs and preferences.

When I started to work or when you started to work, the company culture was very top-down and we needed to adapt because it's a great brand and I'm making an investment in it. It's my career and I play the game of the corporate culture. Now young workers are clearer on what they value, so if they start seeing incongruency between their values and the daily life of the company, that's when they start reassessing the organizational integrity, innovation and teamwork. They ask, "Is this really why and how I want to work?"

If I see that my organization is not necessarily playing by the rules I was promised during the recruitment process, I'm going to realize there's a conflict between my values and the values of the organization and I'll start looking for the next opportunity. Today this is more present, and young workers are more likely to make a bold move and change employers. In our past lives, you and I would just remain silent and learn to accept company values and say, "That's the way it is." We thought of ourselves as good soldiers, but probably in the wrong sense because it was more of a moral loyalty towards the employer.

**TWE:** Yes, exactly. What is the process for orgs to start to personalize the work experience so that they're more aware of employees different needs and interests so it's different from the top down model you talked about?

**TD:** Most companies are not there yet. I have the feeling they're still struggling to not even individualize but to prioritize their services. As an employer I have a very demanding workforce that expects having meaningful work, having compensation and benefits, having job security, and valuing diversity, equity and inclusion.



Right now a lot of companies are struggling to redefine their employee value proposition: what do we offer and what do we stand for? It's clear that an organization cannot be successful and be a pioneer in all of these areas, but given they're having challenges attracting, engaging and retaining workers you can feel that they're trying to think, "Okay how do we redefine our employee value proposition?" and then they need to *deliver* what it promises. At some point they may want to individualize the work experience or the work expectations, but that requires a much higher level of maturity. I would rather they take a step back and instead of trying to immediately individualize, first redefine who they are as an employer. What do they offer? What do they stand for? And try to deliver a matching work experience.

**TWE:** That's fascinating. So does the HR office need to reorganize and look differently in order to help its organization reach that maturity and understand what their value proposition is?

**TD:** My immediate response is that it's not HR, it's about equipping the line managers and the people managers to have those types of conversations, moving beyond discussion around past performance and ratings and having the real conversation with their employees looking at the next twenty-four to thirty-six months. What are you valuing? Are you looking for a promotion? Are you looking to decelerate and take a little bit more time? Are you valuing work-life balance?

When I read the research and talk to clients, it's always the same: we need to upskill our people managers to actually manage our people. But that's becoming more and more difficult because we are facing a multicultural and multigenerational workforce. Employers need to be more people-oriented and to feel comfortable having this conversation with their people, not just talking about the past and the present but also talking about their future. If you are not having this kind of conversation, workers will start forming their own expectations about what the future should be. And if the employer cannot meet those expectations, workers will say, "Okay, you're not even willing to have a conversation with me. When I'm voicing my opinion I have the feeling that it doesn't change anything, so it's time for me to find my next experience with a new organization."



So it's a question of really fostering a dialogue, but we're in a very strange time because a lot of companies are economically struggling and they are focused on present employee performance rather than the long-term sustainable future of the individual and the company. So we are not in a situation that is really optimal to have the kinds of conversation we're describing.

**TWE:** Understood. And this is why this is such powerful work you're doing. You're right there on the edge of it as it's playing out. It's by no means in focus. It's right on the edge of starting to happen, and it must be exciting work for you to see all this and be learning as you're watching it play out.

**TD:** Yes, but at the same time I'm talking to companies about long-term investment in human capital so that they are securing the workforce for the next decade, even though organizations are focused on cost efficiency and profit margin, so it's there is a disconnect between running the machine as it currently works and making a long-term investment in the future. And when you're experiencing a cost containment, where do they cut? They cut diversity, equity, inclusion, health and well-being, and learning and development – the things that are the actual long-term investment in the workforce. And they won't see the negative consequences over the next 12 months, but within the next five years they will definitely feel them. These long-term consequences are much more abstract, and so most leaders don't care about making these cuts because they don't have a direct impact on their immediate efforts.

**TWE:** So very true. And in speaking to educators you're speaking to our heart. This is what we believe. This is what we see. And yet we understand that business is driven by the bottom line; that if they can get immediate results for the bottom line that's what they're going to look at. You make a fascinating point that everyone wants great leaders but we're eliminating the roles that create them. Can you talk a little about that?

**TD:** I think the middle manager role is one of the most difficult because, on the one hand you need to manage the workforce and its specific needs and expectations, while at the same time you need to manage the leadership, which is extremely difficult because they're really squeezed between the two. During COVID, studies demonstrated that the middle manager was the layer in the workforce that experienced the highest levels of burnout. I'm not surprised because I was in that specific situation where I had my top management my employees and there were times I had to manage very opposite messaging to each group, and it can be quite a difficult job. Ultimately, in the end it's your performance that's being measured rather than the way you manage people. So it's a huge workload for which you are not necessarily recognized nor rewarded.

More and more studies are also showing that people don't want to become managers. They say, "It's not for me. I've seen others suffering in that role." I've also read studies that up to fifty percent of newly promoted people managers are actually failing within their role, so it's becoming less and less attractive. It is, however, a role that is extremely critical in organizations.

**TWE:** It really is. You go on to talk about how performance management systems are broken, so why fix them? What if we just forget about them? Okay, so what if we do that; what replaces them and how does that free us up for what you're describing managers should be doing?

**TD:** Well there is a very important choice around performance management. Are you using performance management to assess and recognize and reward the past, or are you using performance management to develop the future? If the leadership clearly sets a developmental focus, then you can remove the traditional ranking protocols. I'm not saying disregard high and low performers, but if it's ultimately about developing the workforce why use a ranking based system that manages to the extremes (the top 10% and my bottom 2% of performers)? You're imposing a very frustrating system just to manage the top and bottom of a normal bell curve just to manage the outliers.

That having been said, if your performance management framework is really there to reward performance, then yes you absolutely need to maintain the system and somehow discern the high, medium and low performers because that's the way your system is structured. But, again, we know that the new generations of workers are entering the workforce wanting developmental feedback about what they can do better in the future, and if you tell them to spend a couple of hours discussing their ranking when their bonus is less than 1% of their overall pay, they won't see the value of spending time on the conversation since there's very little return for the effort.

**TWE:** Education is going through the same kind of disruption. We've been guilty of the same kind of bell curve mentality and letting people subsist in the middle and not really giving everyone that kind of customized education based on their needs, interests and abilities. What would you say to us are the opportunities? We're very excited about the chance to improve our profession after spending our careers being told, "This is the way it's done. This is the way it's always been done." There may be real opportunities here to improve how we do things. In light of this conversation where the workforce is looking at disruption and opportunities to do things differently, what would you say to teachers about how we should be thinking of changing education to prepare young people to go into the workforce to be successful and fulfilled with well-being?

**TD:** I'm not sure I'm well-positioned to answer this, but an article from McKinsey about the skills of the citizen of the future and the top competencies are empathy, analytical thinking, critical thinking and cultural awareness. So these are the skills that will definitely not become obsolete even if AI becomes ten times more powerful. So if these are the skills a young child or a teenager need to acquire to become successful in this very complex world that's taking shape, these are the skills that should be education's focus. Perhaps work backwards and see how the existing curriculum aligns with these competencies and work from there. I have two kids and I love to see what they're learning in terms of knowledge but I'm not concerned about them not knowing. They can super easily acquire knowledge. I'm more concerned about them acquiring these competencies and being put in situations where they practice and learn how to use them. Learning to write ten paragraphs about the Roman Empire, for example, is very good to train the memory, but how does it prepare the next generation of citizens? And what is the role education plays?

More and more organizations are realizing that traditional high school and university programs are not necessarily providing the next generation the knowledge and competencies they need, and organizations are going to create their own programs to develop their own talent, if education isn't regulating itself. Other stakeholders will take action so that we can compensate the gaps. That's the disruption right there, that there are other interests that are going to step in if we if we're not prepared to do it ourselves.

**TWE:** Yes, we are seeing this happening here in the states. In all of this, should we be thinking beyond the traditional school with brick and mortar building and bringing everybody into one facility? Should we be thinking more about apprenticeships and mentorships out in the community where students are learning instead of sitting with one teacher for a year at a time, allowing them to be more mobile and flexible, and does that help us customize learning in a different non-industrial way?



TD: It's not easy because when I moved to Switzerland I came from a very traditional background and mindset, and I very quickly realized that university is not necessarily the top of the game. Since Switzerland is a country where they equally value the banker and the plumber, there isn't a sense of hierarchy in the levels of sophistication of studies.

There's also the fact that the Swiss have industries with very specialized craftsmanship, like watchmaking, and so the country is already fairly advanced in terms of mentorship and apprenticeship. People don't necessarily need to go to the best universities to get the best salary and the most rewarding and fulfilling careers. Switzerland is a country where they realize that you can be fulfilled in a lot of different jobs and not all jobs require that kind of conceptual background. So, yes I think we need to redefine the skills and competencies, curricula and delivery methods, whether it's a webinar, a book, an apprenticeship or a combination of all of these kinds of things. Ultimately, it's about challenging the status quo to address the cracks in the current system so we can adapt.

I'm profoundly convinced that there are two areas where we need to invest: education and health. That's the two areas where we cannot make any compromise. I know unfortunately right now this is being challenged, but I'm convinced that putting the emphasis on these two areas is critical for our individual and collective success.

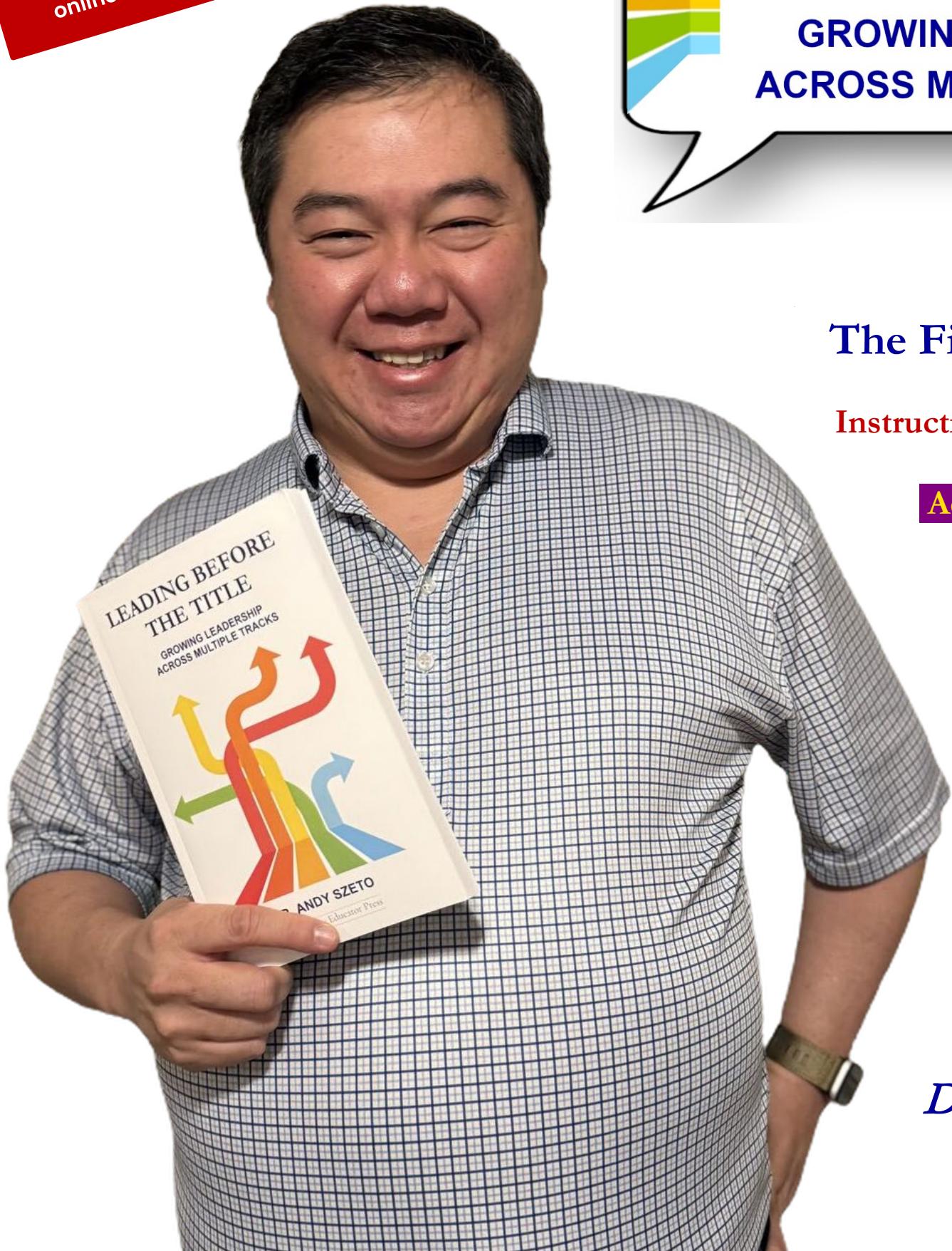


*Tanguy Dulac founded [PeopleCentriX](#) so leaders can deliver transformative work experiences that inspire individuals to be their best and do their best; helping them gain a deep understanding of people's expectations, openly articulate their value proposition, and deliver on those expectations and promises through fulfilling work experiences. Prior to this, he worked for fifteen years in management at Deloitte and PricewaterhouseCoopers, advising clients on effectively addressing people strategies, challenges, and priorities. You can follow his most recent work in the [We Are Human at Work Newsletter](#), sharing his work at the La Silla Observatory in the Chile, as well as bringing together thirty H.R. leaders from Geneva's most influential international organizations to ask, "What happens when human potential is unleashed?"! [in](#) [globe](#) [envelope](#)*

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# You Can't Build Quality on a Broken Workplace: Rethinking Leadership, Professional Development, and Advocacy in Early Childhood Education

Neffitina Thompson, Ed.D.

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## A Broken System Can't Build Quality

Billions of dollars are spent each year trying to improve the “quality” of childcare programs through new curriculums, assessments, and professional development checklists. Yet morale in many centers remains alarmingly low. Teachers call out frequently, skip quality measures, and hesitate to invest in their own growth.

Over the years, I've come to believe that what's missing isn't more systems or stricter accountability—it's leadership.

When I began researching leadership, culture, and climate in early childhood education (ECE) programs, I discovered a powerful truth: you can't build quality childcare on a broken workplace. Programs try to improve outcomes for children while ignoring the environments in which educators work. But when staff feel unsupported, undervalued, or unheard, even the best-designed improvement plan will fail.

I once visited a center where the director proudly displayed quality certificates along the hallway. But in the staff room, the teachers whispered about burnout. One told me, “I love these kids, but I'm running on fumes.” The walls said quality—but the culture said survival.

As Dr. T the Pre K Guru, I've walked into hundreds of programs and seen the same pattern: policies built on passion, but not people. You can't legislate belonging, and you can't checklist culture.

## The Human Side of Quality

We often talk about “high-quality care” in terms of ratios, curriculum fidelity, and licensing standards, and while these are important—but they don't tell the full story. True quality is relational; it's built on trust, collaboration, and belonging among the adults who care for our children every day.

When those relationships break down and teachers feel micromanaged or dismissed, the entire program climate begins to suffer. Across diverse ECE settings, I've witnessed this same truth: leadership shapes everything.

Staff working under empathetic leaders describe empowerment and teamwork, while those under rigid, even punitive leadership, describe burnout, fear, and disengagement. The difference between a thriving and struggling programs isn't funding or QRIS ratings; it's leadership that listens.

Research by Akwaa (2025) reinforces this. Her study on social-emotional learning (SEL) and restorative practice found that educators' ability to model empathy and build relationships directly influenced student outcomes. Authentic school improvement depends on cultivating trust and belonging within the learning community; a reminder that quality cannot thrive where educators feel disconnected or undervalued.

*“You can hear the difference in a strong early childhood program: the hum of teamwork, the laughter of children, and the calm confidence of educators who trust one another. That sound, the sound of connection, is what real quality feels like.”*

## Professional Development Without Purpose

As a field, we often treat professional development (PD) as the answer to every problem. Need higher quality? Send teachers to training. Need better compliance? Add a webinar.

Still, PD often misses the mark because it's disconnected from daily realities. Teachers juggle complex compliance demands, health, safety, and documentation while many PD sessions focus narrowly on theory, not practice.

I once attended a session where teachers were asked to memorize policy codes without ever discussing how they play out in a classroom of three-year-olds. At the conclusion of the training, the room was silent: no questions, no energy, no reflection. It wasn't that the teachers attending didn't care. It was that the training spoke at them, not to them.

[The Worthy Educator Framework](#) (2024) calls for purposeful and reflective practice as a professional standard, urging leaders to connect PD to educators' lived experiences. When this happens, training nurtures both competence and connection and shifts from being transactional to transformational.

Quality PD should do three things: build competence, build confidence, and build connection. When these align, PD becomes a bridge between accountability and authenticity, transforming compliance into collaboration.



## The Leadership Gap

Many early childhood leaders are promoted for their teaching strength, not leadership preparation, and their training often centers on compliance: how to maintain ratios, complete forms, and prepare for inspections. This neglects critical components of leadership: how to build trust, resolve conflict, and create a culture where people feel safe to speak up.

The [Funds of Knowledge \(FoK\) framework](#) offers a way forward. Traditionally used to value the cultural assets children bring to school, the approach also applies to leadership. Every educator carries valuable wisdom from their family, community, and life experience, and when leaders recognize and leverage that expertise, they transform staff from "workers" into partners in improvement.

As Dr. T the Pre K Guru, I often remind directors: you don't build quality through control; you build it through connection.

## Rethinking Professionalism

A common frustration I hear from directors is that staff "don't want to be professional." Intrinsic motivation thrives only where people feel seen, supported, and respected. It's not that teachers don't care, it's that they often don't feel cared for.

Professionalism isn't compliance, it's community. When leaders create spaces for educators to share ideas, ask questions, and make decisions together, growth happens naturally.

Motivation isn't mandated, it's modeled. Professionalism grows where belonging is nurtured, and quality improves when people feel safe to take risks.

## Bridging Policy and Practice

Policymakers often talk about “quality” as something measurable by stars or ratings. But the true measure of quality is felt: in the tone of a classroom, the warmth of a greeting, and the trust among colleagues.

As Lipsky (1980) explained in his theory of street-level bureaucracy, frontline workers, teachers, directors, caregivers, are the implementers of public policy. They interpret and negotiate conflicting demands of regulation, resources, and human needs. Educators are not just carrying out policy; they’re translating it daily under real-world constraints.

If we want to elevate childcare quality, we must invest in leadership development at all levels, not just administration. Funding for quality improvement must include emotional intelligence, cultural responsiveness, and organizational well-being.

Integrating regulation-focused PD strengthens the workforce by enhancing educator confidence, aligning daily operations with frameworks like [QRIS](#) and [COMAR](#), and promoting accountability tied to growth rather than punishment.

When educators understand the why behind regulations and feel trusted to use professional judgment, compliance becomes more than a checklist, it becomes part of their identity.



## Educators as Advocates: The Dr. T Perspective

I once met a preschool teacher who spent her lunch breaks replaying her licensing audit in her mind—wondering if she’d done everything “right,” if the inspector noticed the chipped paint on the cubby shelf, or if her classroom notes were detailed enough. The audit was over, but it lingered in her thoughts, coloring how she spoke to her team, how she greeted parents, even how she saw herself as a professional. In her quiet reflection, you could see the weight—and the power—of the street-level policymaker at work.

Her story is not uncommon. Across classrooms and centers, educators carry the invisible labor of compliance, often without the tools or trust to influence the systems that judge them. But they do influence those systems—every day.

Your educator voice is your advocacy power. And as Dr. T the Pre K Guru, I say this often: when teachers and leaders link practice, regulation, and workplace well-being: we rebuild early education from the ground up.

The same skills that brought you into education can make you an effective advocate. Advocacy begins with reflection, on why you teach, what you value, and how you can use your voice to shape better systems.

Lipsky’s (1980) concept reminds us that frontline workers are also policymakers in practice. Through our daily decisions, how we interpret rules, adapt procedures, and respond to families, we shape systems in our everyday work. As educators, our advocacy isn’t resistance; it’s reform in motion.

## Advocacy Priorities

- ✓ Require PD providers to show measurable educator outcomes tied to instructional and regulatory quality.
- ✓ Mandate leadership development focused on emotional intelligence and organizational culture.
- ✓ Integrate regulation-focused PD into training hours to boost confidence and reduce compliance stress.
- ✓ Evaluate PD impact through classroom observations and staff morale—not just attendance.
- ✓ Foster partnerships between higher education, programs, and agencies to connect research with practice.

These steps align professional growth with accountability, reframing quality as something we build together rather than something that is done *to* us.



## A Call to Action

If there's one truth my research and my work has reinforced, it's this: quality begins with the people who make it possible.

Both *The Worthy Educator Framework* and my findings converge on this truth: we can't build strong childcare systems on foundations of burnout, fear, or silence. Real improvement starts when leaders invest in belonging, reflection, and shared power empowering educators as they feel seen, supported, and trusted to lead.

We must center the humanity of educators, their voices, knowledge, and relationships, as the heart of any quality system. Imagine a program where every teacher feels heard, every family feels welcome, and every leader feels trusted to show the way forward with empathy. That is the vision of a *worthy workplace*; a place where quality isn't a checklist but a culture.

When professional development is reflective and leadership is rooted in belonging, we move beyond compliance to connection. We build truly worthy educational spaces where educators, children, and families thrive together.



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

The Worthy Educator is the result of years of work connecting, supporting and leading educators who have a passion for their work that goes beyond the salary and benefits that come with the job. We do not settle for the status quo. We need to know we are making a difference. And we have to know we have the supports and relationships we need to feed us mentally, emotionally and spiritually as we continue on along our career paths.

Worthy Educators lead at every level in education from the classroom to the boardroom to the halls of higher education. We are each unique professionals, yet our common values and aspirations resonate among us in ways that we've never experienced in other professional communities. It's not magic or coincidence. It's what happens when you bring together dedicated, talented, energized people who hunger for more. You belong here. Become a Worthy Educator. You'll be glad you did, and we'll be glad to accompany you on your career journey!

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**POLICY**

## Leveraging AI in the New Teacher Ecosystem: Supporting Growth and Leveraging Technology



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### Introduction

The modern educational landscape is complex, continually evolving with digital classrooms, blended learning models, and diverse student needs. Within this environment, the new teacher ecosystem—encompassing the unique challenges and developmental stages of novice educators—is a critical area for support. Artificial Intelligence is emerging as a technology with the potential to redefine how we facilitate learning and provide assistance. This article explores how AI, when integrated thoughtfully and ethically, can serve as a valuable resource to enhance instruction, alleviate administrative burdens, and personalize professional development, thereby supporting new educators in their vital role.

### Understanding the New Teacher Ecosystem: Evolving Demands

The traditional paradigm of a teacher as the sole source of information has undergone significant transformation. Contemporary classrooms are dynamic, frequently digital spaces that incorporate hybrid and remote learning models. Students bring varied backgrounds and socio-emotional needs to the educational setting. This inherent complexity places substantial demands on all educators, particularly those in their initial years of teaching. New teachers must adapt to roles encompassing data management, differentiation strategies, and social-emotional learning support. The extensive nature of these responsibilities necessitates tools that extend their capacity without compromising the essential human connection they establish with students. Effective support systems for new teachers often require accessible resources that augment their efforts.

### Core Applications of AI in Teaching

For new teachers, managing classroom responsibilities while delivering effective instruction can be challenging. Artificial Intelligence (AI) offers powerful tools that support lesson planning, assessment, and administrative tasks—helping early-career educators become more efficient and confident in their roles.

- **Instructional Support:** AI-powered platforms such as ChatGPT, Khanmigo, and Google's Gemini are important tools for new teachers that help with lesson planning, student questions, and constructive feedback for the students. These tools provide on-the-spot content suggestions and explanations, supporting educators in presenting material clearly and accurately. Generative AI is also useful in creating differentiated learning materials tailored to diverse student needs, such as gifted education, bi-lingual, learning disabled, and students with academic challenges. For example, teachers can use AI to adjust reading levels, design practice questions, or generate visual aids, reducing prep time and enhancing student engagement. When done correctly, this can help beginning teachers save a lot of time while improving the classroom environment.

- **Assessment and Feedback:** Grading papers, tests, quizzes, and student presentations can be overwhelming for beginning teachers, but AI tools like Gradescope, Turnitin, and Edulastic help reduce the time needed to accomplish these tasks. These platforms offer efficient grading and provide students with constructive feedback—particularly in writing, coding, and math. Additionally, AI systems that use predictive analytics can help identify students at risk of falling behind by analyzing patterns in student performance. These tools enable new teachers to intervene early with targeted support.
- **Administrative Efficiency:** New teachers are often faced with endless administrative tasks that can consume valuable teaching time. AI can make tasks such as attendance tracking, report generation, and parent communication more efficient and quicken the time to do so. Virtual assistants or chatbots can manage the scheduling of meetings and send reminders, allowing new teachers to focus more on instructional delivery and student interaction. Such chatbots can reduce paperwork significantly and make the classroom more efficient.



### Benefits to Teachers and Students: Mutual Advancement

The integration of AI into the educational ecosystem offers substantial benefits for all stakeholders, particularly new teachers and their students. For students, AI facilitates truly personalized learning pathways. AI can identify a student's learning gaps in real-time and provide targeted resources or exercises, leading to deeper understanding and increased engagement. For educators, and especially for new teachers, the impact can be profound. By automating repetitive, time-consuming tasks, AI can contribute to reduced teacher burnout, a critical factor in teacher retention. This liberation of time and energy allows educators to dedicate themselves more fully to creative teaching, fostering critical thinking, and building meaningful relationships with their students. The educator's role can evolve from information disseminator to facilitator, mentor, and inspirer. Furthermore, AI empowers educators with data-driven instruction. Predictive analytics help identify patterns, highlight areas where students collectively struggle, and enable prompt adjustments to teaching strategies. This provides an analytical lens, aiding in the precise targeting of instructional efforts.

### Risks and Ethical Considerations: Navigating Challenges

While powerful, AI tools require careful consideration regarding their implementation. Their integration must be approached with caution, particularly concerning data privacy and algorithmic bias. Student data must be safeguarded with the utmost rigor, and AI algorithms must be scrutinized to ensure they do not perpetuate or amplify existing societal biases, inadvertently disadvantaging certain student populations. There is also the risk of over-reliance on technology, which could potentially dehumanize education if not managed carefully. AI should augment, not replace, the irreplaceable human connection between teacher and student. It is important to address the perception of "job displacement" versus the reality of "augmentation." AI is not intended to replace educators; rather, it aims to make their roles more manageable, impactful, and human-centric. The educator's role can evolve, becoming even more crucial as curators of learning experiences and nurturers of socio-emotional growth. Finally, ensuring equity in access to AI tools is vital. The digital divide must not expand into an AI divide, leaving some students and schools without the benefits this technology can offer.

### Recommendations for Implementation

Effectively integrating AI into the new teacher ecosystem requires targeted **professional development**, strong **ethical guidelines**, and **collaborative frameworks** that support innovation and inclusivity. AI literacy must become a foundational component of teacher preparation. New teachers need structured opportunities to explore how AI tools can support instruction, assessment, and classroom management. This includes understanding AI's capabilities, limitations, and potential biases. The deployment of AI in schools must be guided by clear policies that address data privacy, algorithmic bias, and informed consent. New, and returning teachers, should be trained to evaluate AI tools for transparency and fairness. Ethical frameworks such as UNESCO's *Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence* (2021) emphasize the need for explainability, accountability, and human oversight in AI systems used in education. Schools must implement regular audits and provide educators with the authority to question or reject tools that conflict with student welfare or equity. Cross-sector **collaboration** is key to ensuring AI tools meet real educational needs. New teachers bring valuable classroom insights that should inform the design and implementation of AI solutions. Establishing partnerships through advisory boards or co-design initiatives allows for better alignment between policy, pedagogy, and technological development. Such collaboration promotes trust, transparency, and the ethical scaling of AI across educational systems.

## Conclusion

As new teachers enter today's complex educational landscape, the thoughtful integration of Artificial Intelligence offers vital support. From lesson planning and assessment to managing administrative tasks, AI can help early-career educators navigate their roles with greater efficiency and confidence. By streamlining routine duties and offering insights into student learning, AI allows new teachers to focus more deeply on building relationships, fostering engagement, and cultivating critical thinking in the classroom. To truly benefit from AI, implementation must be ethical, intentional, and equitable. New teachers need access to professional development that builds both their technical skills and understanding of AI's limitations. While AI can enhance teaching, it should never replace the essential human connection at the heart of education. With the right training and collaborative support from developers, leaders, and policymakers, AI can become a transformative tool—empowering new teachers to thrive and lead with impact.

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*"Thank you so much! I am beyond excited to have completed The Worthy Educator EDInfluencer Advocacy Microcredential! I set a goal, stayed committed, and seeing that certificate attached absolutely made my day! This experience stretched my thinking, sharpened my advocacy voice, and gave me the clarity I needed to keep championing what's best for children, educators, and families. I truly feel more equipped, more energized, and ready to step boldly into this next chapter of my advocacy journey. Thank you for creating a program that not only teaches but inspires. Your encouragement throughout this process meant so much, and I'm proud to represent The Worthy Educator wherever my work and leadership show up. Here's to continuing the good work, building our legacy, and influencing change with purpose, heart, and joy! 🌟🌱❤️*

*Gratefully, Neffitina*

## Leaders of the Class: Motivating Work

Maureen Chapman and James Simons

Educators, Innovators and Founders

Cor Creative Partners

Quincy, Massachusetts

It is important to foster a culture that is conducive to everyone's engagement in the four foundational leadership practices. This arises organically when all learners engage in the four foundational leadership practices. And yet, without these classwide conditions in place, only some learners will successfully engage in the practices. For this reason, you—the lead leader of the class—will leverage the four leadership practices yourself to foster the conditions that enable everyone to follow suit. In other words, you will regularly reflect on the classroom culture, set goals, experiment with strategies, exchange feedback, and advocate for yourself and others to foster the desired conditions.



In the Launch unit, students will internalize these leadership conditions, reflecting on how they look, sound, and feel. But before doing so, it is worth first reflecting on these conditions yourself.

### MOTIVATING WORK



“These kids aren’t motivated!” It’s a sentence we’ve heard—heck, it’s a sentence we’ve said—many times. It implies that the students are the underlying issue. But what if we added one word? “These kids aren’t *being* motivated.” That shift likely does not feel good. After all, you are already doing so much to motivate students. You deserve recognition for your commitment, creativity, and skill as a teacher. Plus, you know that if students are going to grow as leaders, they need to take responsibility for their own motivation.

This is all true. But it is not the full picture. In the Motivate unit, students will reflect on their emotions and identities to set goals that they are motivated to achieve. At the same time, throughout each unit, it will be your responsibility as the lead leader to ask, “What more can I do to motivate all students?”

Think about it this way: If you hosted a dinner party and a third of the guests didn’t eat the food, you wouldn’t say, “I guess they aren’t hungry.” Instead, you might consider the relationship between the diners and the dinner. Maybe they eat different types of food in their cultures. Maybe they have a sensitivity that makes the meal hard to digest. Maybe the food needs seasoning. Maybe they don’t feel comfortable with the other guests or the host (we’ll dive more into that issue when unpacking the safety to take risks). Dismissing a student as unmotivated is like deciding that a dinner guest just isn’t hungry. That could be true—or maybe you need to serve something different.



The first condition for enabling a class culture of leadership is the presence of work that is motivating, meaning that it is purpose driven, appropriately challenging, interactive, and identity aligned.

### PURPOSE-DRIVEN WORK

When we visit classes as school leaders and as instructional coaches, we ask students two questions: (1) What are you doing? and (2) Why are you doing it? You might be surprised how frequently they cannot answer that second question, which explains why so many students are not fully engaging.

As humans, we are desperate to know the why behind what we are doing. Psychologist Ellen J. Langer (2023) writes, “In some of my earliest research, it turned out the simple word ‘because’ persuaded people to act even if it was not accompanied by any new information” (p. 142). The phrase “May I please use the copy machine?” yielded a lower success rate than “May I please use the copy machine because I need to make duplicates of this worksheet?”

For many students, it is easy to identify what are called *surface* motivational purposes: getting good grades, passing the test, earning a reward, or staying out of trouble with their parents. But while these types of motivations may work in the short term, they have zero positive impact on learning in the long term (Hattie, 2023).

To ensure sustained classwide growth, we need to help students connect with a deeper sense of purpose. Without such purpose, our pedagogical skill and interpersonal care can only take us so far. Psychology professor David S. Yeager (2024) finds in his deep research that “even exceptional teachers struggle to support students who haven’t identified their purpose for learning yet” (p. 205).

# Purpose

### APPROPRIATELY CHALLENGING WORK

An inherently motivating task is one that presents the appropriate amount of academic challenge (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Vygotsky, 1978). Imagine Goldilocks finding the three bears’ homework spread out on the table. She picks up a task that is too difficult and becomes overwhelmed. Then, she picks up one that is too easy and becomes bored. Finally, Goldilocks grabs an assignment that is just right. She can maintain momentum toward her learning objectives, yet there is enough resistance to require her to really work at it.

The interconnected competencies of leadership cannot grow without resistance. Thus, we must offer academic endeavors that push students out of their comfort zones and into what psychologist L. S. Vygotsky (1978) calls the *zone of proximal development*. Within this zone lies “the sweet spot” of productive struggle “in between scaffolding and support” (Blackburn, 2018). Too often, some students engage independently in appropriate academic challenges, while others either never attempt challenging work without scaffolding or never encounter challenging work, period. Without appropriate challenge and support, the student who is below grade level will remain below grade level. Simultaneously, without appropriate challenge and support, the student who is above grade level will stagnate, slowly sliding toward the center. If we want to increase equity, we need to give every student academic resistance that will spark growth (The New Teacher Project, 2018).

How do we know if the academic challenge is appropriate? Our prescribed learning standards provide a helpful guide, as do the following questions.

Is everyone in the class experiencing frequent success?  
Is everyone in the class experiencing frequent failure?

From our successes, we learn what is working and come to see ourselves as capable of the task at hand. From our failures, we learn what is not working. If we let these lessons fuel future experimentation and achievement, we come to see ourselves as capable, not just of the task at hand, but of any task. For this reason, we hope that every student fails. (We bet you didn’t think you’d read that sentence in an education book.) When the work is appropriately challenging, they will fail—a lot.

### SOCIAL WORK

As secondary teachers, it is tempting to perceive students’ social tendencies as a deficit (“I’m trying to teach, and these kids keep socializing! I want them to take notes, not pass notes!”). Here’s the thing, though. Students’ social drives are far from a deficit—in fact, they’re a superpower hundreds of thousands of years in the making. Back then, our ancestors were trying to survive an inhospitable environment full of woolly mammoths and saber-toothed tigers. At the time, our odds didn’t seem great. And yet, look around your classroom; you’ll see wall-to-wall humans and, chances are, not a single saber-toothed tiger in sight.

All right, pop quiz: What evolutionary advantage enabled our survival?  
Our ferocious teeth  
Our brute strength  
Our lightning speed  
Our big, social brains

If you've ever tried to fight a bear or outrun a cheetah, you probably know, through process of elimination, that the answer is D. Our brains evolved to navigate increasingly complex social situations. Those who were socially successful benefited from the connection, protection, and collaboration of communal life (not to mention the chance to reproduce and pass their super-social genes along to the next generation).

We are all social animals, and our social drives are particularly pronounced during adolescence (Knoll, Magis-Weinberg, Speekenbrink, & Blakemore, 2015). Beginning around the age of ten, testosterone increases in the bodies of boys and girls—so, too, does their desire to demonstrate their value to those around them. After all, on the prehistoric plains, establishing oneself as a valuable contributor to the community protected one from being ostracized and losing the safety that comes with community membership.

While this need for acceptance can be disruptive, it can be equally productive if we harness it. “Adolescent brains are so focused on social status,” writes Yeager (2024), “that within that context—when trying to impress peers or help others—the adolescent brain can match that of an adult in activities like advanced planning and making decisions” (p. 43). This means that the most motivating student work is *social* work.

In each unit, we offer ideas for interactive learning experiences that invite students to socialize with each other about academics. In particular, in the culminating Collaborate unit, the leaders of your class will collaboratively engage in a messy, challenging, interdependent, and authentic academic endeavor. Through this collaboration, students will work to earn peer approval by demonstrating their value to each other. What’s more, as you focus on fostering a safe and supportive relationship with each student, they will work to earn your approval as well.

Again, according to Yeager (2024), adolescents’ interest in earning status and approval applies to their relationships with peers, mentors, and members of the broader world that surrounds them: “Give young people meaning and purpose *right now* by asking them to learn skills to achieve something that has a direct impact on the community and on their social reputations” (p. 211). With this in mind, it will be your job to show how your academic discipline connects and contributes to society by offering academic experiences with authentic real-world relevance.

### PERSONAL WORK

*Jaws: The Revenge* (Sargent) might not have been the best movie of 1987, but its tagline—“This time . . . it’s personal”—has lingered in our cultural consciousness for a reason. The most motivating pursuits are those that feel personal. We have discussed the value of academic experiences that are purpose driven, appropriately challenging, and interactive. But these features mean little if the work does not align with an individual’s sense of self. For this reason, in the Motivate unit, we provide support for student leaders to reflect on how they feel and who they are: their group membership, beliefs, values, interests, experiences, and strengths. We will unpack each of these identity elements in The Foundation section of the Motivate unit (page 64) so that you feel prepared to tell your students, “We are going to do some academic work, and this time . . . it’s personal!”

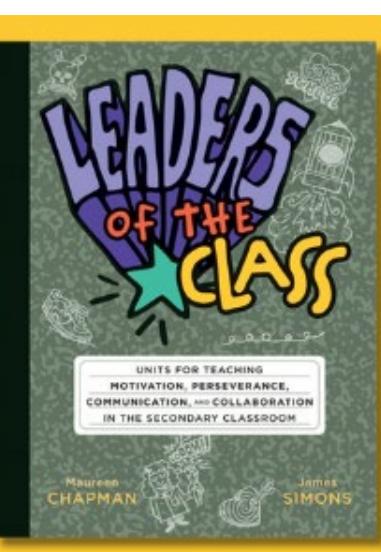
### LEADERSHIP OPPORTUNITIES



If you want a baseball player to learn to hit the ball, you better give them chances at bat. Similarly, if you want a student to learn to lead, you better give them leadership opportunities.

Believe us, they will take whatever chances they can get. Ever ask if anyone wants to erase the board or run an attendance sheet down to the office? It’s wild how many hands shoot in the air. Students are desperate for even the smallest opportunities to lead.

The positive impact is even greater when we build leadership opportunities—in the form of student voice and agency—into our academic coursework. Research shows that the “more educators give students choice, control, challenge, and collaborative opportunities, the more motivation and engagement are likely to rise” (Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012, p. 27). When we amplify student voice, we increase not only engagement but also student purpose and self-worth (Quaglia & Corso, 2014). We cannot overstate these positive effects. According to a Harvard study, student agency may be as critical as basic academic skills in determining student outcomes (Ferguson, Phillips, Rowley, & Friedlander, 2015).



“Chapman and Simons provide secondary teachers with a practical road map for teaching students leadership skills as a daily practice, instead of a title.”

—Jorge Valenzuela / Education coach and coauthor

This makes sense, and to prove it to you, we are going to take you on a tangential trip to IKEA (bear with us). In many ways, IKEA provides a productive pedagogical model as we seek to motivate students through academic leadership opportunities. We want our students, like shoppers, to leave our store with something new every day, and the nature of an IKEA consumer's experience can inform how we envision this transfer of knowledge and understanding.

Consumers do not arrive home with a couch; they arrive home with couch parts. After observing an exemplar in the store's model rooms, the consumer constructs their own couch with the support of the assembly instructions. (A little direct instruction never hurt anyone; 0.56 effect size per Hattie, 2023.) Suddenly, the person is more than a consumer; they are a producer, too!

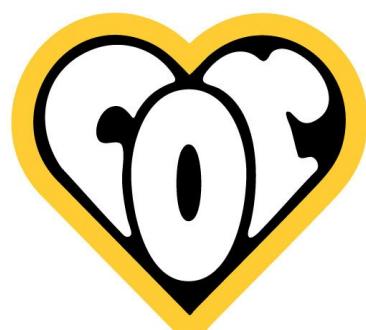
And here's the thing: Because the consumer contributed to the couch's creation, they place immense value on the item. It is a phenomenon called the IKEA effect: *I am not getting rid of that couch anytime soon, because I helped build it. It is mine, and I love it* (Norton, Mochon, & Ariely, 2012).

The same phenomenon occurs in classrooms when educators empower student leaders to co-construct their own learning. If you want students to meet community

expectations, invite them to decide those expectations by collaboratively establishing classroom norms, as they will during the Launch unit. If you want students to achieve classwide learning objectives, invite them to chime in with their own learning goals—a major focus of Motivate—which then resurface in each subsequent unit. If you want students to experiment with strategies for persevering, communicating, and collaborating effectively, invite them to decide—individually and collaboratively—which strategies they think will work for them, as they will do in the framework's final three units.

Like the IKEA shopper, students need to be more than consumers of information; they must also be producers. So, in every unit, we incorporate opportunities for students to take the lead in building the learning that they will take with them. Think of student voice as existing on a spectrum (Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012). On the far-left side is *expression*—the opportunity to share opinions, objections, complaints, praise, and celebrations. On the far-right side stands *leadership*—co-planning, decision making, responsibility taking, and guiding collaborative processes. Through our leadership framework, students have the chance to express themselves, and increasingly, they will move to the right side of the spectrum, culminating their work with a student-led group project in the Collaborate unit.

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*Maureen Chapman and James Simons are the co-founders of Cor Creative Partners, working to spread their love of school through educator professional development with a focus on student engagement and leadership development for adults and adolescents alike. They are the co-authors of Leaders of the Class: Units for Teaching Motivation, Perseverance, Communication, and Collaboration to Secondary Students. Prior to this, Maureen taught for 15 years in elementary, middle, and high school classrooms, with eight years in school leadership. James served as a high school principal and dean of students, an instructional coach, and a middle and high school English teacher.* [in](#) [envelope](#)

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A Worthy Book Study with James Simons & Maureen Chapman



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# Educating for the Whole: Whole Child Education as a Future-Ready Imperative in Maine and Beyond



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## Abstract

This article argues that Whole Child Education (WCE)—the integration of cognitive, emotional, social, and physical domains—constitutes not merely a support for academic success but a future-ready framework essential for preparing learners in a rapidly changing world. Set within Maine’s distinctive educational contexts, WCE is positioned as both a corrective to inequities in rural and underserved communities and a foundation for cultivating transformative competencies required for 21st-century life. After addressing criticisms that WCE distracts from scholastic rigor, the paper draws on empirical research to demonstrate that holistic supports enhance, rather than dilute, academic outcomes.

The discussion situates WCE within global discourse on the future of education, drawing from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the Partnership for 21st Century Learning (P21), and the Aspen Institute. A central case study is the creation of the world’s first Master of Arts in Teaching (M.A.T.) Whole Child Education at the University of Maine at Augusta, which represents an institutional commitment to preparing educators in holistic, trauma-informed, and community-engaged pedagogy. By integrating neuroscience, social-emotional learning research, and global policy frameworks, this article positions WCE as indispensable not only for academic success but also for equipping learners with the adaptability, resilience, and civic responsibility required for the future.

## Introduction

Education systems in the United States and globally are at an inflection point. The convergence of economic instability, rapid technological change, and cultural shifts requires schools to move beyond narrow conceptions of academic preparation. Increasingly, scholars, policymakers, and practitioners acknowledge that the health, safety, and social-emotional development of learners are not optional supplements to instruction but essential conditions for success (ASCD, 2017). This view is at the core of Whole Child Education (WCE), a framework that integrates cognitive, emotional, physical, and social development into an interdependent model of schooling.

Critics often contend that schools should focus solely on academics, leaving issues such as mental health, trauma, or resilience to families or external agencies. Yet neuroscience and educational research consistently demonstrate that learning is biologically impossible when students are stressed, unsafe, or unsupported (Immordino-Yang, Darling-Hammond, & Krone, 2019). WCE responds directly to these findings by emphasizing interconnected supports that prepare learners for both academic engagement and long-term flourishing.

This article advances three central arguments:

1. WCE enhances, rather than detracts from, academic rigor.
2. WCE addresses inequities, particularly in rural and underserved contexts such as those found in Maine.
3. WCE cultivates future-ready competencies—emotional intelligence, adaptability, civic agency—that are essential for thriving in a complex, uncertain world.

To illustrate these claims, I draw from both empirical research and my professional expertise as a faculty member at the University of Maine at Augusta (UMA) and former Executive Director of Maine ASCD, where I worked to advance professional learning aligned with WCE. I highlight the creation of UMA’s M.A.T. in Whole Child Education, the world’s first dedicated M.A.T. rooted in the WCE approach, as a case study of innovation in educator preparation.

## Literature Review

### The Whole Child Framework

The ASCD Whole Child framework outlines five tenets: each learner should be healthy, safe, engaged, supported, and challenged (ASCD, 2017). These interdependent conditions illustrate that intellectual growth cannot be separated from physical wellness, social connection, and emotional regulation. Schools organized around these principles do not see academics as isolated content delivery but as the outcome of an ecosystem in which learners' needs are addressed comprehensively.

### SEL and Academic Outcomes

A robust body of evidence underscores the academic benefits of social and emotional learning (SEL). Durlak *et al.* (2011) conducted a meta-analysis of 213 school-based SEL programs, finding that students demonstrated improved attitudes, behaviors, and academic performance, with gains equivalent to an 11-percentile-point increase. Similarly, Zins, Weissberg, Wang, and Walberg (2004) emphasized that SEL is foundational to academic engagement, highlighting that skills such as self-management and relationship-building are not tangential but central to learning.

### Emotional Intelligence and Long-Term Success

Daniel Goleman's (2006) work on emotional intelligence (EI) further supports WCE. Goleman argues that EI competencies—including empathy, adaptability, and self-awareness—are often more predictive of career success and leadership effectiveness than IQ alone. These findings align with WCE's insistence that education must prepare learners for complex futures requiring collaboration, resilience, and ethical reasoning.

### Physical Health and Cognition

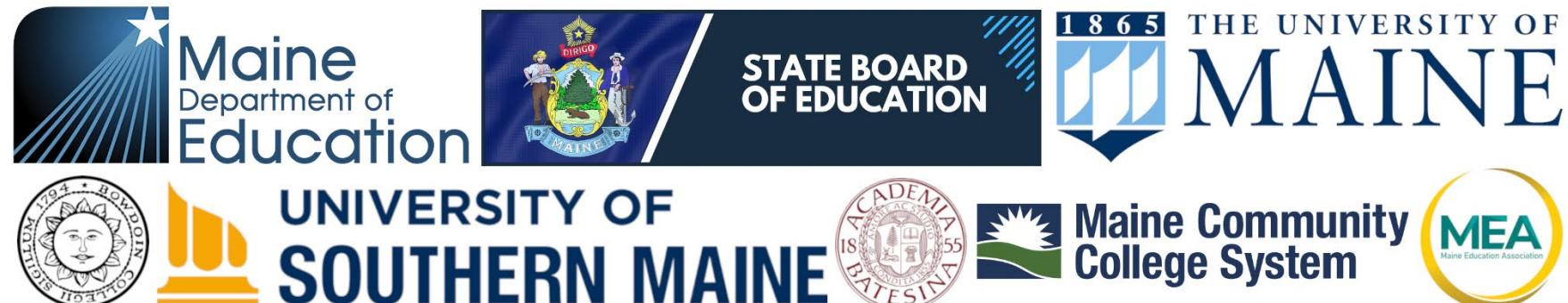
The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2010) demonstrated that physical activity and access to nutrition are correlated with improved concentration, memory, and academic performance. Schools that integrate health education, physical movement, and wellness supports thus directly enhance students' cognitive readiness. For rural states such as Maine, where disparities in access to health resources persist, this integration is especially critical.

### The Future of Education and Skills

Globally, organizations such as the OECD and P21 articulate frameworks that align closely with WCE. The OECD's *Future of Education and Skills 2030* project identifies three "transformative competencies": creating new value, reconciling tensions, and taking responsibility (OECD, 2018). The P21 framework emphasizes the "4Cs": critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity (P21, 2019). These competencies extend beyond content mastery, requiring schools to nurture dispositions and skills deeply connected to social-emotional and physical development. WCE provides the systemic conditions under which these capacities can be cultivated.

### Neuroscience of Learning and Emotion

Research in affective neuroscience demonstrates that cognition and emotion are inseparable. Immordino-Yang *et al.* (2019) argue that the brain systems governing emotion and social interaction are also those that support learning and decision-making. Ignoring social-emotional dimensions of education undermines the very neurological processes that enable learning. This evidence base provides a scientific rationale for embedding WCE within every dimension of schooling.



## Context: Maine's Educational Landscape and Professional Authority

Maine offers a distinctive lens through which to consider WCE. The state's educational landscape combines rural isolation with urban centers that have experienced demographic change. Rural districts face persistent challenges related to economic instability, limited access to healthcare, and high rates of trauma exposure—including the ongoing effects of the opioid epidemic. In such contexts, schools often function as community hubs, providing not only academics but also meals, counseling, and health services.

As the former Executive Director of Maine ASCD, I facilitated statewide efforts to embed whole child principles into professional learning. At the University of Maine at Augusta, where I currently serve as a faculty member and Coordinator of Teacher Education, I spearheaded the development of the world's first dedicated M.A.T. in Whole Child Education (University of Maine at Augusta, n.d.). This program, grounded in trauma-sensitive practice, resilience, and educator self-care, prepares teachers to recognize and respond to the interdependence of learners' academic and developmental needs.

By situating this program at UMA, an institution committed to serving rural learners and communities, the initiative aligns directly with Maine's educational and economic realities. It represents a pioneering model that could inform national strategies for preparing educators in holistic, future-ready pedagogy.

## Responding to Criticism: WCE as Foundation for Academic Rigor

One persistent critique is that WCE dilutes academic rigor. Yet research consistently demonstrates the opposite: SEL and wellness supports strengthen academic achievement. Durlak et al. (2011) and Zins et al. (2004) show that SEL interventions correlate with higher test scores and improved classroom behavior. Far from a distraction, WCE provides the foundation upon which rigorous academic instruction rests.

Another critique is that WCE shifts responsibility away from families. Yet in Maine's rural communities, schools often serve as the most consistent institutional presence in children's lives. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, Maine schools that provided meals, counseling, and digital access exemplified WCE in action, ensuring continuity of learning despite unprecedented disruption (Dorn, Hancock, Sarakatsannis, & Viruleg, 2020). Rather than replacing families, WCE strengthens school-family partnerships by offering resources and supports that create conditions for shared success.

### WCE and Equity

By addressing social-emotional and physical needs alongside academics, WCE also advances educational equity. Students experiencing poverty, trauma, or cultural displacement benefit most directly from wraparound supports. In Maine, schools in communities such as Lewiston and Biddeford—home to growing populations of immigrant and refugee families—have integrated WCE principles to provide culturally responsive, trauma-informed support. This aligns with national trends, such as the Aspen Institute's Nation at Hope report, which calls for integrating social, emotional, and academic development into every school as a matter of equity and democracy (Aspen Institute, 2018).

### Future-Readiness: From Integrated Competencies to Civic Agency

The case for WCE becomes most compelling when viewed through the lens of future-readiness. The OECD's Education 2030 framework argues that students need competencies to create new value, reconcile tensions, and take responsibility (OECD, 2018). These competencies require not just knowledge, but dispositions shaped through social-emotional and physical development. Similarly, the P21 framework highlights critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and creativity as essential for 21st-century work and citizenship (P21, 2019).

Whole Child Education provides the structural and cultural conditions for these competencies to flourish. For instance, trauma-sensitive practices help learners regulate emotions and persist through challenge, directly supporting adaptability. Classroom collaboration grounded in SEL builds communication and teamwork. Health and wellness initiatives support stamina, attention, and resilience. Civic engagement programs integrated into WCE foster responsibility and ethical reasoning, preparing learners not only for work but also for democratic participation.

In Maine's rural schools, these competencies are particularly salient. Small, community-centered schools are well-positioned to cultivate civic agency and collaborative problem-solving. When educators are trained in WCE, they can leverage these contexts to prepare students not only for local contribution but also for global citizenship.

### Case Study: UMA's M.A.T. in Whole Child Education

Against this backdrop—where future-ready competencies are cultivated through the lived conditions of health,

safety, engagement, support, and challenge—educator preparation becomes a strategic lever for systemic change. If schools are to advance civic agency and global citizenship in ways that are authentic to local context, teachers must be prepared to lead learning environments that are academically rigorous and developmentally responsive at the same time. UMA's M.A.T. in Whole Child Education represents a clear, institutional answer to that need.

The University of Maine at Augusta's M.A.T. in Whole Child Education embodies Whole Child Education as a future-ready framework by preparing teachers as both instructional experts and architects of supportive learning ecosystems. The program foregrounds trauma-informed pedagogy, educator resilience, and community engagement as core professional capacities—not peripheral supports—because these competencies directly shape whether rigorous learning can occur. In doing so, it signals a paradigm shift in teacher preparation: teachers are prepared not only to teach content, but also to design the conditions under which learners can think critically, collaborate across difference, persist through challenge, and act with responsibility.

Central to this approach is the program's emphasis on transforming the teacher as a prerequisite for transforming teaching. Coursework such as *Trauma-Sensitive Classrooms*, *Educator Self-Care and Resilience*, and *The Whole Child* equips candidates to understand how stress, safety, and relationship influence attention, memory, decision-making, and engagement—and to translate that knowledge into concrete classroom practice. Candidates develop the relational authority, reflective habits, and co-regulation strategies that allow them to hold high expectations while sustaining a culture of dignity, belonging, and academic challenge. The result is a model of professional formation that prepares teachers to be steady, skilled adults in the lives of learners.

This teacher transformation is consequential because it extends outward. Educators prepared through a whole-child lens are positioned to change classroom trajectories—reducing barriers to engagement, increasing persistence, and supporting learners in building the social, emotional, and cognitive capacities demanded by complex futures. Over time, those shifts compound: teachers who can integrate rigorous instruction with trauma-sensitive practice and developmental supports are more likely to produce learning environments that improve both academic outcomes and long-term wellbeing, particularly for students most affected by inequity.

The program also makes visible an essential premise for Maine and beyond: in many communities, schools function as hubs of stability and connection. Preparing teachers for whole-child practice is therefore inseparable from preparing them for whole community impact. Teachers trained to partner with families, collaborate with local agencies, and design culturally responsive learning experiences help strengthen the relationships and networks that sustain communities—especially in rural and underserved contexts where schools are often the most consistent public institution in children's lives.

In sum, UMA's M.A.T. in Whole Child Education illustrates how Whole Child Education can be operationalized at the level of educator preparation to produce ripple effects that move from teacher capacity, to learner flourishing, to community resilience. This case study underscores the central claim advanced in this paper: Whole Child Education is not an alternative to academic rigor, but the foundation that enables rigorous, equitable, and future-ready learning at scale.



## Analysis and Discussion

Whole Child Education is not ancillary to the academic mission of schools; it is its indispensable foundation. By addressing the interdependence of cognitive, emotional, social, and physical development, WCE creates conditions for rigorous academic learning, equitable access, and future-ready competency development. The evidence base—ranging from SEL meta-analyses to neuroscience research—demonstrates unequivocally that ignoring whole child needs undermines learning itself.

For Maine, the stakes are especially high. Rural inequities, economic instability, and cultural transitions demand schools that function as holistic community hubs. WCE provides a framework that not only supports individual learners but also strengthens families and communities. The M.A.T. in Whole Child Education at the University of Maine at Augusta, the first program of its kind worldwide, exemplifies how higher education can lead innovation in educator preparation by embedding WCE at the core of teaching and learning.

As global education systems wrestle with the demands of the 21st century, WCE should be seen as more than a reform agenda. It is a future-ready imperative—a comprehensive, evidence-based approach to cultivating learners who can think critically, collaborate across difference, reconcile tensions, and take responsibility for building sustainable futures. In short, educating for the whole child is educating for the whole world.

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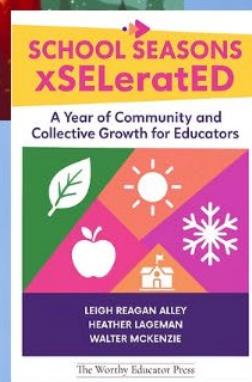
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# SCHOOL SEASONS xSELeratED



A Human-Centered Guide Every Educator Deserves!

School Seasons xSELeratED is the kind of book every educator wishes they had at the start of the year – and the kind they will keep within reach long after the year ends. What Walter McKenzie, Leigh Reagan Alley, and Heather Lageman offer here is more than a framework; it is a philosophy of teaching and leading that recognizes the emotional seasons educators move through and gives language, structure, and intention to support them.

As someone who has taught, led teams, and built programs in complex environments, I was deeply moved by how human this book feels. The micro-moves are thoughtful and practical, but the true power of the book lies in how it honors the inner life of teachers—their energy, their purpose, and their need for rituals that protect both. The month-by-month design mirrors the emotional arc of the school year with striking accuracy. You feel seen in August, steadied in October, renewed in April, and celebrated in May.

The authors' xSELeratED Schools Framework is one of the most balanced I have encountered. It integrates self-understanding, community care, and collective action without overwhelming the reader. The emphasis on curiosity, empathy, and courageous repair is especially timely for educators navigating demanding climates.

This is a rare guide that is both visionary and immediately useful. It respects teachers' time, trusts their judgment, and gives them tools that build culture rather than drain it. Anyone committed to sustainable, relationship-anchored teaching and leadership will find something transformative here.

A beautiful contribution to the field and a generous gift to the people who make schools whole.



Mishkat al Mounim  
A Worthy Educator  
Founder and President, The Communication of Success  
Author of *Unseen, Unbroken*

## School Seasons xSELeratED: A Year of Community and Collective Growth for Educators

Leigh Reagan Alley  
Heather Lageman  
Walter McKenzie



**School Seasons xSELeratED** is a calling to a collective pause, a purposeful inhale, and an invitation to return to ourselves, to each other, and to the legacy we build individually and together. It is our refocusing on the work of education not as knowledge, outcomes, and achievement, but as connection, belonging and healing. This is intentional, purposeful work: the integration of head and heart, skills and relationships, academic rigor and human well-being.

The book is developed as a monthly guide of reflexive practices that span the entire school year, serving not as something extra, but as your essential companion for well-being, growth and fulfillment.

*"Creating School Seasons xSELeratED with Walter and Leigh transformed my understanding of what's possible when we move from ME to WE – when brilliant minds unite around our shared commitment to making education more human, more healing, and more whole. This isn't just a book we wrote together; it's a testament to the power of authentic collaboration and the magic that happens when educators dare to bring their full selves to the work that matters most."*

**-Heather Lageman, author**

The next logical step flowing from our **xSELeratED** initiative, this book will fill your heart and feed your educator soul. Written in collaboration, it complements the experience and perspective of **Leigh Reagan Alley**'s orientation to wholeness, **Heather Lageman**'s community-building and **Walter McKenzie**'s systems thinking, weaving a three-part harmony of intentional reflection and insight across the months. You will use this companion again and again, year after year, with support from the authors and additional online resources that extend and enrich the book.

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## Making Cultural Connections to Enhance Learning in Middle School Math Classrooms

Natalie Odom Pough, Ed.D.  
Assistant Professor of Mathematics Education  
Georgia State University  
Atlanta, Georgia



### Abstract

Dr. Natalie Odom Pough encourages innovative approaches to middle school math, fostering deep thinking and meaningful connections through thought-provoking questions. Drawing from her extensive teaching experience, she emphasizes the importance of early exposure to critical thinking skills, supporting lasting math retention and a stronger mathematical mindset among students.

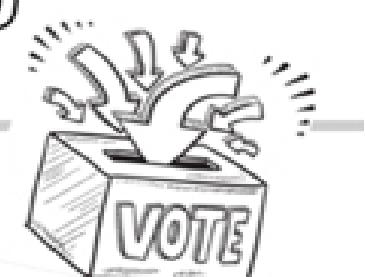
Through my continuous evolution as an educator, I've learned how important it is to focus on the identity of the students I serve. Society has pushed mathematics into a corner where most learners stare at it and cringe. I want middle school students to see themselves as mathematicians. Moreover, I want them to see mathematics as the concept that helps move all other contents. Connecting what is happening in the world around us to the content being taught is one of the fastest ways to help students think critically, ask deep questions, and see the purpose of mathematics. Acknowledging the students and connecting them to the mathematics curriculum requires effort. It is the same effort science teachers make when a virus shuts down the country, and they teach students how viruses are spread and the importance of washing hands for at least 30 seconds. It takes effort, care, and content knowledge to do it well.

Similarly, social studies teachers do this when tying current events into their curriculum, including the Israel-Palestine conflict. English language arts teachers employ common measures to alter their curriculum when their school board bans books they have taught for years or when a current event sparks inquiries that deserve a book study to help students see what is happening around them. This is identity work - understanding who you teach and developing a curriculum that connects them with the content beyond the prescribed formula of standards and standardized tests. Identity work goes beyond race and gender. There is a focus on culture. Educators must understand that culture is more than the foods we eat. It is what brings us together - music, movies, sports, etc. Culture encompasses the latest dances, the trendy language being used, the popular television shows that interest students, and their wardrobes. More importantly, culture can embody one's racial background, and it can also be shared across races with a connection that brings a generation together. As educators seeking ways to improve mathematics teaching and learning for every student, their acknowledgment of their identities in middle school will shape who they become in adulthood.



Unit 1: Lesson 1

# Adding and Subtracting Whole Numbers

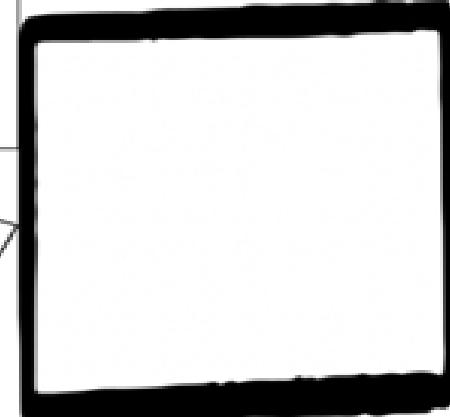


## 2018 Election Data

Governor	Percentage	Votes	How many votes did Abrams lose to Kemp by?
Brian Kemp (REP)	50.22%	1,978,408	
Stacey Abrams (DEM)	48.83%	1,923,685	
Ted Metz (LIB)	0.95%	37,235	
<b>How many Georgians voted in 2018's Gubernatorial election?</b>			

Voter Turnout	
Ballots Cast	3,949,905
Registered Voters	6,428,581
<b>How many Georgians DID NOT vote in the 2018 election?</b>	

What happened next?



A couple of years ago, I used 2018 Georgia gubernatorial election results to teach an adding and subtracting whole numbers lesson to help students understand what it meant when people say, “The 2018 election was a *close* race.” I wanted students to see how close this election was and to focus on an underlying issue many Georgians realized after this election - many registered voters were not voting. During the lesson, which included parents observing classes on Parent Day, students could see how many registered voters did not vote and how their votes would have impacted the results. The mathematics behind this lesson pushed students to see how small a margin was and to understand that every vote counts. Throughout our discussion, students demonstrated their desire to vote and to begin to understand their civic duty. Moreover, students saw their current role as someone who can urge the adults in their lives to vote in every election.



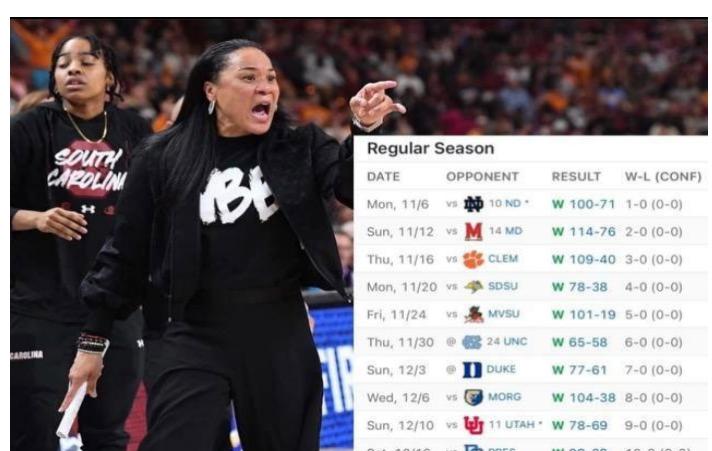
During our discussion, the name of the late Congressman John Lewis, the former representative of the district where the school stands, was mentioned. In that moment, I witnessed adults and students alike making a profound connection between our mathematics lesson and a man who devoted his life to securing voting rights for all.

I watched children transform into high-level mathematicians who could humanize mathematical ideas and draw meaningful parallels to the history they have studied. One student reflected on how disappointed John Lewis must have been to see so many people in his home state choose not to vote. It was then that I realized: with more exploration and dialogue at this level, we are nurturing the thinkers and doers who will clearly envision and shape their futures.

There have been lessons where I presented my students with the ingredients list for Takis, a popular snack, and asked them to determine the percentage of natural ingredients. This activity resonated with my middle school students because many adults often express disgust for the snack and label it unhealthy. To develop critical thinkers, we must invite students to explore our perspectives and uncover the reasoning behind our conclusions.

Students created charts to illustrate their findings based on prior knowledge, analyzed the nutrition label and serving size, and engaged in thoughtful discussion. One student posed a particularly insightful question: “Although the ingredient list appears to be mostly from nature, why doesn’t the snack feel healthy?” This prompted a rich conversation about food processing and mass production. That moment reminded me that questioning and curiosity are at the heart of developing true critical thinkers.

Athletics is another topic that bridges generations. Even if someone isn’t a sports fan, certain moments in athletics leave lasting cultural imprints. Today’s students are witnessing the rise of women’s basketball, an experience that will connect them for years to come. I brought that cultural phenomenon into the mathematics classroom as well. Using a viral social media graphic featuring Dawn Staley, head coach of the University of South Carolina’s women’s basketball team, and her team’s remarkable record at the start of a recent season, I designed a series of math questions rooted in real data. Through this exploration, students not only applied mathematical reasoning but also learned about careers in Sports Information. The lesson was multifaceted, engaging, and a clear success.



An example of one of my students’ work showcases how she processed the problems (see below), noting that there was an error. While correcting this, I simply highlighted that she had made a mistake and asked her to review it through the lens of an error analyst. Her mathematics was correct—the error was not in computation, but in transferring the results from one part to the next. She was able to identify her mistake through thoughtful reflection on each question, demonstrating a level of reasoning and perseverance that exceeds typical middle school expectations.

<p><b>Thursday</b></p>  <p><b>Regular Season</b></p> <table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th>DATE</th> <th>OPPONENT</th> <th>RESULT</th> <th>W-L (CONF)</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr><td>Mon, 11/06</td><td>vs NC STATE</td><td>W 100-71</td><td>1-0 (0-0)</td></tr> <tr><td>Tue, 11/07</td><td>vs NC STATE</td><td>W 100-71</td><td>1-0 (0-0)</td></tr> <tr><td>Thu, 11/12</td><td>vs NC STATE</td><td>W 114-78</td><td>2-0 (0-0)</td></tr> <tr><td>Fri, 11/13</td><td>vs NC STATE</td><td>W 108-80</td><td>3-0 (0-0)</td></tr> <tr><td>Mon, 11/13</td><td>vs NC STATE</td><td>W 108-80</td><td>4-0 (0-0)</td></tr> <tr><td>Fri, 11/17</td><td>vs NC STATE</td><td>W 101-78</td><td>5-0 (0-0)</td></tr> <tr><td>Thu, 11/23</td><td>vs NC STATE</td><td>W 85-88</td><td>6-0 (0-0)</td></tr> <tr><td>Sun, 12/03</td><td>vs NC STATE</td><td>W 77-61</td><td>7-0 (0-0)</td></tr> <tr><td>Wed, 12/06</td><td>vs NC STATE</td><td>W 104-88</td><td>8-0 (0-0)</td></tr> <tr><td>Sun, 12/10</td><td>vs NC STATE</td><td>W 79-69</td><td>9-0 (0-0)</td></tr> <tr><td>Sat, 12/16</td><td>vs NC STATE</td><td>W 89-29</td><td>10-0 (0-0)</td></tr> </tbody> </table> <p><b>SC</b>      <b>Opp</b></p> <table border="1"> <tr><td>100</td><td>101</td><td>204</td><td>151</td><td>303</td><td>1</td><td>1</td></tr> <tr><td>114</td><td>114</td><td>78</td><td>91</td><td>244</td><td>925</td><td>925</td></tr> <tr><td>109</td><td>105</td><td>65</td><td>78</td><td>171</td><td>503</td><td>503</td></tr> <tr><td>323</td><td>244</td><td>358</td><td>358</td><td>945</td><td>945</td><td>945</td></tr> </table>	DATE	OPPONENT	RESULT	W-L (CONF)	Mon, 11/06	vs NC STATE	W 100-71	1-0 (0-0)	Tue, 11/07	vs NC STATE	W 100-71	1-0 (0-0)	Thu, 11/12	vs NC STATE	W 114-78	2-0 (0-0)	Fri, 11/13	vs NC STATE	W 108-80	3-0 (0-0)	Mon, 11/13	vs NC STATE	W 108-80	4-0 (0-0)	Fri, 11/17	vs NC STATE	W 101-78	5-0 (0-0)	Thu, 11/23	vs NC STATE	W 85-88	6-0 (0-0)	Sun, 12/03	vs NC STATE	W 77-61	7-0 (0-0)	Wed, 12/06	vs NC STATE	W 104-88	8-0 (0-0)	Sun, 12/10	vs NC STATE	W 79-69	9-0 (0-0)	Sat, 12/16	vs NC STATE	W 89-29	10-0 (0-0)	100	101	204	151	303	1	1	114	114	78	91	244	925	925	109	105	65	78	171	503	503	323	244	358	358	945	945	945	<p><b>1</b> How many points did South Carolina WBB score between 11/6 and 12/16? They scored 925 points between 11/6 and 12/16. How many points did their opponents score? Their opponents scored 503 points. What's the difference? The difference is 422 points.</p> $\begin{array}{r} 925 \\ - 503 \\ \hline 422 \end{array}$
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<p><b>Friday</b></p> <p>Using the data set from Thursday answer #1 and 2.</p> <p><b>1</b> What is the <b>average</b> points scored between 11/6 and 12/16 for the Lady Gamecocks? <math>925 \div 10 = 92.5</math></p> <p>The average points scored between 11/6 and 12/16 for the Lady Gamecocks is 92.5 points.</p> <p><b>2</b> Of the points scored, what percentage of points belonged to South Carolina?</p> <p><b>SC: 925</b> <b>OP: 503</b> <math>\frac{925}{1428} = 0.6417</math> <math>0.6417 \times 100 = 64.17\%</math></p> <p>The percentage of points that belonged to South Carolina was 65%.</p>	<p><b>1</b> Which questions required that you do some research, come to tutoring, or ask for clarification? Why? Number 3 on Friday required that I do some research and ask questions because I didn't know how to set up my problem based off of the question at hand and with the answers I got online I answered the problem.</p> <p><b>2</b> What is your comfort level with simplifying exponents and the exponent rules? Circle one. Then explain how you are working on mastering these skills. Also explain (<b>in complete sentences</b>) how your comfort level has changed as we continue to work on these types of problems.</p> <p>They're easy now.</p> <p>I'm still working on it!</p> <p>I'm still clueless.</p>																																																																												
<p><b>Reflections</b></p> <p>All reflection responses should be written in complete sentences to receive full credit.</p>																																																																													

In the middle grades, culture and connection bring learning to life. Helping students understand that every decision they make is connected to another is both a life lesson and a mathematical one. By intentionally embedding culture, current events, and introductory data science into the scope and sequence, we can create opportunities for students to engage with mathematics in meaningful, relevant ways. Many of these ideas stem from information I gather through NPR, social media, podcasts, and other news sources, which help me connect classroom learning to the world students experience daily. As a result, they are able to communicate their understanding beyond the traditional unit assessment and, more importantly, recognize the deep connections between their daily lives and the mathematics they learn.

CONTENTS



Dr. Natalie Odom Pough is a limited-term assistant professor of mathematics education at [Georgia State University](#). She dedicates her work to the next generation of thinkers and doers who will see the need to change the world. Dr. Pough was awarded the Presidential Award for Excellence in Mathematics and Science Teaching and has been recognized as a Champion of Education for ASCD and The Worthy Educator. [in](#) [envelope](#)

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Richard Lange supports voices of new and pre-service educators through his work at [Mentors.net](#).

# Managing Change for Lasting Improvement in Schools with Ann Little



**Tuesday, February 3, 2026  
4:00-5:00 p.m. e.t.**



This session offers a thought-provoking exploration for educational leaders sharing how collaborative change management can lead to sustainable progress in educational settings. Successfully managing change in schools in 2025 requires a strategic approach that addresses the unique challenges in the educational landscape, including technological integration, funding constraints, teacher and staff capacity, stakeholder engagement, and effective leadership. By understanding these challenges and implementing proactive strategies, schools can navigate change successfully and create a more positive and effective learning environment for all stakeholders.

As the founder of Unique People Global, Ann Little is an experienced leader in international education, helping schools plan, implement and improve. She has a strong background working on education reform projects in the Middle East and Southeast Asia, and in leading a significant special education literacy project in Hillsborough County, Florida. She is partnering with The Worthy Educator to bring her skills and experience to you!

Change management in 2025 requires school leaders to be visionary, adaptable, and empathetic. They need to embrace challenges and opportunities with a laser-like focus and a commitment to following through on continuous cycles of improvement. Join Ann as she shares her experiences in education project management, both in the United States and internationally.



**Be sure to attend live:  
Registration is free,  
but seating is limited!**

*Please note: this is a live, interactive event.  
AI bots and automated attendees will not be admitted.*

**Register Now!**

## One Cog in a Well-Oiled Machine: UCET is Bringing Utah's EdTech Story to the World



Jared Covili

Administrator, Digital Teaching and Learning  
 Jordan School District  
 Salt Lake City, Utah

Throughout my 24-year career in education, I've transitioned through various roles, each enriching my understanding and passion for educational technology. From a high school language arts teacher to a district administrator, these experiences have shaped my belief in the transformative power of technology in education. However, it isn't just the machines that change our classrooms. I've discovered the power of the human network that shapes the technology in our classrooms. As I've grown and developed, so has the educational technology workspace. When I first started in the 1900's, technology was a desktop for the teacher and one computer lab for the students. Now, Artificial Intelligence has transformed the technology landscape, reimagining machines to be part of our learning communities.

As a young educator just starting my career, I was incredibly fortunate to discover and attend the annual Utah Coalition for Educational Technology (UCET) conference. This introduction proved to be a pivotal moment, fundamentally shaping the trajectory of my entire educational career. The opportunity UCET provided for networking with exceptional leaders and innovative practitioners across the state of Utah was invaluable. It was through this connection that I was truly able to find my voice as a teacher and eventually take on new leadership roles, benefiting immensely from the shared knowledge and collaborative spirit of the UCET community.

I haven't been the only educator to benefit from attending the UCET annual conference. Thousands of teachers share similar stories to mine. Participating in professional learning offered by UCET has opened so many doors to educators across Utah. However, few know that UCET's impact across the state of Utah is the result of decades of work in a passionate edtech community. Utah's story is one of collaboration and shared vision. It involves partnerships including state agencies, public education, and higher education. Each of these groups has worked tirelessly to impact educational technology throughout the state and all have helped UCET make Utah a major player in the national edtech community.

### Laying the Foundation for UCET

Utah is a small state when compared to many of the large players in public education. California, Texas, and Illinois all have districts in the top ten largest across the country. Even though we may have fewer students, Utah is consistently at the front of the pack when it comes to educational technology innovation. While many districts shut down in March 2020 due to the pandemic, schools across Utah took a few days to switch from in-person to online learning. This was unheard of in many parts of the US, but Utah had built a technology infrastructure that was up to the challenge.

Part of the reason why Utah is so successful is two-pronged: the statewide network and the Digital Teaching and Learning Grant. Without these two scaffolds in place, Utah's landscape for educational technology wouldn't be as successful as it has been. One of Utah's greatest assets in digital teaching and learning is its strong statewide infrastructure. This wireless backbone, facilitated by organizations like the Utah Education Network (UEN), enables the sharing of resources and vision across all educational institutions in the state.



## The Importance of a Statewide Network

The concept of an agency like UEN was a forerunner to many of the technological innovations that came since its inception in the early 1990's. For much of my career, I was fortunate to be able to travel around the state as a professional development trainer for UEN and I recognized the role that state agencies like the Utah State Board of Education (USBE) and UEN play in bringing technology to all teachers and students across the state of Utah.

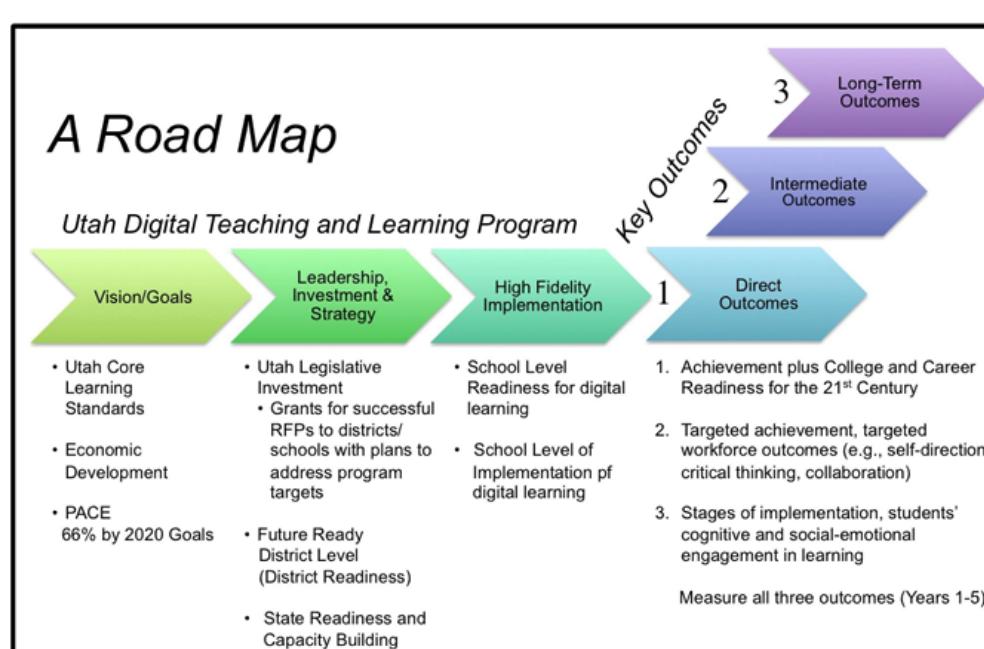
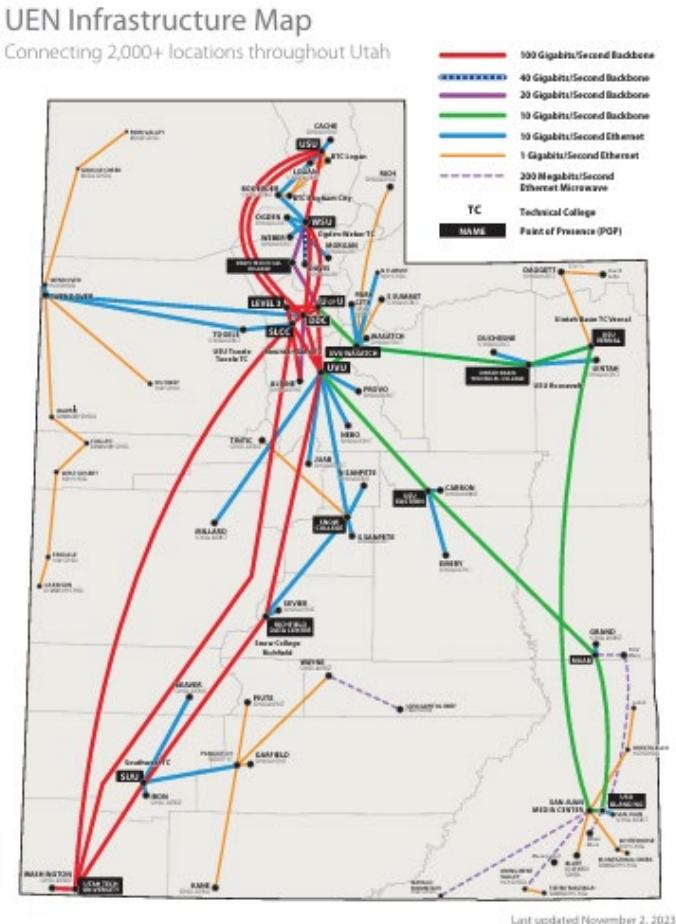
The statewide network's strength lies in its ability to connect diverse educational entities, ensuring that resources and innovations are shared efficiently and effectively. Due to this vast statewide network, UCET has been able to connect with teachers from the different regions across Utah. When you consider the vast size of the state, that allows districts to connect from over 600 miles apart.

However, UEN's value to classrooms goes beyond just fiber optics cables and internet connections. UEN has been instrumental in providing leverage for all Utah schools when it comes to professional development and software contracts. Small, rural districts have little to no purchasing power in the world of software contracts. Statewide contracts with tools like Canvas, Nearpod, Adobe, and Zoom have been negotiated by UEN to leverage our entire public education system. This is essential to help schools across Utah have equitable access to these vital classroom technologies.

Digital Teaching and Learning Grant Program

The Digital Teaching and Learning (DTL) Grant Program, launched in 2016, represents a significant investment in Utah's educational technology landscape. This program aims to enhance learning through technology by providing financial support to school districts and charter schools.

The Digital Teaching and Learning Qualifying Grant Program was created in accordance with Utah Code Section 53F-2-510 and Utah State Board of Education (USBE) Rule R277-922. Districts and charter schools are required to create a 5-year plan for Digital Teaching and Learning to be approved by USBE to qualify for the funds.



This initiative began with stakeholders from across the state including the local school systems, the Utah State Board of Education (USBE), UEN, and the Legislature creating Utah's Master Plan to best leverage the power of technology for learning. This plan articulates "Utah has a powerful opportunity to act, and to harness technology as an extraordinary tool to our benefit... To move all students to high levels of learning powered by technology, all students will need access to infrastructure, devices, and applications that can be most effectively incorporated into learning... With teachers serving as architects of learning combined with the knowledge to effectively integrate technology, schools can provide students with a pipeline to explore real world concepts, interact with real world experts, and analyze and solve real world problems." The Legislature created and charged the USBE to combine these efforts to create this program.

The Digital Teaching and Learning Program currently invests \$20 million in accelerating and deepening learning through technology in Utah's K-12 schools. The first program cohort was launched in 2016, funding grants in 65 school districts and charter schools across the state. Since then, additional districts and charter schools have joined the program.

Here's a snapshot of the DTL program:

- Program Objectives: The DTL program seeks to integrate technology into learning processes effectively. It requires participating districts to develop a 5-year plan, focusing on infrastructure, device access, and application integration to enhance teaching and learning outcomes.
- State-wide Impact: The program has already funded numerous districts and charter schools, providing them with the resources needed to implement innovative technology solutions. This funding has enabled schools to employ Ed Tech specialists who support teachers in integrating technology into their classrooms.

- Collaborative Efforts: The DTL program is a collaborative effort involving stakeholders from the Utah State Board of Education, UETN, and local school systems. This collaboration ensures that the program aligns with the state's educational goals and effectively leverages technology to improve learning outcomes.

The DTL program has been revolutionary in its impact on education across Utah. In the years leading up to the pandemic, Utah was experiencing a technological shift throughout many of our classrooms. While the first round of grant funding helped many schools reach a 1:1 student to device ratio, later rounds of DTL funding have helped build the human infrastructure required for a successful technology adoption. Districts across the state used DTL funds to hire edtech specialists that could lead professional development programs in technology adoption.

UCET has leveraged the power of both of these concrete structures to expand the power of human connections within education in Utah. One of the most powerful human networks that has significantly impacted my journey has been the Utah Coalition for Educational Technology (UCET), which is instrumental in promoting the effective use of technology in Utah's educational landscape. Over the years I've seen the educational technology space grow in our classrooms and schools. UCET has been instrumental in shaping that growth for the teachers and students in Utah.

### UCET's Mission

After attending the UCET conference, I knew that I needed to get involved so I ran for a volunteer position on the board within a few years. It's a relationship that has stuck with me ever since, even though my role on the board has evolved over time. I'm now in my 18th year on the board and can't imagine a better way to stay connected to the teachers throughout Utah.

The UCET conference may have been my gateway into the world of educational technology, but it is UCET's mission that has been my passion for the past twenty years. I truly believe that educational technology can radically transform the classrooms of tomorrow and I want to be a part of that change.

UCET plays a pivotal role in Utah's educational technology ecosystem. Its mission aims to:

“...promote the cooperative development and effective use of information technology in Utah's educational institutions.

...provide a forum for the exchange of information on technology by holding conferences, meetings, and workshops, and publishing a newsletter.

...bring together any and all parties interested in the use of technology in education for the purpose of representing their varied interests to each other and to the public”

([www.ucet.org/about/board](http://www.ucet.org/about/board)).

UCET embodies the values of education across the state of Utah and promotes the need we have for networks, not just those with fiber optic cable and broadband access. Rather, the key to Utah's success in the world of educational technology is the human network which stretches across a variety of school districts, higher education institutions, and state agencies.

### UCET Making A Difference

UCET has grown as an organization over the past 45 years. What started in 1980 with a ballroom at a local hotel has grown into a national conference that has boasted an attendance of over 2000 participants. During a time where educational conference attendance appears to be dwindling in Utah, UCET has consistently grown to the point where the 2025 conference was held at the Salt Palace Convention Center, the largest conference event center in Utah.

While there are many reasons for the maintained increase in attendance, it cannot be understated that UCET helps bring the education community together. For many, UCET feels like a family reunion because of the power of human connections. Another reason for the high level of attendance is that the edtech space is one that provides a sense of optimism about the future of education and it allows teachers growth opportunities that foster empowerment.

UCET's mission underscores the importance of not just technological networks but also human networks. The relationships and collaborations fostered by UCET contribute significantly to the success of educational technology initiatives in Utah. One of the primary ways we've been able to reach out to our people is through networking both in-person and online.



## Professional Learning to Bring Teachers Together

One of UCET's aims is to be more than an annual conference. Like many ISTE/ASCD affiliates, with volunteer boards, it can be easy to settle into the role of providing an amazing yearly conference and then provide a smaller role throughout the rest of the year. As part of my role as the ISTE/ASCD Liaison I have worked to leverage our ISTE affiliate partners to help UCET adopt a variety of training models and outreach opportunities which have helped us connect with our members.

**UCET Book Club** - We've recently developed an engaging online book club designed with two key goals in mind: to help our members connect with one another in a flexible virtual setting, and to introduce them to cutting-edge ideas and emerging technologies that are transforming education. Crucially, this book club is a foundational connection point to ISTE (the International Society for Technology in Education), a renowned, broader national network dedicated to empowering educators and improving learning worldwide. Through guided discussions of ISTE-authored texts, we are enabling Utah teachers to cultivate a strong local professional community, acquire skills to implement new learning strategies immediately, and ensure they are an integral part of the vital, national conversation about educational innovation.

In 2025, our book club chose to read, *How to Teach AI* by Rachelle Dene Poth. Capitalizing on our ISTE affiliate status, we not only were able to purchase the books at

a sizable discount, but we had our capstone webinar moderated by the author herself! You cannot measure the value of being able to learn from the author in a book study. I know how much I learned from this year's book study and our UCET members who participated were richly rewarded from this experience.

## Edcamps

With our state being so large geographically, it can be difficult to gather educators from all corners of Utah. Our state-wide conference reaches many, but we need other ways to bring teachers together. Edcamps have been hugely successful in providing more local ways to help teachers build their own PLC groups. Over the past decade we've held edcamps throughout Utah - Edcamp Utah (SLC area), Edcamp CUT (central Utah), Edcamp St. George (southwestern Utah), Edcamp 4 Corners (southeastern Utah), and Edcamp WASO (Provo area).

Edcamps have helped UCET transform professional learning by providing educators with the unprecedented freedom to crowdsource the agenda and choose sessions based on their most pressing needs and curiosity. This unique, participant-driven structure encourages authentic, collaborative learning where every teacher is both a learner and a leader. Edcamps inherently foster a vibrant sense of community and professional empowerment, moving away from passive lectures toward dynamic, active discussion. This flexible environment ensures that learning is instantly relevant, allowing teachers to quickly adopt innovative strategies and build a robust, supportive network of peers to implement new ideas effectively.



*"Edcamp is what professional development should be about. Teachers coming together to discuss individual challenges and interests, while sharing resources or possible solutions based on real needs, interests, and experiences. Participating in Edcamp Utah was one of the most authentic professional development experiences I have had in years."*

-Jeremy Smith  
[\(https://ucet.org/about/edcamp/\)](https://ucet.org/about/edcamp/)

## #UTedchat

While edchats have come and gone we'd be remiss if we don't mention the impact that educational twitter chats had across Utah. #UTedchat began in 2014 as an UCET experiment and quickly developed a loyal following. Held weekly on Wednesday nights #UTedchat routinely brought educators together from across the state. It was a forum that brought together a variety of groups including higher ed and public ed, suburban and rural, elementary and secondary to discuss the issues related to education in Utah. #UTedchat was an organic way to bring teachers together. At one point #UTedchat even received national recognition for its engaging conversations (<https://iste.org/blog/44-education-twitter-chats-worth-your-time>) .

After ten years and nearly 400 chats #UTedchat closed down as technology trends had shifted and Twitter was no longer the collaborative space it had once been for educators. Like with all technologies, it has changed with the times. Still, #UTedchat demonstrated the need that teachers have to connect with one another and UCET looked to be a leader in that space.

*"Our building has had very little PD time for tech. Twitter has been a place to grow. Being a part of these chats has changed me."*  
[\(https://ucet.org/about/utedchat/\)](https://ucet.org/about/utedchat/)





UCET Board of Directors

## Conclusion

UCET's success truly mirrors the remarkable technological innovation that the state of Utah has achieved within its classrooms. This isn't a recent phenomenon, but a long-running narrative that began when the integration of technology into education was merely an ambitious dream, a stark contrast to the commonplace digital tools and connected environments we take for granted today.

I have been privileged to have a front-row seat for the past two decades of this incredible journey. Over that time, I've watched as ambitious visions became pilot programs, pilot programs became state-wide initiatives, and technology evolved from a novel accessory to an essential pillar of the learning experience. In my role with UCET, I see my primary responsibility as helping to bridge the gap between this foundational history—where we've been, what we've learned, and what we've built—and the rapidly evolving technological landscape that is shaping the future of education.

Ultimately, the power behind this movement is not just the hardware or the software, but the people. We are all essential cogs in the human networks that drive meaningful and effective educational technology. These networks—of teachers, coaches, administrators, and government leaders—help UCET provide the crucial support, training, and collective wisdom necessary to navigate constant change. No matter what new innovation appears on the horizon, the strength of the human network remains the most important factor in ensuring that technology serves the student.



UTAH COALITION FOR  
EDUCATIONAL TECHNOLOGY

*Jared Covili* Jared Covili is the Administrator for Digital Teaching and Learning in the [Jordan, Utah School District](#). Jared's background is in secondary education where he was a Language Arts teacher at the secondary level. Jared received his Bachelor's degree in English and his Master's degree in Instructional Design and Educational Technology from the [University of Utah](#). Besides his work in Jordan, Jared served as the president of the [Utah Coalition for Educational Technology \(UCET\)](#) for 2011-2012 and currently serves on the UCET board, connecting with ISTE and organizing Edcamp Utah. Jared is the author of [Going Google](#) and [Classroom in the Cloud](#).



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*Lead  
Forward*

*with Andy Szeto*



# Leading into the Future

Dr. Andy Szeto shares a lifetime of leadership learning and doing through this exclusive feature for *The Worthy Educator*, offering insights, ideas and a path forward for aspiring leaders in education!



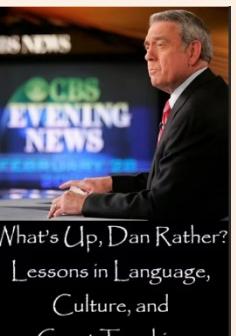
**It Starts with a Question**



**Open Doors in a Closed World: What Panera Bread Taught Me About School Receptions**



**The Jacket That Finally Fit**



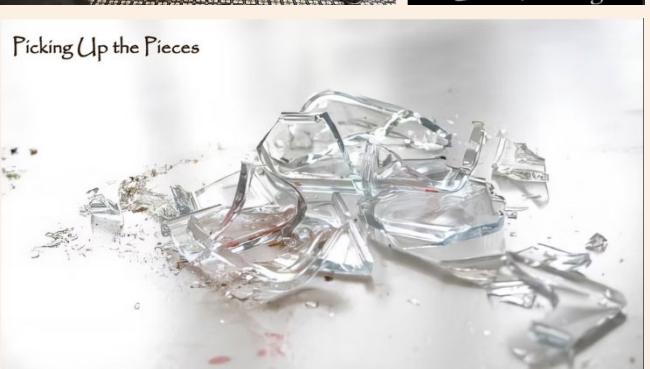
**What's Up, Dan Rather?  
Lessons in Language,  
Culture, and  
Great Teaching**



**A K-Pop Anthem & Authentic Leadership: Lessons from "Golden"**



**The Summer Program That Taught Me Everything I Didn't Know**



**Picking Up the Pieces**

[Dr. Andy Szeto](#) is a public school district administrator focusing on academic policy and performance for overage and under-credited students. He also serves as an adjunct assistant professor specializing in educational leadership, teacher education, TESOL, and adult education at multiple colleges in the NYC metropolitan area. He has led initiatives to improve instructional practices and student outcomes, with a focus on meeting the needs of diverse and historically underserved student populations. You can connect with Andy by email [here](#) and read more of his writing at [drandyszeto.com](http://drandyszeto.com)!



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LEGACY

TRANSFORMATION IN ACTION

## Learning to Relearn: A Writing Journey Rooted in Identity, Resistance, and Affirmation



Kwame Sarfo-Mensah  
Founder & CEO  
Identity Talk Consulting  
Lusaka, Zambia

When I started writing *Learning to Relearn* in 2021, I wasn't just writing a book - I was laying down a challenge. A challenge to myself. A challenge to the field of education. A challenge to the norms we've accepted for far too long about identity, power, and the purpose of schooling.

I had read dozens of books on antiracist education. Some were powerful, some were performative, and too many were divorced from the lived experiences of the very communities they claimed to center. I didn't want to write another book that sat politely on a shelf during PD week and then collected dust. I wanted to write something disruptive. Something rooted. Something unapologetically human. I wanted to amplify the identity stories of educators and activists who come from historically marginalized communities. A book that readers can pick up, read, and come out of the reading experience feeling seen, heard, honored, and affirmed for who they are and how they show up in our global society. I wanted to write a book that reframes the way that we teach, understand, learn, and talk about identity. From the early reader responses, I truly believe that I've achieved just that!

*Learning to Relearn* was born from years of witnessing how our educational systems continue to fail students whose identities fall outside the dominant narrative. But even more than that, it was born from conversations. Conversations with educators of color who felt unseen. With queer teachers who felt silenced. With White educators trying to move beyond guilt and into action. With students who were tired of being told they didn't belong unless they conformed.

I also wanted to reframe how we even talk about identity in education. Too often, identity is treated like a side dish, something we address in a February bulletin board or a DEI newsletter. But identity is the core ingredient. It shapes how we teach, how we learn, how we lead, how we discipline, and how we define success.

So this book had to push beyond comfort. It had to disrupt.

### The Writing Process: Breaking the Mold

Writing this book was not a clean, linear process. It was messy. It was emotional. And it was absolutely necessary.

Every time I sat down to write, I thought about the educators who would hold this book in their hands. I thought about the teacher in a rural district who felt like the only one speaking up for justice. I thought about the assistant principal trying to shift school culture while navigating burnout. I thought about the teacher candidates who had never had their racial, cultural, or gender identities validated in their entire training.

This book was for them.

That meant I couldn't just talk theory. I had to bring in real stories. I had to center real people. And I had to ask readers to do real work. Each chapter is written with intentionality, blending narrative, research, and reflection. I didn't want to offer quick fixes. I wanted to guide readers through a process of unlearning, interrogating, and - yes - *relearning*. That's what makes this book more than a one-time read.

As the early copies started to circulate, the feedback came in fast. And it was humbling.

Educators messaged me saying they finally felt seen. Some cried while reading because it was the first time they saw their teaching experiences validated in a professional text. Others told me they had been afraid to speak certain truths aloud - but this book gave them the language and the courage to do so.

That's when I knew I had done what I set out to do.

This wasn't just another education book. This was an invitation. A mirror. A rallying cry.

### Making Identity Work a Daily Practice

One of the things I emphasize everywhere I go - whether it's a keynote, a workshop, or a classroom visit - is that culturally affirming practice is not a special event. It's not a themed month. It's not something you pull out when a tragedy hits the news cycle.

It's daily work.

Since publishing *Learning to Relearn*, I've had the opportunity to connect with educators and institutions who are putting that belief into action. From the [SENIAC Conferences](#) to the Teacher Assistants Conference, to partnerships with schools and colleges around the world, the energy has been electric. These educators aren't just reading the book. They're living the work.

At [Elms College](#), for example, *Learning to Relearn* has been adopted into their curriculum through the [Center for Equity in Urban Education](#). [Seton Hall University](#) and other schools have followed suit. The book is being used not just as reading material, but as a launchpad for curriculum redesign, teacher reflection, and student dialogue.

Even international schools are embracing the message. Institutions like the [ACS International Schools](#), [International School of Beijing](#), [Seisen International School](#), and [American International School of Lusaka](#) have added the book to their libraries and professional learning plans. That kind of reach tells me that educators everywhere - across borders and backgrounds - are craving a more affirming, justice-centered approach to education.

In 2024, *Learning to Relearn* won the [Foreword INDIES Gold Award](#) for Best Education Book. In 2025, it was honored with the [IPPY Gold Medal](#) for Best Education Commentary Book. And while awards aren't the reason I write, I won't lie...it means a lot to have this work recognized.

But more than recognition, these awards are validation that *this* kind of work belongs in the canon. That the stories and perspectives I've centered are not niche - they're necessary.

[Dr. Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz](#), who wrote the foreword, said it best: "*With Learning to Relearn, Sarfo-Mensah has written himself into the canon of scholars who boldly advocate for social justice in schools.*" I hold those words close because they remind me of the responsibility that comes with writing and the power that comes from doing it with integrity.

And while I'm appreciative of the overwhelmingly positive response that the book has received from you all, I'm also weary of the fact that there's a great level of resistance from individuals, corporations, and others who don't want books like mine to see the light of day. For this reason, I'm humbly asking you to continue to support me and other independent Black and Brown authors who are producing written works that challenge white supremacist systems.

### Pushback and Persistence

Of course, not everyone is cheering.

The truth is, there's a very real and growing resistance to books like mine. There are school boards and corporations that are working overtime to silence any curriculum that challenges white supremacy or centers marginalized voices. There are laws being passed to limit what we can teach about race, gender, and power.

So yes, while I'm deeply grateful for the outpouring of support, I'm also aware of the fight we're up against.

That's why I'm calling on our community - not just to read the book, but to protect the space for it to exist. To speak up. To share it. To review it. To use it in your schools. To invite me to your campuses. To bring the conversation into spaces where it's been shut down.

Because this book wasn't written to play it safe. It was written to shake the table.

The beauty of *Learning to Relearn* is that it's not finished. Not really. Every conversation it sparks, every educator it reaches, every classroom it impacts - *that's* part of the story. That's part of the legacy.



So here's what I'm asking from you:

- Watch the recording of our Learning to Relearn Book Study through The Worthy Educator.
- If this book moved you, leave a review. Let others know why it matters.
- Share it. With your team, your district, your professors, your students.
- Adopt it. Make it part of your curriculum. Use it in your professional development.
- Bring me in. Let's do the work together - in your school, your city, your network.

This isn't about promoting a product. It's about sustaining a movement. One rooted in the belief that education should affirm, not erase. That our classrooms should be places of liberation, not assimilation. That relearning is not a weakness - it's a form of resistance.

### Relearning is a Radical Act

The more I talk with educators, the more I believe this: Relearning is one of the most radical things we can do.

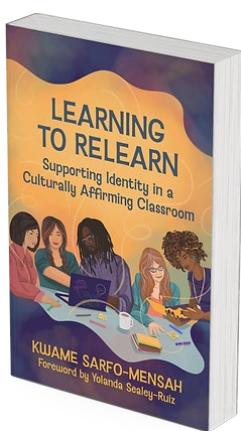
It requires humility. It requires courage. And it requires community.

*Learning to Relearn* was never about perfection. It was about possibility. It was about rewriting the narrative - starting with ourselves. And judging from the response, the conversations, the transformations I've seen - educators are ready.

They're ready to question. Ready to evolve. Ready to teach from a place of deep identity, fierce love, and unwavering justice.

So let's keep learning. Let's keep unlearning. And most importantly, let's keep relearning - together. Join me at [Learning to Relearn](#).

CONTENTS



Kwame Sarfo-Mensah is the founder of [Identity Talk Consulting, LLC](#), a global educational consulting firm that specializes in developing K-12 teachers into identity-affirming educators. Prior to starting his firm, he served as a middle school math teacher in Philadelphia and Boston for nine years. His latest book, ["Learning to Relearn: Supporting Identity in a Culturally Affirming Classroom"](#) is highly acclaimed and the basis for this piece. [in](#) [envelope](#)

Coming in  
February!  
Our 2nd annual  
#edufriends  
tribute sharing!



#edufriends

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

[Share Your Edufriends Story!](#)



# LEGACY

## TRANSFORMATION IN ACTION

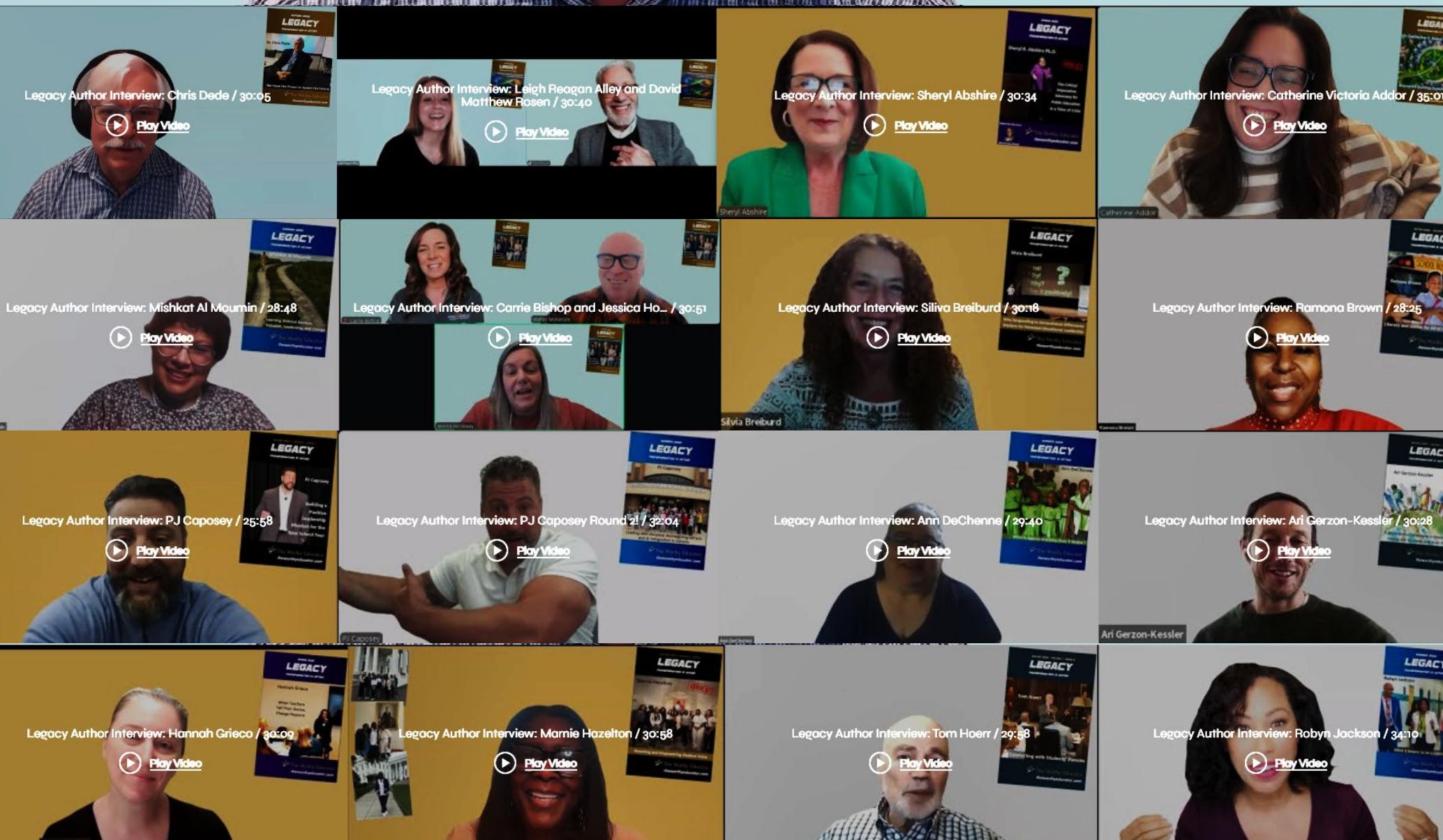
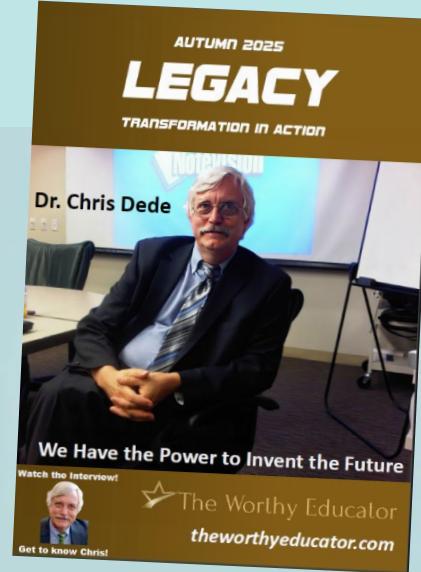


### AUTHOR INTERVIEWS



Legacy Author Interview: Chris Dede

Play Video



44 AUTHOR INTERVIEWS AND COUNTING  
EACH BASED ON THEIR LEGACY JOURNAL ARTICLE!

# LEGACY

TRANSFORMATION IN ACTION

## Humans in the Loop of Learning in the Age of AI



Thomas Szczesny, Ed.D.  
Principal, Powderhorn Elementary School  
Littleton, Colorado

People flourish when afforded space to be present with and act in the service of others. We all – young or old – are energized from knowing our presence is significant to those around us and knowing how that presence contributes to the broader community (Prilleltensky, 2020). Presence matters, but conversations today about large language learning models (LLMs) and Artificial Intelligence (AI) often focus on absence instead – taking humans out of the loop – creating efficiencies. The notion doesn't take into account what we know to be true about education: connection is foundational. To thrive, we require direct interaction with others. Relationships are the beating heart of education, not software and servers.

Teaching and learning is a relational endeavor, and research affirms this sense of belonging as foundational for academic growth (TNTP, 2024). As educators, it's dismaying to encounter assertions that technology can replace our presence. Some even go so far as to assert computers can offer instruction tantamount to a teacher's delivery. This article argues against to the contrary, advocating in favor of human-centered teaching and learning. Even more importantly, I make the case for professional learning that incorporates AI and LLMs to help design learning experiences with human connection at their core, and it begins with connection and mattering as central to joyful learning. The challenge and the opportunity is building learning environments where human interaction, not computer interface, is the focal point.

To address the topic of LLMs and AI in education, we must first acknowledge the reality that they are present in the lives of our students, who are raised in a world where technology's capabilities define how they experience the world around them, how they interact with each other, and how they learn and create. We must choose to view this reality as an opportunity to help our students understand how to responsibly, ethically engage with these new technologies.

Historically, the emergence of new technology stokes fears about its implications for human connection, cognition, and interaction, but over time, we witness its lasting imprint and we find our agency through it. Its utility depends on how we choose to use it. The evolution of human interaction with technology is a story of co-creation. As educators, we can be the change agents who help students to be ethical, constructive users of the new tools they take to so easily.

Today's educators face both enormous challenges and enormous opportunities as champions for human interaction – relationships and connection – education's central, guiding value. In this moment in human history we can solidify the foundation to which we commit ourselves by advocating for the value humans still contribute in the workplace and in society, and by demonstrating how everyone flourishes when they know that they are valued. We must shape learning environments that are deeply human to empower learner agency as a requirement for teaching and learning today, and ensure that these learning environments safely and securely incorporate LLMs and AI. In doing so, we inform a new age of student learning, professional learning and community engagement; a human-centric path forward that champions people and how they think bout and make use of technology.



## Advocating for Human-Centered Education

A leader's responsibility includes walking those they serve through transition. Bridges (2009) explains transition as a series of 4 phases. Across each phase, it's critical to keep in mind that transition involves loss. This is a particularly relevant frame for leaders to remember in conversations about AI and LLMs, because the potential for loss can be profound for those having change thrust upon them. Relationships are foundational in conversations about AI, as we share and address the fears that we can be replaced - or our skill and passion can be replicated - through new generative technologies. It can feel as though it is threatening our very identity.

The reality is, with all the excitement and speculation about the impact of these new kinds of technologies, we can be energized to respond proactively. Rather than dehumanizing classrooms and workplaces, this current era gives us the chance to re-emphasizing each person's unique identity and essential value. It's important to acknowledge these anxious feelings we have and honor each voice as a first step to coming together and advocate for those values and principles that are core to meaningful learning, working and living. This refortifies our value for human-centered education by keeping us very much in the loop - a motivating factor in our own agency as education professionals.

While keeping humans in the loop is obvious to anyone in education, it's important to recognize our audience goes beyond our profession. By engaging the broader community, we educate, inform, and prompt deeper discussion about the role of schools and technology in society. We must espouse a compelling vision that presents a new model for education that is best for our today's students. There are several germane points to be made in advocating for human-centered learning in this age of techno-infusion in every aspect of our lives.

## The Power & Purpose of Education

Consider these key points in making the case for the power and purpose of public education. It's not an exhaustive list. Rather, these are starting points to prime deeper thinking about the human role in optimizing generative technologies and the critical role of educators in this moment in time. These points illuminate several through-lines as to why and how humans remain intimately in the loop when it comes to new technologies in teaching, learning and our everyday lives.

### Education and Democracy

In a pluralistic society, it's imperative we relate to each other; to listen, engage, and respond as people. Those skills are learned through direct human interaction, and the classroom and school yard cultivate these abilities to have healthy, constructive exchanges throughout our lives (Dewey, 1916). The need for institutions that foster these skills is growing in importance as polarization increases across the globe and the challenges we face only intensify. It's easier now to construct and remain in a personal echo chamber that reinforces our own views without considering others. Balkanization does not promote peace, understanding, or harmony. A willingness to engage, seek perspective, and find common ground is key to listening, negotiation and compromise - skills that our formative years in schools help us to develop.

### Teaching and Learning Best Practices

Students learn best through the act of constructing knowledge. Construction itself is a collaborative effort through which everyone participating benefits from the exchange of ideas. These skills build upon each other through authentic learning experiences with others (Dehaene, 2021).

### Raising Good Humans

Often, I hear parents say what they want most for their child is to develop as a good human, and while we can hold different views about what constitutes being a good human, we can agree on core characteristics and attributes, such as kindness and empathy. Cultivating these qualities requires human interaction in nurturing learning environments to create the context for growth and development.

### Durable or Human Schools

We can also approach our advocacy work in terms of economy and efficiency, explaining how young people need the skills of teamwork, communication, and collaboration to thrive in the twenty-first century workplace and in society. In addition, flexibility, creativity, and problem-solving are essential skills humans bring to learning and productivity that cannot be supplanted by technology, and schools are well-equipped for cultivating these attributes and adapting and evolving to accommodate new skills and dispositions as they become evident.



## Only Humans can Close the Loop: Human Skills

Ethics are one through-line for all potential points of advocacy. Engagement with democracy, the notion of raising good humans, and the development of durable skills all implicitly assert the importance of fostering direct human interaction in our classrooms. There's no agenda in making this statement, nor a clear goal about what needs to constitute "right." Robust debate about ethics has existed for centuries and will continue. The very debate itself revolves around different conceptions of the same principle, and young people benefit from exercising their values and beliefs with one another in supportive environments.

One essential skill, for example, is critical thinking. It requires the ability to analyze potential bias in the data that is presented, and LLMs are built from data that can contain bias. The information from AI models built on those LLMs must be considered in this context. It isn't an indictment of AI to question the validity of what is produced. AI itself is incapable of that self-reflection. As educators we can help students see the potential for skewed results and bias. AI models have the goal of satisfying human wishes; to say what we want to hear. A user is naturally inclined to see the results in a positive light, receiving an answer they want to hear over a better response that better serves them, creating that echo chamber effect.

Examples like this insert ethical considerations into helping young people understand AI. Philosophers have long debated whether and how to optimize our lives for joy and fulfillment, yet technology that makes optimization easier, or a sense of righteousness easier to attain, does not always lead to deeper fulfillment. It's a profound question, striking at the core of what it means to be human in this age of digitized, generative being. Classrooms are the bastion for these deep reflections and even deeper discussions.

*Only humans can close the loop.*

## Only Humans can Close the Loop: Teaching and Learning

We stand as advocates for relational teaching and learning, cultivating the abilities, mindsets, and dispositions that support students in growing into ethical, humane adults - good humans. Caring professionals can thoughtfully design interactions that help children grow as kind, collaborative problem-solvers. In this way, we are agents of creation, utilizing our knowledge of teaching and learning to make these outcomes possible.

Educators are central in learning models that emphasize relational experiences in the development of human skills. We recognize when students feel unsure or uncomfortable and offer re-assurance, modeling empathy and understanding. The relationships we cultivate over time help us know the contrast of expression that prompts a check-in. Similarly, educators come to know their students in ways that enable them to choose texts or questions that ignite their curiosity. In the moment, we set the conditions for dialogue that enriches learning and promotes personal growth. In these ways, educators serve as a catalyst, creating interactions that fuel our growth as humans. Instead of filling the pail, as the saying goes, educators spark and tend to the fire, gathering the material, igniting it, and carefully tending to it in order to keep it burning.



## Only Humans can Close the Loop: The Importance of Mattering

AI and LLMs cannot skillfully navigate the human experience of learning. Only we are capable of setting the norms for interaction, noticing the rhythms of dialogue, affirming positive change, and assuring a sense of safety wherein students can make themselves vulnerable enough to learn and grow and thrive.

AI cannot replicate the care of an educator. We know that people learn when they are genuinely cared for, and only a fellow human can be that warm presence. We show this in a myriad ways that they recognize, appreciate, and value another person's presence so that students know they matter. This is the first step to inspiring agency both in students and in colleagues. Our presence and involvement in the lives of learners makes all of this possible, with or without technology, and today technology is ever-present.

Human skills are best cultivated in environments where students have agency over their learning. Collaboration, compromise and problem-solving empower students as creators. They own the process as they make contributions, which is essential for students to know they matter.

*If we can get stakeholders to agree that we don't want to deprive our young people of agency, then we can agree we need to keep humans – educators and students - in the loop.*

*If we can agree that we want our young people to know how to interact with others, then we can agree we need to keep humans – educators and students – in the loop.*

*If we can agree we need to maintain vibrant classrooms, then we can agree we need to keep humans – educators and students – in the loop.*

Students must be invited into the loop in order to invite their meaningful participation. When it comes to technology, the same questions posed here can be posed to young people. Namely, how can we use emergent technologies as tools while maintaining our connection to each other? They strike the core of who we are as humans, and educators can insert the ethical considerations so important in framing the learning in this new age. We provide students agency, asking them to consider and create conditions for living in their world. The reality is we all adapt and reach a better place for grappling with the deeper questions we face.



## Only Humans can Close the Loop: Incorporating AI

We can re-ground what it means to be an educator in the age of AI. A shared desire for relational models of learning that center human connection should become the guiding lights. They guide toward keeping educators as essential in the loop of learning while engaging with AI and LLMs strictly as tools within a larger context of genuine interaction. The approach affirms the value of educators while offering a path forward for their place in the loop. It begins with noticing that the learning experience itself must be human-centered. It must center student agency and the concept of mattering. From that place, AI can offer ideas that put parameters on that experience – the task around which it is centered – but technology's limitation includes the fact realization of that task cannot be accomplished in a manner that promotes the development of human skills as an outcome.

The pressing challenge for leaders is how to help educators see AI and LLMs as tools for creating learning experiences that empower students, affirm their value as people, and provide them agency. Too often, AI for educators is portrayed as a useful mechanism for gaining efficiency, such as automating email. This is true, too, but its real value lies in what it affords us in planning and preparing for growth and success. In leading the transition, we frame the professional learning space much the same way we define new learning environments for students.

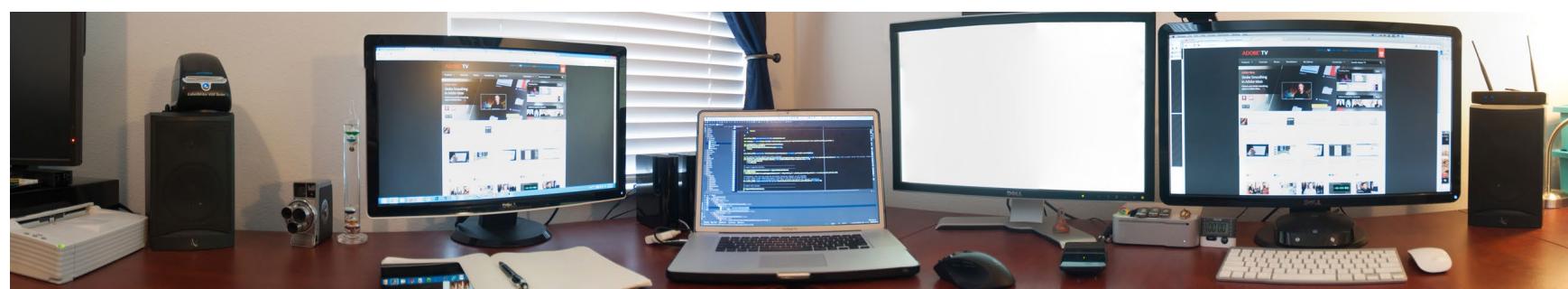


### Only Humans Can Close the Loop: Leading Forward

The way this works in our district, our Instructional Technology team met with instructional leaders so we could listen and learn about the tools available. We then filtered the tools that were appropriate and relevant for our teachers. From there, we met with each grade team PLC to introduce tools and provide space to play and learn before committing to using technology they found most helpful. A few weeks later that same team from the Instructional Technology team returned to lead training for the whole staff. Before that, we met with the Instructional Technology team to share what we observed in PLC and how staff responded to the tools to shape the professional learning they delivered. Afterwards, a designated instructional technology teacher leader met with each team to design upcoming units using these new AI tools. At my suggestion, they created a choice board to guide collaboration – yes, using AI.

The whole sequence is intended to acclimate staff to AI in a gradual, accessible manner. The core team of instructional leaders will serve as lead learners, but everyone on staff learns certain tools to establish a baseline so there is a common language for our professional learning, which is a best practice for navigating technological change (Leonardi & Neeley, 2022). Discretion is key for setting that baseline of available tools, which is why we've had a lead group act as filters and plan for engaging the full staff. It allows us to establish a baseline of knowledge around a standard set of tools based on our guiding principles. In other words, we use AI for curating resources that allow for more student discourse and exchange, even if and especially at the expense of other tools with less utility for that purpose. This is discretion in action.

Your tools should be chosen based on the principles you hope to make the point of emphasis in the classroom, flowing from the environment you're seeking to cultivate. Use frameworks that elevate similar principles, to assess whether a given resource lends itself to the development of human learning. The [University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education's Core Practices for Project Based Learning](#) and [Stanford's YELL \(Youth Engaged in Leadership and Learning\) curriculum](#) are two options. As frameworks, they prompt students with open-ended questions, present them with meaningful issues and challenges, and include scaffolding to support novel solutions to challenges. Consider how AI can augment the development of learning aligned to these experiences.



AI can be trained to generate prompts, brainstorm ideas, and create tasks fostering classroom interaction. Rather than relying on a single educator to generate those ideas, the technology can be a tool for thought partnership in designing interactive learning experiences that promote the development of human skills. They can also help design empowering, humanizing learning experiences. Educators themselves must be present to execute those plans. The support of teachers helps to create buy-in and emphasize the pedagogical principles of delivery around discourse and debate that are embraced in your district.

At the point of either observing classroom discussion or engaging in a feedback conversation with a teacher, people are dialoguing in loop and sync. It's planning comes from Skinner (1954) and its execution comes from Dewey. Familiar to generations of educators, it is an example of something educators may fear losing in this age of generative AI. The notion of training through feedback with direct stimulus and response may train AI to deliver the resources an educator can use to foster debate and construction of knowledge amongst students, but it's not a productive model for actually fostering such interaction.

It's important to establish where this type of learning lives. The structure of your district may involve different departments in different ways. It may also have variable degrees of collaboration. I raise the complexity of organizational dynamics as a barrier only to name a potential challenge as you scaffold support for yourself and your building.

### Only Humans Can Close the Loop: Designing for both/and in the Age of AI

Another step we're taking to engage on the topic of AI is addressing the role of technology in our students' lives through our formal structure for community engagement, our School Advisory Council (SAC). The school's SAC advises on a range of issues. Some are codified, such as the school's budget, but the other topics are chosen through a collaborative process. This year we opened a broad umbrella to cover the topic of technology and its role in the lives of young people. We surveyed families to narrow the scope of this broad topic, asking them which tools and technologies they want to understand better and how it can support learning at home. Privacy and safety emerged as top of mind, which points toward the concerns families have about the technology. It also points toward the fact families hope young people develop skills for being judicious in how they use technology; a further affirmation of a human-centered form of education.

It's an unavoidable truth: technology plays a prominent role in our students' lives. Like with educators, we need to equip families to help their young people develop healthy, ethical habits in their use. Screen time, for instance, dominates many conversations about tech use at home. There is fear around the appropriate amount of time online, and if and when to extend that time, offering yet another opportunity to center relational work and outcomes for children.

Conversations with families about technology and AI, in particular, can become opportunities to affirm the importance of developing relationship skills. It also underscores why educators will continue to play such a prominent role in the age of AI. It is a complex moment in time when collaboration is necessary. Now more than ever, it is what is required to thoughtfully build our dialogue loop.



I value equity, collaboration, connection, and joy. As a person and leader, I seek to expand the capacity of others to connect, love, lead and impact. I lead in service of cultivating environments of belonging where everyone knows they matter in order to inspire the collective growth of the community and support individuals to realize their highest potential. I also love to learn because it allows me to be more effective in how I serve others, starting with how I myself can improve. It helps me realize not only how much room I have to grow but also the awesome responsibility of taking that personal journey in order to serve others to seek those same horizons.

It's an awesome endeavor, and I bring extensive experience in strategic leadership, innovation, change management, professional learning, and public communication. I also bring particular expertise in systems-thinking, organizational culture, adult and youth development, project-based learning, and durable skills. I developed the insights in this article working in and collaborating across a range of sectors, including in K-12 education, higher education, and non-profit organizations, and for-profit institutions.

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*Tom Szczesny is the principal of Powderhorn Elementary School in Littleton, Colorado, where he is building true community, working with families and stakeholders in support of each student's success - socially, emotionally, and academically. Previously, he worked for 14 years in the School District of Philadelphia across a range of roles, including teacher, researcher, teacher coach, and principal. His expertise is in strategic leadership, change management, systems-thinking, organizational culture, and project-based learning.* 



**Illinois Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development**

## Illinois is rebranding!

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE  
Illinois ASCD Rebrands as PD365

Springfield, IL — October 1, 2025—The rebrand reflects the organization's unwavering commitment to providing professional learning and support every day of the year—for every educator, in every role. PD365 represents the organization's renewed focus on delivering powerful, relevant professional development 365 days a year. For the organization, this is more than a name change—it's a recommitment to empowering educators with ongoing learning opportunities and resources to meet the needs of every student, every day.

[Read the press release](#)



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**Why the Rebrand?**  
The change to PD365 comes in response to evolving guidelines from ASCD/ISTE, the national organization with which Illinois ASCD has been historically affiliated. As ASCD and ISTE unify their work under a new global framework for professional learning, affiliates across the country have been encouraged to establish distinct names and brands that reflect their unique missions, audiences, and regional impact.

By becoming PD365, the organization honors its decades-long legacy while also ensuring compliance with ASCD/ISTE guidelines and positioning itself for future growth. The new name reinforces its core mission: to provide Professional Development, 365 days a year—tailored to the needs of Illinois educators while remaining connected to a national and global network of innovation in teaching and learning.

**Looking Ahead**  
Under its new identity as PD365, the organization will:

- Expand Reach: Offering both in-person and virtual programming to educators throughout Illinois.
- Broaden Services: Providing professional development tailored to classroom teachers, administrators, and district leaders across all grade levels.
- Deepen Partnerships: Collaborating with universities, education associations, and national thought leaders to deliver cutting-edge resources.
- Sustain Community: Maintaining the relationships and networks that have made Illinois ASCD a trusted leader in education for generations.

The new name and brand identity will be rolled out over the coming months across PD365's conferences, publications, and digital platforms. Members and partners can expect the same trusted quality of professional learning—now with a renewed focus on continuous growth and innovation. For more information, please visit [ilascd.org](#).



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# The Worthy Educator

# christmas beach

# HOUSE GIVEAWAY!

## We're Excited to Announce our Winner!

**It is an honor to announce that the winner of our Christmas Beach House Giveaway is Elissa Andrade, an Instructional Specialist for the Department of Systemwide Equity in the Montgomery County Public Schools in Rockville, Maryland! Elissa is a career educator who has served as an elementary and middle school special education teacher, consulting teacher, and innovative support teacher in schools in suburban Washington, D.C. and in Miami, Florida!**

Hi Walter!

We have been having a great time. The kids have enjoyed kicking off their winter break at the beach.

Yesterday we made our traditional Christmas buñuelos and hot chocolate. Today we walked on the beach and went on the Corolla Outdoor Adventure tour to see the wild horses. We also had a nice walk on the beach, where Zelda enjoyed some time in the sand.

Thank you again!

In Appreciation,  
The Andrade Family





# Treat a Worthy Educator!

Each month a Worthy Educator is selected to receive a free meal on us! Everyone who belongs to our community is eligible for the drawing, and it's free to join us!



## Our Winners (so far):



**Leah Pongratz**

Lead Teacher  
Washington County Schools  
Maryland  
September 2024



**Tahseen Qureshi**

Engagement Manager  
Safal  
Texas  
October 2024



**Joshua Medrano**

Academic Dean  
Rancho Christian School  
California  
November 2024



**Fred Ende**

Director Of Curriculum & Instruction  
Putnam|North Westchester BOCES  
New York  
December 2024



**Davina Williams**

Elementary Science Coordinator  
Portsmouth Public Schools  
Virginia  
January 2025



**Monty Hitschler**

Director of I.S. & Technologies  
Town and Schools of Rockport  
Massachusetts  
February 2025



**Isabel Bozada-Jones**

Coordinator, Federal Programs & MTSS  
Reynoldsburg City Schools  
Ohio  
March 2025



**Sweety Patel**

Director of School Counseling Services  
Carteret Public Schools  
New Jersey  
April 2025



**Binod Duwadi**

Visiting Faculty  
Kathmandu University School of Ed  
Nepal  
May 2025



**Silvia Breiburd**

Professor and Teacher Trainer  
ISFD y T Pedro Poveda  
Argentina  
June 2025



**Alfonso N. Carvallo**

CEO  
Elite SDGs Business Consulting  
Peru  
July 2025



**Javeria Rana**

Academic Director  
Unique Intl Ed Services  
Pakistan  
August 2025



**Amy Mathews-Perez**

Founder  
Making Education Special for All  
Texas  
September 2025



**Lisa Bradley-Coates**

Education Administrator  
State Department of Juvenile Justice  
Virginia  
October 2025



**Serenity Moore**

New Employee Induction  
Montgomery County Schools  
Maryland  
November 2025



**Pinar Sekmen**

Founder  
PS: Professional Support in Education  
Turkey  
December 2025

# LEGACY: TRANSFORMATION IN ACTION IS NOW ACCEPTING SUBMISSIONS FOR OUR SPRING 2026 ISSUE!



**The Worthy Educator accepts journal submissions on an open, rolling basis. Please submit by March 1, 2026 to be considered for our Spring 2026 issue.**

**Legacy: Transformation in Action is open to timely submissions that showcase the work being done by practitioners modeling and championing education transformation. We do not identify quarterly themes; we are open to a diversity of voice and thought that reflects the rich tapestry of humanity and represents the full range of stakeholders in education.**



**See our full submission guidelines and portal at  
[theworthyeducator.com/submission-guidelines](http://theworthyeducator.com/submission-guidelines)**

# **LEGACY**

**TRANSFORMATION IN ACTION**



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