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A Message from the President and Executive Director

“When we least expect it, life sets us a challenge to test our courage and willingness to change; at such a moment, there is no point in pretending that nothing has happened or in saying that we are not yet ready. The challenge will not wait. Life does not look back.”

— Paulo Coelho

South Carolina educators have been handed a tremendous challenge this year—one that has certainly tested our courage and measured our strength. We were faced with a once-in-a-lifetime obstacle to overcome, and we traversed the rocky terrain only to find ourselves on the other side with more mountains to climb and people looking to us for where to go next. As school leaders, you know all too well that the one constant in education is change. While this year has been unlike any other, your experience in leading with courage and through change has given you the ability to meet the challenges that will not wait and enabled you to guide your students, teachers, and communities over the next obstacle.

In the past year, SCASA has worked incredibly hard to bring school leaders together. By holding in-person, hybrid, and virtual roundtable meetings and Center for Executive Education Leadership (CEEL) workshops, we have continued to make the safety of our members our number one priority. With limited capacity, social distancing, enhanced cleaning protocols, and mask requirements, we have been able to provide the same services for our 4,500 members. COVID-19 brought with it a flurry of state and national policy changes impacting public education. As these changes poured in, we have facilitated sessions to provide guidance to schools and districts through this year. In the 180 weekdays since the start of August, we have held 158 in-person or virtual meetings for school leaders across the state to work together to overcome the challenges of the pandemic and provide the best possible learning environment for our students.

South Carolina students were not the only ones gaining new knowledge this year. School leaders have learned a great deal about how to provide robust academic programs while following public health guidelines to keep our students and staff members safe. We have learned how to mount massive vaccination campaigns, navigate quarantines, and adjust protocols daily to meet changing circumstances and needs. It is not unusual that our communities ask a great deal from schools and educators—but this past year spotlighted how essential school and district leaders are to maintaining a learning environment for the over 750,000 public school students statewide.

It is imperative that leaders continue to grow to better support their students and teachers. The 2021 Innovative Ideas Institute (i3) this summer and CEEL programs that start in the fall will provide you with opportunities to do exactly that. We have a fantastic set of breakout sessions led by leaders from around the state and incredible game changer and keynote speakers set up for i3. We hope you can join us as we return to the 40-year tradition of an in-person conference.

Without question, this has been a tough year with many challenges for everyone. However, there is light at the end of this tunnel. You faced the challenges with courage and strength—and for that we are forever grateful.

Harrison Goodwin
SCASA President

Beth Phibbs
Executive Director
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The short walk from the ISS room back to my office felt like walking a mile in a dry wasteland. I sat down at my desk and let my eyes linger over a picture of my three sons—my beautiful brown boys. I drew in a deep breath and closed my eyes in an attempt to slow the rush of emotion surging through my veins. I did not obtain my degree in school administration to be a warden in a prison, and yet this is how I felt most days of the week. Spending the majority of my workday assigning young Black boys ISS or OSS was a burden I questioned my ability to carry. I did not, could not see these students as “other.” No. They were just as much a part of me as the three whose dimpled smiles and dark brown eyes stared back at me from the picture frame—a call to action. Where do I begin? How do I find the courage to help educators confront and dismantle the inequities within this system that fill our ISS rooms with young Black boys while the gifted and talented classes down the hall are filled with their white peers?

This is a question that I haven’t fully answered; however, the first step to solving a problem is to acknowledge that one exists. Significant opportunity and achievement gaps between white students and their Black and brown counterparts is not a new problem. In fact, this issue has received attention since 1966, and yet the gaps persist and, in some cases, grow wider. According to data from South Carolina’s 2018 testing cycle, 63.9% of white students passed ELA or math while only 37.35% of Black students and 49.19% of Hispanic students earned a passing grade statewide. School closures in 2020 brought on by COVID-19 revealed more striking evidence of racial and economic disparities, in part because educators caught glimpses of their students’ home lives in new and enlightening ways.

One English teacher shared with me a moment that opened her eyes to the challenges that some of her students face: “I was facilitating a Google Live, when one of my girls said, ‘Mrs. Smith, can you give me a second. I’m watching my baby cousin while my mom and my aunt are at work. She’s waking up from her nap, and I need to warm her bottle.’” The teacher’s response was quick and polite as she struggled to keep the worry and sadness in her heart from showing up on her face. She decided, right then and there, that she was going to use a different approach for dealing with students who struggled to turn in work in a timely manner. She understood that, when you’re 13 years old and suddenly find yourself as the primary caregiver for your family, completing school work may not be at the top of your to-do list.

As educators continue to examine the impact of COVID-19, similar stories are uncovered; the students’ skin color is the common factor in these stories. As school closings persisted longer than anyone anticipated, districts quickly strategized to meet the needs of its most vulnerable learners. Using school buses to deliver meals and provide hot spots to expand wireless access were crucial elements of providing support to Black, Hispanic, and low-income communities. Yet, these measures have done little to make up for decades of inaction. Racial and economic disparities within the education system were prevalent long before COVID-19. And if historical patterns continue, COVID-19 will only exacerbate the
problem, McKinsey and Company, a global management and consulting firm dedicated to helping organizations create and sustain “change that matters,” estimates that learning loss due to school shutdowns will put the average student 7 months behind. This number grows for Black, Hispanic, and low-income students: 10.3 months, 9.2 months, and 12 months or more, respectively. These numbers become more high-stakes when they’re translated in terms of future economic impact: “While we estimate that white students would earn $1,348 a year less (a 1.6 percent reduction) over a 40-year working life, the figure is $2,186 a year (a 3.3 percent reduction) for Black students and $1,809 (3.0 percent) for Hispanic ones.” When the individual citizen falls behind, our whole country feels it. If classroom instruction resumes by fall 2021, McKinsey and Company estimates that our nation, as a whole, will suffer a loss in productivity ranging from $306 billion to $483 billion dollars. If we don’t heed this global health crisis as a wakeup call to take intentional action towards creating school cultures in which all children can thrive, our economy isn’t the only area that will take a hit. Research shows that a more highly educated citizenry is also healthier, less likely to commit a crime and/or go to prison, and are more active and engaged in their democracy (Dorn et al., 2020).

When one of us wins, we all win! John Dewey, education reformer, stated, “What the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must the community want for all of its children.” School leaders, it is time for us to develop the courage to work towards a greater vision. Our schools are only as strong as our weakest students, and a long historical pattern shows us that all students are not thriving in this current system. We cannot continue to employ ineffective practices or, worse yet, ignore the problem or attempt to address the problem indirectly, making little to no progress because we’ve failed to deal with the heart of the matter. We must develop the courage to examine inequitable practices that make it more difficult for some students to achieve academic success. How do we create school cultures in which Black and brown students thrive? It starts with building cultures on a firm foundation of true belonging.

Creating a Culture of True Belonging

Dr. Brene Brown (2019), research professor and storyteller whose TED Talk “The Power of Vulnerability,” is one of the top five most viewed TED talks in the world, defines true belonging as “the spiritual practice of believing in and belonging to yourself so deeply that you can share your most authentic self with the world and find sacredness in both being a part of something and standing alone in the wilderness. True belonging doesn’t require you to change who you are; it requires you to be who you are.” Authentic is the word in this definition that stands out to me the most because authenticity is one of my core values. I prize this value so highly because the journey to a place where I embrace my own truth and self-worth has been quite lengthy.

Because I had a mother who believed in the power of education, I was held to a high standard and was expected to enroll in challenging classes and perform to the best of my ability. This path often meant that I was one of a few persons, if not the only person, of color in the room. In this environment, I was thankful for my ability to code switch, the ability to speak both formally and informally, and felt only a little slighted when my Black peers teased me about “sounding like a white girl.” This is just one of many experiences during my formal education that taught me that school was about fitting in, not true belonging.
Every day, in public K-12 schools across the country, Black and brown students are receiving the message that school is not a place where they belong. Maslow’s hierarchy of needs illustrates that safe learning environments where students feel a sense of love and belonging are precursors to self-esteem and the desire to be the best person that one can be. In light of this, one should only expect students to put forth their best effort when they feel a sense of true belonging. However, in order to create school climates of true belonging and inclusion, educators must see reducing and/or eliminating inequality as an important goal.

Rallying the Troops

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has” is a highly-referenced inspirational quotation, and I am referencing it now because teachers are some of the most thoughtful and committed people I know. Time and time again, studies have shown that the teacher in the classroom is the most important factor in determining student achievement, even more so than students’ home lives and socioeconomic backgrounds. Consistent evidence shows that teachers’ expectations matter most for the outcomes of students from underserved groups.

The power and impact of the classroom teacher should be good news when it comes to creating school cultures where all students excel. Unfortunately, research shows that teacher expectations are lowest for Black and brown students (Rochmes et al, 2017). A teacher’s belief in her students’ ability to learn drives the learning experiences she creates for her students. When a teacher believes in her students’ ability to rise to the challenge, she designs learning experiences with more rigor. When students struggle to reach the standards she sets, she offers the support they need to meet them, and high growth and achievement happen. As it concerns Black and brown students, this scenario is less likely to play out because teachers are prone to engage in deficit thinking. Deficit thinking happens when teachers make assumptions about students’ ability to learn based on their preconceived notions about their backgrounds (Rochmes et al, 2017). Teachers may recognize inequality in these assumptions, but they interpret it as a means to justify low expectations and negative stereotypes, as opposed to modifying their instruction in a way that might make the learning process more equitable for historically marginalized students.

Although most teachers believe that addressing inequalities is important, many do not support strategies specifically designed to close racial and socioeconomic inequality (Rochmes et al, 2017). So how do we help teachers take action based on their beliefs? We build their capacity for empathy, and we empower them to make a difference. Theresa Wiseman, a nursing scholar, describes empathy as the ability to take on the perspective of another, stay out of judgment, recognize emotion, communicate emotion, and practice mindfulness (Brown, 2017). Practicing empathy asks us to become the learners and to listen with genuine interest in understanding the experiences of those who are different from us. These skills are essential to creating inclusive environments because they are the building blocks of deep human connection. The importance of human connection is an area where most educators agree, but it requires a significant amount of emotional labor. This is where school leadership must empower teachers through modeling empathetic behavior and giving teachers the time and resources needed to build relationships with their students, especially the
underserved students who stand to benefit the most from their efforts.

We all know the student who won’t work for anyone else except Mr. So-and-So. What is his secret? What magic tricks does he have up his sleeve? His secret is relationships. The same apathy and lack of motivation that frustrates teachers to no end also frustrates Mr. So-and-So. However, his empathy allows him to imagine a scenario where life for his students may place daily survival above obtaining a quality education. Therefore, instead of writing the office referral and sending the student out of the room, he uses compassion and a genuine desire to understand to build a bridge with this student. He keeps his voice low and chooses words that demonstrate respect for the student as a fellow human being. He communicates with the student in a way that not only says to the student “you belong here,” but also says to the student “I want you here.”

Treating a lack of motivation as a discipline issue often makes the problem worse because students who feel that the teacher has a negative view of them often act out more because there is no relationship to protect. This is why few students who fall asleep, daydream, or come to class unprepared and without materials have been transformed after spending time in ISS. Human connection is our best chance at creating real change in students’ lives. How do we combat student apathy and increase student achievement? We make courage, empathy, and empowerment the cornerstones of schools where students feel seen, heard, and welcome to bring their whole selves.

---

**All the Children Are Well**

But what happens when racial bias, intentional or unintentional, gets in the way of human connection? What happens when Black and brown students witness the fear in the eyes of the teachers who only want them to comply compared to the freedom—the permission to just be a kid—that they observe when teachers interact with the white students, the ones with whom they feel most comfortable? This type of environment breeds an atmosphere of shame, the experience of being unlovable. Younger students, who are almost completely dependent on adults for survival, experience shame as trauma. Students who are suffering from trauma lose the ability to be vulnerable—to deal with “uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure” (Brown, 2019, p. 28). Their main objective becomes self-protection which accounts for the proverbial hard shell that so many of our students hide behind every day. The very act of learning requires vulnerability. In her 2017 keynote address at SXSW EDU, Brene Brown issues this mandate: “What we are ethically called to do is create a safe space in our schools and classrooms where all students can walk in and, for that day or hour, take off the crushing weight of their armor, hang it on a rack, and open their hearts to truly be seen.” Putting an end to persistent racial and economic achievement gaps starts with creating school cultures of belonging that honor our equal and intricate identity as completely and beautifully human.

One of my favorite definitions of a leader is “anyone who takes responsibility for finding the potential in people and processes, and who has the courage to develop that potential” (Brown, 2019, p. 9). Answering the call to school leadership means answering the call to courage, to embrace vulnerability—“uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure” for the unifying purpose of helping our young people become the very best version of themselves and positive contributors in their communities.

While facing all of the unknowns that came with preparing for the return of hundreds of students from virtual to face-to-face learning, one of my colleagues
shared a story that anchored us all and reminded of us of our most important priority—the wellbeing of our students. He shared with us a traditional greeting of the mighty Masai warriors, “Kasserian inegra” which means “How are the children?” (Hoertdoerfer, 2004). The traditional response was “All the children are well.” This ritual showed that the Masai people understood that the strength of their society depended upon the health of their weakest and most vulnerable members—the children. How would our society look if every teacher, every leader could say “All the children are well”? Creating school cultures that profess and practice the value of true belonging, thus removing the barriers that make it more difficult for certain groups to excel, is a courageously beautiful place to begin.

References


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Let’s be honest, embedded throughout the journey of teacher training and leadership preparation was a myriad of courses and assignments relating to leadership theory and leadership practice. It’s probably safe to assume we have all written and revised a fair share of vision statements. Regardless of size, every organization, business, and school has a vision statement displayed on the homepage of their website, stamped as a header or footer on school letterhead, stenciled on a wall of the school office, or artistically displayed in a larger-than-life mural in the foyer of the main entranceway of building. Is the deliberate attention to communicate vision much to do about nothing – a mere box to be checked as requirement from district office? If you are reading this and you are a principal or aspiring principal, I sure hope your answer is no. No, a vision statement is not much to do about nothing, instead it is a critically important statement that represent purpose and core beliefs that serves as the architectural framework that determine goals and objectives. While a mission statement identifies WHAT a leader plans to do, the vision statement explains WHY. The vision statement serves as a lamppost that elucidates aspirations of impact, it is the linchpin that ultimately identifies school culture and learning environment. A vision statement is your metal detector – that identifies distractions and exposes camouflaged opportunities – it is your North Star that illuminates the pathway of purpose ensuring you stay on course. A vision statement is Your Promise – Your Charge to Keep to Children and their Families.

Does your vision statement reflect aspirations of inclusion, equity, and access for all learners? If your response is no, why? If your response is yes, great! If your faculty and staff were asked to identify competencies, policies, practices, and interactions that reflect your vision of inclusion and equity would they be able to do so? Would students and parents? Would you? The response from stakeholders coupled with self-evaluation is the metric by which the impact of your vision is or is not manifested in your school.

21st Century Vision
Teachers and school administrators have a front row seat to the expanding demographic landscape in PK-12 schools across the country. Now more so than ever before classrooms are filled with racially, ethnically, and linguistically diverse students. The impetus to address diversity through practices that foster inclusion, equity, and access is evident. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2020) report the latest data on Racial/Ethnic Enrollment in Public Schools. While the number of students enrolled in public elementary, middle, and high schools continue to climb, since Fall 2000, the racial and ethnic distribution of students continue to shift. Strikingly, data reveals white students have withdrawn from public schools at a significant rate, Black students show a slight decrease in enrollment, while the percentage of Hispanics students enrolled in public schools continue to climb thus establishing a robust surge of color in varied outward complexions.
Economic demands created an urgency for students to develop high-level 21st Century skills and knowledge needed to fill jobs in the workforce. In response, teachers expanded their repertoire of strategies to include 21st Century Teaching Practices. The steady change in racial and ethnic makeup of student populations require school leaders who have a deep sense of purpose, and who consider the needs of all students to be armed with vision in response to the unique challenges and opportunities for success for ethnically diverse students. Are you the leader Black and brown students need – does your vision support this assertion? What are first steps to setting the stage to operationalize your vision.

“A lot of different flowers make a bouquet”

—Islamic Proverb

**Courage to Explore Self?**

Be honest about your thoughts, fears, and apprehensions concerning matters of race, ethnicity, culture, inclusion, and equity. Our personal experiences serve as a framework from which our system of beliefs, values, perspectives, convictions, and behaviors derive. When you look in a mirror these precepts are shown in your reflection which is held in high regard and a standard for expectations for those around us. If principals are to effectively lead the way in educating students of color to thine own self you must be true.

**Consider the Impact of Whiteness**

Because it is a natural tendency for all people to conceptualize norms and expectations through the myopic lens of person experience. It is not uncommon for white educators to steer clear of a role of advocacy because they have few, if any, interactions with lack and brown people outside of the workplace. This pattern of interaction further cements the privately whispered “us and them” perspective. Because of the deeply seeded social construction of race and power that is woven in the fabric of our country white teachers and school leaders have seats at the head table of structural power and are positioned perfectly to impact change. Use it!

**Examine Your Assumptions/Stereotypes and Biases about Students and Families of Color**

Over the years I have heard comments such as, “these kids can read because their momma’s can’t read,” “what am I suppose to do with kids that can’t speak English – they shouldn’t be here anyway,” “parents won’t buy paper and pencils but Johnny (pseudonym) is wearing $175 sneakers,” these kids don’t care about education because their parents don’t care about education,” “why do they talk like that – if they want me to understand they need to speak normal and not in hood-language.” Examine yourself in both thought and deed. Consider the impact of news, social media, tv, and movies on your attitudes and stereotypes of children of color? If you plan to lead from a place of authenticity self-examination is a necessary step. Expect to be uncomfortable and have the courage to be truthful.

**Courage to Believe**

More times than I can count, I heard my grandmother say, “Baby, sometimes you have to see past (beyond) what you can see!” As a child and teenager my grandmother’s words made little sense to me. As a teacher and certainly as an administrator I grew to understand the meaning of her words. Her message was - there’s good stuff inside of people and most of the time
you’ll find it if you are willing to look beyond what you see to tap into it. The packaging might be unfamiliar, the edges might be tattered, the look and sound is different, nonetheless, good stuff is on the inside. Strengths, abilities, talents, and potential lie just below beneath the surface. Without the proper viewpoint these seedlings of untapped potential are concealed from the naked eye. While the “super-hero” narrative is often ascribed to principal leadership, superpowers are not required. However, a perspective of X-Ray vision is essential. Do you have the courage to look beyond what you see?

For many reasons, we devote a lot of time identifying plans and strategies to address what we see on the surface (attendance, participation, assignments, grades, discipline, linguistic barriers, etc.) and we spend much less time considering and believing that greater lies beneath. Although I didn’t realize it at the time, my grandmother’s saying was not so nonsensical after all. This mindset comes naturally to some teachers and is inherent to mothers who send their greatest treasure (their child) to school each day with the hope and expectation their child will be protected, cared for, and nurtured by teachers and school leaders. Expand your lens, disavow insecurities, and be the light that uncover undreamed dreams.

“We who practice leadership for equity much confront, disappoint, and dismantle and at the same time energize, inspire, and empower.”

—Sharon Daloz Parks

**Courage to Be About This Work**

The shift in racial and ethnic makeup of public schools is probably here to stay. Hopefully you see this swing as a good thing. While race and ethnicity are easily recognizable these identifiers represent more than mere reporting categories and aggregated data sets. For students of color and their families, these identifiers are personal and they represent tradition, culture, heritage, and language. It’s critically important to understand and embrace how these experiences impact students. To reduce this notion to mere skin color is to deny the value of the very treasures students of color hold to true. Remember my grandmother’s saying ... “see beyond what you can see,” it’s important to keep in mind the ability to do so serve as the axis of necessary the perspective for effective leadership. The launching pad for This Work - Cultural Responsiveness begins squarely with the principal’s vision. Cultural responsiveness is about embracing diversity, acknowledging value of varied experiences, and fostering authentic (not token) connections throughout the learning community (Ladson-Billings, 2014). Leadership will serve as the driving force to transform the school environment.

“We can’t teach what we don’t know, and we can’t lead where we don’t go.”

—Malcom X

Does your leadership serve as a bridge to consciousness of oneself, empathy, compassion, and value for students of color? Examine your vision. Does your vision statement promote a culture of personalized learning, inclusion, equity, and access for all learners? Remember your vision statement is Your Promise – Your Charge to Keep to Children and their Families.

Leadership can be exhilarating and frightening at the same time. Principals are uniquely positioned to positively impact the lives of students for generations.
Allow courage to serve as fuel to dismantle obstacles and resistance. Have the courage to do the self-work that will allow you to walk the walk – not in pride or judgement but rather as a means of serving as a role model and mentor. Malcom X said it best, “… we can’t lead where we don’t go.” This work – cultural responsiveness is a dynamic, transformative paradigm of leadership that will awaken the minds of diverse learning communities.

References


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Bouncing Back from Pandemic Setbacks: Strong School Libraries Empower Students
By Tamara Cox and Dr. Seth Young

As an extraordinary year comes to a close, South Carolina educators know that a difficult challenge lies ahead in the next school year—the predicted “Covid slide.” Estimates vary regarding the full extent of learning loss from lockdowns, hybrid schedules, remote learning, and absences. Some estimate that students will return with around 70% of typical learning gains while others warn that students may be a full year behind (Kuhfeld & Tarasawa, 2020). This challenge will require every educator to be focused and innovative in order to help each student. Rather than approaching this challenge with ineffective, outdated methods, this is an opportunity to reimagine and redesign. One of the most valuable educators in your building that can be a solution to addressing these Covid impacts is your school librarian.

School libraries help with academic recovery
The impacts of Covid-19 have disproportionately impacted students of color, English language learners, students in special education, and students in low-income households (Mitchell, 2020; NEA, 2020; Robolen, 2020). School libraries can help with academic recovery, especially in these impacted groups. Decades of research has shown that a high-quality library program positively impacts student achievement, graduation rates, and mastery of academic standards. These correlations are most pronounced in our vulnerable student populations (Lance, 2018). The high quality instruction offered in the library and in collaboration with classroom teachers helps students understand and practice the content standards. To accelerate learning, students need collaborative learning opportunities (Darling-Hammond, 2021). Reading promotions and programs can help students fall back in love with books and learning. The school-wide perspective of the school librarian is a valuable perspective to include as school staff plans and prepares for the new year.

Notes from the Principal’s Office
Effectively utilizing all staff members for the benefit of students is essential. Viewing the librarian as an extra adult to help with supervision or to provide duty is often not what is in the best interest of staff and students within a school. Because of different protocols in place, students do not have access to the resources available to them in a traditional school year, so librarians can take those resources to them by either delivering books to classrooms, contacting families to safely organize opportunities for students to visit the library or school while participating in virtual learning, or participate in co-teaching models with other staff members to facilitate learning opportunities for students. By effectively using the space in the library, this can provide students with opportunities to collaborate together while social distancing. This collaboration has proven to be beneficial for students and staff members.

School libraries are a welcoming, safe place for students
The loss of the social safety net and mental health services provided at school potentially caused setbacks for some students during lockdowns and hybrid schedules (Clemens, 2020). One component to welcoming students back into the building and rebuilding that safety net is the school library. The school library serves as a refuge for many students and plays a role in creating a welcoming, safe environment at school. Often the library serves as a calm place within a busy school building. Positive relationships can help students recover from trauma and nurture healthy development and learning (Darling-Hammond, 2021). Because the librarian serves every student in the school for their entire time at that school, the relationships they build with students are valuable.

The library space is important, but also the resources within the space and the programs, events, and lessons created by the librarian. Many social and emotional skills can be addressed by reading and sharing diverse and inclusive books in lessons and in formal and informal book clubs. Book displays can highlight mental health awareness, cultural diversity, and student voice. Collaborations with school counselors, special education teachers, and community organizations can help students build mindfulness, social skills, and empathy towards others through library programming (Jacobson, 2017). Activities such as collaborative coloring sheets, Lego walls, puzzles, makerspace activities, and therapy dog visits provide opportunities for relaxing and resetting.

**Notes from the Principal’s Office**

Effective librarians can strategically choose books that connect with students and their communities as students transition back to a more traditional schedule and return to school. Many students have been isolated and lacked social interactions (Clemens, 2020), and all school personnel can help ensure that students, and staff for that matter, feel comfortable returning to a sense of normal.

**School libraries fill in the gaps for students in need**

The pandemic has raised awareness about education inequality, specifically in terms of access to books and technology. It comes as no surprise that school libraries are a main source of books, especially for children living in a “book desert.” A “book desert” is a community where it is difficult to purchase or borrow books without driving a significant distance (Wong, 2016). All but three counties in South Carolina are considered “book deserts,” making the school library a vital source of reading material for our state’s children (Unite, 2021). Providing access to books is one of the school librarian’s main priorities. The need for book access is amplified as we work to overcome pandemic reading setbacks. Reading programs, promotions, book displays, community literacy events, summer reading, partnering with public libraries, and collaboration with classroom teachers will be vital for serving students in the new school year.

SC schools have made recent strides in addressing technology access at school, but the pandemic revealed additional layers of the digital divide, including lack of internet access and devices in the home, and deficient media literacy skills. Nearly 1 in 10 South Carolina households lack good internet connection at
home (Whitaker, 2021). To combat this need many school libraries have become the source of technology devices and mobile hot spots. Devices are not the only layer of the digital divide that has been found lacking. Studies show that users with higher education levels derive greater benefits from internet access, making the media literacy lessons provided by school librarians even more important for helping students from all backgrounds learn how to effectively use technology (McLaughlin & Resta, 2020). More services and activities have moved online, requiring students to build on media literacy skills in order to be successful in school and in life.

The school librarian is the media literacy expert in the building who can integrate these skills into library lessons and classroom collaborations.

Notes from the Principal’s Office

Every person associated with public education has had to become more comfortable with technology over the past year, and a common assumption is that students are proficient with the educational technology being used by their school districts. However, many students come from homes without adequate wireless internet and have never used their tablet or laptop computer without the guidance of a teacher showing them exactly how to locate assignments or how to connect to their network. Librarians can do more than simply check out chargers, devices, and mobile hotspots to students that are having issues troubleshooting their district-owned devices. When students contact the school asking for help, it’s important to take the time to make sure students know how to use their username and password to log in, how to set up the mobile hotspots provided by the state, and how to connect to their devices.

It is also important to understand that resources from the library can be used to help provide essential support to teachers. With more students logging in from home, it is important to protect library resources so those students and their teachers have access to research materials and literature that supports the curriculum. Librarians can partner with classroom teachers to ensure all students have access to whatever is necessary to provide students with the opportunity to be successful.

Conclusion

It is essential that SC school librarians have the tools, resources, funding, and administrative support that they need to serve our state’s children. Due to the unique position librarians hold in the school building, they can play a vital role in ensuring student success and overcoming the “Covid slide.” With administrative support, proper staffing, and adequate funding, your school library program and librarian can help you meet your school and student learning goals as we face the challenges of a unique school year. Let’s take the lessons learned from 2020 and make a new and better “normal”—one where every child in SC has a fully-funded, fully-staffed, and supported school library.

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Tamara Cox
School Librarian, Wren High School
Anderson District 1

Dr. Seth Young
Principal, Wren High School
Anderson District 1
A courageous conversation is anything you find difficult to discuss. Courageous conversations live in our schools, neighborhoods, churches, and families. As a school administrator, the list can go on and on. All of us have had conversations that significantly impacted our lives. We have also relived conversations that were riddled with emotion and confusion. Perhaps a teen does not arrive home at the appointed hour. Maybe a neighbor parks over the property line. What do you do?

The ability to skillfully and timely address violated expectations, broken commitments, and bad behavior is paramount in creating a culture of accountability. Patterson, (2013), author of crucial conversations writes, “At the heart of almost all chronic problems in our organizations, our teams, and our relationships lie crucial conversations….. ones that we would rather not hold or do not hold well. Twenty years of research involving more than 100,000 people reveal that the key skill of effective learners, team-mates, parents, and loved ones is the capacity to skillfully address emotionally and politically risky issues. Period.”

Courageous conversations are imperative because when issues are not addressed, they will continue. What you put up with, you end up with! A lack of accountability and disengagement go hand in hand. What is it like to work with a colleague or supervisor who is reluctant to address tough issues? Perry Belcher (2020) said, “Nothing will kill a great employee faster than watching you tolerate a bad one.” Complacency and disengagement cost your organization. Those employees who are just going through the motions have a 37% higher rate of absenteeism and 18% lower productivity.

A courageous conversation includes one or more of the following: (1) the “what happened” conversation; (2) a” feelings conversation, and ; (3) an “identity{ conversation. Most conversations involve disagreement about what happened. “Who said what?” “Who is to blame? Examine your own personal contribution to this issue. Even if your contribution is small, own it! Every conversation also involves feelings. “This is the thanks I get!” indicates anger. While feelings may not be directly addressed, they seep into the conversation, and are often at the core. The identity conversation is elusive and yet challenging. It is all about how we see ourselves. What impact will this have on my career? Even if you are the one delivering the bad news, the “identity” conversation is at work. Maybe you think you are the kind of person who always find a way to make things happen and you don’t normally do this by saying “NO”. How will people see you when you take a new stance?

This article will detail what to do before, during, and after a courageous conversation. A protocol to follow will increase the likelihood of a positive outcome.
Before the conversation

Problems come in complicated bundles! Deciding which problem to address is critical for the success of a courageous conversation. Some issues may be small annoyances, but others may impact the safety of colleagues. Learning to identify the gist of the broken commitment or bad behavior takes time and practice. Consider the example above of a teenager who does not abide by a curfew. One could say the problem is simple – the teenager was late. However, there are issues of a broken commitment, violation of trust, defiance, and causing others to worry about their safety. What is the right problem? Is it a matter of skill or a matter of will? Is the teenager unable to meet the expectation or simply unwilling? Addressing the wrong issue will not bring about the desired result.

Deconstructing bad behavior to its bare essence takes patience and precision. Remember the weatherman, Phil Connors, in the movie Groundhog Day? He relived the same problems over and over. Groundhog Day can be avoided by putting thought into addressing the right problem.

Secondly, control your emotions. Displaying strong emotions creates a bad beginning which may ensure a poor ending. Believing that you are taking the high road does not set the stage for understanding. (Indeed, the first rule for taking the high road is not to talk about how you are taking the high road.) You have no more than a few sentences to set the tone for the conversation. Strong emotions on your part will elicit their strong emotions or a “shut down” that does not bring understanding and resolution.

Select a time and place that provide for privacy and safety. At the faculty coffee pot or walking down a hallway would not ensure privacy and could lead to distrust.

Lastly, see the other person as a person and not a villain. Do not jump to conclusions or discern blame as you are thinking through the conversation.

“Assuming that others do contrary things because it’s in their makeup or they actually enjoy doing them and then ignoring any other potential motivational forces is a mistake. Psychologists classify this mistake as an attribution error. And because it happens so consistently across people, times, and places, it gets a name all its own. It’s called the functional attribution error.” (Patterson, 2013, p. 52).

Avoid laying blame. When affixing blame is the objective, understanding is the casualty. Susan Scott (2017), author of Fierce Conversations, states “In any situation, the person who can most accurately describe reality without laying blame will emerge as the leader, whether designated or not.”

During the conversation

Start with “heart” in a friendly manner. Ask if this is a good time they could talk. Next, describe the gap between the expected performance and their performance. For example, “Our workday starts at 8:00 AM and I saw you come in at 8:25 AM this morning." Make no assumptions as you are on a fact-finding mission. Mark Twain said, “It ain’t what you don’t know that gets you into trouble. It’s what you know for sure that just ain’t so.”

If this is the first infraction, discuss the content of the issue. Some may find it difficult to hold a courageous conversation at the first infraction, but it is needed. Using the analogy of a weed in your lawn, what happens the first time you see it? You could simply reach down and easily remove it with your hand, or you could watch, see what happens, and maybe address it later. Time goes by, you are busy with other issues, and you forget about the weed. The next time you notice it, it is much larger and has taken a strong root in your lawn. Now you must get a hand shovel or a poisonous weed killer to assist. You missed the opportune time to address the problem… at the first infraction. Remember, what you put up with, you end up with!
If this is the second time the issue has been addressed, the conversation should focus on the pattern. You acknowledge this problem has a history. Don’t get sidetracked with debating the content; that is not the point at this time. Your concern is the pattern being established.

If the problem continues, focus on relationships. Most likely, a series of broken commitments has undermined the trust in the relationship. You may doubt their fitness for the job. Of course, if the same problem is being discussed over and over, that is an indication you have picked the wrong problem to address. Do you feel like you are Bill Murray in Groundhog Day?

What if there is a new issue that emerges during the courageous conversation? Perhaps the teacher who is arriving late for school, came from the hospital where she spent the night with an elderly parent? If the new problem is more serious, emotional, or time sensitive, you need to address it immediately. Take a step back and re-establish safety if the issue is highly emotional.

Some people talk incessantly and it is difficult to get a firm footing in conversations filled with noise. Consider asking a thoughtful question and then wait for the answer. Silence often makes us nervous. The more emotional the topic, the more silence is needed. Ask a poignant question and then let silence do the heavy lifting.

Next, agree upon a plan for resolution. Who will do what by when? Describe the ideal outcome. When this issue is resolved, what difference will that make? What results will others enjoy? What results will I enjoy? What is the plan for follow-up? Once agreed upon, put the plan in writing. Clear expectations are essential in an improvement plan. Employees say the most stressful part of work is not knowing what managers expect of them. That’s according to a survey from Chicago-based ComPsych, a leading provider of employee assistance programs. Asked what is most stressful when experiencing change at work, 31 percent of the more than 2,000 survey respondents cited “unclear expectations from supervisors.”

No matter if this is a content, pattern, or relationship focused discussion, conclude by summarizing and sharing your path. For example, “Should this occur again, I will need to write a formal letter of reprimand.” Be transparent regarding the next step. Finally, end with a question such as “Is there anything else I need to know?” Or “Is there anything I can do to assist?”

**After the conversation**

Put the agreed upon plan in writing. All action items need a person responsible and a date for follow up. Put follow-up dates and times on your calendar. Small and frequent positive feedback is most effective for improving performance. Should the follow-up plan go awry, step up and re-engage in another courageous conversation. If workplace expectations are not clear and concise, now is the time to make that improvement.

**Summary**

If you would like to assess your skills regarding courageous conversations, take the free online survey, Your Style Under Stress at the VitalSmarts website. This quick assessment also provides immediate feedback. My hope is that you will strive to improve your courageous conversation skills and become a catalyst for change.
Courageous Conversations Checklist

**Before the Conversation**

- Determine what conversation to have.
- Control strong emotions.
- Determine how you will ensure safety.

**During the Conversation**

- Don’t patronize, one-up, or make assumptions.
- Start with a question.
- Describe the gap in performance.
- Use the C (content), P (pattern), and R (relationship) plan.
- Adopt the stance of being on a fact finding mission.
- Listen.
- Let silence do the heavy lifting.
- Share your path forward and summarize the discussion.
- Agree upon a follow up plan.
- End with a question.

**After the Conversation**

- Put the follow-up plan in writing.
- Mark follow-up plan dates on your calendar.
- Implement the follow up plan.
- Provide feedback.
- Frequently re-emphasize clear expectations.

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**ACEs in our Classrooms—A student’s view through the years**

By Karen Bush

How well do we know the kids in our classrooms? Sure, we know their names, and sometimes we know their families. But how well do we really know the kids in our classrooms? My teachers thought they knew me too, but the truth is - they only knew what I let them know about me. There was so much more to the little girl that sat in their classrooms.

As I look back on my school years and as I continue in my adult life to learn more and more about Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), I have learned so much about myself, and I have learned even more about the girl that sat in those classrooms. I invite you to take a peek and meet that girl, and who knows, you may have some students just like her walking the hallways of your school today.

Never underestimate your ability to make a difference in a child’s life...especially if you believe!

**Dear Elementary School Teacher,**

I am so sorry that I came to school today wearing the same clothes I had on yesterday and without my backpack. We had to leave home late last night to get away from my daddy who came home in a drunken stupor. He started yelling and hitting us. My dad is an abusive alcoholic. He dropped out of high school and works in a textile mill. My mom tries her best to make a home for us, but we live in fear all the time. Many nights I go to bed without supper. The best meals I get are at school. Sometimes we don’t have power or water so school is the warmest, nicest place I know.

I know you didn’t know all of those things about me, and now that you do, please don’t be sad. I don’t need you to feel sorry for me. I need you to love me and encourage me, but more importantly, I need you to believe in me. I need you to have high expectations for me. I am a smart girl, and I need you to help bring that out of me. I need to feel secure in your classroom. I need to hear encouraging words and feel loved. I need to hear and see things with you that I don’t even know exist. I need you to help me dream and help me to achieve all that I can be. And most of all, please don’t let me use my life’s circumstances as an excuse. Do not let me settle for less than my best. Please don’t expect any less from me, just because you feel sorry for me.

**Dear Middle School Teacher,**

You may have heard a little bit about my story from my elementary school teachers. I know how teachers talk. The good news is, we no longer live in fear of my dad. We have not seen or heard from him since I was in the third grade, so now it is just us girls. My mom is raising my two sisters and me by herself. Sure, we don’t have much, but we have each other, and that is enough. I have some good friends whose families try to include me and take me places. I have been to my first movie and I even got to go to an amusement park last weekend!

I am starting to get stronger and show you and my other teachers how smart I can be. I think if I could just get a little more confident and speak up more, you might really see something in me. I qualified for “GT” whatever that means. My sister says it’s a good thing. She talks about going to college when she graduates from high school. She even has my mom talking about going to
Dear High School Teacher,

I know you have heard stories about me. But I also know that when you hear those stories, they are hard for you to believe. When you look at me, you see the Top Ten in the class student, National Honor Society member, Junior Marshall, Copy Editor of the Yearbook, Concert Choir Member, and Miss Basketball South Carolina. You see the girl that teachers voted as Miss Merry Christmas - for having the Christmas Spirit all year long. You see a family of “strong women” with an older sister that is at Furman University with plans to go to medical school and a mom who graduated from Limestone College night school and is now a successful Human Resource Manager.

Most people, including my friends and teammates, don’t know the “real” story. They only know what they see now. I want to caution you, that although things are much better and sometimes look “perfect” on the outside, things are far from perfect on the inside. You see, inside I am still that scared little girl living in fear. Inside, I doubt myself and believe the taunts from my dad that still echo in my mind. There are times when I am in your class, and I know the answer, I have something good to add to the conversation, but I won’t speak up for fear of sounding stupid or being wrong. Get to know me, talk to me after class, call on me even when I am not raising my hand. Don’t be fooled by what you see on the outside. Help me to become that same girl on the inside too.

And please, help me to find a way to college. Don’t let me believe that just because we don’t have much money means that I cannot afford to go. Talk to me about financial aid. Help me apply for scholarships. Help me make a highlight film to send to college coaches. Don’t let me accept no for an answer.

And now to the many special teachers and coaches in my life along the way,

I am going to make it! Not only am I going to make it, I am going to soar like an “eagle!” Thank you for believing in me, even when I did not believe in myself. Thank you for having compassion for my circumstances but not letting me use those circumstances as excuses. Thank you for exposing me to things that I didn’t even know existed. Thank you for having high expectations for me and not lowering the expectation because you felt sorry for me.

I am headed to college on a full academic and athletic scholarship! And...I plan to be a teacher. I hope to make a difference to others the way you have made a difference to me. Who knows, maybe one day I will even be a principal!

Karen Bush
Principal, Inman Intermediate School
Spartanburg District 1
Courageous Leadership in the Pursuit of Equity in Practice

By Dr. Donna Elam, Virginia Tate, and Sara Wheeler

Leadership in the twenty-first century is an ever-evolving field that demands that leaders engage in the pursuit of lifelong learning in order to facilitate continual improvement. Led by Superintendent Dr. Christina S. Melton, leaders in School District Five of Lexington & Richland Counties are emboldened to be courageous and curious in order to impact the success of all students. To that end, School District Five works closely with key stakeholders and experts and has been devoted to the field of diversity, equity, and culturally competent leadership in order to facilitate maximum achievement. In School District Five, leadership includes providing access to key professional development and providing time for data collection, reflection, and refinement of practice.

In 2013, School District Five began a relationship with Dr. Donna Elam of the Elam Leadership Institute in order to infuse cultural competence and equitable practices into the federally funded Magnet Schools Assistance Program (MSAP) grant known as Project Access, which included Dutch Fork Elementary Academy of Environmental Sciences, Seven Oaks Elementary MEDIA Magnet, Irmo Middle School International Academic Magnet, Irmo High School International School for the Arts, and Spring Hill High School Career Pathways Magnet. Recipients of funding from the MSAP grant, awarded through the Office of Innovation and Improvement at the US Department of Education, were charged with reducing, preventing, and/or eliminating minority group isolation and closing the achievement gap. In 2017, the district was awarded another MSAP grant for the Discover Five Schools—H. E. Corley Montessori Magnet, Leaphart Elementary School STEAM Magnet, Nursery Road Elementary Arts Magnet, and Irmo High School International Baccalaureate Career-related Program in collaboration with The Center for Advanced Technical Studies (CATS). Dr. Elam’s work has been pivotal to the success in all magnet programs.

Though originally Dr. Elam’s work was intended for magnet schools, Dr. Melton quickly realized that the focus of the Elam Leadership Institute was impactful and necessary for all leaders, teachers, and students in the district. In 2015, the topic of equitable practices was introduced as a component for all teachers in professional development. For School District Five, a key to successful professional development is teacher choice. Now in the seventh year, #LeaD5 is a district-run professional development initiative that allows teachers to choose a strand of professional learning with which to engage for one year. Over three different sessions, teachers gain valuable knowledge and participate in collegial learning conversations led by district leaders in partnership with outside experts. The Equity in Practice Series, developed through collaboration with the School District Five Magnet Office, utilizes equitable practices, including student voice, to help educators create a learning environment that is inclusive of instruction and curriculum representing the students’ cultural backgrounds and varying life experiences.

“The Equity in Practice Series is a reminder of the impact that we have on students each day. Diversity, equity, inclusion, and justice are my personal and professional passions. With this series, I gained a community of educators committed to this work and the lasting impact it has on students and the education system.”

—Albert L. Jones, III
Fourth-Grade Teacher

The successful Equity in Practice Series continues to experience expansion in School District Five. During the Superintendent’s Leadership Summit in the summer of
2020, all administrators were led through professional learning by Dr. Elam and challenged by Superintendent Melton to pursue continued growth towards equitable practices. Dr. Elam states that Dr. Melton is at the heart of growth for the district. Elam believes that, “everything that we have done comes from Dr. Melton’s insight and direction. She is an example of transformational leadership.” Following the Summit, school principals began the yearlong work of looking at equity through the lens of achievement. Dr. Elam calls her work with principals and school leaders the Equity of Effort Framework—a new habit of mind to address every aspect of the educational system from policy to practice. The Equity of Effort framework is now employed throughout the district, from Principal Professional Development to MTSS meetings.

For School District Five, the foundation of all decisions is based in data and data-driven practice. Dr. Melton has created an environment of data-driven decision making at every level of leadership. The alignment between the work of Dr. Elam and the focus on data was natural. The district utilizes and teaches Dr. Elam’s Equity of Effort framework which “turns intent into action” through the use of key data points (Elam, 2021, p. 5). Both the district office leaders and individual school leaders access key data to include “demographic data, student performance data, and school process data” to assess challenges to equity and achievement (Elam, 2021, p. 5). Importantly, the focus on the framework includes all dimensions of the district organization from the district office, to the school board, to the schools.

The focus on data-driven practice through Elam’s Equity of Effort pairs seamlessly with the work of John Hattie. Hattie’s work helps teachers and leaders to examine the impact of instructional strategies, and he notes that teacher expectations are critical to student success. Leaders in School District Five used the research of Hattie and Elam’s strategies to elevate teacher expectations. The Elam Leadership Institute helps schools to individually examine skills to establish ambitious academic goals by benchmarking students to the most successful classrooms. In other words, Elam helps to convince teachers, leaders, and students that goals are possible and to begin from a place of achievement. This work has helped to shift thinking towards an expectation of the highest levels of achievement.

Student engagement, the second fundamental factor in Elam’s work to operationalize expectations, is another focus of professional development. In order to build student engagement, leaders focus on building student confidence and teacher involvement. Elam reminds leaders that student confidence is influential on student behavior. In order to increase student engagement, leaders work with teachers to include culturally relevant and interesting texts, to provide student choice, to engage students with graphic organizers and cooperative learning, and to utilize tools such as word walls and bulletin boards to provide visible components of diversity into instruction.
“I thought I understood diversity before being exposed to the Elam Institute. This cohort has forced me to look at the whole child and consider their perspective in a profound way. I assumed my job as a high school educator was to teach the subject matter. I now understand I cannot teach the subject matter until I understand the student.”

—Laurie Humphrey

Nat'l. Board Certified AYA Social Studies
AP Gov't/Macro/Micro Economics

Dr. Elam believes that one reason that District Five continues to make strides towards increasing student success is because of the belief by Dr. Melton in the “power of teachers and their impact on their students.” Elam notes that the ability of District Five to be reflective is powerful. Throughout the process of improving equitable practices, district leadership has worked with school leaders and teachers to include reflection on student learning. Additionally, reflection is embedded in practice for students, as well. Using students as stakeholders allows leaders to receive top to bottom feedback about student engagement and achievement. The reflective practice has created an organizational culture that empowers all stakeholders. Chief of Instruction Michael Guliano appreciates the impact and believes that it is evident that, “Equity cannot be a ‘one and done’ conversation. I’m proud to say that our school district has implemented not only equity discussions but actions for many years. Our schools have developed action plans based upon district instructional initiatives that address equity by using school-specific data.” Courageous leadership involves all of us in School District Five of Lexington & Richland Counties. All means all!

References:
More than 60% of educators have student loan debt, and that debt weighs heavily on their decision to stay in the profession. According to our recent study*:

- 88% would stay in education longer if they could have their loans forgiven
- 70% would stay longer if they could lower their monthly payment

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Contact your Horace Mann representative for more information or visit horacemann.com/student-loan-debt-help/schools.

*Horace Mann Educators Student Loan Debt Study, June 2020

**Potential savings of educators assisted by Horace Mann with Public Service Loan Forgiveness from October 2016 through 2020 based on assumptions established by the U.S. Office of Federal Student Aid. Monthly and annual savings are based on 2020 only. For more information regarding the U.S. Office of Federal Student Aid assumptions, refer to www.studentaid.gov/loan-simulator.

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When Florence 1 Schools adopted Students First as the district motto, the aim was for it to serve as a reminder: no matter the situation, the impact on students should always be considered a priority. One of the most significant impacts on students is the quality of the teacher in the classroom. A teacher who reflects upon their individual practices and seeks to provide effective, engaging, and rigorous instruction represents the students first mentality. In order to support teacher reflection, Florence 1 had to look at the way educators were being evaluated and make certain that they were receiving purposeful feedback that would lead to professional growth.

Teacher evaluation should be designed to help educators invest in their professional growth, which in turn leads to improved student performance. By adopting a local evaluation model, Florence 1 sought to ensure the evaluation model used with its educators focused on professional growth and empowered risk-taking while avoiding the punitive mindset many evaluation models reinforce. While the overall goal of education might be the same, the pathways to achieving that goal might look different. To that end, the South Carolina Department of Education (SCDE) allows districts to create their own locally-developed evaluation model. Florence 1 believed this was an integral piece of the puzzle for both professional growth and improved student achievement.

Changing Evaluation Strategies

Two years ago, seeking an evaluation model that gave educators more ownership of their growth and development, while also focusing on maximizing the learning potential of all students, Florence 1 began implementing a locally-developed model approved by the SCDE. The model’s first year of implementation was a pilot with induction teachers during the 2019-2020 school year. In year two, the model was utilized district-wide for all educators. Induction teachers were given training and support for this new model during their pre-in-service in August of 2019. All remaining district teachers received segmented training beginning in January 2020. The purpose behind the pilot and training year was to allow educators and evaluators the opportunity to transition to the new model gradually, while creating a foundation for the rich conversations necessary for a growth mindset.

Florence 1 began exploring their own evaluation model after receiving feedback from district educators that some components of the state model felt isolated and punitive; other aspects of the evaluation model were interpreted differently by evaluators across the district making implementation inconsistent. The model created by Florence 1 was adapted from a process successfully implemented by our superintendent in his previous district in New Jersey. In the early design, teachers’ input heavily influenced the structure to be more holistic and concrete. Our evaluation, curriculum and professional
development have the same goal while always maintaining a focus on dynamic student growth and achievement. In order to remove the subjectivity in evaluating educators, we created systemic language which led to consistent implementation among evaluators.

The goal of the evaluation process is to give teachers concrete attributes to reflect on when creating their lesson plans. What does quality instruction, teaching and learning look like in a Florence 1 classroom? Using a model that was created with Florence 1 data allows educators within the district to narrow their focus, being proactive and intentional in the planning and execution of their instruction. The instructional rubric consists of four domains; Planning and Learning, The Learner and Learning Environment, Content Knowledge, and Instructional Strategies. An additional Professional Responsibilities and Teacher Leadership domain reinforces professional growth and improved student achievement. When digging into the domains, evaluators and educators are provided specifically defined teacher performances, essential knowledge, critical dispositions, and clear evidence outlining the expectations for teaching and learning in Florence 1 Schools.

**Evaluation Domains**

The progression of the domains demonstrates a building block for teaching and learning. The Planning and Learning Domain begins with an entire section on learner development. Creating a focus on the diversity of learners within the system is essential before one can begin to plan and in turn teach. In Florence 1, teachers need to understand how learners grow and develop, recognize that patterns of learning and development vary individually within and across the cognitive, linguistic, social, emotions, and physical areas. By recognizing this up front, and getting to understand the diversity among learner development, educators can better design and implement challenging learning experiences that are developmentally appropriate for their students.

During the planning process, educators use their knowledge of learner development to collaborate with their colleagues and select resources that will impact student achievement of learning goals. Educators take professional responsibility to use short- and long-term planning as a means of assuring student learning. Our educators also acknowledge that their plans must always be open to adjustment and revision based on the learner needs and changing circumstances. The root of planning effective instruction is the educator’s respect of the diverse strengths and needs within their classroom.

Another integral part of our evaluation model is understanding the individual differences, diverse culture and communities that students are coming from when they enter our classrooms and making sure that we are providing inclusive learning environments that enable each learner to meet high standards. Being culturally responsive educators demonstrates to our students that we see a value in the diversity their experiences and backgrounds bring to our learning communities. Increasing access to the perspectives and cultures within classrooms, where a student’s culture is part of the learning, increases motivation and understanding. Respect is a building block for learning; the Florence 1 evaluation model focuses on building respect and using diversity to create productive learning spaces. Once spaces of respect are established, students can be engaged in collaborative learning that helps promote creative thinking and problem solving.
The in-depth focus on learner development and learning differences in our evaluation model demonstrates our commitment to keeping students first and creating experiences that transform their learning. By understanding how our learners develop, and supporting their individual differences, we can create opportunities with Florence 1 students in mind. The rubric builds upon these first two domains with a transition into content knowledge and instructional strategies.

In domain three, content knowledge, the educator understands the central concepts, tools of inquiry, and structures of the discipline(s) they teach, particularly as they relate to the South Carolina College and Career Readiness Standards. The educator creates learning experiences that make these aspects of the discipline accessible and meaningful for learners to assure mastery of the content. Taking it even further, the educator understands how to connect concepts and use differing perspectives to engage learners in critical thinking, creativity, and collaborative problem solving related to authentic local and global issues. Developing the ability to think critically, outside of a classroom lens gives students an opportunity to see learning as more than just isolated information that isn’t useful. This domain stretches far beyond the basic content knowledge one needs in order to accurately convey meaning. Rather, it takes that basic level of content knowledge and expands that into how knowledge is used to provide meaningful learning experiences.

Technology is a key component to collaborative learning and development of 21st century skills. Domain four communicates the importance of using new and emerging technologies as a way to deliver instruction and promote student learning. Domain four also focuses on the educator using a variety of instructional strategies to encourage learners to develop deep understanding of content areas and their connections to one another, while also learning how to apply knowledge in meaningful ways. This was an area we noted was lacking in many other evaluation models. Since we have adopted this new model and worked with our IT department to ensure teachers and students have the necessary technology tools in their hands, our educators were well equipped to keep moving forward in fostering 21st century skills in their students well before the pandemic. We have been able to align professional learning opportunities that continue to develop a resource library for teachers with regards to technology. Being able to prioritize technology has allowed us to see what our students need as 21st century learners and make sure we provide for those needs.

The emphasis on each domain to focus on the learner, their development and differences in order to create experiences that promote critical thinking and problem solving demonstrates why this model for evaluation is centered around student growth and achievement.

The Professional Responsibility and Teacher Leadership domain encourages our educators’ commitment to their professional growth. Specifically, educators use self-assessment and problem solving strategies to analyze and reflect on their practice in order to impact student learning. After the reflection process, they are engaged in professional learning that is aligned with their growth goals. Educators also engage with their colleagues in collaborative, professional learning opportunities. Developing a community of teacher leaders who continuously take ownership of their professional growth sets the Florence 1 model apart from other evaluation models.
A Growth Mindset

Throughout the evaluation process, educators have several opportunities for reflection. Each educator in Florence 1 has at least one observation during the school year; they are also provided the opportunity to conference with their assigned evaluator. During the evaluation process, particularly during the post-conference, our evaluators serve as facilitators. They ask the educator to reflect on what went well in the lesson they observed and help them identify what areas could be sharpened by sharing objective evidence from their classroom observation. This reflective practice enables our administrators to focus on becoming stronger instructional leaders.

Simplifying the documentation aspect of evaluations was necessary to keep the focus on professional growth and student achievement. Florence 1 achieved this through creating an online portal with Genesis Educational Services. Genesis designed our record keeping system and digitized our evaluation forms to align with the needs of the evaluators and educators. This user-friendly employee portal houses all the necessary data and incorporates key features like observation scheduling to make evaluations easier. Additional components include, evidence mapping, pin signature and on demand evaluation reports. After evaluations are complete, district and school-level administrators use the evaluation data to plan targeted and meaningful professional development opportunities aligned to the needs of educators.

One example of this is the choice board created last year at West Florence High School. The board offers a variety of professional development opportunities for their staff to participate in. All of the options on the board were created based on the data they pulled from their staff evaluations. This choice model targets areas of need while allowing educators options for how they address their professional growth.

Maintaining a growth mindset that involves reflection and action aligns to the district’s model of putting students first. We’ve seen this firsthand in our teachers’ willingness to engage in risk taking leading to more innovative practice within the classroom. This shift in educator mindset has also led to increased student achievement. Subsequently, empowering our educators to take ownership of their professional growth has facilitated teacher retention leading to zero teacher vacancies for 2020-2021 school year. The implementation of Florence 1 Schools’ locally-developed evaluation model has changed our instructional practices throughout our district classrooms and led to educator growth and improved student achievement.

Jennifer Heilbronn
Executive Director of Professional Development
Florence District 1
As Real as It Gets
Why career centers are real schools, and why that matters in the real world.

By Brana Patterson Myers

The district clerk meant nothing by it, but she still said it. “Since you’re not a real school, you were inadvertently left off the list.” If it’s happened once, it’s happened a hundred times. No one means to slight us, and if you asked them, I’m sure they all would speak favorably about our school, and career centers in general, but enough is enough. For decades, career and technical education has fought to overcome a stigma that somehow diminishes or, at the very least, overlooks the power and productivity of hard work. At Enoree Career Center, our motto is simply “Let’s get to work!” We strive to honor and recognize hard work, both physical and academic. We loathe idle time and hold high expectations for teachers and students who know there are only so many hours in a day. Our motto becomes two-fold when we add in that we’re focused on making students more than grade-earners or even graduates. We are focused on them being employable and sought after by companies and industries that pay well and make a positive difference in our world. Lately, with the growth in manufacturing and in the tremendous population growth of the upstate, career centers are turning the tide on the previous reputation of training kids for low-paying, dirty jobs. Instead, career and tech educators are focused on helping students literally “get to work” in careers that provide financial stability, skill versatility, and unlimited options for how the future will unfold for students. Not only are we a real school, but we are really thriving.

I’ve been working in Greenville County for 32 years now. I’ve served traditional elementary, middle, and high schools in multiple capacities over the years; but none fulfilled my passion for students and relevant learning like career and technical education does. I became the director at Enoree Career Center in 2016, and I truly believe the position is my dream job, only it’s not a dream. It’s real life, every day. As CTE educators, we are providing options and opportunities for all kinds of students. The connections to real work, real employment, and real futures are obvious in every classroom in our building. Career centers like Enoree are most definitely real schools, and in an attempt to be a courageous leader who believes career centers go well beyond the ordinary vision of education, I’d like to explain why.

At Enoree Career Center it is at first hard to tell the difference between us and a traditional high school. Students arrive in the bus loop, the car line, and the student parking lot. They often linger outside, sometimes a little too long, and then dash in just before the last bell. The students hit up the vending machines, check their phones, listen to music with air pods, and socialize with their classmates, just like they would at any regular high school. They report to class where attendance is taken and announcements are made, just like traditional school. But some time just after the morning Pledge of Allegiance and the daily announcements, a transition, or maybe even a transformation, takes place. Our regular teenage high schoolers turn into trainees about to be right in the middle of the realest education public schools can provide. Day after day students tackle topics, problems, scenarios, technical skills, and
employment training in various work areas across our building.

In our welding lab, students dress out in helmets, shields, gloves, and welding sleeves to ensure their safety as they work on real projects that simulate those they would find in industry. It’s not unusual for firefighters, fully donned in turnouts and fire coats, to be flowing water or climbing on the roof using real ladders they took from our real fire truck. In cosmetology, students prepare for the South Carolina State Board Licensure Exam in our two full-service salon labs. It’s the real test given to anyone who wants to be a real cosmetologist in South Carolina; and career center students in Greenville County are required to score a 75 or higher on the exam, just like any other candidate for licensure (South Carolina Board of Cosmetology, 2020). In our automotive labs, you’ll find kids in coveralls, likely with grease underneath their fingernails, leaning under the hoods of real cars, or spraying a fender in a real paint booth. In culinary arts, students work under the supervision of a certified chef in a commercial kitchen. The situations are similar in Law Enforcement, Building Construction, Mechatronics, Machine Tool, and Graphics. Every lab or shop is an experience in real work and real learning.

Finding teachers for career center programs is a real challenge, but also the make-or-break part of our success. Career center teachers in South Carolina usually obtain their South Carolina teaching certificate through alternative programs such as PACE or DIRECT, which take into account a teacher’s previous work experience (South Carolina Department of Education, 2020). At Enoree, 100% of the teaching faculty worked in their field of expertise prior to becoming a teacher, and 100% have completed alternative certification programs with the South Carolina Department of Education. Many gave up or retired from jobs in corporate America to fulfill the calling to teach. Most CTE teachers in South Carolina take pay cuts to come into the classroom, and some walk away from promotions and seniority status to venture into education (US Bureau of Labor Statistics). For example, Mark Crain, firefighting instructor, left a twenty-plus-year career as an officer with Travelers Rest and Greenville City Fire Departments to join the Enoree faculty in 2018. Since then Mark has been named as a “First Class” first-year teacher, and most recently as Greenville County’s “Secondary Emerging Teacher of the Year,” chosen not just out of CTE teachers, but out of all second- and third-year middle and high school teachers in our district. Welding instructor Jamie Walden was named first runner-up to the Greenville County Teacher of the Year in 2019, and he currently sits in a position of leadership on the Greenville County Schools Teacher Forum Board. Susan Paxton and Pam Cassels, cosmetology instructors, both have thirty-plus years in their field and continue to stand behind the chair in their own salon businesses while simultaneously forging their careers as teachers. The value of having a teacher who has real experience in your field of interest is immeasurable for students. That linear connection from careers to teachers to students is rare in traditional education, but in CTE, and especially at Enoree Career Center, it exists literally in every classroom and lab. In CTE it is likely that the teacher who trains you has already done the job you’d like to have. Nothing could be more valuable or real to a student.

Our realness extends out a little further through our work-based learning programs. Students in their second year of a program have opportunities to spend some of their class time working for local employers putting to use some of the skills and training they’ve acquired at the career center. Enoree alone has 46 students currently working in real co-ops and internships, and best of all,
many are earning real paychecks. Many students go on to be hired full-time with our industry partners immediately after graduation. Many of our business partners also offer tuition reimbursement and scholarships for those who wish to pursue degrees at technical schools and four-year institutions.

During this year of COVID-19, Enoree has had a dose of reality that exceeds that of the traditional high schools. Upon recognizing that our larger class and lab spaces would allow for social distancing, career centers in Greenville County returned to 100% in-person learning before the rest of the district. Second-year students have been attending classes in real time since October 2020. First-year students joined the 100% attendance plan right after winter break, once we had perfected the safety protocols for keeping students safe, but still in person. Building construction students at all four of Greenville County’s career centers took on real projects to assist in cutting, fabricating, and inventorying the four-thousand plexiglass dividers that are now required in classrooms across the district. Even in the pandemic, our students saw the importance of real perseverance and teamwork as they contributed to the greater cause of navigating the challenges of the pandemic.

Perhaps the best part about our school and other career centers is the real reflection of the world shown through the diversity of our students. Each of Greenville County’s career centers pulls enrollment from four or five local high schools, meaning students attend career centers with students they wouldn’t otherwise interact with on a traditional track. This increases student opportunities to thrive in a diverse population. It is not unusual to notice multiple languages being spoken in our shops and to notice the multitude of ethnic and cultural backgrounds in one small space. It is also not unusual to notice the leveled playing field as those who excel in traditional classrooms and those who struggle with the usual 3Rs work side-by-side, and no one is able to tell the difference between the two. Career centers are places for everybody, from the highest ranked AP student to the unmotivated student struggling to make it out of academia with a diploma. Career centers are also catalysts for getting rid of gender stereotypes. Senior Daniela Alvarez is in her third year of Enoree’s Machine Tool Technology program. She’s participated in three different work-based learning assignments, and she currently serves as a state officer for the South Carolina chapter of SkillsUSA. When asked about her non-traditional career choice, Daniela says “My machine tool training empowers me to be successful and gives me options well beyond the ones offered to me in a traditional school. I also hope my success at Enoree sets an example for other girls. There aren’t limits for “girl power” in career centers.” Real world skills and training offered in career and technical education across our state and nation offer something for everyone with equity and diversity that isn’t always the norm. Howard Gardner’s Theory of Multiple Intelligences finds a place among us as we notice “smart kids” emerge from every
corner of our building, and in every program, sometimes working with their hands, sometimes using their minds in ways traditional school couldn’t quite tap (Gardner, 1983). In an era of ever-changing innovation, world-wide technology markets, and a global economy, our students gain experience in building professional relationships with a multitude of people who don’t necessarily look or think alike, but who have common plans and goals. It is only through our real-world experiences that this kind of diversity comes together to make a solid workforce for our collective benefit.

We try not to be offended when someone says we are not a real school. What they usually mean is that we aren’t traditional, and we embrace that concept. The proverbial “when are we ever going to use this” question doesn’t come up much inside the walls of Enoree Career Center. Students know they are training and preparing for a real career and a real future. They also understand that when career and technical education is successful, our workforce is stronger, our economy is stable, and the future, for all of us, is much brighter. The next time someone mentions a career center, check out their website, or try to visit so that you can see what a real school looks like. Start with Enoree if you’d like. I’m happy to show you our school any time, because at Enoree and in career centers all across South Carolina, the learning is as real as it gets.

from https://ed.sc.gov/educators/teaching-in-south-carolina/cte/program/


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Post-COVID Planning: Re-opening Requires Redefining Access

Reflecting upon WHOLE: What Teachers Need to Help Students Thrive

By Kevin E. Baird

American Democracy rests upon the concept of a Free Accessible Public Education (FAPE). This is the essential mission of public schools. As we emerge from the COVID pandemic, with more disruption on the horizon, we must redefine our concept of access. The ‘A’ in FAPE must shift.

Over the past three years, my co-authors and I have journeyed into the most challenged American neighborhoods to find the most successful schools. The lessons they teach can help us re-imagine “access.” Our findings led us to identify four critical priorities moving forward.

Priority 1: Student Access to Learning Begins with Student Mental Health Monitoring and Intervention

Students must be mentally and emotionally ready to learn. Distraction, acting out, and student disengagement are not caused by laziness or poor parenting. These behaviors are the autonomic responses of bodies filled with the stress hormone cortisol. Cortisol activates the amygdala in the brain, actually making it neurobiologically impossible to learn new things. Students are returning to us having experienced and witnessed trauma on multiple levels. Undesirable behaviors in the classroom are the result of fear and anger, anxiety and grief.

Just as we take the temperature of shoppers walking into a store, access to learning must begin with immediate, constant, and continuous vigilance of student mental health for readiness to learn. Intervention cannot be a long-term response with an IEP. Mental health intervention requires immediate and responsive action if we are to ensure access to learning and begin with a solid foundation that allows us to bridge the achievement gap.

Planning Element 2: Equity and Access Begin with Mentally Strong Teachers and Administrators

The idea for our book Whole: What Teachers Need to Help Students Thrive began with a provocative finding: In a study of stress hormone levels by occupation, teachers had the fourth most stress of any occupation in the United States.

As we visited schools in neighborhoods blighted by poverty and hopelessness (a sort of “local battlefield”), we found one central, common factor across schools who were succeeding despite their local environment—a priority of caring for the mental well-being of their educators. Successful student-learning outcomes began with caring about teachers, prioritizing their mental health, and feeding their combined self-confidence.

As an aging demographic, we can expect some of our colleagues will not return this fall. A greater number will be impacted by the loss of a loved one, by the emotional hardships of physical confinement, and by the increased anxiety caused by economic uncertainty for their families. We cannot expect educators to return to us this fall without mental and emotional needs resulting from their grief, their economic anxiety, and their personal loss.

Good schools begin with great leaders. The mental health, positive outlook, and self-confidence of our school leaders are equally important. What is true for teachers is also true for our leadership. They will need care and support.
We must honor that many of our teachers and leaders do not yet possess the skills to effectively respond to student trauma and, indeed, will be suffering from the impacts of their own personal trauma. We must recognize that our schools have rarely prioritized the mental and emotional health needs of our education professionals. And we must understand that the skills for self-care and response to trauma are not acquired in a day or two of “professional development.” We are facing a long-haul mental health triage plan to support our teachers and staff, so they can support our students and deliver equitable, accessible education.

**Priority Element 3: Grade Level is Shifting Downward, and Student Access Requires Urgent Action**

Each fall, students return to school having lost a few months of reading skill development due to “summer slide.” They will also slide backwards in mathematics fluency. Districts traditionally respond to this reality by providing a review in the fall, using placement tests, and mapping curriculum across grades. Our reality has changed. Grade-level readiness for fall has shifted even further backwards than in normal years.

In a real-time study of learning impacts during the COVID-19 crisis, I have joined my colleagues at the Successful Practices Network to analyze data from the online reading platform ACHIEVE3000. Our findings have urgent implications for back-to-school planning. Right now, at the time of this writing...

- A significant access gap remains—one year after the beginning of the pandemic—in the at-home learning environment between already high-performing students compared to struggling learners. The access gap may not be defined by technology (although it often is a technology gap), but instead is often defined by a gap in social-emotional supports at home.

- For students who have digital access, there is a significant participation gap between already high-performing students compared to struggling learners. In our urban centers, we have thousands of students who have simply “gone missing.”

- Even among high-performing students, many struggle to be engaged in continuous learning online, and many have struggled with a re-adjustment back to “regular” classrooms.

As we look forward to fall 2021, access to “grade-level” materials will be a significant challenge for many of our students, as their skill development will have plateaued last year and slid backwards from there. It is not hyperbole to expect a further half-year reduction in skill level. A tsunami of student and teacher frustration, anxiety, and failure is building and may crash upon our schools as they re-open.

Districts must respond by placing Equity of Access and Acceleration at the top of their strategic planning agendas. We must act quickly to use placement data for intervention. And we must not ration our best reading and math acceleration tools to just a few, but aggressively support fastest-possible skill-building for every single student.

**Priority Element Four: We Must Urgently Adapt to a New Learning Ecosystem**

Throughout history, the impact of extreme and widespread natural disasters has transformed the environment. The meteor strike which led to dinosaur extinction happened in an instant, with devastating transformation over time. The 1815 sudden eruption of Indonesia’s Mount Tambora unleashed three years of extreme and destructive weather worldwide. The primary outcome of the Spanish Flu pandemic was a loss of cognitive ability and future achievement across the
impacted generation of school children. The white tile prevalent in historic buildings from those times came about as an adaptation for easy and visible cleaning to reduce virus transmission. Our modern learning environment has shifted dramatically. We must form an urgent response to successfully adapt.

The design of our classrooms must adjust to allow for flexibility to provide for more effective collaboration, for accelerated gap-closing learning, and for the prospect of physically distanced collaboration now and in the future. Our learning environments must be designed to maximize modern, accelerated learning which includes the ability to accommodate students with social-emotional disruption.

In addition, the design of our schools and district office spaces must change to allow for flexibility and improved ventilation and air quality. Pathogen Reduction as a district priority is not likely to fade in a year or so. Indeed, beyond the pandemic, we know that “sick building syndrome” is a real thing. Asthma and allergies are among the leading causes of student and teacher absenteeism.

Finally, our expenditures must shift to materials which accelerate learning growth for all students, not just those with an IEP. And we must consider our digital learning ecosystem as equally important to our physical learning ecosystem.

In Summary:
Free Accessible Public Education is our critical mission. Access to learning requires a mental and emotional readiness to learn, and a readiness to teach. Access requires content which adapts when our skills slide backwards, and which accelerates all learners to provide equity of opportunity. Access requires adaptation within a transformed ecosystem, shifted overnight to one where relationships between students and teachers are more important than curriculum and pedagogy, and where digital infrastructure is as important as the physical building. Access has shifted. So must we.

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What is best for students? Every educational leader asks themselves this question multiple times a day. This one singular question is at the heart of decisions made by educational leaders who seek to understand the impact their decisions have on student well-being and student academic achievement. However, how often is the question, “what’s best for students?” been rephrased to ask “what’s best for Black and brown students?” Too often in education, schools and school systems seek to create change without looking at the ways that schools and school systems themselves generate and perpetuate harm towards Black and brown students. While multiple studies have assessed the ways curriculum, policies and systems in schools and school districts negatively impact minoritized student groups (Gregory, & Roberts, 2017; Griffith, Hurd & Hussain, 2019; Ladson-Billings, 2006), too often, nothing changes. So, what do we do? How do educational leaders gain the courage to create meaningful change that will positively impact all students?

One of the most important duties of a school leader is to ensure that all students feel safe, seen and have a learning environment that allows for them to grow as learners. While most schools and school systems believe they create these environments for all students, we have to ask ourselves, does our data relay the same message? When we look at data, what do we see? Do we see the same historical trends where marginalized groups are performing at lower levels than white students? What questions does this lead us to ask? Does it lead us to investigate what in our system is causing this disparity between student groups who are moving through the same school system? Most importantly, do we look more specifically at the instructional practices and cultural competencies within our school systems, instead of only looking at external factors.

Educational leaders must investigate, learn, and implement with fidelity practices within schools and schools systems that create culturally sustaining environments for minoritized students. Culturally sustaining pedagogy was developed by Paris (2012) and it seeks to create schools and school systems that perpetuate and sustain the cultures of the students they serve. Aspects of student culture that school systems should facilitate the maintenance of includes: cultural values, cultural practices, language, and cultural ways of meaning making. If school systems want to create school environments that are equitable and accessible for all students, including those from marginalized backgrounds, then schools must invest in conducting the work to create school environments that value student culture outside and inside of the classroom. Areas school systems can begin to make meaningful connections in building and sustaining student culture is through welcoming student linguistic and cultural practices into the classroom as a value-added, instead of seeing these attributes as a deficit.

Too often, emergent bilingual students and Black students face linguistic prejudice in the classroom and in
school systems. Emergent bilingual students are told they can only use English in the classroom and are treated as though their knowledge of a second language is a detriment to them, instead of an accomplishment. Black students are told that when speaking African American English (AAE) that it is not a real language or that it is inappropriate for school, even though research shows that AAE has rules and conventions that its speakers follow (Hollié, 2001), just like Standard English. Practices like the ones above are often embedded in school culture and practices. Moving educators away from devaluing student linguistic practices that differ from their own, when educators have been conditioned to what is “appropriate,” is not easy. However, this is where it takes courageous leadership to ask teachers to look at the ways they value or devalue student linguistic practices in the classroom. Even further, to ask school leaders to evaluate the ways they value or devalue student linguistic practices in the school. Are we encouraging emergent bilingual students to use their first language in leveraging the acquisition of another? Are we providing emergent bilingual students access to resources that allow them to further develop their first language acquisition or do our classrooms and our schools stamp out student voice? Are we asking teachers to listen to the content of the answers their Black students provide, rather than listening for what are deemed grammatical errors by Standard English standards? Are we reading stories and primary sources where the speakers use AAE in the classrooms in our schools? Actors within a school system can easily say they value student linguistic diversity, but school and classroom practices need to show how linguistic diversity is valued.

When talking about culture in schools, leaders must cultivate the conversation to center the culture of the students served by the school. When looking at practices used in the classroom, educational leaders must evaluate how these practices serve students of color and other minoritized students. One aspect educational leaders should assess is whether student culture is cultivated, celebrated and allowed to thrive in academic learning spaces. Educators must value students’ funds of knowledge (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992) that they bring with them each day in the classroom. School leaders must lead classroom teachers to assess the ways they build student cultural practices in the classroom and guide faculty towards cultural competency. For example, for many minoritized students (i.e. Black students, Hispanic students, Asian students and indigenous students), storytelling is a part of their culture (Banks-Wallace, 2002) and can be used in a variety of academic settings. However, if educators do not know this cultural practice is used in these communities, it is a missed opportunity to leverage student cultural knowledge and the way students make meaning in their own communities in the classroom. In doing the work of asking teachers and school leaders, to be introspective about their own biases held about various student groups and student cultures, it creates space to evaluate the reasons why student funds of knowledge (Moll, et al., 1992) are not being utilized in the classroom. It also creates space for professional learning concerning student communities, student cultures and ways to value student culture and diversity in meaningful ways in the classroom.

If school leaders only focus on creating spaces for student linguistic practices to flourish and for students to leverage their cultural practices in school settings will not create equitable schools that foster culturally sustaining pedagogy. School leaders must be willing to lead with courage and make it a priority to learn more about the cultures of the students in the building, raise faculty
competency of student culture, help faculty members navigate inherent biases in the school system and change them, in order to facilitate an environment that honors all students. Schools and school systems often invest thousands of dollars on programs to help “those” kids perform at higher levels, but what are schools and school systems doing to target the root causes of student performance. While there are many factors outside of the locus of control of the school, educational leaders must be courageous enough to take the first steps by being introspective in how their own biases and beliefs have shaped the school culture developed in their building, evaluating their own school culture, curriculum and policies that may unintentionally cause harm for minoritized students and being willing to take action to ensure the implementation of culturally sustaining pedagogies in the entire school building with fidelity. As educational leaders move to ensure that minoritized students are identified as a group and are centered in the educational decision making process, then and only then can we know the answer to the question, “what is best for students?”

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Get Out of the Weeds and Into the Classroom

By Ashley C. Wardlaw and Logan Wright

In the fall of 2019, our school district introduced the Upbeat Survey to gain general feedback from teachers and staff members. The survey ranged from questions about safety and consistency of expectations in the building to feelings of teacher autonomy and collaboration. Our results showed favorable responses in many areas, including high academic expectations and teacher collaboration, but revealed several areas of concern around instructional leadership. Only 67% of our teachers surveyed in fall 2019 said administrators saw teachers as experts, and only 57% of teachers believed administrators noticed their hard work. While these results are not conclusive to everything happening in our building, we knew it was time to make a change. We needed more than a change in policy; we needed a mindset and culture shift that would shake our current instructional processes to the core.

As we considered our survey results, we first turned to the main line of connection with instruction and teachers: our walk-through observation form. Our structure was for every administrator to observe every teacher over the course of the year. The observation/walk-through schedule was set up on a weekly rotating basis that would allow each administrator to see each teacher twice during each semester. These walk-through observations ranged from five to ten minutes with feedback given to teachers in a fillable form. The completed form was emailed to the teacher at the conclusion of the observation. Teachers were given the option to respond but few utilized this option. As an administrative team, we took the lack of responses as ‘no news’ is good news, but it turns out ‘no news’ meant teachers weren’t reading the forms. It became evident that in the attempt to be more efficient by creating check-box walk-through forms, we completely missed the point of observations. We had unknowingly stopped listening to what was actually going on in the classroom and over complicated one of the most basic elements of being an administrator.

When we asked teachers for their thoughts on our walk-through form and system, they agreed unequivocally that our observations were ineffective in improving student achievement and teacher efficacy. One teacher remarked, “In terms of effectiveness, I found that some observers didn’t stay long enough or didn’t understand the various teaching styles and different content areas.” Another stated, “I definitely wanted the feedback, but I feel like the forms are just check boxes, and I’d rather have honest, less structured feedback.” While we thought we were providing feedback, we were really widening the disconnect between teachers and administrators. Our teachers wanted us to listen, but we were too busy filling out the form. To put it simply, our observations were focused on logistics, not instruction. A fillable form and a five-minute walk-through did nothing to facilitate meaningful discussion about instruction between teachers and administrators. The goal and purpose of the walk-through was to provide feedback that made teachers feel supported and valued; however, it was clear that we were not meeting that goal. It was time to change our process to better support our teachers.

“I feel like the forms are just check boxes, and I’d rather have honest, less structured feedback.”
In order to provide effective support, we had to reflect on what practices and skill gaps were holding us back from the ultimate goal of being instructional leaders. As an administrative team, we needed to step away from being the ‘all knowing leaders’ and step into being receptive learners. We transformed our weekly instructional meeting into a time for learning. Each week we would focus on a topic relevant to our goal. The first gap identified was an understanding of actionable feedback. We started by creating a common definition amongst our team. We leaned heavily on the work of Diane Sweeney and her 2016 publication, Student Centered Coaching: The Moves, to close our understanding gap.

Our first focus was on giving well-rounded feedback that added clarity and value on current instructional practices as well as helped teachers uncover student engagement possibilities. Sweeney (2016) considers adding clarity, value, and uncovering possibilities the three most important factors of student-centered and actionable feedback. The team completed seven weeks of learning focused around giving actionable student-centered feedback. Over the course of those seven weeks, we discussed coaching stems, conversations, focusing on what the students are doing, and the importance of listening while coaching. Based on the feedback we had received about the current observation form and walk-throughs, we were not even providing one of those three key components. This realization prompted a change in how we recorded observations and shared feedback.

Our standard practice for a walk-through included an online form that was completed while the observer was still in the classroom. The informal walk-through form mirrored the formal evaluation instrument. Observed instructional practices were scored either evident, somewhat evident, not evident, or not observed. Teachers were receiving feedback that was centered on administrators putting checks in the appropriate boxes. We were getting caught in the weeds of formality and we were missing the bigger picture. A note-taking form was developed to help our team be more engaged with the classroom instruction, focus on evidence of student learning, and have time to reflect on the observed instruction. The note-taking form pushed our team to leave our technology in the office and ‘go old school’ with a clipboard and pen. In our team meetings, we reflected on using the note-taking form and made adjustments as needed. After four iterations, we came down to a simplified form with six components: lesson topic, instructional practices, student evidence of learning, great moments, areas of growth, and questions. Once the note-taking form was finalized, we committed to providing feedback in the form of a personal email or face-to-face conversation within a 48-hour period. Our administrative team immediately noticed a change in what we were seeing in observations. Instead of looking for a Learning Target posted on the board, now we were listening for evidence of student learning. We used Sweeney’s (2016) language stems to clarify, uncover possibilities, and add

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<td>Great Moments:</td>
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<td>Notes or teacher idea for:</td>
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value for teachers. We quickly saw the impact of our newly structured feedback. Teachers were actually responding!

As we dedicated more time to being in the classroom, some members of the leadership team voiced concerns about blurring the line between evaluation and support. In addition, the coaching culture in our building was connected with the idea that those who were coached were struggling. In order to avoid the negative connotation around coaching and to present a new model of support, we focused on partnering with teachers and coined the term “Instructional Partnerships.” The purpose of developing Instructional Partnerships was to create camaraderie and build trust between teachers and administrators. The Instructional Partnership concept built upon the idea that administrators would work alongside teachers to help develop rigorous and engaging classroom experiences. We separated the evaluative role of administrators from the partnering role by establishing cohorts focused around professional learning communities (PLC). Each administrator’s cohort included teachers that were not on their formal evaluation list to ensure our partnerships were focused on support. Administrators were then tasked with building relationships inside their cohort and making contact each week with their teachers. The team agreed that contact could be in the form of an observation, PLC meeting, or follow-up. Once our concept and structure was in place, the stark reality of just how little time we had been putting into our teachers was brought to light.

We took a pause in our learning and turned our focus to how we were structuring our day and what duties need to be prioritized. If our Instructional Partnerships were going to work, we had to make time for them. As administrators, we wear many hats during the day. We are investigators, counselors, disciplinarians, and supervisors just to name a few. Adding another hat of Instructional Partner seemed feasible and definitely needed; however, we were not prepared for the time commitment. While we had learned about time management and strategies for utilizing time more efficiently, we were not anticipating the teachers to embrace the follow-up conversation as much as they did. Teachers were excited that we were actually listening and they jumped at the chance to respond. One teacher even said, “Thank you so much for your detailed, quick feedback. Your comments always reassure me that I am being effective in my classroom.” Another said, “I had a great observation today and a great follow-up conversation for about 30 minutes. By far the best feedback and discussion I have had in probably 10 years of being here.”

With this new excitement, the time administrators spent in the classroom nearly doubled—followed by conversation teachers actually wanted to engage in. Being more engaged with the lesson as the Instructional Partner put our team in a time crunch to complete many of our school’s managerial tasks. Though a good problem to have, the team was feeling stretched too thin. We were feeling the growing pains of a new program. Our challenge as administrators was to structure our time so we could be effective while wearing all of our hats. We had to stop saying we were too busy and start making adjustments as to how we
were spending our time. During one of our weekly learning meetings, the team was challenged to record how we spent our time during the school day. We concluded that we were spending time focusing on managerial tasks and not on the instruction happening in the classrooms. The light bulb came on. We realized that coaching could only happen while teachers were in the building, and our emails could wait. We had committed to partnering with our cohort and providing honest feedback. This commitment also came with a change of philosophy of what duties are most important. As a team, we agreed to continue our work to make partnerships our priority.

To say implementation of our Instructional Partnerships was easy is a gross misrepresentation of the truth. Change is hard, especially for the ‘all-knowing leaders.’ As we navigated our new partnerships, we discovered several things that could be revamped to achieve our ultimate goal of becoming instructional leaders. While we believe that the cohort model is best for our school, we will continue to adjust groupings to ensure the best possible outcome for administrators and teachers. Our plan is to develop cohorts based on departments and not mixed PLCs groups. Our Instructional Partnerships launched with only a semester left in the school year. We recognize now that if our team is going to be able to manage our time around what is best for the cohort, we will need a full year with a flexible schedule.

The key to a successful partnership between teachers and administrators relies on listening and having the patience to not have all the answers. We know we have made gains at Wade Hampton High School, and we plan to continue our partnerships with an intentional focus on rigor in the classroom. We anticipate that in our next Upbeat Survey our work as Instructional Partners will be visible in the numbers. After our first year of being engaged partners in the classroom, we have learned that administrators can influence instructional change if they are willing to take the time to get out of the weeds and get into the classroom.

References

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Supporting Teacher Resilience and Growth in the Midst of Reentry

By Dr. Natalie Osborne Smith and Casey Calhoun

An Introduction: The Season of Change
The Greek philosopher Heraclitus stated that “by cosmic rule...all things change” (p. 25). There are no truer words that could be used to describe the work of educators. Change has always been a part of our work and profession, and it continues to be a constant, especially in a year like 2020-2021. In our district, we have re-entered, adjusted, flexed, and shifted so much since last March. Like many of our peers, we have shifted models of teaching from online to hybrid to face to face at the drop of the dime. We have revised our master schedules multiple times to support these model shifts, and we have launched new programs like our Online Learning Academy to provide quality virtual instruction for children. These changes have been beautiful and difficult and empowering and challenging.

But, do you know what has not changed? The constant has been our teachers’ passion for the children in our district. What has also stayed constant is the urgency we all have to ensure each child has access to instruction that is challenging, engaging, and empowering. Lastly, what has remained critical is the need for growth-oriented professional cultures where every teacher feels empowered and supported to provide deeper instruction to students.

So in the context of this environment, where change, passion and a sense of urgency are all wrapped together, we faced some truly important questions this year. How we might help teachers thrive in the midst of so much change, and how do we support educators as whole people while keeping our eye on our vision to “empower each child to design the future?” We believe the key to our successes this year can be attributed in part to our intentional work to answer these very questions.

The Focus on Educator Resilience
Elena Aguilar (2018) stated that “between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom” (p. 1). During the constant change of COVID-19 closures and reentry, school leaders have been pushed to focus on the relationship between stimulus and response more than ever. As we stated above, our goal was to determine how we might support educators in the constant flux of the COVID-19 year. The key for us has been to focus on supporting educators’ levels of resilience so that in the midst of all this change our cultures, physical buildings, and technical structures can create spaces where educators can thrive, not just survive (Aguilar, 2018).

So you might ask, “why make resilience the lynchpin of our support plan?” According to the American Psychological Association (2015), resilience is the process of adapting well or bouncing back after facing adversity, trauma, tragedy, or stress. It is the “adapting well” part of the APA’s definition that we were most interested in tackling as a team. When we thought about helping practitioners to adapt well, we focused on what they could gain or how they could benefit from our experiences this year. How can we help them thrive with additional positive behaviors, thoughts and actions?
Like so many other leadership challenges, we learned that to truly support educator resilience we must thoughtfully and strategically plan for and model resilience for staff so they can continue to learn, grow, and develop as professionals and as people (American Psychological Association, 2015). Furthermore, we have found that when we bolster the resilience of our teams, we strengthen the personal and professional relationships in the school and system as well. These strong personal connections have been vital as we sought to grow the professional practice of our teachers even during a year as challenging as this (Hallowell, 2011).

**Intentional Structures and Supports: Adult Advocacy**

So how have we created safe spaces for educators to innovate this year? Well, our goal was to create environments where educators thrive through personal connection, social and emotional support and personalized professional learning. To create this space, we implemented a number of technical and adaptive strategies to address organizational conditions and structures. For instance, to support the connectedness needed to bolster educator resilience, we intentionally built time and structure into the weekly schedule for staff social and emotional wellness. At the district level during the fall and winter, we set aside Fridays as virtual learning days for students so that educators had extended time for planning, collaboration, social and emotional connection, and targeted instruction with small groups of children. At Lexington Middle School we specifically carved out time on Fridays for all staff, both certified and non-certified, to meet in Faculty Advocacy groups. These Advocacy groups have met once a week to focus on the mental wellness of each individual staff member. It has given us a group of colleagues that we can laugh and cry with as we reflect on all we have experienced during this rollercoaster of a year. We have found that our people need this intentional connection and authenticity. Ultimately, our faculty advocacy groups have given our staff the safe spaces they need to connect, heal and support one another during such a challenging year.

**Intentional Structures and Supports: Flexible Professional Learning**

Prior to our extended closure due to COVID-19, our schools were beginning to implement a new procedure to support school improvement called the school-based work plan process. The goal of the school-based work plan process is to help our leaders leverage collaborative data analysis in order to identify a few high-leverage improvement efforts. We call these improvement efforts work plan goals. Our schools then strategically monitor their work plan goals, which allows them to manage the change process throughout the school year. Our work plan process became critically important as we strategically supported teacher growth in a school year like this one. During our reflection periods at the beginning and middle of the year, schools reflected on which professional learning targets from the work plan were most crucial to ensure growth. Our focus for the selection of learning targets this year remained our north star - the district’s vision. We asked ourselves repeatedly how we could continue to empower each child to design their future no matter the method of instruction, whether that be virtual, hybrid, or face-to-face.

So with a sense of urgency to provide deeper learning in each instructional model, we purposefully designed professional learning opportunities based on immediate staff and student needs. For example, at the district-level we designed a structure called “Virtual PL to Go”
(VPL2Go) in response to teachers’ need for support and connection during our closure. As we designed each VPL2Go series, we considered two factors: content and structure. Our content choices have been focused on school-based work plan areas of growth as well as the needs that teachers named in response to our extended closure in the spring. According to Homer and Osborne Smith (2020), the VPL2Go development team use three different structures to provide content to educators:

1. **Livestream Webinar**: Google Meets’ livestream feature allows facilitators to present content in a webinar-style session. Participants can pose questions in a virtual parking lot, and facilitators answer those questions during the live presentation.

2. **Flipped Model**: Facilitators pre-record instructional videos around a predetermined topic. Participants watch the videos prior to the live session. On an advertised date, participants join a live Q&A with facilitators using Zoom to collaborate on implementation questions and ideas.

3. **Collaborative Webinar**: Facilitators use Zoom to present a live, eight- to 10-minute mini-lesson around a specific content area. Participants and facilitators then join a collaborative discussion for five to eight minutes, where they determine possible implementation strategies for the tools or lesson ideas shared.

All sessions through the reentry period were archived for our teachers use asynchronously. Therefore, our flexible district-wide VPL2Go model has given teachers choice in what they experience as well as in how they experience the learning. Giving teachers choice and flexibility has been critical as we navigated the need for remote teaching and learning at different points in the year.

At the school level, school leaders have also been rethinking space, time, and resources to support teachers’ instructional growth through responsive professional learning. At Lexington Middle School, professional learning has been very flexible in delivery. We have shifted between self-paced independent learning modules, whole staff Zoom learning sessions, individual instructional coaching sessions, and small group in-person sessions to meet the needs of educators. The choice in the structure of professional learning has depended on the current safety conditions, the teachers’ mental and emotional well-being, and the type of collaboration needed to learn the content deeply. This year has confirmed more than ever that the more personalized the learning experience can be for the individual, the deeper our staff members are willing to go in professional learning. In fact, during the spring semester the Lexington Middle staff has delved into explicit skill instruction as the driver for teaching. As part of this professional learning, we intentionally built in ample individual/partner reflection and collaborative planning to ensure application of new skills. The instructional coaches have also used planning to give specific feedback to teachers in regards to the content skills we wanted children to exhibit. Overall the flexibility and personalization of professional learning cycles have garnered a greater sense of efficacy across the staff throughout the year.
Closing: Questions to Consider

Like our peers in other districts, so many of the challenges we have faced and the changes we have made have been learning experiences. Some of these changes and innovations are strategies and structures we would want to consider for the upcoming year. So in that vein, we are using the following questions to help us identify those supports and structures that we hope to continue moving forward.

1. **How do we rethink scheduling structures to prioritize deep levels of teacher collaboration?**

2. **How can we help teachers to use their collaborative time more efficiently/effectively so they may meet the needs of each child in their care?**

3. **How do we continue to provide time and structure for faculty advocacy groups so they might support one another as colleagues and humans?**

4. **How do we continue to provide a high level of flexibility in professional learning while also addressing the areas of growth in schools’ work plans?**

As we stated in the beginning, our strategy is to respond to any and all questions with our vision in mind. We must consider how each answer to the questions above ultimately empowers every child in our system to design the future. So, it is with that sense of purpose and urgency that we strategically respond so our staff may continue to experience powerful connection, deep collaboration, and flexible professional learning in the coming year.

**References**


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Taking on a middle school principalship, at a new level and in a new school district, was the start of my 2020–2021 school year. Being a principal, for 15 years prior, did not fully prepare me for what I was going to be tasked to do this year. When I was hired, the district was finalizing the learning platforms for the year. Kershaw County School District would provide three learning platforms simultaneously for the school year:

- Option 1: Face-to-Face Instruction
- Option 2: Virtual Synchronous Instruction
- Option 3: Asynchronous Self-Paced Instruction

Students would also be allowed to change learning platforms at the end of each quarter. Our district’s secondary department worked to provide how these learning platforms would work in our schools. After receiving guidance from the district, Stover’s administration team deliberated on how we would deliver these three options.

Our superintendent gave principals the flexibility to determine how students would move throughout the building and how we would offer the three learning platforms. As our administration team worked together, we researched COVID-19 spread and student movement. We made the decision that students would remain self-contained at each grade level for content classes (ELA, Math, Science, and Social Studies), and the teachers would rotate to the classrooms. Students moved only for related arts, which limited the risk of exposure and contact spreading. We then had to determine how to offer related arts classes within the three learning platforms. In order to provide instruction for the initial caseload of virtual students, our administration team split the number of related arts offerings in half. Related arts teachers taught virtual instruction for one semester and face-to-face instruction the next semester. However, band was offered year-long virtually and face to face. The related arts schedule was a hard concept to put in place, but it worked.

It is always a great advantage to have an amazing scheduler on the administration team, and we had that with one of our assistant principals. We carefully went through each teacher’s schedule to plan out their rotation to each classroom and to create student schedules to reflect self-contained classrooms. The advanced students’ schedules reflected movement out of the self-contained classroom as needed. After those schedules were completed, we went back and checked student numbers for learning platforms. At the beginning of the year, we had over half of our students between options 2 and 3. Some virtual teacher caseloads had 150+ students while the face-to-face teacher loads had 80 to 100 students. By October one thing was apparent; the virtual teachers were overwhelmed. The caseloads and virtual screen time put a few over the edge, and something needed to be done quickly. The tremendous amount of emails from parents and students to virtual teachers with caseloads of 150+ students reached its limit. However, as students started returning face to face, these numbers eventually evened out.
The schedules appeared to be working on paper, but one thing that I quickly noticed was the divide it was creating between virtual teachers and face-to-face teachers. The opportunity to collaborate with other content and grade-level teachers was challenging. More time was required for both virtual and face-to-face team members to plan together and create a culture of positivity and fairness. One of the virtual teachers gave me some honest and constructive feedback. I considered her as one of the more flexible teachers on staff, and she stated the virtual teachers needed more time to get through the amount of work created with teaching options 2 and 3. I immediately met with my administration team to work out a plan. I presented the plan to my superintendent who approved and supported our team recommendations. We decided to allow for the virtual teachers to have one to two days of asynchronous instruction (teachers taped preplanned activities and/or lessons during the week) depending on their caseload of students. Teachers utilized this time to go through the hundreds of emails, plan and grade, and provide office hours for students who needed additional support and tiered interventions. After this plan went into place, our virtual teachers were better able to provide instruction with the option 2 and option 3 learning platforms.

Our administration team was now tasked with preparing our face-to-face teachers to receive back virtual students for instruction. The largest increase of students returning back to face-to-face learning came at the end of Quarter 2. With my superintendent’s support, I asked that all students failing at least 4 content areas return to school for Quarter 3. We were losing many of our virtual option 3 (self-paced) students with a virtual failure rate of over 60%. We had to do something or our students would see the ramifications of the decision to stay home and work virtually for years to come. When the virtual students returned to face-to-face instruction, our virtual teachers moved from teaching all virtual classrooms to teaching some classes with face-to-face instruction and other classes with virtual classroom instruction. Several related arts classrooms had to teach dual modality because of numbers and/or high school credit courses.

### Option Choice and Failures by Quarter

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<tr>
<th>Quarter</th>
<th>Option 1</th>
<th>Option 2</th>
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<th>Failing 3 or more</th>
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#### Diagram:

[Chart showing option choice and failures by quarter.]
One of the greatest challenges in addition to scheduling three different learning platforms was ensuring all students tested with MAP. One of the goals I wanted our administration team to ensure was the ability to get all students tested to obtain an accurate picture of their performance since March 2020. This was not a small task because at the beginning of the year, the majority of our students were learning on two virtual learning platforms. Many questioned the validity of testing students at home. Our administration team, led by our assistant principal for testing, did an incredible job coordinating the separate testing of our virtual students. Virtual students tested in the school with no contact with face-to-face students. It was optional for virtual students to come in; however, the majority reported to campus to test in the fall of 2020. Over 90% of our virtual students attended in-person testing allowing us to get accurate and reliable results. The team noticed that the fall scores were very low and that we needed to put the following in place to improve MAP scores:

- dedicate daily time for interventions through EXACT PATH,
- coordinate MAP conferences with students to set individual student goals,
- create Student Learning Objectives (SLOs)/GBEs written to support increased student achievement, and
- give quarterly benchmarks and analyze the data as a team.

The increases from fall MAP to winter MAP were not as high as I would have liked them to be. We were able to measure some gains, and we are hopeful that spring MAP testing will allow us to see additional gains in student achievement.

Looking back, with less than 40 instructional days to go, the biggest struggles were supporting the social and emotional learning of our students and providing social and emotional support for our staff. Regarding student emotional support, our school provided a counseling support system. Students were able to request, via Google Forms, opportunities to talk with their school counselors and administrators. Additional support was provided by counselors from the Alpha Behavioral Health Center of Kershaw County and the Department of Mental Health. Kershaw County School District also recognized this need for employees and collaborated with the Alpha Behavioral Health Center to provide free counseling sessions for our staff members and their families. These support systems are invaluable. Even the best of teachers were ill prepared for the amount of time and commitment needed to teach three learning platforms.

As I told all staff at the beginning of the year, we needed to be flexible in all aspects of teaching. This was not a normal year by any means, but the failure of our students was not an option. The success of our students is our number one priority. The academic, social, and emotional progress we were able to see with students this year was directly attributed to the following:

- returning the majority of failing virtual students at the beginning of Quarter 3,
- implementing Saturday Virtual Academy (SVA),
- providing virtual tutors through Kershaw County School District,
- providing peer tutoring,
- implementing a district mentor program to provide support for at-risk students, and
- providing on-site social and emotional support for students on campus through the Alpha Behavioral Health Center of Kershaw County and the Department of Mental Health.
The administration team has started working with each grade level to discuss scheduling goals as we prepare for the next school year. We discussed our successes and areas requiring improvement. Honest feedback is key from all stakeholders to move forward and continue the business of educating our students. Our administration team has two outstanding assistant principals: Mrs. Charisse Flowers, and first-year assistant principal, Mrs. Wendy Hill. Without their dedication, hard work, and many hours preparing for the start of the school year, we would not have been able to provide three learning platforms from day one. Our counselors, Mrs. Mornique Dozier and Mrs. Ashley McCaskill, were the best in providing the social and emotional support for our students, scheduling students as they moved between learning options every quarter, and just lending a hand whenever needed. Stover teachers and staff were the true heroes during this process. Their flexibility and grace were immeasurable while teaching three options and managing the transition of students between options every quarter from day one! I would be remiss if I did not mention our parents for their willingness to listen, try new options, and their patience throughout the year. Thank you so very much!

A special thank you to the support provided by Kershaw County School District; Assistant Superintendent Mr. Tim Hopkins, who supplied us with PPE items to keep all of our staff and students safe during face-to-face learning; and Dr. Shane Robbins, our school district superintendent, who trusted our team to be creative and allowed us the flexibility to think outside of the box. Thank you for always being willing to hear me and give me the freedom to lead during this pandemic.

I know that we will have successes and areas that will be challenging. However, I know this team is capable of meeting these challenges. I am blessed to be a part of such a dynamic team of professionals. After this year, everything and anything is possible as we continue to facilitate the mission of our school and the mission of Kershaw County School District: To educate all students for success.

Dr. Chantelle Baker
Principal, Leslie M. Stover Middle School
Kershaw County Schools
Leading Courageously Through the Midst of a Pandemic

By Dr. Cornelius Leach

“Men make history and not the other way around. In periods where there is no leadership, society stands still. Progress occurs when courageous, skillful leaders seize the opportunity to change things for the better.”

—Harry S. Truman

The words of former President Harry S. Truman could not be more true based on the way the American educational system has caused school leaders to change. The 2019–2020 school year ended unexpectedly with the surge of the Coronavirus-19 pandemic. Educational leaders around the world grappled with how to educate our young people while keeping students and staff safe. The beginning of the 2020–2021 school year began with some of the same challenges and questions: How should we begin the school year? Should we continue virtually or have in-person instruction? Is it safe for students to come to school for face-to-face instruction? The questions could go on and on. Regardless of the challenges and obstacles that ended one school year and hindered the beginning of another, courageous leaders led the charge to keep the focus on the process that leads to student growth and success.

Connolly (2008) stated that courage doesn’t demand that we win every battle, but only that we don’t run away from them. Educators across the country knew that whether students would be educated virtually or in-person, quality teaching and learning had to take place. There would be no “dodging” of the bullet. The key to courageous leadership is how one responds to what arises during the journey, rather than whether individual circumstances are defined as good, bad, or indifferent (National Middle School Association, 2008).

The leadership teams at Crosswell Drive Elementary School and Millwood Elementary School in Sumter School District accepted the challenge and believed courageous, collaborative, and effective leadership would be the only way to manage the crisis of the pandemic and lead their teachers and staff toward the fulfillment of the vision and mission of the schools. Both schools have been recognized with progressive accolades and have partnered specifically with the Southern Regional Educational Board (SREB) to facilitate teaching and learning.

Crosswell Drive Elementary has been named a “Model School” by the International Center for Leadership in Education (ICLE) for the 2020–2021 school year. As only one of five elementary schools in the nation receiving this honor, ICLE recently recognized Crosswell Drive Elementary as an innovative and progressive school, “acting courageously amid a most challenging year.” This honor allows Crosswell Drive Elementary to discuss its progressive framework aligned to accelerating laser-targeted instruction and remediation to a national audience in June. Crosswell Drive Elementary has received this accolade based on the courageous and collaborative leadership that exists between SREB and both elementary schools.
Millwood has been named a 2021 SC School Improvement Council (SC-SIC) Dick and Tunky Riley Award Finalist based on the work of the SIC during the 2019–2020 school year. The SC-SIC award is presented annually to recognize the contributions local SICs make to public education. Even though the pandemic hindered some of the face-to-face work with collaboration of the external stakeholders, courageous actions continued to ensure that the total school community was making good decisions to best meet the needs of the students. To continue the work of the SIC and the goals and initiatives in the school renewal plan, Knoster’s Model for Managing Complex Change proved beneficial in sustaining positive efforts in professional development activities, community engagement, and the development of long-range plans to minimize the negative effect the pandemic had on our students and families.

The Knoster Model was created by Tim P. Knoster, Ed.D., professor at the McDowell Institute for Teacher Excellence in Positive Behavior Support in the College of Education at Bloomsburg University of Pennsylvania. The model related to behavioral science has been researched, studied, and tested for several years. The Knoster Model consists of six key elements that must be addressed to affect desired change—Vision, Consensus, Skills, Incentives, Resources, and Action Plan.

If any one of these elements is missing, the change effort will fail, with varying “Negative Change” outcomes. As difficult as it may be, transitioning from a more traditional approach to educating students and receiving and providing professional development during the pandemic created a paradigm shift for the administrators and staff at Crosswell Drive and Millwood Elementary Schools. The traditional face-to-face interaction had to be modified for full virtual participation, which posed challenges with some staff members not being technologically savvy.
In the midst of a pandemic, courage may not necessarily be promoted in the world of educational leadership. We are attached to roles that are reinforced through traditional norms. Seldom do you see educational leaders step out of job-secure responsibilities and practices. Typically, we are molded or promoted not on our creativity and innovation but rather on our ability to manage and stay within the lines. This is not to say it is the case for all, but as you reflect on yourself and your colleagues, you can place more than one in this category.

Why do we not see more courageous leaders in educational leadership? Is it because there are those in district positions that stymie creativity and courage? Is it because being courageous takes effort and may generate conflict? The questions could go on and go deeper as there are several reasons, either personally or systemically, why educational leaders do not aim directed courage toward student achievement and advocacy.

The existence of courageous leadership brings the possibility of vulnerability. This is one of the main reasons why educational leaders do not challenge the norm. How can the educational leader of the building be vulnerable for failure? We as adults do not like to fail, and if we ground our practice in the safety of tradition, we stand complacent among the rest.

Courageous leadership is not necessarily bravery but more so the ability to modify and adjust as needed to increase student learning during unprecedented times or situations. We are and have been in the pure definition of unprecedented times. We are the academic front liners that are responsible for the education of our students. We understand that traditional educational practices will not meet the needs of a majority of our students next school year. We do not know the full extent of the trauma both socially/emotionally as well as academically. All we know is that students are going to be there on day one, and we must courageously modify and adjust our practices to meet the needs of those we serve.

Remember, being a courageous leader forces you, as well as others, out of their comfort zone. The effort it takes is minimal compared to the outcomes it can produce. The effort it takes to be a courageous leader is minimal compared to the outcomes it can produce for our students. Courageous leadership gives your team security, builds team confidence, attracts other strong leaders, and increases the likelihood of success (Dodd, 2014). We challenge you to modify and adjust strategically in order to maximize student outcomes. Make yourself vulnerable for some failures as change and progression do not occur in comfort but rather in the strength of those that fortify their convictions. Simply put, if you change nothing then nothing changes.

Unprecedented times, such as now, and moving forward consistently present opportunities in the dark. The courageous leader is the beacon of light that can reach the darkest corners to illuminate the essence of growth and progress. Without that courage, we are merely safe in the notion of minimalism and traditionalism, which are the greatest enemies of courage and progression in the pursuit of knowledge among our students.

References


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Principal, Millwood Elementary School
Sumter County Schools
At the Continuous Learning Center (CLC), an alternative school in the Kershaw County School District, we believe in developing fundamental values for our students as well as our staff. We have developed the theme G.R.O.W. (Goal-Oriented, Respectful, Optimistic, and Wise). This motto has become an integral part of our program as we develop leaders for the future.

When I was blessed with the opportunity to run the alternative program, I knew we needed to establish clear values that we would uphold throughout the program. I knew I wanted our message to be simple, yet convey what we ultimately wanted the program to accomplish with our students; between myself and other stakeholders, it was established that at the end of the students’ time with us, we wanted to see them grow academically, as well as socially and emotionally. From there we built the “We G.R.O.W.” concept, with each letter representing a core value that we felt would be key components to not only the students growing and finding their own successes, but for the program to grow in its capacity as a whole. It was our overall hope that through these clear and common values, we could establish a program centered on growth for all stakeholders, and allow us to “work backwards” in a sense that all our efforts would need to align with upholding the values of the program.

Students and teachers have shared that the G.R.O.W. concept has been impactful in their lives.

High school student Emma Contreras said, “The push for goal-setting and optimism has helped me stay on task and stay positive about my goals inside and outside the classroom.”

“This concept has changed the mindset of my classroom. When I have to redirect a student, I focus on their desired goals for motivation and not on negative consequences. My students are able to see how each individual assignment is a step that helps them GROW towards their goals,” Wendell Gooding, Special Education teacher, said.

Elementary teacher Lynley Jones-Blankenship stated, “In my classroom, GROW has become a mindset shift for both myself and my students. We work hard to ensure we are using the language and applying the skills/character traits of each letter in our daily activities and actions. Through the implementation of our GROW motto, we are growing as individuals in all critical areas including academics, behavior, and social-emotional.”

“Optimism helped me change my attitude. I have learned to think before I act,” Larry Young, fifth grader, said. As a result, Larry has now transitioned back to his school within the District.

G.R.O.W. has enabled us to develop leadership skills in our students and teachers. Each core value of G.R.O.W. is explained in the following paragraphs.

**Goal-Oriented (G)**

Each day, we begin with G.R.O.W. time, similar to Homeroom. Each day has a theme: Monday- “Make
Mondays Matter;” Tuesday- “Take the Next Step Tuesdays;” Wednesday- “What Do You Want to Be Wednesdays?”; Thursday- “Thursday Talks;” Friday- “Fun Fridays”—if students have completed their goals for the week, they earn free time for gym or games. We also have our students check their academic progress, and they learn about positivity, good habits, and setting goals. Students maintain a G.R.O.W. binder in which the students and their teachers track their goals on a daily basis. G.R.O.W. bucks are rewarded if students meet academic goals, and they can be used to purchase canteen items or items from our G.R.O.W. Store. Our high school students have begun Microburst Learning Employability Soft Skills training and assessments. For each skill, we invite community business leaders to present their expertise of leadership and job skills to our students (Thursday Talks). Students also have the opportunity to earn certification for these employability soft skills, which they can include on their resume as well as take with them to a job or internship interview. Now more than ever, employers are sharing that they are looking for employees who know and demonstrate soft skills as well as leadership qualities.

Respectful (R)
We emphasize self-respect, which we relate to the students’ own goals. We then focus on respect for others, with a special emphasis on respecting the “personal history” of others. A project we worked on as a program to further emphasize this message was for Black History Month. We partnered with the Camden Archives and Museum to obtain the history and photographs of Jackson schools in Kershaw County, and students learned about the history of the schools during segregation and desegregation. A plaque from 1988 to commemorate the school was found, and our local technology school (Woolard Technology School) students refurbished the plaque. We hosted a rededication of the plaque, and invited Jackson School alumni. Students wrote letters to the alumni. Throughout the month, students worked on projects on historical figures from various decades. Students researched information about them and decorated a poster board, which included their researched information. They also created styrofoam doll heads to represent their historical figure. Finally, students developed a virtual video about their historical figure. It is crucial that educators and students honor the past, celebrate the present, and inspire the future. These projects enhanced the concept of respect for our past, present, and future.

Optimistic (O)
In G.R.O.W. time, we stress that an optimistic attitude and effort determine the future. During Read Across America Week, one of our days highlighted the theme “Finding the Good in Difficult Times.” In G.R.O.W. time, we used an article about J.K. Rowling’s successes and failures as a writer. She went on to write one of the most popular book series ever—Harry Potter. Students learned that they can grow from their failures, and they can be inspired by the successes and failures of others like J.K. Rowling. They can persevere through their obstacles. Optimism is a mindset we stress each day because an
optimistic attitude is the foundation of each day. We are also in the development stage of a partnership with our local Optimist Club to recognize Optimistic Students of the Week or Month.

**Wise (W)**

Instilling the importance of wise decisions is another daily habit in our program. Throughout each day, we stress self-motivation, while recognizing and acknowledging uncertainty and change. We also stress to consider others’ perspectives and be mindful of our diverse world. Flexibility and adaptability are crucial when making decisions. In our English classes, our students read Walter Dean Myers’ memoir Bad Boy, in which Myers wrote about his troubled childhood, but through wise decisions, he went on to become what many consider one of the strongest voices in children’s and young adult literature today. Our students showcased the Harlem Renaissance by creating “Harlem City” in our hallways with the city landscape as well as images of jazz, sports, and music of the time period. To celebrate the project, our students and staff enjoyed an authentic Harlem Renaissance-themed lunch.

CLC’s value system is helping us “GROW” by the leadership skills we sow.
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Michael Jordan (MJ) once said, “Obstacles don’t have to stop you. If you run into a wall, don’t turn around and give up. Figure out how to climb it, go through it, or work around it.” Having a solution-oriented mindset has allowed our administrative teams to help families, teachers, students, and staff overcome the challenges and obstacles presented during the COVID-19 pandemic. Turning challenges into opportunities has led to celebrations in the 2020–2021 school year we might have never experienced in a typical year.

One challenge during a school year filled with so much change and uncertainty has been the inability to get out in front of issues and fully prepare for them. This has been difficult because, as administrators, we take pride in our proactive approach and ability to respond appropriately. During the winter, district office staff and administrative teams knew we had to begin to focus our vision beyond the next few months of spring and summer into the 2021–2022 school year. It felt daunting—having one foot in the realities of the present and another foot in a still unpredictable future.

Yet it was also energizing to set aside distractions and think ahead with optimism. As His Airness said, “Get the fundamentals down and the level of everything rises.” We were fully immersing ourselves back into our comfort zone with a mindset of inquiring, anticipating, planning, and plotting! The challenge lied in the multiple fronts to consider and how to avoid a fragmented approach. In conversations across departments, including Instruction, Special Services, and Student Services, our teams identified the fundamentals we felt were critical to the success of any approach we adopted:

1. Building on strengths and familiarity
2. Maintaining a focus on core instructional strategies
3. Centering social emotional wellness
4. Connecting as many departments and initiatives as possible
5. Creating a single framework for PK–12

As we processed our long lists of concerns and potential solutions, we began to find a convergence, recognizing how each area dovetailed into another. What emerged was the Supportive Practices model, which aligns two main overarching concepts: core instructional practices and basic human needs. The human needs pillar encompasses all things related to Social and Emotional Learning (SEL), mental health, and physical wellbeing within the idea that all behavior is a drive to meet one or more needs. The instructional practices pillar captures the most essential tools all educators use to maximize the quality and impact of teaching and learning. We believed the simplicity of the model’s straightforward construction and terminology would not obscure the potency of the instructional practices and the power of looking through the lens of human needs.

Of course, we didn’t start from scratch. The model borrows from multiple systems already in place including Restorative Practices, The Pyramid Model, Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS), the SC 4.0 Rubric, SEL, and our district’s classroom observational tool, Classroom Mosaic. The Six Basic Human Needs were adapted from ParaSharp by 321 Insight’s professional development tools, which we had previously used in administrator and paraprofessional coaching. This language resonated with us even more strongly given the current world’s reminders of our shared humanity.

Once we had a model in hand, the question became how to disseminate it while avoiding any initial reaction of it being “one more thing” or “something else new” in
a year where this would certainly spell doom! While we knew these to be neither new concepts nor new expectations, the presentation would certainly impact reception and longevity.

We landed on the idea of giving administrative teams a rare chance to spotlight for each other the creative and compassionate ways they had already met so many of their school community’s needs. This served to recognize that we were already engaged in ensuring safety, fostering belonging and affiliation, finding gratitude, creating the tools necessary for success, streamlining communication, and honoring the need to self-regulate. We wanted to begin with a celebration of the fact that the work we proposed was indeed established and ongoing.

With this beginning in mind and a thoughtful approach to long-term efficacy, we designed an implementation plan in several phases. The initial launch was facilitated by educators from a range of areas within departments to emphasize the cooperative nature of the effort and the wide application of the model.

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<th>Group</th>
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| 1 (Feb. 2021) | Meeting with all school administrators and instruction department directors and chief | • Center the “why” for the model in our preparation for the 21–22 school year and anticipated mental health needs  
• Introduce how the six basic human needs model and the core instructional practices support each other, including the use of practice scenarios and break-out groups  
• Provide time for administrators to share their school’s strengths in terms of meeting the six basic human needs this school year |
| 2 | School-level meetings with administrative teams and their faculty | • Share the model and choose from guiding questions to hold discussions about applying the model |
| 3 (Mar. 2021) | Meetings with all school administrators and instruction department directors and chief | • Reinforce the “why” of anticipated mental health needs  
• Share feedback from their faculties  
• Contribute ideas for maintaining a focus on the model to target (1) what it means to be strategic and intentional in the implementation of the model and (2) how a review of implementation can be integrated into existing structures (e.g., faculty meetings, grade-level/department meetings, action items on 21–22 plans)  
• Consider any resources needed |
| 4 (Mar. - Aug. 2021) | Specific group meetings | • Utilize separate meetings with groups such as curriculum coordinators, PBIS leads, district SEL committee, and mental health practitioners to review the model and make connections to their work; discuss among directors, principals, and school administrators at monthly meetings |
| 5 (21-22 school year) | School-level meetings with administrative teams and their faculty | • Strengthen ties between the model and other district departments and practices (e.g., discipline, security, athletics) and within their own school teams and departments  
• Provide support to target (1) expectations for the instructional practices in all classrooms and (2) use of the six basic human needs to better understand behavior and align interventions |
One area that is essential to the effectiveness and longevity to this model is the buy-in from school administrative teams. As leaders in the building, they will have the closest connection to monitoring, observing, and identifying areas to address. Their input will impact the focus and navigate the course. The model will be our vehicle for the district, with administrators as the drivers. This approach allows opportunities for authenticity, feedback, and tailored experiences for staff and students.

Both pillars of the Supportive Practices model are necessary components in a foundation built to last. We will enter the new school year with a renewed investment in Tier 1. We will continue to ignite the strength of our community and relationship building with them. And as always, we will remind ourselves of the value of coaching in this never-ending process of becoming who our students need us to be.

Returning again to MJ for inspiration: “My best skill was that I was coachable. I was a sponge and aggressive to learn.” As educators we are all coaches and all players. We may be weary now, but we are reigniting that “aggression to learn” in ourselves and our students. The Supportive Practices model allows us to strengthen our skills on the court and set our teammates up for a slam dunk!
## SCASA Business Affiliates

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