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MAY 2021

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SchoolAdministrator

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"Education made my life better because it brought positivity to a childhood filled with tragedy and misfortune." **PAGE 16**

FRONTLINE

RESOURCES

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I found Peg Portscheller's latest contribution ("Your Case for an Executive Coach") to your magazine's Board-Savvy Superintendent section in February to be very timely.

I believe every new superintendent should have a coach. Just as Portscheller mentioned about athletes and accomplished musicians working with personal coaches, education leaders should have the same opportunities. Better yet, make it mandatory.

Mandating coaches for lead administrators is a far better investment in education than continuing to **THROW MONEY AWAY** on the "next great" administrative evaluation tool or further student assessments. The Wallace Foundation, in its report "How Leadership Influences Student Learning," states: "Educational leadership … comes from many sources, not just the 'usual suspects' — superintendents and principals. But the usual suspects are likely still the most influential. Efforts to improve their recruitment, training, evaluation and ongoing development should be considered highly cost-effective approaches to successful school improvement."

The foundation's research was conducted in 2004. Seventeen years later, we owe it **TO OUR STUDENTS AND TO THE FUTURE OF OUR COUNTRY** to move on this now, especially in light of the damage the pandemic has had on our educators and our students.

JEFFREY S. ZWIEBEL
RETIRED SUPERINTENDENT,
POTTSVILLE, PA.

Union Relations

Re "It's Just Lunch … Or Is It?" by Jeffrey Alstadt (December 2020): One key to a superintendent's success is fostering a positive relationship with teachers, specifically the union. There needs to be a relationship of mutual respect and trust to make any significant change in a school district. And the change will be better if teachers have participated in problem solving and decision making.

As a retired superintendent, I thought this was an excellent article. The author's willingness as the superintendent to listen and develop trust are signs of excellent leadership.

LINDA YONKE
SENIOR ASSOCIATE,
SCHOOL EXEC CONNECT,
OAK PARK, ILL.

I've had similar positive relationships with my union colleagues to those Jeff Alstadt detailed. I've seen both the good and the bad in these relationships, so I was glad to hear that Alstadt had similar experiences in supporting the collective bargaining process.

I really enjoyed the visualization of the triangle with the students in the middle, as it provided a clear representation of the roles each of us plays. I would have appreciated hearing more about the board relationship in the triad.

JOHN SONNENBERG
CEO,
CARMENTA EDUCATION,
ROUND LAKE, ILL.

A Worthy Profile

I appreciated seeing LaTonya Goffney, superintendent of the Aldine district in Texas, profiled ("Extending an Educational Lifeline") in the December 2020 issue. She is a leader I admire because of her dedication to student success and her willingness to make bold decisions, even during the pandemic.

Her focus on literacy as an equity issue is an example of her commitment to student success. Tackling a large literacy initiative is a challenge at any time, but to do so during the COVID-19 challenges as well shows her willingness to consistently put students first.

Thanks for shining a light on leaders and honoring the work they do each day to create opportunities and improve access for students.

HEIDI SIPE
SUPERINTENDENT,
UMATILLA SCHOOL DISTRICT,
UMATILLA, ORE.

Read the expanded letters at *www.aasa.org/SAletters.aspx*.

LETTERS SHOULD be addressed to: Editor, *School Administrator*, 1615 Duke St., Alexandria, VA 22314. Fax: 703-841-1543. E-mail: magazine@aasa.org

School Administrator

EDITOR
Jay P. Goldman

MANAGING EDITOR
Liz Griffin

SENIOR EDITORIAL ASSISTANT
Jacqueline Hyman

DESIGN/PRODUCTION
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1615 Duke St.
Alexandria, VA 22314
TEL: 703-875-0707; Fax: 703-841-1543
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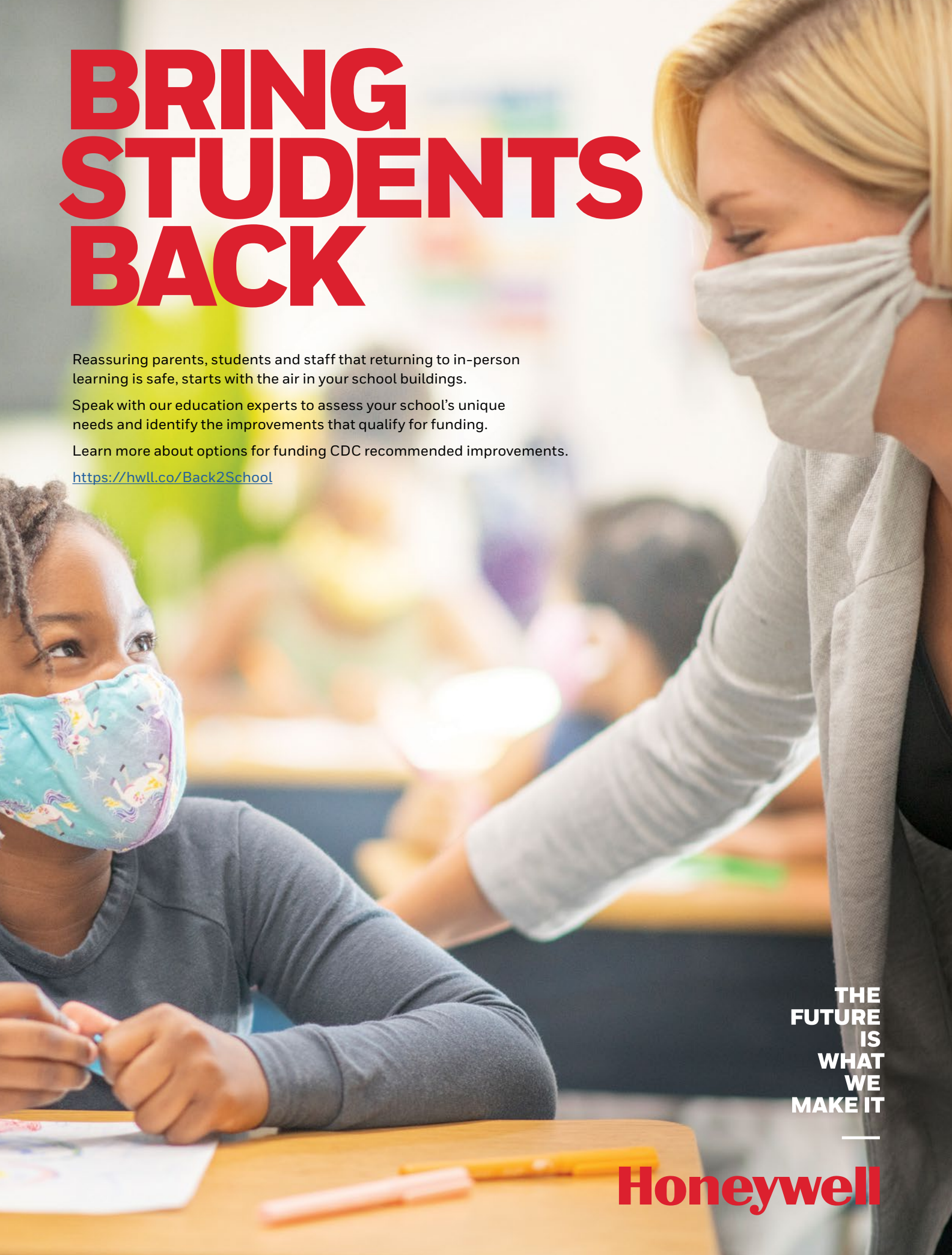

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STARTING**POINT**

Assessing Better Testing

DURING THE COUPLE OF MONTHS leading up to this month's issue, student assessment commanded prominent attention in the education news generated out of Washington. That was owing to the U.S. Department of Education's decision to require students be tested in 2021.

The mandated assessments, managed by state education agencies, won't be used for accountability purposes, which perhaps opens the door to new thinking at the district level about how to more effectively measure student performance going forward. The story lineup here ought to spark some creative ideation along those lines.

The contributors include Thomas Guskey, a veteran author on testing and assessment (page 32); Matt Townsley, author of *Making Grades Better* (page 28); Justin Wells, a California-based consultant who addresses the use of portfolios and students' public defenses of their learning (page 36); and Susan Dugle, chief academic officer in Shelby County, Ky., which devised its own take on assessment (page 40).

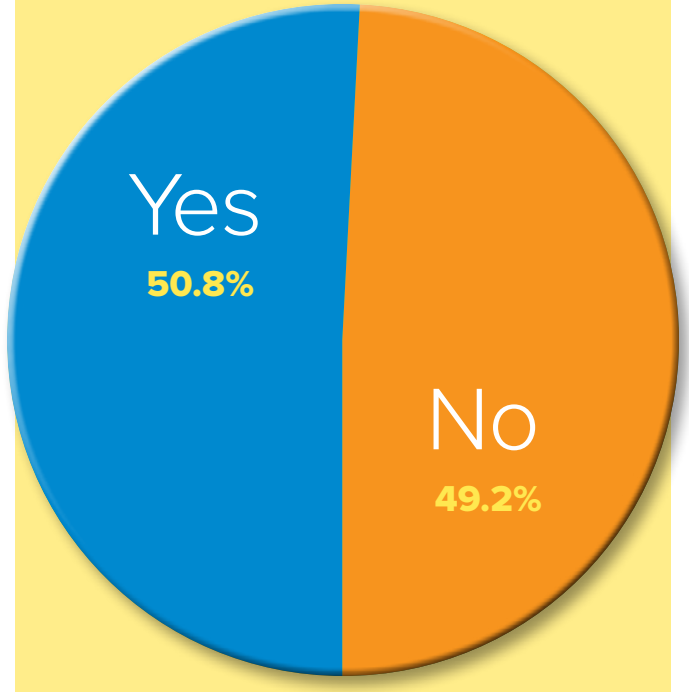
The May issue also carries a conversation between book author Marcus Buckingham, management strategist with a following in the school leadership ranks, and Howard Carlson, executive administrator of the Greater Phoenix Educational Management Council and a former superintendent. It's the sixth installment in our Thought Leadership Series (page 22), which began last October.

JAY P. GOLDMAN
EDITOR, *SCHOOL ADMINISTRATOR*
VOICE: 703-875-0745
E-MAIL: JGOLDMAN@AASA.ORG
TWITTER: @JPGOLDMAN

"We pride ourselves on quick feedback."

STATE OF THE **SUPERINTENDENCY**

Does a "minority" community have concerns that differ from the concerns of the majority parents in your district?



Community Concurrence

When superintendents nationwide were asked if the minority community had concerns that differed from the concerns of the majority community, superintendents were almost evenly divided.

An almost even split persisted for this question in AASA's 2020 study regardless of demographics or school district size, except on one disaggregated measure. About 70 percent of urban superintendents reported the minority and majority communities were more likely to express divergent concerns.

Considerable differences emerged when the survey respondents shared their perceptions of the level of concern for specific issues by minority and majority community members. Policy development and student discipline were of greatest concern for the majority community, while diversity and educational equity were of greatest concern to the minority community.

SOURCE: "The American Superintendent: 2020 Decennial Study," published by AASA. Access at *www.aasa.org*.

BEST OF THE BLOGS

"As adults and teachers, we have been trained through college programs (like robots at times) to think that kids need knowledge, facts, etiquette, discipline to be successful; when in reality they may simply need a pair of shoes, or a backpack, or a meal, or a friend. Education is more than books and it's more than grades."

From "It's JUST Education..." by **Peter C. Blake**, superintendent, Rome City School District, Rome, N.Y., on his blog Leading Through Listening

"If getting back to normal means a complete return to the status quo, then I definitely do not want to return to normal."

From "The Courage to Change" by **Theresa Alban**, superintendent, Frederick County Public Schools, Frederick, Md., on her blog Off the Cuff with Dr. Theresa Alban

"This was/is the hardest stretch of my career. My award-winning and supportive Board had moments of fracture. I never fully believed in any recommendation I provided because in this situation I felt there was no certainty. No matter what I did, it felt OKAY at best."

From "Yesterday, I Exhaled," by **PJ Caposey**, superintendent, Meridian School District 223, Stillman Valley, Ill., on his blog Innovating Education One Day at a Time

Read the full postings of these and other members' blogs at *www.aasa.org/SAblogs.aspx.*

"I love it when we have these types of conversations — the debates about what 'works' and what 'doesn't work.' It's these types of dialogue that help us move forward in our thinking and plans to make education even better."

From "Is Remote Learning the Future of Public Education?" by **Dave Eberwein**, superintendent/CEO, School District 63, Saanichton, British Columbia, on his blog The Power of Why

FLASHBACK **MAY 2016**

Full array of coverage about schooling and poverty: "Re-examining Beliefs About Students in Poverty," "Where's the Suburban Safety Net?" "Not by Schools Alone" and "What Can We Learn From Charters Serving High-Poverty Students?" Among the authors: Paul Gorski, Sonja Santelises and Bill Milliken. ... AASA President David Schuler's column: "Poverty and Children's Trajectories." ... The State of the Superintendency infographic ranked the Top 10 problems on the job. No. 1: Funding inadequacies. ... In Board-Savvy Superintendent, Nick Caruso suggested it's OK to reject the first offer of a superintendency. ... The Ethical Educator case found an educator intervening between two feuding parents to protect a high schooler. ... Executive Director Dan Domenech titled his column "Our Country's Confounding Chasm."

A New Board's Hard Right Turn

SCENARIO: A school board election brings onto the board a majority of members who are hard line on employee issues. The majority pushes district leadership, which has tried to create a supportive and compassionate culture contributing to quality staff performance, to address discipline, attendance and other issues with the strongest consequences and exert strict limits on discretionary benefits. The new board members view the culture as not sufficiently demanding or accountable. Should the superintendent adopt their hard-line approach?

SHELLEY BERMAN: Although accountability is important, the new members fail to understand that positive organizational culture and compassionate leadership are the most effective vehicles for engendering beneficial results and job satisfaction. Organizations can't fire their way to greatness. It emerges when employees feel supported to collaborate, take risks and grow.

A shift to hard-line policies can be destructive, throwing the organization into turmoil and distracting staff from achieving goals and addressing problems. It takes only a short time to create a negative environment, but it can require years to rectify it.

The superintendent should attempt to educate the board and highlight staff accomplishments to foster appreciation. Failing this, the superintendent can strive to buffer staff against board attitudes, remaining responsive to staff while addressing the need for accountability. But if the board's stance remains, the superintendent should seek a district that appreciates the value of positive organizational culture.

MAX McGEE: Updating the resume should be the superintendent's first order of business. If his core values regarding employee relationships are not aligned with those of the board majority, he will not succeed and should keep options open for future employment in districts that are more aligned with his core values and beliefs.

His second action should be to meet with each newly elected board member individually to learn why each wants a hard-line culture and to share quantitative and qualitative data that show the value of the current culture. Then he should schedule a facilitated governance retreat to determine the philosophical direction the board will pursue. Ideally, he would make a compelling case for either sustaining the current direction or achieving a compromise on a new vision that balances compassion with aspects of the new board's desires for more accountability.

MAGGIE LOPEZ: The superintendent needs to talk with all board members and gather information before adopting any approach. The board should provide feedback, offer examples and share any evidence related to its concerns. Does the entire board agree on these issues or just the new members? How and why did they come to this conclusion? Where did they get information related to these concerns?

The superintendent needs to handle this discussion in a manner that is nonthreatening to the board and does not make the superintendent appear defensive but rather an interested problem solver. It will be tricky!

If in the end the superintendent ascertains the concerns are valid, then the board has given the superintendent leverage to move forward with changes. If the majority's concerns are more about pushing their agenda or trying to run the district, the superintendent will spend the next year(s) demonstrating that their perception of the district isn't accurate and that there is accountability.

MARYELLEN ELIA: When a new board is elected, there is much work to do as a team to develop a level of understanding about the rationale of policies, processes and procedures — the *why,* the *how* and the *results*. In this case, the data on staff discipline, attendance and the other areas need to be discussed in a board workshop for an open exchange.

It is the superintendent's responsibility to provide the board with the connections that exist between the approach the leadership takes on providing a supportive culture to staff and the dedication that staff provides to ultimately support students. Whatever changes result from this discussion, the openness is essential and hopefully provides a way to move forward.

See the panelists' full analyses of this case and read the AASA Code of Ethics at *www.aasa.org/SAethics.aspx*.

Each month, *School Administrator* draws on actual circumstances to raise an ethical decision-making dilemma in K-12 education. Suggestions for dilemmas may be submitted to magazine@aasa.org.

The Ethical Educator panel consists of **SHELLEY BERMAN**, former superintendent, Andover, Mass.; **MARYELLEN ELIA**, president, Success for Students, Tampa, Fla.; **MAGGIE LOPEZ**, retired superintendent, Colorado Springs, Colo.; and **GLENN "MAX" MCGEE**, president, Hazard, Young, Attea and Associates, Schaumburg, Ill. Expanded analyses appear in the magazine's online edition.

Mounting Litigation on Disabilities Issues

REMOTE LEARNING was not even a concept when the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act became federal law. But here we are in 2021, in the midst of a public health crisis, where schools were forced to shift to remote learning models overnight.

While many students are facing academic challenges from the pandemic-forced disruptions to schooling, students with disabilities who require services with physical interaction have been severely impacted by the shift to remote learning that's taken place in many parts of the country.

In March 2020, the federal government issued guidance that requires school districts to provide each student with a disability the special education and related services identified in the student's individualized education plan "to the greatest extent possible." The guidance recognizes "exceptional circumstances … could affect how a particular service is provided." But what does this mean?

Is it even possible to effectively provide occupational therapy, physical therapy or speech therapy with little to no physical interaction? Can a student's IEPs goals be met in a remote setting?

Parental Litigants

In the fall, two parents of children with severe disabilities have said "no" and filed suit against the Boulder Valley Central School District in Colorado. One student has Down Syndrome and various intellectual and language impairments. The student's IEP identifies the highest needs as "community safety, communication skills, friendships and social relationships, and personal care needs." The student also receives occupational therapy to develop independent living skills.

The second student has been diagnosed with low-functioning non-verbal autism. The student's IEP specifies a need for sensory tools; assistance with toileting, dressing and meals; supervision during all times of the day; and small-group and one-to-one instruction.

By providing only two days of in-person instruction per week, the complaint alleges the school district is not meeting the students' IEP requirements and thus failing to provide a free appropriate public education.

Similar lawsuits are popping up in various states and a national class action suit has been filed in New York. The lawsuits demand full-time instruction, fresh evaluations for students with severe regression, compensation for parental expenses and funding for additional staff. The federal Office of Civil Rights also is investigating at least four school districts for compliance with the IDEA during the pandemic.

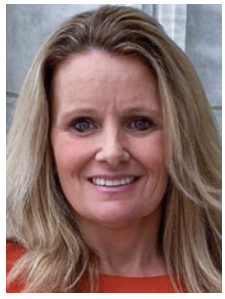
Four Considerations

While acknowledging the considerable difficulty in offering specially designed instruction and accommodations remotely, school districts can act in several ways to meet the needs of their students with disabilities and avoid potential litigation:

- **Communication.** Districts must develop a protocol to communicate proactively with parents and guardians regarding their child's IEP services. When families are frustrated, they turn to litigation as their last option, and that is not in anyone's best interests.
- **Services.** Districts must review each student's IEP and determine which services can be remote during any closure and what other alternative methods of instruction and services can be provided to assist the student in meeting her or his IEP goals.
- **Documentation.** Districts must clearly document the amount of instruction and services the student was provided (including dates, times and duration, and any progress toward meeting the IEP goals using measurable data points.
- **Compensatory services.** The IEP team also must determine whether the child is entitled to compensatory education services to make up for skills that were lost or not advanced during the period when the student did not receive in-person instruction. In making this individualized determination, schools should consider various details, such as services provided to students during the suspension of in-person instruction, regression in skills and progress or lack of progress on IEP goals.

Focusing on these four items will ensure students obtain the best services practicable during this unprecedented time while also minimizing litigation for school districts.

"When families are frustrated, they **TURN TO LITIGATION** as their last option and that is not in anyone's best interests."



SHANNON TAHOE is an attorney with the Capital Region BOCES in Albany, N.Y. E-mail: shannon.tahoe@neric.org

Efficient Management of the Board Meeting

"Many reasons for ineffective board meetings are **OUT OF THE SUPERINTENDENT'S CONTROL**, but there are some things you can do to improve their success."

NICK CARUSO is senior staff associate for field service and technology with the Connecticut Association of Boards of Education in Wethersfield, Conn. E-mail: ncaruso@cabe.org

YOUR SCHOOL BOARD MEETING goes for 4½ hours, but you notice little substantive work was actually accomplished.

Board meetings reflect a lot about the leadership in a school district. Well-run, purposeful meetings have a direct impact on how well the district is governed. I often hear complaints that board meetings run excruciatingly long, often without direction, and sometimes appear chaotic. Meetings of this nature will not help improve the achievement of the students in the school district and won't engender a feeling of success by staff or build confidence in the community.

What do board meetings look like in your district? Do they start on time? Do your staff members offer concise reports and presentations, or do they ramble? Worse, are you sometimes surprised by what they say in their presentations?

Does the board accomplish *the work* that was articulated in the meeting agenda?

Controllable Matters

Many reasons for ineffective board meetings are out of the superintendent's control, but there are some things you can do to improve their success. For the purposes of this column, I am going to leave out personal behavior at board meetings, which is a lengthy discussion in itself.

Start with attention to the meeting agenda. The agenda sets the stage and the tone for your meetings. The agenda can determine the flow of business and the success (or not) of your meeting. Do your meetings focus the board on governance issues or management?

Pay attention to timing and don't overload an agenda. I encourage board members and superintendents to ask the question, "Does this item have to be a board decision?" Perhaps the board would be better served having a longer policy discussion once and then let the administration make the operational decisions related to that policy from then on.

Meeting Purpose

The primary purpose of your meeting is to get the work done, but you also use the meeting to inform the community about what is happening in the district. You need to balance one need against the other, but make sure the work is accomplished.

If an issue that comes to the board in public comment threatens to take up a lot of meeting time, schedule a separate public hearing to allow the meeting agenda to be completed.

Discussion should stay focused on agenda topics. I suggest putting time limits for each topic right on the agenda. You can't necessarily control the board members' comments or questions, but you can control the presentation the board gets. Consider a dry run with your administrators before a meeting to make sure the proper material is covered. I've also seen presentation templates where a consistent set of questions are expected to be answered in every proposal. This can help focus the staff and make it easier to help the board reach consensus.

Set an ending time on the agenda with the understanding the board will adjourn at that time.

Bring recommendations to the board only after you have prepared them for the decision. If you are introducing a new topic, especially something controversial, give the board some time to understand it.

Board Chair Help

Keep meetings goal-driven. Where possible, link agenda items to district goals. Help board members understand the big picture better by making those connections.

Keep meetings focused on policy where possible. Keep the board operating at the "macro" level.

Think of your meeting like a symphony. The superintendent is the orchestrator, planning the flow of music, crafting the performance movement by movement. The chair is the conductor actually directing the multiple parts of the performance. If both do their job correctly, the concert goes off without a hitch.

Help the chair develop skills to move the meeting along. Get him or her a simplified copy of Robert's Rules of Order. If they need help, suggest sources of professional development or ask your state school boards association for help. They can help you facilitate a board retreat to discuss how to make meetings more effective.

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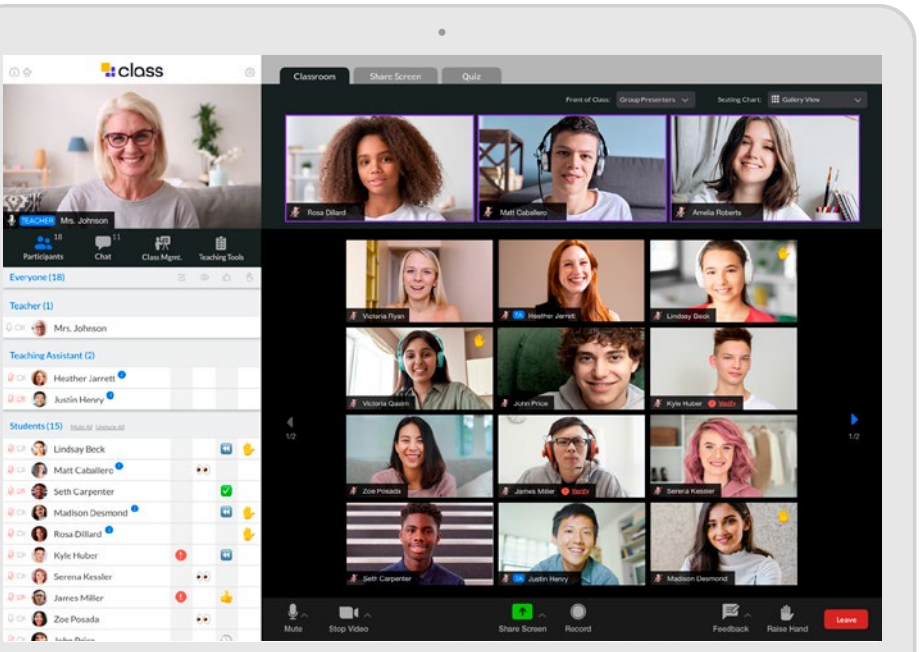

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Role Modeling for Black Female Leaders

"Through social media, I have personally connected with **OTHER AFRICAN AMERICAN FEMALE SUPERINTENDENTS** who offer support and encouragement …"

ANN LEVETT is superintendent of the Savannah-Chatham County Public Schools in Savannah, Ga. E-mail: Marie.Levett@sccpss.com. Twitter: @AnnLPGA

HOW DO AFRICAN American female school leaders attain the superintendency and then succeed in the position? That question is posed regularly to me and the few African American females who have been selected for this post.

African American females today represent fewer than 3 percent of the total number of superintendents nationwide. Research points to multiple barriers, notably institutional biases, gender and racial discrimination, lack of mentoring and the challenges of networking.

As I sought further advancement opportunities in school district leadership, I found few role models visible and available. Mentoring was one avenue that offered immediate promise, and it became more important as I navigated the circuitous path to the superintendency.

With traditional mentoring programs limited, I found myself relying on what I could read or learn about the unique circumstances under which we work from the few African American males and females who were superintendents in my limited circles.

Power of Connections

Today the possibilities for connecting, mentoring and role modeling have been transformed by social media, something not available earlier in my career. Social media has radically altered the landscape for information sharing. We can document our lives publicly at an astonishing pace.

These media platforms provide powerful pathways for connecting professional role models, transferring knowledge within a wide network of people and sharing relevant personal stories. The ease of connecting with others has been especially helpful for African American females who are actively serving as superintendent and those who aspire to the position.

I use Facebook and Twitter, primarily, to inform and engage those who have an interest in our schools and public education generally on issues of importance, to collect feedback and invite ideas, and to drive change. Through social media, I have personally connected with other African American female superintendents who offer support and encouragement, share ideas and often validate my feelings of joy and/or distress. Several have become trusted advisers given our similar experiences with both professional and personal challenges.

I am especially proud that more than a few of my social media posts have resulted in exchanges with those who want to know the "inside" story on the life of an African American superintendent.

Aspirants use direct messaging to seek advice on strategies for pursuing the superintendency, ask about the politics of the selection processes and gain information on the skills needed in the position. They often want to know how to judge whether a potential job is a good match or seek feedback on financial, health and family factors that influence future career moves.

Several aspirants followed my publicly reported journey to the superintendent's position and wanted to know how I managed to deal with the stresses.

Traded Benefits

The power of sharing and meaningful learning through social media offers benefits across the board. At the onset of the pandemic, I posted about the loss of in-person graduation ceremonies for our Class of 2020. My publicly posted personal letter to our district's 2,000-plus seniors resonated strongly with other superintendents, journalists and administrators across the nation in addition to my intended local audience. This sharing created hope for some and offered ideas for others facing similar concerns. This is another example of how the relational and bridging power of social media can become a source of empowerment for us all.

While there are still major barriers to increasing the number of African-American females as superintendents, I am encouraged by the power of connecting with those in the position already and those who see it as a possibility. There's an old saying that "If you can see it, you can be it." We can continue to use social media to recognize the potential of others like us and help them prepare for and gain access to opportunities for growth. Aspirants will learn quickly that if we overcame institutional impediments to get where we are, so can they. Through these exchanges, aspirants and incumbents can share advice and relevant stories that may create a pathway to a more inclusive and welcoming leadership corps.

The Paradox of 'Nice White Parents'

ALL PARENTS WANT what's best for their children. But who gets to decide what's best? At AASA's 2021 National Conference on Education, a pair of public radio journalists masterfully unraveled this hard question for those of us watching and listening.

Chana Joffe-Walt is the reporter and Rachel Lissy an assistant producer of an acclaimed five-part podcast "Nice White Parents."

The journalists originally set out to examine pervasive segregation in the New York City public schools. But as Joffe-Walt chronicled her journey examining options for her own school-bound child, a deeper narrative emerged. It wasn't higher test scores or shiny new objects that mattered most in these predominately poor schools. Instead, the influence of white parents drove the reputation of a "good" versus "bad" school.

On the dozens of school tours Joffe-Walt took, she noticed 100 percent of the visiting parents did not match 90 percent of the students in the building. In episode 1, she admits, "I don't think I ever felt my own consumer power more viscerally than I did shopping for a public school as a white parent. ...The whole thing was made more awkward by the fact that nobody on those tours ever acknowledged the obvious racial difference."

Before the podcast was about to air last year on WBEZ Chicago's "This American Life," the station was besieged by comments about the show's divisiveness. Ironically, no one had yet heard the episode. Host Ira Glass posited, "There's so much reporting on people of color as people of color and so little reporting on white people as white people, even when they're at the heart of a story."

"Generalizing the behavior of a group of white parents to all white parents is as dangerous as generalizing the individual faults of people of color to entire races, a theme in Ibram Kendi's best-seller *How to Be an Antiracist*. Yet **WHITE FAMILIES HAVE BUILT-IN ADVANTAGES** that people of color in the same situation lack."

The Power of Normal

Hearing Joffe-Walt's experiences at the AASA conference conjured up my own memories as a white educator. As principal of a Title 1 school in southern California, it was not unusual to encounter "nice white parents" vying to win the lottery to chaperone a field trip or lobbying teachers for the coveted job of room mom. Despite teachers' complaints about ulterior motives, they relied on these parents to provide time and resources to enhance classroom programs.

Generalizing the behavior of a group of white parents to all white parents is as dangerous as generalizing the individual faults of people of color to entire races, a theme in Ibram Kendi's best-seller *How to Be an Antiracist*. Yet white families have

built-in advantages that people of color in the same situation lack.

Consider a few school rituals that play to these advantages: Kindergarten roundup scheduled at 10 a.m. on a weekday; teacher conferences at times when less-advantaged parents can't leave work; elaborate fundraisers organized by families with enough social capital to send the varsity football team to Hawaii for an exhibition game. When schools cater to one parent group over another, this behavior becomes normalized.

Troubling Dichotomy

Decades of education reform have focused on turning around underperforming schools. Ironically, these schools often sit in black and brown neighborhoods. While white parents say they value integrated schools, their actions tend to speak differently.

Last summer, this dichotomy played out on San Diego's Coronado Island after 4,500 community members signed a Change.org petition demanding the local school board denounce solidarity with Black Lives Matter. Trustees were implored by white parents to reject curricular changes that "encouraged students to learn about and acknowledge their own ignorance and biases" or were "designed to re-educate students through a racial justice lens." Parents insisted there was no need to modify curriculum because their children had never witnessed racism in school, despite students of color sharing stories to the contrary.

As society contemplates the uneven playing field in public education, huge sums of money continue to be raised in predominately white neighborhoods to ensure students have access to anything and everything. Time and again, our underestimated youth pay the greatest price for austerity with larger class sizes, less experienced teachers and fewer opportunities.

These opportunity gaps represent a failure that belies the ideal of the American dream. People of color don't need more allies. They need school leaders to notice and act upon misguided impulses. Board resolutions and public proclamations about our commitment to equity mean little without true connections to the lives of families who need us most.

SUZETTE LOVELY, a retired superintendent, is an education consultant in San Clemente, Calif., and author of *Ready for Anything: Four Touchstones for Future-Focused Learning*. E-mail: dr.suzette.lovelya@gmail.com, Twitter: @SuzetteLovely

Discovering My 'True North'

IN BILL GEORGE'S BOOK *Discover Your True North*, the author concludes with this notion: To prepare to lead, we must relentlessly pursue learning about ourselves and what motivates us.

After completing George's book, I set out on a personal journey to identify my own "true north." What is my true motivation?

As a child, I suffered the tragic loss of my only sibling and my father and was raised by a working single mother. While she was a loving mother and had an extended family, I struggled with grief and financial hardship throughout much of my formative years. How did I find motivation amid such circumstances to get to where I am today?

Finding Inspiration

At first, I thought this would be relatively easy. I am highly driven with many accomplishments both personally and professionally. I was the first person in my family to graduate from college and now serve as an assistant superintendent. For me, the bigger the challenge, the higher the motivation. I was surprised, however, to find no answer as to why I am inspired to do what I do. I realized if I was going to lead others to be inspired, I had to know what inspired me.

After some inward reflection and consultation with some of my closest friends and colleagues, I thought of times when I helped a student connect with a service they needed or helped them to identify what they wanted to do with their life after high school. Both were opportunities to improve someone else's life. That was it: My true motivation comes from helping make other people's lives better.

Upon deeper reflection, I realized this motivation was borne out of my own educational journey. Education made my life better because it brought positivity to a childhood filled with tragedy and misfortune. Education provided me a sense of control in my life and a chance to improve my situation. Having identified my true motivation, I now feel even more purpose-driven and prepared to engage in true leadership.

Supporting Others

My journey of self-discovery led me to consider how wonderful it would be if others on my team were able to experience this realization! I have come to believe that assisting others with their self-discovery is the quintessence of leadership itself.

Self and collective efficacy are best promoted by helping people identify their true motivation. I challenge all school leaders to find their inward motivation and guide the members of their teams by encouraging them to do the same. Identifying the truths behind our motivations unlocks a sense of purpose and fulfillment.

> "Imagine the schools we could have if all teachers, support staff and administrators **KNEW THEIR TRUE NORTH** and were reinforced in feeling confident they were working at what they were meant to do."

Often, the biggest challenge associated with any leadership position is changing human behavior. If leaders take the time to listen and ask probing questions to help their followers find their true north, they can reinforce them or help modify behavior toward shared values and common goals within the organization.

Imagine the schools we could have if all teachers, support staff and administrators knew their true north and were reinforced in feeling confident they were working at what they were meant to do. The feeling is as stimulating as it is contagious. Who wouldn't want to feel that way about their life's work?

Perhaps helping individuals identify their inner motivation and reinforcing them in the manner associated with their true north is the very essence of emotional intelligence in action. Once leaders are able to act in emotionally intelligent ways and cultivate a sense of collective efficacy among team members, they may be able to maximize the outcomes of the entire organization.

BRIGETTE MATSON is assistant superintendent of the DuBois Area School District in DuBois, Pa. E-mail: bmatson@dubois.school

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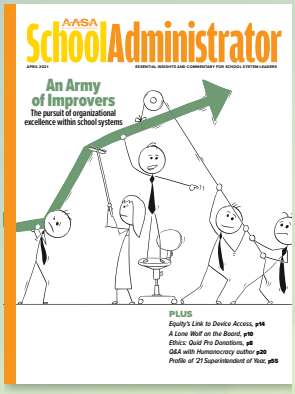

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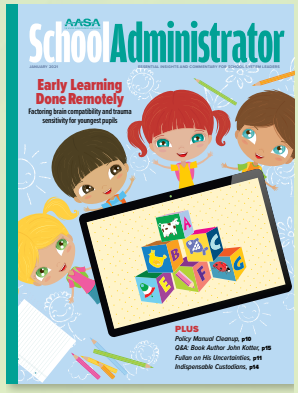

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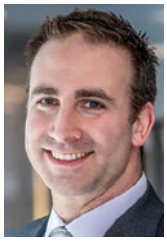

AS DIFFICULT AS 2020 was, the past few months have brought signs of hope with coronavirus vaccinations that will help our lives return to normal. With all the safety measures schools put in place last fall to ensure students could continue their schooling, it's tempting to look at vaccines as a sign that school administrators can now pay less attention to communication and return to normal operations.

However, the months ahead will require schools to continue providing regular, detailed and compelling communication to families, staff, faculty and community stakeholders. The following principles might be worth considering.

▶ **Refresh the plan.** It's already clear this pandemic will end gradually rather than at the flick of a switch. That pace will result in a set of new scenarios to prepare for that are much different than the ones considered last fall.

How does a school communicate about the continuing use of masks and social distancing guidelines as students gradually receive a vaccine? Does a school start the academic year next fall with a set of procedures different than those the community is familiar with? How should schools address the question of whether faculty and staff need to receive the vaccine?

School leaders should look at their communication plan now and consider what new scenarios they may encounter to save time and effort when those situations arise.

▶ **Give careful thought to core messages.** Administrators need to be sure their communication projects confidence, thoughtfulness and empathy, both for those who are ready to resume normal life and those who may have more anxiety about doing so. These messages should include enough detailed information to be actionable for faculty, staff and families but not so "in the weeds" they cause confusion or anxiety.

Once the messages are developed, administrators should practice delivering them so they feel natural in any setting, including Q&A sessions or parent meetings.

▶ **Realize that going back to "normal" will look different.** Out of the necessity to communicate during the pandemic, many schools have conditioned their communities to expect a regular cadence of detailed communication. The desire to be kept informed will continue long after the pandemic is over, which will require an intentional communication strategy for school leadership teams.

One recommended practice is to perform a communications audit to assess all the various methods of communication an organization uses with its various stakeholders. Performing such an assessment will help schools plan how to effectively communicate with the community on a sustained and ongoing basis.

▶ **Get ready for COVID's aftereffects.** As COVID-19 gradually recedes, there will be new issues to address that will require skillful communication. The community will want to know whether any learning gaps have developed because of operational changes during the COVID era and the plan for addressing them.

Separately, the next round of contract negotiations with teachers' unions may look different because of new demands inspired by the pandemic. Getting ready for the unexpected will help administrators as they undoubtedly face new challenges.

This is certainly a time to be optimistic, but it's also important to be realistic. The challenges schools faced last fall are quickly being replaced by new demands. While the game looks to be changing, the rules are the same — clear and effective communication will continue to play a key role in how leadership keeps the school community moving together in the same direction.

MICHAEL MITTELMAN is a managing director at Finsbury Glover Hering, a strategic communications firm in New York, N.Y. E-mail: Michael.Mittelman@fgh.com. Twitter: @MikeMittelman

Learn about COVID-19 vaccines and how you can keep your school community safe.
cdc.gov/coronavirus/vaccines

When Choosing an Architect

SELECTING AN ARCHITECT is one of the most important steps in capital development projects, but often boards of education are swayed by extraneous factors.

In one school district where I served as an administrator, we were undertaking a districtwide capital development program that would result in all 15 schools receiving building improvements. The district was taking advantage of a dollar-for-dollar, matching grant from the state. This meant the district would only have to pay for half of the project.

The district was impoverished. Every building qualified as a schoolwide Title I school. Financing the project presented a challenge, but the district had some bonds that were being retired, and with voter permission, could be refinanced and applied to this project without increasing property taxes. The concept was presented to the taxpayers with some promises:

- Every school community would be involved in determining each school's renovation.
- Local and minority trades people would be used whenever possible.
- A local architect would be used.
- The project would not result in an increase in taxes.

An Errant Choice

The suburban school district, because of its proximity to a major city, had only one architectural firm located within the district. Although a reputable architect who had worked on several commercial projects in the area, he was not a school architect.

A promise had been made to hire locally, and this architect was chosen by the board. Engineering expertise and customer service from the architect were professional, but the architect's knowledge of educational issues was limited.

The original specifications included sufficient ethernet connections for administrative technology, but not for instructional technology. The architect did not realize students also would need connectivity.

> "Unfortunately, the school board hadn't seen the importance of paying extra for **A PROJECT MANAGER**. The lack of sufficient connectivity for instructional use was discovered after ethernet drops had been put at each teacher's station."

Unfortunately, the school board hadn't seen the importance of paying extra for a project manager. The lack of sufficient connectivity for instructional use was discovered after ethernet drops had been put at each teacher's station. Additional connections for access points had to be added afterward.

Another issue was found in a middle school where the architect designed a floor-to-ceiling glass wall separating the lunchroom/multipurpose room from the gymnasium. The intent was to give a more spacious feeling to the area. However, not including educators in the planning process resulted in a situation in which students eating lunch were watching their classmates in a phys-ed class. The architect had been oblivious to the self-esteem issues of middle school students' being watched by their peers in the lunchroom. The solution was to install a curtain to be drawn during lunch periods.

Experience Counts

Some architects specialize in instructional design. An effective school architect typically works with the board, the community, educators and often student representatives to ensure everyone's needs are being met. A detailed design and planning process is used by school architects with experience and credentials in educational architecture and design.

Choosing a school architect carefully can eliminate future problems and ensure optimal facility use. Some things to look for when choosing an architect before starting a capital project would be these:

- **CEFP certification.** This represents the highest standards of performance and understanding of the design and management of educational facilities.
- **LEED AP BD+C designation.** This is an advanced credential for architects, certifying they have expert knowledge about the LEED for Building Design and Construction rating for systems and processes supporting energy efficiency and green/sustainability standards.
- **Reputation.** Check with neighboring superintendents regarding architects they have used.

Choosing an architect who understands the mission of your school district is the key to a successful capital development project. You and your successors will have to live with the results for generations to come.

STEPHEN MIDLOCK is a professor of educational leadership at the University of St. Francis in Joliet, Ill. E-mail: smidlock@stfrancis.edu

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Lifting Employee Performance

A conversation with Marcus Buckingham

In this sixth installment of the *School Administrator's* Thought Leadership Series, we hear from **Marcus Buckingham**, renowned business consultant, best-selling author and distinguished researcher on employee performance. Buckingham today leads ADP Research Institute and is widely recognized for his work through the Gallup Organization in understanding what the world's greatest leaders and managers do differently.

The author of *Nine Lies About Work: A Freethinking Leader's Guide to the Real World* and *First, Break All the Rules: What the World's Greatest Managers Do Differently,* Buckingham also is known for his work on cultivating employees' strengths rather than improving their weaknesses as the key to personal and organizational success.

Buckingham recently was interviewed by **Howard Carlson**, a former superintendent in Arizona, Minnesota and Washington. Now working in leadership with the Greater Phoenix Educational Management Council, he is the author of two books, *So Now You're the Superintendent!* and *Accelerated Wisdom: 50 Practical Insights for Today's Superintendent*. Carlson maintains a leadership blog at *www.acceleratedleadershipwisdom.com.*

The interview has been edited for clarity and length.

HOWARD CARLSON: In your work, you have challenged our thinking about leadership over the years and today we will dive into your influential book *First, Break All the Rules* and your latest writing, *Nine Lies About Work*. In *First, Break All the Rules*, you indicate that, if leaders want to build a stronger and more productive workplace, they should work toward achieving high levels of performance around six key questions. Do you still believe that's true, and can you review those six questions?

MARCUS BUCKINGHAM: Yeah, I'm happy to just riff on that. The responsibility of a leader is not to become better at leadership. Because if you took all the best leaders you've ever encountered and lined them up, the first thing that would strike you was how very different they are in terms of the way they are driven, what they're focused on, how they build relationships and how they think. In fact, the only thing that a group of successful leaders have in common is followers.

Leading is one of those jobs like teaching, where your success is defined through the behavior and the responses of someone else. In the case of teaching, of course, it's the student. You are not a teacher unless someone is learning. And, in terms of leading, you're not a leader unless someone's following.

So the research that I did way back in 2000 was focused on what kind of emotions, what kind of experiences, do the best leaders create in their followers? At the time, we identified six questions that were focused on some pretty core things that the best leaders use to create the most productive workplaces and employees. *Do employees know what's expected of them* is a very simple question that a leader must clarify. *Do I have the materials and equipment I need to do my work right*? *Do I feel as though I have a chance to use my strengths every day?* People want to know that you as a leader have seen them — and seen them for what they do best, then put them in a role that helps them to use their abilities.

Recognition and praise. *As the leader, do I catch employees doing things right*? Caring. *As an employee do I feel as though you genuinely care about my psychological or physical well-being or my growth?* Of course, the last one is growth and

development, *do I feel like you genuinely want me to get better?*

So whether those are the exact questions is less important than leaders realizing they need to create in their followers certain distinct feelings. Otherwise, you won't get the productivity, collaboration or loyalty from your employees and teams.

CARLSON: OK, most of my remaining questions come from your book *Nine Lies About Work*. It helped me gain an understanding regarding the lies we've come to believe and, ultimately, how schools and workplaces should look as an alternative. So can you describe the difference between performance acceleration and performance measurement as it relates to employees? And secondly, how can school districts use performance acceleration to enhance employee effectiveness?

BUCKINGHAM: Well, we made the distinction between performance acceleration and performance measurement because currently we blur those two together in the workplace. We blur performance acceleration and performance measurement together through things like goals, where we'll tell someone you're supposed to achieve certain goals by the end of the year and we set those goals for you because we believe that we're going to get more performance out of you if we define those goals, and then measure you on how many of the goals you hit.

There are two big problems with doing that. No. 1, the best way to get someone to achieve is not through imposed goals or to define for them a model of leadership. That is not the best way to help a person achieve. All achievement, learning, performance and growth comes from the inside out. So if a person wants to set their own goals, in terms of what they want to achieve, that's fine. But what you're doing, as a person who's managing or leading that person, is to figure out what their unique strengths are, what their unique values are, and then help that person to put those strengths and values into proper practice.

That comes from the inside out, and the way that you do that is to check in with that person every week. You don't check up on them. You check in with them every week to figure out what's the next week going to look like. Can I offer you a tweak or a course correction or a slight adjustment? That's the way you get more performance out of people. You see their uniqueness and then you help them with little touch points every week to channel that uniqueness. That's performance acceleration.

Marcus Buckingham says measuring employees' performance based on the number of goals they achieve is misguided and unproductive.

Performance measurement is an entirely different thing. There's no way you can measure someone's performance on goals they achieved because how you define a goal will be completely idiosyncratic. How you judge whether somebody hit that goal is a function of perception. It doesn't matter how much measurement you put into it. Measurements of goals are completely idiosyncratic. They have no inter-relater reliability.

So performance measurement needs to be treated in a completely different way, and it's got to be separated from performance acceleration.

PHOTO BY SUNNY THOMAS

During his tenure as a superintendent over 17 years, Howard Carlson found several Marcus Buckingham books useful to his thinking and actions in school leadership.

We clump performance acceleration and performance measurement together and as a result, we end up doing both really badly.

CARLSON: Let me ask a follow up here. Let's say as you are consulting with a school district, how might you set this up, what might it look like, how would you do it, what would be the key components?

BUCKINGHAM: That's a big question. I run the ADP Research Institute and that gives me an opportunity to do global research at scale. We've just finished this 25-country study, which included approximately 26,000 people, and we were measuring resilience.

The least resilient industry is health care. Eleven percent of people around the world who work in health care are highly resilient, which comports with what we know about burnout, emergency room nurses and doctors, and levels of post-traumatic stress disorder. The pandemic has just made this worse. These poor people, even before the pandemic, were burning out at extraordinary levels.

The second most vulnerable profession is education. Twelve percent of people around the world who work in education are highly resilient. Everybody else is just vulnerable. The reason for that ties to many things. But one of the most compelling factors predicting whether you are resilient is this: *Am I part of a team? Do I feel part of a team?* If I say yes, I'm three times more likely to be highly resilient than if I don't. Schools are deliberately set up so that teachers themselves are atomized in a classroom. That's what we do with nurses and that's what we do with teachers. So setting up and establishing teams is vitally important.

The very first piece of human art that we've ever found was discovered in December 2019 on a small island, Sulawesi, in Indonesia. It's about 50,000 years old, and it's not a painting of a god. It's not a painting of an animal or a human body. It's a painting of a group of individuals who are trying to corral or kill some animals. And each of the individuals depicted has a different animal head. One has a face of a lion to depict courage. One has the trunk of an elephant to depict strength. One has, seemingly, the mouth of a crocodile to convey their cunning. This is a picture of a team, the very first piece of art we have found shows that we can achieve more together than we can alone. And that we function best in very small groups, very small teams.

So the very first thing I would do is go in and say how can we truly build a team environment in this school district? What does that even mean? What does that look like? If we can do that, then we can do so much more to help each team member get closer to their team leader to figure out the right rituals to have in place, to figure out the right metrics we can use to help the team determine whether we are engaged. All sorts of things

PHOTO COURTESY OF HOWARD CARLSON

flow beautifully through the idea that school districts should build more teams like their best teams. That's where you start. You get rid of ratings, you get rid of siloed departments, and you figure out how can we show teachers that they're all part of many different teams.

Ninety-seven percent of people around the world say they do most of their work on teams and 85 percent say they do most of their work on more than one team. I would start there. I would, depending up the situation, continue thinking and focusing on what does a team mean in this district. What do our best teams look like and how can we learn from their procedures, rituals and methods of communication?

CARLSON: Shifting gears a bit. In *Nine Lies About Work,* you indicate that people don't care which organization they work for, but rather which organization they join. Can you expand on that concept and then speak to how school districts can integrate this thinking as they work to attract and retain teachers? I think that's a very important point for people.

BUCKINGHAM: The point there was people don't care which organization they work for. They care which team they're on. So, and this is important for companies and school districts, we talk a lot about how organizational culture is so important. Actually, when you start to measure culture, you go inside any organization and you start to ask questions about what it's actually like to work there, what is the mission there, do people support one another there, is recognition free flowing there, do people feel like they have to watch their back there — all sorts of questions about culture — you find that the answers to those questions vary much more within an organization than between organizations. The data from the real world is unequivocal about this. Company cultures are not monolithic. They vary significantly, according to which team you're on.

In the world of schools, you'll find huge variation. Even within the same school, there will be huge differences in terms of what it's actually like to work there. And what people then end up leaving isn't the organization. *They leave the team.*

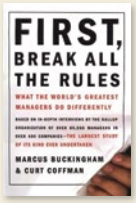
So anybody who's leading a team or a team of teams, who is guiding a large organization, needs to realize that the actual experience of what it's like to work there will be mediated through what is happening at the local level. You can't really do much to create an engaging work environment when you're five miles behind the front line, as it were, as a district superintendent. There's a limit to what you can do. You can create the space and the conditions and the support for local leaders to do good work with their people, but you can't reach in and make it happen. You just can't.

So the first thing to realize is that when people leave, either psychologically or physically, they're leaving the local team. When they join something, they join the organization. So, yes, if you're a school district and you want to try to attract the best talent, it makes tons of sense to try to put a coherent and compelling talent brand out there. Define your talent brand. Speak about it in public forums. Publicize it, absolutely. And you will probably attract better talent. That's really cool because people do care which company they join. But once they've joined, how long they stay and how productive they are while there doesn't depend on the organization. It depends on the local work teams or local work environments they're in.

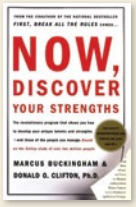
CARLSON: That is excellent thinking — that to attract teachers in large part is based upon the school district's efforts, while retention is about the individual school and professional learning

Books by Marcus Buckingham

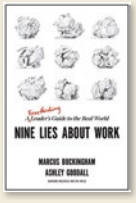
Marcus Buckingham has written several bestselling books on the topics of leadership, management and creating high-performing workplaces. His work, guided by large, multi-national studies, can help us develop highly effective school systems. Here's what I see as the relevancy of three of his published works.



First, Break All the Rules (2016)
This is the book that introduced me to Buckingham and one I highly recommend. After interviewing 80,000 managers in 400 companies, he and co-author Curt Coffman identified six key questions that employees ask about their organization. Securing positive responses to these queries is proven to promote a highly effective workplace.



Now, Discover Your Strengths (2001)
Continuing with the theme of focusing on employee strengths rather than correcting weaknesses, this book, co-authored with Donald O. Clifton, describes a helpful tool called the Strengthsfinder assessment. Administering the assessment can be a great way to understand employees' strengths and help school leaders guide those they supervise.



Nine Lies About Work (2019)
This is Buckingham's latest book and was the primary focus of my interview with him. Co-authored with Ashley Goodall, the book calls into question many of our long-held beliefs about employees and leading in the workplace. The book is provocative and revolutionary; it will challenge and inform school leaders' thinking about how to lead their staffs.

— HOWARD CARLSON

Employees care more about what team they're on than what organization they work for, says Marcus Buckingham, author of *Nine Lies About Work*.

community in which a teacher will work.

In *Nine Lies About Work*, you discuss the difference between a planning model and an intelligence model. Can you take a moment and explain how school districts might successfully move from one to the other?

BUCKINGHAM: A planning system is one where the frontline workers, in this case teachers, are used to generate data, such as school attendance or students' grades or gaps in learning. Those data are then pushed up the hierarchy where they land in the end on the school superintendent's desk. The superintendent and his or her team then sifts through the data and tries to make sense of it and turn it into a strategic plan of some kind.

That plan is then pushed down through the organization in the same way the data were pushed up through the organization. The problem with this is it takes way too much time to put together these plans, to have the data roll up to the school superintendent and then to roll back down to the organization to have people act on it. By the time people are acting on these strategic plans, the world has moved on. Things have happened in the real world. This year is just an extreme example of it. But things will have happened in the real world that make whatever you were planning in November irrelevant by January. In fact, in the end, a strategic plan is one of those things where the better it is developed, the worse it works. The more detailed and complete it is, the worse it works because you put more time into it and the world has changed.

So what that tells us is that comprehensive plans don't work, which is the second lie of the book — that the best plan wins. The best plan does not win. *The best intelligence wins*. What that means is we should build intelligence systems. The difference between an intelligent system and a planning system is an intelligence system inverts the whole process I described. The role of the superintendent is to figure out ways to get as much intelligence inside the schools as possible and then, as fast as possible, relay that information to the people on the front lines, the teachers, so decisions can be made that quickly react to the situation at hand.

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE NORDIC BUSINESS FORUM

The goal of the school superintendent should be how quickly can he or she get relevant, real-time, reliable intelligence to teachers. That's the job of a school superintendent. How quickly can I do that? Because the people who are going to be making decisions about how we should teach and what we should do to best meet students' needs are the people who are dealing with students all the time. They're in the real world, and they know, better than anyone else, what's working, what's not, what needs tweaking, what needs adjusting.

The data that the school superintendent and the district provide should be helping each teacher to go, "hmmm that worked, that didn't and how can our team make an adjustment? We'll try more of that, we'll turn that up a little bit, we'll turn that down a little bit." It's not easy, by any means. Intelligence systems aren't easy to build. But they are systems that enable a school district to have what I would call tensile strength, where it is, as an organization, responding to the warp and weft of what's happening with a particular student body or community during the course of a year. You invert the whole thing. How could we get the relevant data, the relevant intelligence, to our teachers as fast as we possibly can.

CARLSON: Okay, one final question. You state that leadership isn't a "thing" in *Nine Lies About Work* because it can't be measured reliably. But followership is a "thing" because it can. If this is the case, then how can we effectively measure followership and how should this impact the way we train education administrators?

BUCKINGHAM: Well, the lie there is a thing called leadership, that it's definable, maybe it's the list of competencies or a list of attributes or a list of skills. And if you want to be a better leader, you should try to acquire this thing that we have defined as leadership. That's how you get to be a better leader, you get more leadership.

The problem comes when you try to find that "thing" in the real world. When you take a list of great leaders and you line them up against the wall, and you realize they all have incredibly different approaches to the way in which they've impacted the world.

I quoted a couple of examples in the book. If you take Warren Buffett and Richard Branson, both men over the age of 75, both entrepreneurs, both white. And yet, they couldn't be more different in terms of how they've led. You would never say to a Warren Buffett, grow your hair longer and smile brighter and then you could be more like Richard. It would just be stupid. You would never say that. You would go, Warren, how can you be the most intelligent Warren, and, Richard, how can you be the most intelligent Richard?

So when you look at leading, you realize that what you're seeing is uniqueness. You're seeing a whole bunch of unique individuals. Even in this last presidential election, Donald Trump got 74 million votes and Joe Biden got 81 million votes. They both got a lot of votes. They're both white men. They're both over 75. They're both politicians, and they couldn't be more different. I'm not saying who's a good leader and who's not. They both got a whole bunch of people to vote for them; yet they are unique.

So when you look at the real world, you realize there's no such thing as leadership. Leaders do not have anything in common at all. We should stop saying that they do and teaching people as though they do because they don't. *The only thing they have in common is followers*. Leaders have people who have chosen to climb that hill with them.

Now, interestingly, we can measure that. Why can we measure that? Because if you go to the basics of data fluency, what you discover is that humans are good at providing data on only one thing. We are good at providing data on our own experiences and feelings. I can report on that. I can't report on who you are. I can't report on what qualities you have. I can't rate you on the attributes that I think you possess. I can't do that because of the idiosyncratic rater effect. But I can report how I'm feeling and what I feel like doing, which is why followership can be measured. We can ask do you want to follow Marcus up that hill? And if you say, yes I really do, then no one can come in and say, no you don't. You are the arbiter of whether you will follow Marcus up that hill.

We can measure followership through those first six questions I mentioned at the beginning. I have extended that to eight questions at the beginning of *Nines Lies About Work*, which you can ask to measure followership. And what that means for leader development is that, rather than spending a ton of time talking about this generic concept called "leadership," and how you can acquire it, we should completely flip that around and say, let's teach you a lot about followers. What do people really want, what do they need if they're going to follow you up that hill? Let's really get you to dive into that, and then the question won't be how you can acquire leadership. The question will be, given who you are, as a unique human, as a leader, what is your way of getting people to follow you? ■

Next in Line:

School Administrator's Thought Leadership Series continues in June with an interview of **Joy Harjo**, the poet laureate of the United States, by **Maria Ott**, who serves as executive in residence at University of Southern California's Rossier School of Education. She is a former superintendent in California.

Grading in the Mi

The benefits of 'no zero' and other modified practices ought to long outlast the learning challenges of the moment

BY MATT TOWNSLEY

Waterbury, Conn., superintendent Verna Ruffin noticed early on during the pandemic that students had taken on some demanding and necessary roles outside of their academic responsibilities. They were serving as caregivers and money earners for their families.

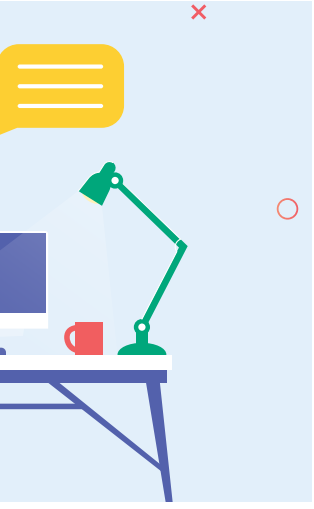
During the economic and social upheaval brought on by the coronavirus, the 18,000-student Waterbury schools made temporary changes in their grading policies last spring because of the inequities associated with the brisk transition to online learning. Waterbury, along with other districts nationwide, quickly adopted "do no harm" grading practices such as freezing existing grades and providing students with the option of pass/fail grades.

When students resumed school last fall in fully remote, hybrid or in-person settings, many schools returned to their previous grading practices. Once national and regional news media shared stories of widespread failures among students in the fall and winter, some schools decided again to reevaluate their grading practices.

Supportive Measures

In Waterbury, Ruffin worked with her board of education to address the concerns over failing grades during the fall term. The board opted to alter its grading scale so the lowest percentage a student could receive is a 50, similar to "no zero" policies some grading experts have advocated previously to overcome a zero grade's disproportionate mathematical effect on averages.

The pandemic has continued to place students in challenging situations to provide for their families. Penalizing them for not turning in



dst of a Pandemic

assignments in the midst of such hardship did not align with Waterbury's mission of "inspiring every student to be successful in and beyond school."

Whether a student received a zero or a grade of 50 on an assignment wasn't important. It meant they were failing and in need of additional support. By identifying these struggling students, Waterbury committed to providing additional resources and interventions to help meet their needs.

Feeling a need to play catchup for learning loss last spring and responding to decreased instructional time and unique student situations this school year, school districts are considering a number of changes to their grading and assessment practices during the uncertainty of the pandemic. Waterbury Public Schools is just one example.

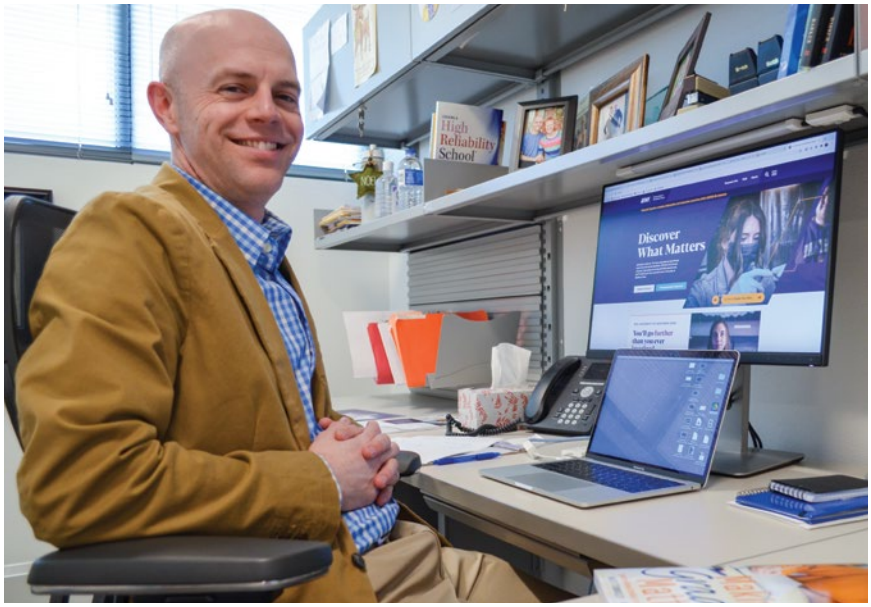
Less Is More

Prior to the onset of the pandemic, the 39,000-student Adams County School District 12 near Denver, Colo., emphasized quality grading practices. Yet educators still were not fully prepared for the severe disruptions to their instructional delivery model that limited face time with students.

Even so, while the amount of content teachers in District 12 are covering has declined in the current year, an emphasis on students' understanding of the most important standards has increased. In the past, teachers were expected to teach and assess students on a lengthy list of state standards. With less instructional time, district leadership empowered principals and classroom teachers to focus on fewer standards, particularly those that will be most helpful as students advance to future grade levels and coursework.

Beau Foubert, executive director of curriculum and instruction in District 12, believes the *less is more* mentality provides teachers with capacity to focus on where students are at in their understanding of key standards, so that remedial and enrichment opportunities can be provided on a more targeted and individualized level.

At the end of a reporting period, for instance, the elementary and middle school students' overall progress toward grade-level standards and expectations is communicated using the descriptors "Does not meet," "Approaching," "Meets the standard"



Matt Townsley, co-author of *Making Grades Matter,* says assessment that emphasizes mastery of skills communicates learning to students and their parents in ways that traditional grading does not.

and "Advanced understanding." By zeroing in on the most important standards and communicating students' level of learning, parents and the following year's teachers are more aware of areas in need of further development and areas of strength.

A Learning Basis

One of the norms at the Van Meter Schools, a 900-student district in central Iowa, is that *what* students learn matters most, so students are allowed multiple opportunities to demonstrate learning in various ways.

With students in face-to-face, hybrid and fully remote settings, superintendent Deron Durflinger says teachers believe that flexibility is more important now than ever before. Living out their mission to "personalize learning for each student's success, today and tomorrow," he says, teachers are providing flexibility with *how* students demonstrate learning.

For example, band and choir teachers are permitting students to demonstrate learning through recorded lessons submitted online. Students in physical education class are sharing their learning through an educational athletic training software application. A personal finance class uses an online curriculum permitting students to demonstrate learning at their own pace.

In addition, Van Meter teachers recognize that flexibility is needed for students regarding *when* they learn. Teachers regularly extend deadlines for submission of learning within each reporting period, based on individual circumstances. Committing to the idea that students learn at different rates, the school also has incorporated a flex time at the beginning and end of the school day, which includes teacher-led interventions and small-group mentoring.

An Incomplete Option

Iowa's Des Moines Public Schools, with more than 32,000 students, has temporarily suspended the use of the letter grade F and is using Incomplete in its place in all of its secondary schools.

Noelle Nelson, executive director of teaching and learning, indicated that in conversations with educators in the district, it was abundantly clear students were experiencing more barriers to accessing learning than ever before. The shift from F to Incomplete for the current school year enabled them to live out their belief that all students deserve high expectations and clear communication about their learning.

Communication to teachers and stakeholders included the following about this temporary change:

- A designation of Incomplete will be used for any course failure.
- Students who receive an Incomplete will be given opportunities to re-engage and complete their learning.
- A statement will be included in transcripts to indicate the unique circumstances in which the course was taken.

Des Moines also is considering summer programming and an extension of windows for students to submit evidence of learning.

Standards-Based Grades

All four of these school districts believe the pandemic has provided an opportunity to better understand the importance of grades to communicate *learning* rather than *earning*. As schools experience the benefits of temporary grading shifts influenced by the public health crisis, now is the time for school leaders to overhaul their grading practices on a more permanent basis.

One practice encompassing many of these temporary shifts is called standards-based grading, or SBG, in which schools emphasize mastery of skills over point accumulation. In SBG, work habits such as submitting assignments on time and class participation are reported separately. This permits students and parents to gain a transparent understanding of the child's areas for improvement and success.

In addition, students are provided multiple opportunities to demonstrate understanding. Using flexible deadlines within the reporting period as some schools are emphasizing during the pandemic, students complete teacher-prescribed corrective action plans in order to gain another opportunity to demonstrate their learning

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

Sample Traditional Grade Book Versus Standards-Based Grade Book

Traditional Grade Book

ASSIGNMENT	SCORE
Worksheet 1.1	**5** /10
Worksheet 1.2	**9** /10
Quiz 1.1–1.2	**20** /24
Chapter 1 Test	**86** /100

Standards-Based Grade Book

STANDARD	LEVEL OF LEARNING
Multiply and divide fractions	**4** /Proficient
Multiple-digit division	**1** /Beginning
Understand absolute values	**3** /Progressing
Solve problems by graphing in a coordinate plane	**2** /Developing

on course standards.

Finally, grade books and report cards communicate students' current levels of learning based upon standards. In lieu of a culminating math assessment reported as "Unit 5 Test" in the grade book, which limits demonstration of learning to a test but not a project or presentation, schools should consider using a 1-4 integer scale with corresponding descriptors of learning. For example, students might receive a 4 in the grade book reflecting proficiency of "multiply and divide fractions," a math learning standard. By assessing and then communicating the most important standards in the grade book, teachers will be in a better position to respond to the individual needs of learners.

District leaders considering standards-based grading should be aware that this practice is gaining traction in several states. A January 2021 report by the Wyoming Department of Education describes a majority of elementary schools that have started to implement (58 percent) or already fully implemented (38 percent) SBG.

However, SBG is more in its infancy at the secondary level with a little more than half of the middle grades starting to implement (53 percent) or fully implementing (10 percent) and less than half of high schools starting to implement (5 percent) or fully implementing (30 percent). Similarly, a December 2020 report of Iowa secondary schools indicates 28 percent of secondary schools are fully implementing SBG and an additional 39 percent had a plan in place to implement SBG within the next five years.

Permanent Change

Whether the modifications to grading practices are temporary or permanent, students and their parents in Waterbury, Adams County, Van Meter and Des Moines are benefitting. Astute district leaders should study these benefits to make more permanent changes such as standards-based grading. Doing so acknowledges the growing inequities in public schools that will outlast the pandemic. ■

MATT TOWNSLEY is an assistant professor of educational leadership at the University of Northern Iowa in Cedar Falls, Iowa. E-mail: matt.townsley@uni.edu. Twitter: @mctownsley. He is a co-author of *Making Grades Matter: Standards-based Grading in a Secondary PLC at Work* (Solution Tree, 2020).

Additional Resources

Author Matt Townsley recommends these informational resources for school district leaders who want to learn more about grading in a pandemic and beyond, in addition to resources collected on his website (*http://mctownsley.net*).

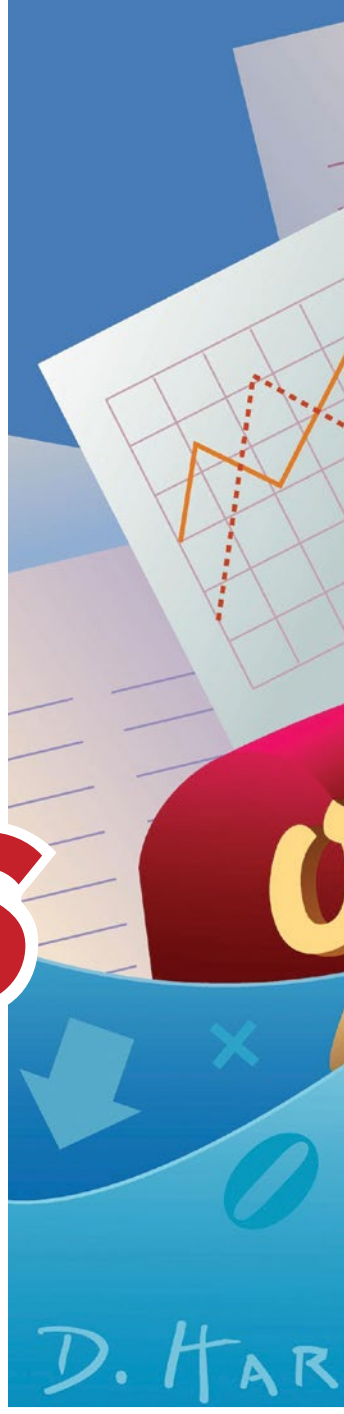
BOOKS

- *How to Grade for Learning: Linking Grades to Standards (4th edition)* by Ken O'Connor, Corwin Press, Thousand Oaks, Calif.
- *Get Set, Go!: Creating Successful Grading and Reporting Systems* by Thomas R. Guskey, Solution Tree, Bloomington, Ind.
- *Making Grades Matter: Standards-Based Grading in a Secondary PLC at Work* by Matt Townsley and Nathan L. Wear, Solution Tree, Bloomington, Ind.
- *The Standards-Based Classroom: Make Learning the Goal* by Emily Rinkema and Stan Williams, Corwin Press, Thousand Oaks, Cal.

DIGITAL RESOURCES

- "A Case for Standards-Based Grading and Reporting" by Ken O'Connor, *School Administrator*, January 2017 (*https://www.pageturnpro.com/AASA/76487-January-2017/sdefault.html*)
- "Eight Essential Principles for Improving Grading" by Susan Brookhart, Tom Guskey, Jay McTighe, and Dylan Wiliam, *Educational Leadership,* September 2020 *(www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/sept20/vol78/num01/Eight-Essential-Principles-for-Improving-Grading.aspx)*
- "Grading Principles in Pandemic-Era Learning: Recommendations and Implications for Secondary School Leaders" by Matt Townsley, *Journal of School Administration Research and Development,* Summer 2020 (*https://ojed.org/index.php/JSARD/article/view/2760*)
- "What Grading and Assessment Practices Could Schools Use in the Year Ahead?" by Susan Brookhart, PACE, Stanford Graduate School of Education, and Answer Lab, USC Rossier, August 2020 *(https://theanswerlab.rossier.usc.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Answer-Lab-Grading-202009-v1.pdf)*

Undoing the Traditions of Grading and Reporting



One silver lining from the ongoing public health crisis might be the lasting impact of two modified approaches of the past year

BY THOMAS R. GUSKEY

The COVID-19 pandemic compelled district leaders to make drastic changes in the way schools operate. Nearly overnight, school buildings were closed, transportation was halted and instruction became remote for students. These changes made apparent the need for revisions in grading and reporting as well.

What district leaders quickly discovered, though, is that changing grading policies and practices meant challenging some of education's longest-held traditions.

In efforts to make grading fairer, more meaningful and more equitable for students during the pandemic, school district leaders in many communities realized that certain grading traditions have long outlived their usefulness and need to be altered or abandoned. When schools began to reopen and classroom instruction resumed, several of these changes in grading were retained. Grading reform thus became a silver lining to the hardships created by the pandemic.

Two of the most important improvements in grading and reporting involved (1) the use of fewer grade categories and (2) the assignment of multiple grades.

Grade Categories

One of the first changes in grading made at the onset of the pandemic was to reduce the number of grade categories teachers had to consider. Prominent universities such as University of Chicago, Harvard University and Stanford University

led the way by shifting temporarily to satisfactory/unsatisfactory grading after transitioning to remote learning. University officials recognized the abrupt changes in instruction made it unfair to faculty members and their students to have to distinguish the five levels of student performance associated with A-F grades. Shifting to satisfactory/unsatisfactory grades meant professors assigned only one of two grades using a single performance cut-off.

School districts followed suit, with many changing their grading systems to include only two grade categories as well, typically satisfactory/incomplete. Opponents charged this would diminish academic rigor and lessen students' motivation to strive for excellence. Change advocates argued, however, that such a change was fairer to teachers and students who were forced to deal with unprecedented changes in both teaching and learning because of the pandemic. They contended that satisfactory/incomplete grading would help students focus more on learning rather than simply working to achieve high grades. District leaders also saw this change in grading as a way to offset some of the obvious inequities students faced in learning from home.

Admissions offices at colleges and universities throughout the U.S. showed their willingness to adapt to these changes in high school grades. Brandeis University, in suburban Boston, developed a COVID-19 FAQ page that stated: "If your school decides to move to an alternative grading

system (i.e., pass/fail, credit/no credit), our office is fully prepared to accept these changes as made by individual schools. Any information explaining these changes is always welcome, whether on the transcript itself or in a communication from your school counselor."

Of course, teachers still had to determine specific criteria for "satisfactory" grades and develop procedures for students to resolve "incomplete" grades. To help decide what level of performance should be considered satisfactory, several school districts conducted surveys of stakeholder groups.

The Great Valley School District in Malvern, Pa., surveyed nearly 1,700 parents, more than 300 teachers and all site leaders asking at what level of performance (i.e., grade A, B, C or D) should satisfactory be set. To the surprise of district leaders, 96 percent of parents, 94 percent of teachers and all school leaders indicated that satisfactory should be equivalent to a grade of C or higher. These results made it easy to recommend procedures for setting the cut-off between satisfactory and incomplete grades.

Research Support

When schools in some communities reopened last fall, while still struggling with health and safety issues related to the pandemic, most returned to grading scales with more categories of student performance. But for many, returning to percentage grades that include 101 levels of student performance, two-thirds of which denote failure, was too great a transition. Teachers at all levels questioned the reasonableness of setting so many cut-offs for students' grades. Many also raised doubts about the extent to which they could agree on the distinction between adjacent percentage grade categories, say between an 89 and 90.

District leaders found additional support for getting rid of percentage grades in the synthesis of research on grading conducted by Susan Brookhart and her colleagues in 2016. This extensive review, published in *Review of Educational Research*, made clear the inescapable unreliability of percentage grades. Well-designed studies showed that equally experienced and knowledgeable teachers asked to assign percentage grades to the same sample of evidence on student learning typically varied by 10 to 15 percentage points in the grades assigned.

As a result, many school districts, including the Martin County School District in Stuart, Fla., abandoned percentage grades and now use the five-category A–F letter grade scale and its associated numerical values of 4–0. In defining the criteria for determining these grades, Martin County teachers discovered not only were they more consistent and less subjective in assigning grades, but the grades they assigned had clearer meaning for students and their families.

Abandoning percentage grades also alleviated the problem of assigning zeros. With percentage grades, a zero essentially dooms students to failure. To recover from a single zero and earn a passing grade, students must achieve perfect scores on at least three subsequent assessments. But with letter grades, recovering from a zero to passing means moving from zero to one; not zero to 60 or 65. And because nearly all colleges and universities use letter grades rather than percentage grades, it eases students' transition to higher education environments.

Multiple Grades

Changes in grading prompted by the pandemic also forced district leaders to consider the meaning of grades and precisely what they communicate. Many began to recognize that when teachers combine evidence on student achievement with data on homework completion, class participation, punctuality in turning in assignments and other work habits, the grade becomes a confusing amalgamation that is impossible to interpret. Researchers refer to this as a "hodgepodge" grade that mixes achievement with factors related to

Thomas Guskey, author of *Get Set, Go! Creating Successful Grading and Reporting Systems,* sees the pandemic leading to permanent, positive changes in how students are assessed on their learning.

PHOTO COURTESY OF THOMAS GUSKEY

behavior, attitude, responsibility and compliance.

The problems associated with hodgepodge grades became apparent to district leaders when they discovered dramatic increases in the number of failing grades this school year. More than a third of high school students in St. Paul, Minn., Public Schools received failing grades in the first quarter of the 2020-21 school year. Similar results were noted in several districts surrounding San Diego, Los Angeles, Houston and Salt Lake City. The number of failing grades in these districts were two to three times higher than last year. Evidence also showed that students of color and those from economically disadvantaged homes were more than twice as likely to be failing as their more advantaged peers.

When district leaders examined the evidence that teachers used to determine students' grades, they discovered that many failing grades were not due to deficits in learning but to the lack of compliance. Students received failing grades because they didn't turn in homework assignments, didn't fully engage in class sessions or failed to meet assignment deadlines.

To provide more accurate information about students' academic performance, many schools began separating student achievement from compliance and work habits by reporting multiple grades. This doesn't mean there are no consequences for compliance infractions, but rather they will be reported separately from grades reflecting student learning. At Bryan Station High School in Lexington, Ky., students receive separate grades for employability skills, which include dependability, punctuality and deadlines, communication, and technology use, in addition to grades reflecting their academic performance.

Although the use of multiple grades is relatively new in most U.S. schools, it has been common practice in schools throughout Canada for decades. In the province of Ontario, schools have reported multiple grades for students across all grade levels for nearly 20 years. Teachers there indicate that reporting multiple grades actually makes grading easier. They don't need to gather any additional data and avoid debates about how these different factors should be weighted in calculating a single grade.

Reporting multiple grades on both the report card and transcript emphasizes to students the importance of these different aspects of learning. Parents gain the advantages of a more detailed and comprehensive picture of their child's performance in school. In addition, because achievement grades are no longer tainted by evidence based on students' compliance or work habits, those grades more closely align with external measures of achievement and content mastery, such as state assessments, AP exam results and ACT or SAT scores.

By separating students' academic performance from work habits and behavior in grade reports, schools can paint a more accurate picture, assessment authority Thomas Guskey believes.

Reporting multiple grades doesn't improve student learning or lessen the inequities that impact how well students learn. It simply makes the grades students receive more honest, more meaningful and more accurate representations of their performance, whether learning remotely or in school.

Simple Strategies

Grading and reporting are basically a challenge in effective communication. Using fewer grade categories and reporting multiple grades enhance the meaning, reliability and accuracy of that communication.

Without adding to the workload of teachers, these two simple strategies can greatly enhance the effectiveness of grading and reporting, provide more meaningful information, facilitate better communication between school and home, and offer direction in efforts to improve students' learning. ■

THOMAS GUSKEY is a professor emeritus in the College of Education at University of Kentucky in Lexington, Ky. E-mail: Guskey@uky.edu. Twitter: @tguskey. He is the author most recently of *Get Set, Go! Creating Successful Grading and Reporting Systems*.

PHOTO BY LAURA J. LINK

Reliable Data from a Rite of Passage

How a performance assessment system known as portfolio defense challenges learners and informs teachers in ways traditional testing does not

BY JUSTIN WELLS

Let's recall what happened to our education system back in March 2020, even though it already feels like a lifetime ago.

As the first outbreak of COVID-19 swept across the country, two pillars of public schooling in America — seat time and testing — crumbled almost instantly. Classrooms were closed and state testing was canceled. In California, where I live, parent and work as an educator, this all happened in less than 100 hours. In the months that followed, the vast majority of students in America were thrust into some degree of educational chaos.

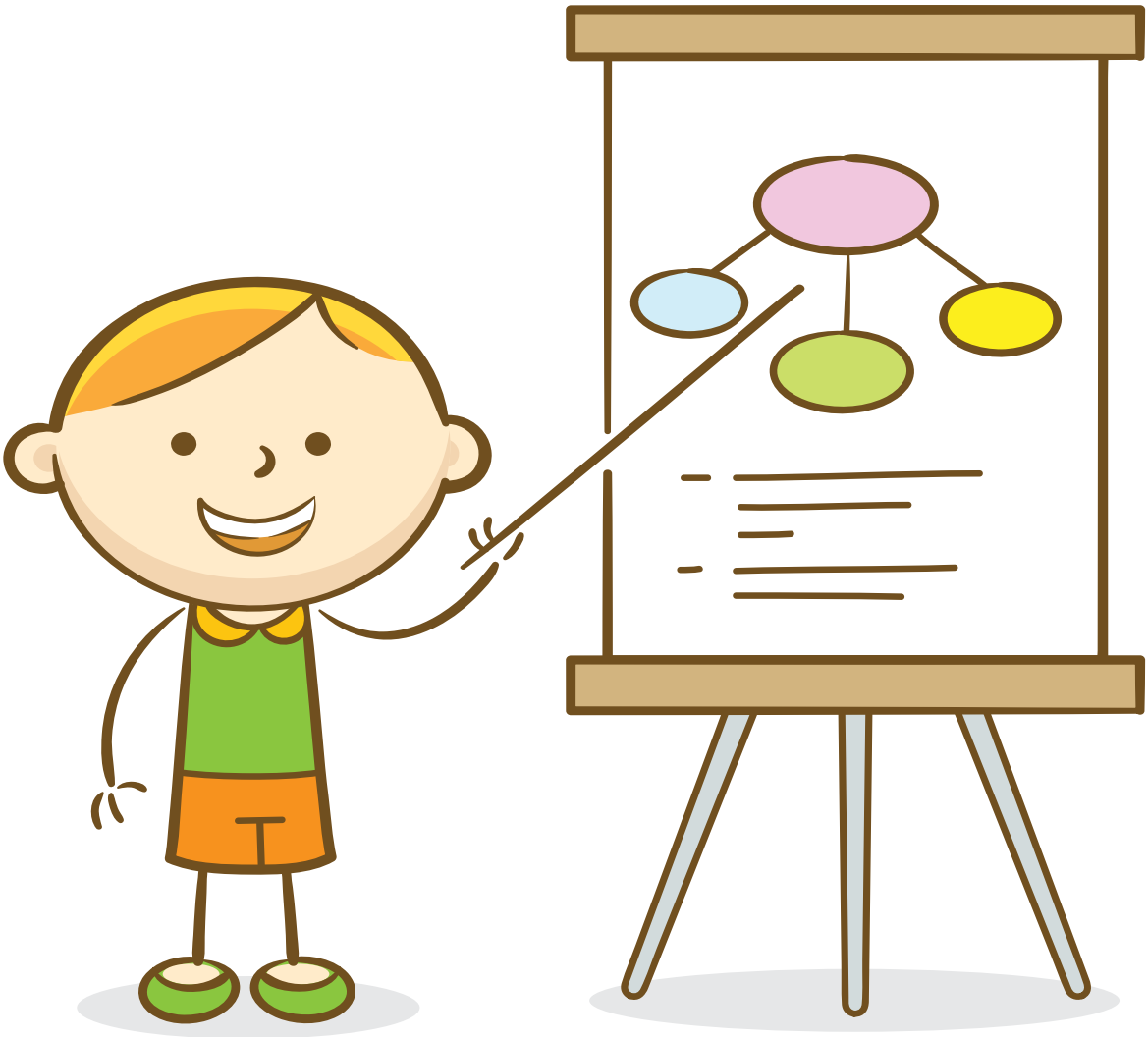
Not so for Yulianna Estrada, a senior at the STEM Academy of Boyle Heights, part of the Los Angeles Unified School District. Before the pandemic hit, she already had been assembling a portfolio of her work that demonstrated what she had learned in high school and why she was ready to move on. She already had a date on the calendar when she was scheduled to defend her portfolio before a panel, which is a graduation requirement at her school.

Rigorous and Memorable

Nothing about distance learning prevented Yulianna from completing and defending her graduation portfolio, so her school did not cancel this assessment. In spring 2020, Yulianna consulted with her adviser by phone, completed her preparations at home and defended her portfolio on Zoom. Her panelists were able to pose questions and evaluate her presentation from their own homes.

At a time when millions of American students had their academic assessments canceled, spring breaks extended, grading suspended and learning essentially put on hold, Yulianna and her classmates engaged in a learning experience that was every bit as rigorous, memorable, and valuable as pre-pandemically conceived. And her school was able to gather and act on the vital data that this assessment provides.

Yulianna is among a growing number of students at schools around the country who are engaging with a form of assessment known as *portfolio defense*, a phrase that elides two concepts: *portfolio assessment* and *defense of learning*. It's a performance assessment that challenges learners to make and support claims about targeted skills by (1) curating samples of their work into a portfolio and (2) defending their claims in some kind of evaluated presentation.



Empowering Students

As we emerge from this pandemic, it's a good time for school district leaders to reflect on our systems. What was resilient? What was brittle? It is especially pertinent to be asking these questions about our assessment systems, which are being shaken to their foundations right now.

Regardless of how the dust settles, school districts will remain responsible for gathering data about learning that can inform teaching. Portfolio defense would powerfully complement and strengthen the assessment system. It is a reliable and resilient source of actionable data for teaching and learning, while simultaneously providing a peak learning experience for young people.

The portfolio-defense concept borrows from two real-world fields. Visual artists, such as photographers, select and assemble examples of their work into a portfolio as a way of providing evidence of their skills. In a defense, doctoral degree candidates must face a panel of experts as a way of standing behind a dissertation and joining a community of scholars.

These origins help us understand why portfolio defense has proven so effective in the world of K-12 education. Portfolios are a flexible solution to assessment challenges because they can wrap themselves around any kind of evidence, and they enroll the learner in the curation of that evidence. Defenses of learning naturally function as rites of passage, making them powerfully motivating and intensely meaningful for young people.

A Flexible Option

We can point to many beautiful variations on the theme of portfolio defense, ranging from a senior's capstone presentation to a kindergartner's student-led conference. But there are some common features emerging in this practice.

Portfolios tend to be assembled electronically and come with not only the curated artifacts but also reflections on why those artifacts were chosen. To maximize their rite-of-passage potential, defenses of learning tend to be timed with existing transition points in a student's academic career. Typically, these are 5th, 8th, 10th and 12th grades.

A defense can run anywhere from 10 minutes to an hour, depending on the assessment aims, school logistics and age of the student. Students generally present to a panel, made up of some combination of teachers, community members and fellow students. Significantly, a portfolio

Students at schools supported by Envision Learning Partners in the San Francisco Bay area develop their presentation skills during their portfolio defense.

defense tends to be assessed as *pass* or *resubmit*. Students who don't meet the standard on their first attempt are supported to try again for a second or even third attempt. Portfolio defense functions best when it is not yet another mechanism for sorting children.

School districts around the country are building portfolio defense systems for a variety of reasons. Let's tour some examples.

Delivering on a Promise

Jefferson County Public Schools in Louisville, Ky., has adopted a graduate profile (also known as a portrait or vision of a graduate). Both the process and the product of the district's graduate profile exemplify what's healthy about the graduate profile trend: community engagement, expanded conceptions of student success and commitments to equity.

Even more impressive, however, has been the way Jefferson County meets the challenge of delivering on the promises of its graduate profile.

The school system decided to build a portfolio-defense system as its primary strategy for moving from "poster to practice." Now, its 100,000 students are archiving and reflecting on their work in electronic portfolios that are organized around the competencies of the district's graduate profile. In the 5th, 8th and 12th grades, Jefferson County students reflect on their growth in a public presentation of learning.

During the pandemic, the district did not back down from this assessment but rather doubled down. Recently, I witnessed the presentation of Jacob Cravens, a 5th grader at Luhr Elementary School. On video from his kitchen table, he guided his audience through artifacts that demonstrated his growth in the skills of the graduate profile.

After the presentation, his panel, which included a 5th-grade teacher, a kindergarten teacher and the principal, discussed not only how Jacob did (he passed) but also how they could improve the teaching of presentation skills next year. That's portfolio defense in action — so empowering for the students and providing such valuable data for the adults who serve them.

Examining Student Work

Pasadena Unified School District in California was the first district in the nation to adopt portfolio defense as a graduation requirement for all

Justin Wells, executive director of Envision Learning Partners, says the use of student portfolios to measure student progress can help preserve a local community's values and culture.

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students. The assessment is serving as a powerful mechanism for calibrating teachers on the quality of assignments and student work.

The requirement that students have a long-form research paper in their portfolio revealed a problematic unevenness of that practice among students and their assigning teachers. Before the district implemented portfolio defense in 2018, many students were graduating from high school having never written a research paper, let alone one that demonstrated readiness for college.

The school system is working toward calibrating how educators assess research paper quality. Pasadena's educators admit they have a long way to go, but portfolio defense has laid out a path for getting there. This should be the aim of any good assessment system: shedding light on student learning in ways that are actionable.

Honoring Students' Culture

Portfolio defense has been widely taken up in Hawaii, where multiple schools are dedicated to preparing their students for their futures while preserving the culture and values of native Hawaiians. At Kamaile Academy, a school on the leeward coast of Oahu, students not only must demonstrate their mastery of academic skills but also explain their plans for embodying the value of "Kuleana," or responsibility to the world, one of the cultural values of the school.

Part of the defense is conducted in the Hawaiian language. Local community elders serve as panelists. In contrast to so many traditional assessment practices, which are now under withering and long overdue scrutiny for alienating young people and exacerbating inequalities, portfolio defense shines for its ability to make our schools more socially just. Portfolio defense systems can be designed to celebrate the cultural backgrounds of our students.

Clear Questions

Assessment, in whatever form it takes, from a pop quiz to a state standardized test, is fundamentally the collection of evidence to answer a question about learning or performance. System leaders must never lose sight of that simple truth. We always should be clear on the questions we are asking and match them to methods for getting them answered.

As a school district leader, think of portfolio defense as a remarkably flexible and effective way to answer vital questions about how your students are learning and how well your system is serving them. And it's a way to ensure your students' voices are a vital part of the answer. ■

JUSTIN WELLS is executive director of Envision Learning Partners in Oakland, Calif., and co-author of *Transforming Schools Using Project-Based Learning, Performance Assessment, and Common Core Standards*. E-mail: justin@envisionlearning.org. Twitter: @jusowells

What Does a Defense of Learning Look Like?

The best way to understand the power of the portfolio defense concept is to witness one live. In the meantime, here are a few videos that offer helpful glimpses into the practice.

- **Building the Backpack**, *https://youtu.be/wM0DtYtcT9U.* A Jefferson County, Ky., 5th-grade student defends his learning during the pandemic.
- **A Kindergartner's Student-Led Conference**, *https://youtu.be/dmlReiql1ec.* Kindergartner Trinity shares her academic progress, supported by evidence from her portfolio. From EL Education.
- **A Portfolio-Defense Montage**, *https://youtu.be/DUyqdku1iSE.* Short clips of different defenses from one year at Envision Schools. A good primer.
- **Yvonne – A Deeper Learner**, *https://youtu.be/PufMWeaHfaM.* A Teaching Channel video that follows one student's journey through the process.

— JUSTIN WELLS

Above: A kindergarten pupil leads a parent conference at a school in Kansas City, Kan.

Left: A high schooler in San Francisco demonstrates what she has learned during her portfolio defense.

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The Making of a Homegrown Assessment System

A Kentucky district puts to the test its students' exhibitions of learning and expected skills

BY SUSAN J. DUGLE

The parking lot was full with vehicles parked along both sides of the main street and in every grassy area available. It was a typical Thursday night at Painted Stone Elementary School in Shelbyville, Ky., before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. There was neither a basketball game going on in the gym nor a school play being performed on the stage.

This was Exhibition Night at Painted Stone, serving 464 kindergarten through 5th-grade pupils. This night was the opportunity for the 2nd graders to show the community how they were growing in their abilities to become effective communicators and responsible collaborators. They were portraying these competencies through exhibitions of learning. The content was centered around animal habitats, but the enduring skills of communication and collaboration were on display for parents, grandparents and community leaders.

Each 2nd grader wore a name tag that said, "Hello, my name is _____. Ask me how I am an effective communicator."

When 2nd-grade teacher Rosalie Rogers reflects on those first exhibitions, she can remember the mess of cardboard, hot glue, construction paper and toilet paper rolls, but what stands out is the confidence these tiny experts displayed throughout the preparation and presentation of the exhibition.

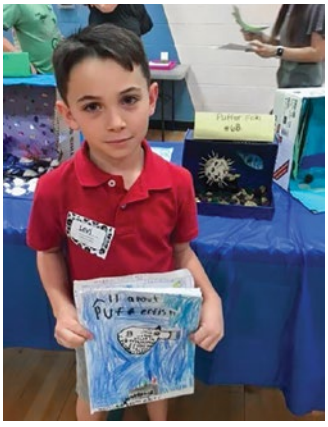
Another Painted Stone teacher, Brittany Akin, admits when teachers give up control and let students co-plan a project, amazing things happen in the world of performance assessment.

Tapping into Passions

Just down the road at Shelby County West Middle School, 6th and 7th graders were displaying their growth in the competency of global citizenship. The students had been learning research skills through projects on subjects they were passionate about.

In their preparation for exhibition night, the middle schoolers had been given feedback by peers and teachers around the specific indicators for effective communication and global citizenship. The response to the feedback was evident as they kept eye contact, used effective gestures and spoke clearly about their contributions to the community.

When first introduced in the district's 14 schools, exhibitions provided an avenue for reluctant learners to share their learning in multiple ways, Stephanie Walker, an exceptional learning teacher in The Rock Academy at West Middle School, says. Students who hesitated to speak up in groups found confidence in preparation for the



Above: Students at Painted Stone Elementary School in Shelbyville, Ky., demonstrate what they've learned at public exhibitions throughout the school year.

exhibition due to a feeling of expertise about a subject of personal interest.

One student who often was anxious about classroom discussions and traditional assessments presented a flawless exhibition on "The History of Nintendo." Community audience members did not detect any anxiety during the exhibition due to the student agency provided by the opportunity to demonstrate learning through performance assessment.

Public Exhibitions

These are examples of planned exhibition nights that were common among Shelby County's school campuses during the 2018-19 school year when we embarked on a journey in performance assessment. As educators, we know parents and grandparents flood into schools when the students are performing, whether for a choral concert or a sports event. We were seeing the same turnout for performance assessment through exhibitions of learning.

Early on, teachers were apprehensive about their students being ready for an audience. Principal Artavia Acklin, at Painted Stone Elementary School, decided to just set a date for all teachers and students to exhibit learning. This leadership action forced teachers to relinquish some control and see what kids could do when given the opportunity.

Acklin admits she was pleasantly surprised with the results. Her colleague, Adam Hicks, principal of Simpsonville Elementary School, had a similar experience. His teacher leadership team also set a schedule for exhibitions at the school and at the local outlet mall. While it raised unintended anxiety in some, it was just the push teachers needed to see the benefits of student ownership and agency in the performance assessment process.

Jointly Designed

Shelby County Public Schools has begun to implement a second four-year Strategic Leadership Plan (*https://drive.google.com/file/d/1NYZJQxHy_H3DmNrKFN0jSeBT_OB4P3eo/view*) that focuses on personalized, student-centered learning. The foundation of the current plan

PHOTOS COURTESY OF SHELBY COUNTY PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Susan Dugle, chief academic officer of Kentucky's Shelby County Schools, oversees a system in which all students have personalized learning plans that monitor progress and celebrate accomplishments.

is a community-created Profile of a Graduate, or PoG, which describes the expectations our community holds for successful students who graduate from Shelby County Public Schools.

The PoG was created in 2017 through a design-thinking process involving school and community stakeholders. The key to the success of our Profile of a Graduate was the initial and ongoing involvement of business, industry, parents, civic organizations, educators and students in the decisions about "what a Shelby County graduate needs to know and be able to do."

During the 2018-19 school year, the first step in our performance assessment system was to develop tools to measure the competencies of the PoG: communication, collaboration, global citizenship, innovation, life-long learning and critical thinking. Through consultation with Envision Learning Partners, Rebecca Martin, the district's director of curriculum personnel, led teacher leaders in the creation of performance outcomes for each of the competencies with appropriate grade-band expectations for each.

As teachers began using these tools, they soon realized that these competencies could not be taught or measured in traditional, standardized ways. In order for students to provide evidence of mastery, teachers had to design learning experiences and assessment tasks that allowed for acquisition and demonstration of the competencies.

Teachers responded creatively. Erika Darin, a 3rd-grade teacher at Simpsonville Elementary School, began teaching the competencies while leading a literary unit on character traits. The students compared their "roles in the world" to a character in a book. They explored how to build the habits of such competencies through constant reflection. They even developed simplified rubrics to display on anchor charts so they could easily assess their growth in the competencies.

At the high school level, teachers increased the use of innovative learning structures through the use of project-based learning. PBL not only integrates content, it also provides opportunities for integration of content with the PoG competencies.

A pair of Shelby County High School social studies teachers, Katie Johnson and Jeff Bracken, collaborated on several project-based learning units that allowed students to explore foundational beliefs in the formation of our country. One such unit culminated in group displays at the annual Light Up Shelbyville community event. Student work in the form of wooden flags depicting group learning was on display for the whole community to view.

Opening Defenses

Teacher efficacy and agency around performance assessment began to grow through the first two years of the Strategic Leadership Plan, which

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A Demonstration of Creative Pandemic-Fueled Learning

BY PHILIP WAKEMAN

No one could have predicted the state of learning during the period of COVID-19. Nor could anyone have predicted the amount of time we would spend in that state of learning.

What also can't be predicted are the unintended positive consequences that shift the thinking of teachers and students alike and how the imagination and creativity of students can impact our practice moving forward.

What became clear to Matt Arledge, a 5th-grade teacher at Clear Creek Elementary School in Shelbyville, Ky., was that ignoring the situation would be doing a disservice to his students. There are moments we plan for and hope for, but amazing things can happen organically when we lift the ceiling off what we are asking students to do.

In March 2020, students were deep into informational reading and writing. Soon, one topic would dominate the minds of students and teachers alike ... the coronavirus pandemic. Rather than push through a typical end-of-unit project, why not address what was on every student's mind? "This is a huge moment in their lives," Arledge said. "Why would we not take this opportunity to make this an experience we talk about and learn from?"

Personal Motivation

From this thought came a research project culminating in students creating an autobiographical account of their experiences and emotions as the pandemic and lockdowns were just beginning.

While the project started with research to build background knowledge, things really took a turn for students when they got to choose their direction of interest and pursue a driving question. Fifth-grader Jessica focused on a question she was struggling with: *Can self-isolation make people feel more connected?*

She missed school, her classmates, her teachers and the daily interactions they brought. Having the freedom to choose and address a personally meaningful question allowed her feelings to be acknowledged while pushing her to understand the reason behind the challenges in her life.

Normally, a project of this nature would have ended in a slideshow presentation, poster or essay sharing the journey. The Time Capsule project enabled Jessica to express these feelings and demonstrate her learning in a way that was personal and not limited to a format.

Jessica decided to create video journals, consisting of amazing anecdotes of what was going on in her mind and at her home. Within these, she chose to write, direct and star in plays acting out concepts such as the toilet paper rush. She then chose to teach herself how to animate to help people understand ideas like social distancing. She recorded her own intro and outro music. Finally, she filmed and edited her video journals because that's how she wanted to present her knowledge. Student. Writer. Musician. Producer. Actor. Editor. Publisher.

Lasting Impact

For Arledge, the project forced him to step back and let students choose how they would demonstrate their learning. This was a lesson that will continue to impact his teaching going forward.

For Jessica, the project allowed her to unleash her emotions and experiences in a demonstration of creativity and learning that wouldn't have been found in an essay or slide show. Mastery of standards were evident, but learning that had purpose and meaning for Jessica resulted in the creation of a product she can look back on not only with pride in her work, but also as a reflection on one of the most consequential events in her life thus far.

PHOTO COURTESY OF SHELBY COUNTY, KY., PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Philip Wakeman (left), an instructional coach, and Matt Arledge, a 5th-grade teacher at Clear Creek Elementary School in Shelbyville, Ky., observe students extend their skills through their portfolio demonstrations.

PHILIP WAKEMAN is the instructional coach at Clear Creek Elementary School in Shelbyville, Ky. E-mail: Philip.Wakeman@shelby.kyschools.us. Twitter: @philipdwakeman. Matt Arledge contributed to this article.

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is designed to lead toward a competency-based education system.

The 2019-20 school year was set to be our first year for defenses of learning for students transitioning to the next level. The defenses are designed to allow students to show growth in specific Profile of a Graduate competencies, mastery of enduring content standards and a preparedness for the next phase of life.

All Shelby County students have personalized learning plans that are used during a structured daily advisory time in which they set goals, monitor progress and celebrate accomplishments.

In March 2020, students were deep into the process of selecting artifacts and receiving feedback for defenses when in-person learning was shut down due to the pandemic. Shelby County East Middle School decided to forge ahead and attempt these defenses of learning in a virtual platform. Instructional coach Robyn Marcum and Dean Abbi Long led the charge along with a group of dedicated 8th-grade teachers.

Because of the intentional planning and personal supports used in the advisory period, students were able to continue with the process in the virtual world. Each 8th grader defended her or his readiness for high school with academic and Profile of a Graduate evidence. A panel of peers, teachers and administrators provided feedback through a teleconferencing platform.

The success of the virtual defenses led to an even more intentional, structured plan to support students in their preparation with advisers for this spring's defenses.

Forging Onward

As the pandemic lingered on, principals and teachers saw the need to continue the intentional instruction of the Profile of a Graduate competencies in a virtual and blended world. Teachers shifted the focus of instruction to provide opportunities for students to learn and practice these competencies through video conferencing platforms, digital learning tools, learning management systems and intermittent in-person learning.

Once again, the resiliency of teachers and students led to amazing exhibitions of learning in a new and different venue. Clear Creek Elementary teachers began to see the value of one-on-one conferring in breakout rooms to allow students to justify and defend their thinking to provide evidence of learning.

Fox DeMoisey, an instructional coach, took on the extra duty of teaching two English IV classes to further support teachers during the pandemic. His focus has been around increasing the authenticity of learning. Along with other teachers in the district, he has prioritized the Profile of a Graduate competencies for all students while providing authentic learning and assessment opportunities.

During the development of the Strategic Leadership Plan, we knew we were preparing our students, teachers and community for an ever-changing world. We had no idea that our preparation would be tested as early as 2020. Even though schooling has been challenging during this pandemic, our stakeholders have shown strong evidence of growth in the competencies of our Profile of a Graduate. As we forge ahead, we will explore new ways to prepare our students to be leaders in our community and world. ■

Principals and assistant principals in Shelbyville County, Ky., prioritize the Profiles of a Graduate skills during their instruction and assessment of students.

PHOTO COURTESY OF SHELBY COUNTY, KY., PUBLIC SCHOOLS

SUSAN DUGLE is chief academic officer of Shelby County Public Schools in Shelbyville, Ky. E-mail: susan.dugle@shelby.kyschools.us. Twitter: @DugleSusan

Are Your Grading Policies Legally Sound?

How to avoid court entanglements when student grades are challenged

BY LAURA J. LINK AND KENT D. KAUFFMAN

Virtual learning has given parents a much closer look into the classroom. Parents in many school communities over the past year have had direct, online access into their child's day-to-day learning with the chance to monitor teachers' lessons and to provide home support with assignments.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, parents have been able to observe instruction first-hand, in real time or asynchronously, and to see how and when assessments are administered to students. The unprecedented parental access has been an essential bridge for many children who have struggled with remote learning.

While often helpful, such access also enables parents to encounter what's *not* happening in the classroom. Parents have front-row seats into assignments that may lack clear communication or criteria for success, assignments given without teacher feedback to correct learning errors, assessments not aligned to instruction — and grades continuing to be allocated, nonetheless. Dissatisfied and more informed, parents are better equipped to challenge their child's grades.

That's been the experience for one of us (Laura). As a parent of a student learning virtually, I did not need a parent-teacher conference to figure out why my daughter had failing grades in her AP Government course. Instead, her direct course log-in provided sufficient evidence.

Online, my daughter received assignments without teacher lessons or directions. I found

projects assigned with no rubrics and activities that required materials that students couldn't access at home. One class announcement revealed a test retake opportunity but only for those students with two or fewer absences. Even then, eligible students should expect 15 points off their grade, per school policy. According to the principal, this automatic point reduction is exacted out of fairness to those students who took the test just once.

Unsatisfied with this rationale and what I had observed online, I challenged the accuracy of my daughter's final course grade beyond the school level — and won.

Increasing Challenges

This scenario is not unique. For many students and their parents, grades are currency. The higher the grades, the greater a student's academic net worth. High grades allow students to gain acceptance into courses, programs and colleges of their choice. As a result, students and parents have been closely monitoring grades. When dissatisfied with grading decisions, increasing numbers of parents have begun to legally challenge school grading policies and practices in the courts. Now more than ever, to meet these challenges and avoid costly and burdensome legal entanglements, school district leaders ought to ensure their grading policies meet legal standards.

Toward this end, we offer five guidelines derived from relevant court rulings to help school leaders establish grading policies and practices that not only are legally sound but also equitable and meaningful.

▶ Develop and implement grading policies that are fundamentally fair.

Courts expect schools to ensure that students receive a *fair* grade. What constitutes fair becomes problematic when there are few or no grading policies in place. To make decisions, courts first look to the school district's grading policy, seeking to determine if policy enforcement is appropriate to the challenge brought forward.

In the *Lane v. Belgrade* (2007) case, two siblings attending Capital High School in Helena, Mont., transferred in state to a new school district, Belgrade, for their senior year. At Capital HS, the siblings had high grade point averages and class ranks, but Belgrade's grading formula adjusted the students' GPAs downward, leading to their parents filing a lawsuit in state court. With no written policy in place, Belgrade was ordered by the court to reverse its actions so the siblings could graduate with their original GPAs.

While having a written grading policy is important, simply having one doesn't guarantee courts will side with school districts. In fact, the recent trend signals that courts are more willing to rule on cases with less deference to the policies of school officials, especially when policies are deemed unfairly applied.

An often-cited example is the case of *Hornstine v. Township of Moorestown* (2003), where a special education student in Moorestown, N.J., with an individualized education plan was identified as the valedictorian. After complaints from other students' families and others in the community that the IEP provided a statistical advantage, the superintendent and school board enacted a retroactive policy amendment allowing multiple valedictorians. The parents of the student in special education sued. In its decision, the federal court ruled that the retroactive policy was fundamentally unfair and the GPA of a student in special education was not less than students without IEPs. The court declared the student in special education as the sole valedictorian.

▶ Remove disciplinary sanctions from students' academic grades.

Fairness issues arise with particular force when they include conflating students' behavior with their academic grades. The courts have been clear that grade reductions for disciplinary reasons result in the misrepresentation of a student's academic achievement. Courts also historically have sided with students when educators have reduced students' grades as a result of behavioral infractions.

In *Smith v. School City of Hobar*t (1993), a federal judge ruled that grade reductions for disciplinary reasons (consuming alcohol off-campus) resulted in a "clear misrepresentation of the student's scholastic achievement for college entrance and other purposes." The judge ruled in favor of the Hobart, Ind., student and ordered the high school to fully count course work missed but made up during the suspension period.

More recently, in *John S. v. Ozark R-VI School District* (2012), a federal court ruled that reducing a suspended student's credit for assignments completed during his suspension was unlawful and ordered Ozark High School in Missouri to give the student full credit for his work. The court noted that academic grades should communicate evidence of student achievement and nothing else.

With this, existing grading practices that disallow makeup work during a suspension period or reduce points for work turned in late or discount points for negative student behaviors in class are

Laura Link (second from left) believes past court rulings on school grading policies and practices can help educators skirt legal entanglements.

not supported by the courts. Instead, educators are advised to find other means to solve behavioral issues than in the gradebook.

▶ Separate nonacademic factors from students' academic achievement.
Courts have relied on grade accuracy to mean *the extent that it permits someone to estimate the extent of a student's knowledge and skills in a given area*. According to this definition, including nonacademic factors such as effort, attendance, work completion, etc., may not be legally defensible.

In *State ex rel. Barno v. Crestwood Board of Education* (1998), a senior at Maplewood Area Joint Vocational School in Ravenna, Ohio, was denied graduation because she didn't attend school at least 93 percent of the time, even with a 3.9 GPA. In ruling for the student, the state court found the school's attendance policy unreasonable and inaccurate because the policy made attendance a prerequisite for credit, something the court viewed as "tantamount to making attendance a part of the curriculum."

In a more recent case in *Wilson v. Dallas Independent School District* (2012), the Texas Court of Appeals affirmed the restoration of a student's passing grade after his teacher changed it from passing to failing because of the student's poor class attendance and lack of effort on assignments.

According to various courts, misrepresentation of achievement is improper and illegal if the grading is done for reasons that are irrelevant to the achievement being assessed. This is supported in cases where downgrading (reduction of points) or upgrading (enhancement of points) due to nonacademic factors has been directly challenged.

Both downgrading and upgrading can significantly influence grades. For instance, if a combination of behavioral factors (such as effort, attendance or conduct) count toward 20 percent of the final grade, students who are perceived as not meeting behavioral expectations could drop from a grade of C to an F. Conversely, students who are credited with maximum behavioral points could move up from a grade of C to an A.

To compound the issue, teachers, even those who teach at the same grade level in the same school, vary widely in the number and combination of evidence sources they may include in that 20 percent. This grading variation opens the door for students and their parents to question and legally challenge which choice and combination of evidence is the most fair, accurate and equitable.

▶ Know your own grading policies and practices.
Grading variation occurs because most teachers

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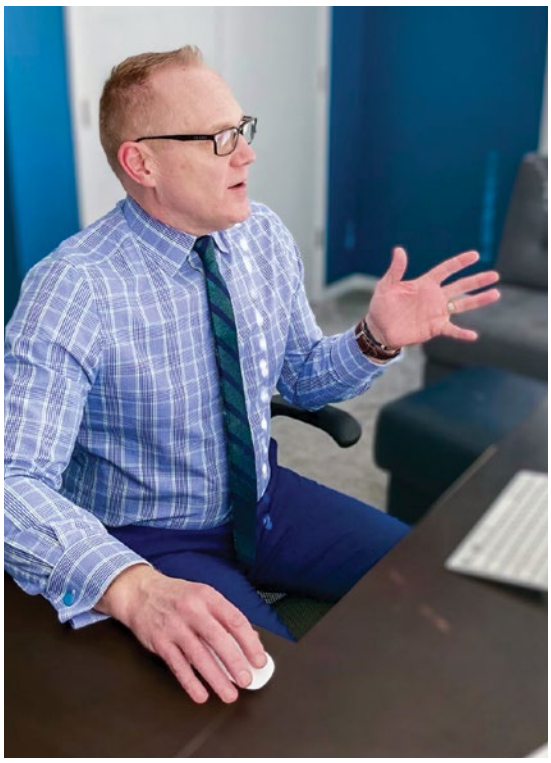


School law authority Kent Kauffman writes that grades ought not be used to resolve behavioral issues in classrooms.

grade in isolation and are left to make grading decisions using their own professional judgment. School leaders rarely intervene in teachers' grading practices because they often are unaware of the problems. They may not know about the varying evidence teachers use to assign grades or that grade reductions for disciplinary reasons regularly occur.

Also, school leaders may not realize how grading policies apply to transfer students or how grading policies affect students' GPAs and class rank. Yet being unaware leaves students vulnerable to downgrading and other grading-related issues. It also puts school leaders themselves at risk because they usually are named in lawsuits.

Such was the case in *Edinburg Consolidated Independent School District v. Smith* (2016), where a high school counselor in Edinburg, Texas, encouraged students to take a course he believed qualified as a weighted course. After completing the course, students were notified they wouldn't receive the weighted status. School leaders didn't realize the students were misguided. Regardless, the district claimed it couldn't give the students weighted credit, even with a counseling mistake, because policy supersedes counselor knowledge. The parents sued, and the court suspended class rank, causing upheaval for seniors seeking college acceptance. Ultimately, the courts upheld the district's policy but directed school leaders to improve their grading policy knowledge and communication with students and their parents.

▶ **Provide students with appropriate due process.** In *Goss v. Lopez* (1975), the U.S. Supreme Court made it possible for students and their parents to win grading challenges. In this case, a student at Columbus Central High School in Ohio was suspended without a hearing after being accused of destroying school property during what was perceived as a Vietnam War protest. In its ruling, the Supreme Court found that when actions of school officials affect students' liberty or property rights, schools must provide due process.

Due process in grading requires that grading policies be accurately communicated to students and their parents in advance, that a grievance procedure for grades be in place and conducted fairly and consistently, and that grading policies are reasonable and have a valid academic focus.

Since the *Goss* ruling, courts quickly and intentionally protected students' due process rights, including protections against unfair or inaccurate grading policies and practices.

A Sound Approach

By understanding the impact that court decisions have had on school grading policies and practices, school leaders will save potential legal expenses and avoid the entanglements that come with parent-school conflict, as illustrated in the opening scenario. In the end, I (Laura) was relieved that my daughter passed her AP Government course. Yet getting there was a hardship, including lots of time, energy and resources, for all involved — the teacher, counselor, principal, district administrators, our family and especially my daughter. Her relationship with her AP Government teacher became tense and measured, causing added stress at home and school, and we both remain less trusting of the school's "student-centered" claims.

Such a scenario can be avoided. By using the five guidelines outlined here, school leaders can take decisive action to help all educators ensure their grading policies and practices are not only legally sound but also fair, accurate, equitable and meaningful for students. ■

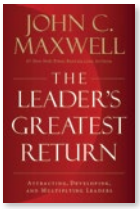
LAURA LINK is associate dean of the College of Public Service at the University of Houston Downtown in Houston, Texas, and contributor to *What We Know About Grading*. E-mail: linkl@uhd.edu. Twitter: @laurajlink.
KENT KAUFFMAN is associate professor of law at Purdue University-Fort Wayne in Fort Wayne, Ind.

PHOTO COURTESY OF KENT KAUFFMAN

BOOK REVIEWS

The Leader's Greatest Return: Attracting, Developing, and Multiplying Leaders

by John C. Maxwell, Harper Collins Leadership, 2020, New York, N.Y., 207 pp., $27.99 hardcover



If you are looking to add value and boost the culture in your school district, I would recommend reading *The Leader's Greatest Return: Attracting, Developing, and Multiplying Leaders* by John C. Maxwell, author of more than 70 books on leadership. In his latest, Maxwell argues that while organizations pour their time, effort and money into restructuring and reinvention, the real way to organizational success is by growing your leaders.

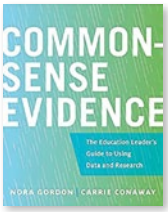
Maxwell neatly lays out how current leaders of organizations can begin generating leadership from all levels of their organization. The steps within each chapter draw on numerous examples from organizations, and Maxwell adds personal stories of cultivating leaders. While reading this book, it was quite simple to draw parallels from the examples that were highlighted to how these steps might be applied in a school district.

This is one of those books educational leaders will come back to and learn something new each time. It would be valuable for leaders who are mentoring others and for leaders who want to bring their district to the next level.

Reviewed by Christopher Brewer, assistant superintendent for educational programs, Rome, N.Y.

Common-Sense Evidence: The Education Leader's Guide to Using Data and Research

by Nora Gordon and **Carrie Conaway**, Harvard Education Press, Cambridge, Mass., 2020, 240 pp., $33 softcover



Those preparing to become superintendents typically take an education statistics course and find that the content has little application for improving actual administrative practice. To address this problem, Nora Gordon, a Georgetown University associate professor, and Harvard senior lecturer Carrie Conaway have written *Common-Sense Evidence: The Education Leader's Guide to Using Data and Research*. They use a broadened understanding of "evidence" and suggest "common-sense" ways of using evidence to improve practice.

By itself, *Common-Sense Evidence* might be useful for an elementary or secondary teacher endeavoring to improve instruction. But without use of education statistics (such as correlation, analysis of variance, chi square tests, etc.), the teacher will not accomplish much. For that reason, I suggest this book be used in conjunction with a standard education statistics textbook. The Gordon and Conaway book would stimulate interest, and the education statistics textbook would provide the necessary analytic tools.

Given the need to interest more administrators in research to improve curriculum and instruction, I recommend this work as a companion to a traditional education statistics text. Gordon and Conaway teach useful methods for securing data for suggestive consideration, but the book does not teach education statistics.

Reviewed by Louis Wildman, professor emeritus, California State University-Bakersfield, Bakersfield, Calif.

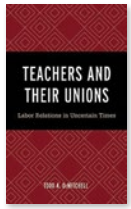
WHY I WROTE THIS BOOK ...

"I based this work on my real-world experiences, having witnessed each of these school finance issues as a superintendent over a decade. Pragmatic expenditure reduction strategies have an essential place in today's economic climate for school leaders, whether at a public, nonpublic or charter school. The book offers research-supported recommendations for taking on spiraling special education expenses, tax reform and unfunded/underfunded mandates due to state and federal laws, as well as sustainable adequate and equitable funding for primary and secondary education."

Clinton Born, professor, Franciscan University of Steubenville, Senecaville, Ohio, and AASA member since 2019, on why he wrote *Reducing School Expenses: Containing Insurance Costs, Funding Capital, and Tackling the Challenges* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2020)

Teachers and Their Unions — Labor Relations in Uncertain Times

by Todd A. DeMitchell, Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham, Md., 2020, 202 pp. with index, $29 softcover



Todd DeMitchell, a professor of education at the University of New Hampshire, demonstrates his expertise in school law with a comprehensive exploration of the teacher union labor movement from its beginnings to current times. It is both a history of union progress and a look at the complicated issues the move-

MORE BOOK REVIEWS

www.aasa.org/SAreviews.aspx

10 Perspectives on Innovation in Education
edited by Jimmy Casas, Todd Whitaker and Jeffrey Zoul
REVIEWED BY MARILYN KING

Building Your Building: How To Hire and Keep Great Teachers
by Jasmine K. Kullar and Scott A. Cunningham
REVIEWED BY SEAN WILSON

Lead from the Start: How to Succeed as the New Principal of Your School
by Tommy Reddicks and Tina Merriweather Seymour
REVIEWED BY DIANE E. REED

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Technology-based solutions for school districts.

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Quantum Learning | *www.quantumlearning.org*
Transformative schoolwide professional development.

Standard for Success | *www.standardforsuccess.com*
Educator evaluation and feedback tool.

Triway International Group | *www.triwayinc.com*
International education, exchange and recruitment.

UPS | *www.ups.com*
Shipping, freight, logistics, supplies for schools.

Wonder Media Story Maker | *www.wondermediastorymaker.com*
Transforming education by cultivating writers through animation.

School districts should do their own due diligence before signing contracts with companies that belong to the AASA School Solutions Center. More on the School Solutions Center can be found at www.aasa.org/ssc.

ment has raised for politics, government, school administration and for the teachers themselves.

Key to the complexity is the knowledge of applying an industrial union model to teachers who view themselves as professionals, not simply a labor force. While contracts can easily spell out terms such as wages and benefits, defining working conditions that lead to effective student learning is not such an easy task. Tying teacher evaluation to student performance, then tying issues of tenure to student proficiency has led to negotiations and contract language that have raised the possibility of conflict unimagined by teachers when they started negotiating simply for wages and benefits.

While not a how-to manual for administrators involved in teacher contract negotiations, this text will provide a foundation for understanding why negotiations are becoming more and more difficult. An inappropriate contract model cannot be reduced to several sheets of paper, then applied to countless non-alike classrooms and students of every sort.

Reviewed by John C. Fagan, retired superintendent, Oak Park, Ill.

ABSTRACT

Candidate Aversion

A doctoral study at Lesley University by Felicia Moschella examines the factors why qualified, certified central-office administrators chose not to pursue the superintendency.

The study surveyed 22 central-office leaders in southeastern Massachusetts and interviewed four of them. The study yielded eight findings. These included:

- the feeling that a superintendency would decrease the participants' quality of life and it was not the right time in their personal or professional lives to make a career change.
- a pool of qualified candidates exists but the stresses of the job make it less appealing to central-office administrators.

Copies of "Perceptions of Certified Central-Office Administrators Who Choose Not to Apply for the Position of Superintendent" are available from ProQuest at disspub@proquest.com or 800-521-0600.

BITS & PIECES

Principal Effects

The Wallace Foundation has released a report titled "How Principals Affect Students and Schools: A Systematic Synthesis of Two Decades of Research."

Among the findings is the idea that principals must develop an equity lens to meet the needs of their students.

To view the full report, visit *www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/Documents/How-Principals-Affect-Students-and-Schools.pdf.*

Student Engagement

McREL International has released a report examining student engagement in both in-person and virtual settings.

The report focuses on the supports and barriers students experience for engaging in the classroom and at school, as well as how student engagement shifted during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Download the report at *www.mcrel.org/the-silent-epidemic-finds-its-voice.*

Equity Forum

AASA has launched a new website forum with resources for school leaders committed to equity in education.

The online portal was created to help members address equity in rural, suburban and urban school districts. In Leading for Equity webinars, podcasts and blogs, AASA highlights courageous educational leaders who are tackling practices that result in disparate outcomes for students.

Visit the site at *https://aasa.org/aasa-equity.aspx.*

Book Reviewers

School Administrator magazine is updating its roster of book reviewers.

If you'd like to review a new book relating to education or leadership this summer, drop a note to the editor at magazine@aasa.org. Anyone who is an AASA member is eligible to join the book reviewing corps.

Antiracist Education

Stand for Children, a nonprofit education advocacy organization, has launched a new initiative called the Center for Antiracist Education.

The goals of the initiative include empowering teachers to identify racism in their learning materials, offering valuable professional development and more.

For more information, visit *https://antiracistfuture.org*.

Classroom Walkthroughs

A new report examines how classroom walkthroughs can be used for school improvement.

The paper by McREL International details three types of walkthroughs: implementation support, coaching and instructional rounds. It also defines aspects of a successful walkthrough program.

Access the report at *www.mcrel.org/classroom-walkthroughs*.

School Administrator / June

SELF-CARE AND WELLNESS. Marc Brackett of the Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence on granting leaders the permission to feel, plus a school district's take on applying his ideas. Paul Imhoff on "Soul Care," his three-part agenda for superintendent self-care. Four superintendents' self-reflections on reducing daily stress. A school district's wellness director on "Supporting Students in Troubled Times."

PLUS

- Thought Leadership Series: Joy Harjo, the poet laureate of the United States, in conversation with Maria Ott, a professor at University of Southern California
- Legal Brief: Dealing with personal attacks through social media
- Board-Savvy Superintendent: Building bench strength on the board
- Guest commentaries, "Mental Health Days for Students" and "You Can Call Me 'Doctor'"
- Profile of Christy Perry, superintendent, Salem, Ore.

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PRESIDENT'S CORNER | KRISTI WILSON

Rethinking Student Assessment

AS WE NAVIGATE the effects of the public health crisis, education leaders must continue to learn from each other. With that in mind, the AASA leadership team last November launched Leader to Leader, a series of monthly, one-hour Zoom sessions focused on addressing the unique needs of education leaders during the pandemic.

Some of the nation's most thoughtful leaders have contributed their insight and experiences, sharing ideas and best practices about topics such as equity and inclusion, the financial impact of COVID-19 and trauma-skilled learning and leading.

A session in February focused on the bold steps leaders can take to rethink student performance, to focus explicitly on the assets students bring to the table, to reimagine a systematic approach to measuring what matters most to communities and to reflect on what we have learned about student performance during the pandemic. We have brilliantly responded in ways none thought possible.

Now we must take bold steps to use lessons we have learned during the past year to make lasting changes in the way we educate and assess our nation's youth — to free ourselves from the remnants of No Child Left Behind and its overreliance on testing and recognize those achievements communities hold to be of equal or more value than a standardized test score.

In 2015, assessment focused on meaningful learning that supported and promoted student achievement and met system accountability needs. Fast forward to 2021, and we find ourselves in a world where stakeholders should insist on measures that include a subset of the standards, including a change from multiple measures to a deeper insight into student mastery of complex and cognitively demanding standards.

In the post-pandemic, will we now find ourselves left with unanswered questions about best moving forward or will we take the lessons learned and apply them in the most meaningful and sustaining ways?

This change, coupled with what we have learned during the pandemic, calls for leaders to evaluate and rethink student performance. As leaders, we must ensure that the value of educators, highlighted during the pandemic, is not forgotten but instead is recognized as a vital and meaningful part of the students' pathway toward a successful future.

> "Now is the time to think about **HOW TO BEST MEASURE** student performance on indicators of success."

What matters most regarding student performance? Daily access to healthy food, reliable home broadband, an adult advocate built into the school design and each student's individual learning path to graduation, are a few things emphasized in successful districts.

Now is the time to think about how to best measure student performance on indicators of success. While students are becoming producers rather than just consumers of information and active participants in their own learning rather than passive receivers, we can take bold steps in shifting away from assessment systems that discourage opportunities for all students to show their true potential.

By creating and fostering responsive connections, we can be certain students are not lost in our systems. Ensuring high-quality remote learning through real-time instruction can and should be measured differently from how a student randomly performs on a test one day. What a tremendous opportunity we have if we just take the time to focus on the gift students bring to school each and every day.

During the past year, it has been a pleasure to participate in the Leader to Leader series. All sessions are recorded and can be found at *https://aasa.org/LeaderToLeader.aspx*. Join us in June for the next session to discuss ways you can ensure social and emotional well-being for yourself, your staff and your students.

KRISTI WILSON is AASA president in 2020-21. E-mail: kwilson@besd33.org. Twitter: @KwilsonBESD33

A Reassessment of How We're Measuring Students

THE ASSESSMENT of a student's performance always has been a critical component of teaching. How else would the teacher know that a student actually has learned the lesson taught?

Teacher-developed quizzes are the basis for the grades given to students. Those assessments help the teacher determine the instructional strategies that will best meet the needs of the students.

That process is the staple of classroom assessments, but it does not generalize beyond that teacher and that class. Even within that class, seldom does a teacher-developed quiz meet the psychometric standards of reliability and validity. Teacher grading varies from teacher to teacher and class to class. The quiz itself is a random assessment of the content taught and the results may not reflect mastery of the total content.

Testing Escalates

Test development is a science, and testing companies invest a considerable amount of time and resources to develop valid and reliable tests that schools can use to not only assess student performance, but also to compare that performance within a grade level, a school, a school district, a nation.

There was a time when standardized tests were used by school districts to gain their own assessment of their students' performance. The passage of No Child Left Behind changed that as school districts were required to administer tests for the purpose of accountability. Standards were established so districts and schools had to meet those standards to avoid public labels for not making adequate yearly progress. Soon thereafter, the standardized test results became the basis for teacher evaluation, generating a negative backlash from teachers.

As schools and districts were evaluated based on their performance on the standardized tests, primarily on math and reading scores, many schools began to prioritize the teaching of those subjects at the expense of a richer and broader curriculum. The increase in testing and the diminution of other subjects began to concern parents who began to boycott the administration of the federally required standardized tests.

> "Civil rights groups have pointed to the test results as **PROOF POSITIVE** of the racial and economic disparity that exists in our schools."

The blowback against testing was partially responsible for the passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act that reduced the emphasis on testing, but not entirely. Test results had been indicative of a widening achievement gap between various categories of students. White and Asian students performed significantly better than Black and Hispanic students. There also was a significant gap based on family income.

Civil rights groups have pointed to the test results as proof positive of the racial and economic disparity that exists in our schools. The lack of closure of the achievement gap is evidence that the affected students require more resources. The test results are needed to continue to evaluate the increase or decrease in the gap.

A Waiver Option

The COVID-19 pandemic led to the waiving of the required tests last year. Many school districts were forced to abandon in-person learning and switch to remote learning. The required testing would not be possible. This year the U.S. Department of Education has not waived the administration of the tests, but it is inviting states to request a waiver from the accountability provisions.

Many educators appreciate the opportunity to waive the latter in a chaotic year when many students have not received sustained in-person instruction, but also are concerned that the continuing requirement to administer a test may be problematic if a significant number of students are not attending school in person and that the time devoted to test administration diminishes much-needed time on instruction.

Civil rights groups, among others, believe that this year in particular, students ought to be assessed for learning loss, and they see this as the basis for requisite testing. Educators counter that the typical standardized tests would not assess the needs of each student, as would be the case with diagnostic assessments.

The debate is indicative of the need for a long-term solution that would combine assessment for accountability purposes with assessment to inform instruction. Advances in technology offer ways of embedding assessment into instructional activities offered online, thus reducing testing time. Formative assessment practices are currently available and combined with artificial intelligence programs may well be the solution we seek.

Focusing accountability primarily on reading and mathematical skills excludes the assessment of other areas that may be deemed as important, such as the recent focus on social and emotional skills and the soft skill areas that the world of work now demands.

DANIEL DOMENECH is AASA executive director. E-mail: ddomenech@aasa.org. Twitter: @AASADan

The Benefits LED Lighting Brings to Classrooms

The impact LED lighting brings to a classroom can make a significant difference in student's ability to learn (and the lack of poor lighting also has a negative impact), said Jake Jacques, CEO of EnergyWare, a national provider of energy efficiency technology.

"Recent studies have been able to make direct correlations between quality LED lighting and improvements in a multitude of key performance indicators in schools. Students are simply in a better position to learn, process information and apply said information practically when they learn in an environment that is illuminated by LED lights."

Poor lighting can be detrimental to student success, as glare or flickering associated with legacy lighting can cause visual discomfort, resulting in headaches, eyestrain and negative behavior. With quality LED lighting installed in schools, students no longer have to strain to see the study material, making it easier to concentrate and navigate the hallways. LED technology has been proven to achieve consistent lighting performance compared to alternative options, making it the industry standard for student success.

Improving student concentration has become a focal point for thousands of administrators across the country, especially as the understanding of ADHD and other studying-related medical issues continues to grow. LED lighting has been proven to help students build their concentration abilities during classes. It has been shown to help them focus more effectively on their work in the classroom as their memory recall and information comprehension skills are able to develop more effectively under quality lighting.

When a learning environment uses LED technology, teachers gain the flexibility to control the color temperature and dimming capabilities to create optimal learning environments. This flexibility is key, as teachers can gauge which settings are needed based on the activities planned for class that day.

Perhaps the most surprising finding comes from a recent study that showed that lighting with the ability to simulate day-lighting can increase cognitive performance in students and help with adjustments in their circadian rhythms. A circadian rhythm is like an internal clock; it plays a huge role in student performance. When students' circadian rhythms are exposed to LED lights instead of fluorescent and/or incandescent lights, they have a better opportunity to be more alert of their surroundings, focus on key objectives, and perform in the classroom.

This extremely noteworthy benefit is backed by a rapidly growing body of evidence that links a significant reduction of the impact that LEDs have on the circadian rhythm. A circadian rhythm, when exposed to LED lights instead of fluorescent and/or incandescent, can assist with one's ability to focus and perform in the classroom. This is a major finding, as overexposure to poor lighting has been tied to negative consequences for circadian rhythms, resulting in damaging effects for sleep/wake cycles.

The benefits of LED lighting go beyond big savings. Providing lighting that supports the various needs within a classroom continues to be a major factor in student behavior and performance. To learn more about LED lighting and its influence on student success, please visit *www.EnergyWareLLC.com.*

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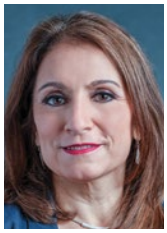
Doug Brubaker

The new superintendent in Texarkana, Texas, is Doug Brubaker, who had served four years as superintendent in Fort Smith, Ark. Previously, he was the associate superintendent in Garland, Texas, for two years and assistant superintendent in Mansfield, Texas, for six years. Brubaker also worked as director of instructional technology in Carrollton, Texas, and held two principalships over seven years in Southlake and Burleson, Texas. He began his career as a teacher in 1995. An AASA member since 2016, Brubaker received his Ph.D. from the University of North Texas.



Susana Cordova

The new deputy superintendent of the Dallas, Texas, Independent School District is Susana Cordova, who served the previous year as superintendent in Denver, Colo. She earlier was the deputy superintendent in Denver for three years and spent time as acting superintendent. Cordova also filled berths as chief schools officer, chief academic officer, executive director of teaching and learning, and principal in Denver. She started her education career as a bilingual language arts, drama and social studies middle school teacher in 1989. She has been an AASA member since 2019.

Rosalie M. Daca

The Urbandale Community School District in Urbandale, Iowa, has selected Rosalie Daca as its next superintendent. She had served as chief academic officer in the Racine, Wis., Unified School District since 2013, where she held prior positions as an elementary school directing principal and a middle school assistant principal. Daca has 35 years of experience as an educator and began her career as a mathematics teacher for 15 years in St. Petersburg, Sebring and Wakulla, Fla. She has been a member of AASA since 2014.

Jennifer A. Kephart

Jennifer Kephart is the incoming superintendent for Washington, Mo., after spending several years in Lee's Summit, Mo., as associate superintendent of academic services and assistant superintendent of elementary education. She previously spent three years as executive director of elementary education in Liberty, Mo. Kephart has held several principalships and teaching positions in various Missouri districts. She began her career as a teacher in Shawnee Mission, Kan. An AASA member since 2020, she received her Ed.D. from St. Louis University.

Nisha Patel

Nisha Patel has been selected as superintendent in Clayton, Mo. She spent the previous 1½ years as superintendent of Fox C-6 School District in Arnold, Mo., where she had been assistant superintendent for secondary schools for three years. Patel held several posts in the Rockwood School District in St. Louis, Mo., including high school science teacher and principal. She received the 2020 Champion Award from the National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Abuse-St. Louis. An AASA member since 2016, Patel received her Ed.D. from Maryville University in St. Louis, Mo.

Tony B. Watlington

The new superintendent of the Rowan-Salisbury School District in Salisbury, N.C., is Tony Watlington, who earlier spent three years as the chief of schools and four years as the central region superintendent in Guilford County, N.C. Watlington held several other positions in Guilford County during a 12-year tenure. Early in his career, he worked as a bus driver for Harnett County Schools in Lillington, N.C. An AASA member since 2018, he earned his Ed.D. in educational leadership from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

APPOINTMENTS

Benjamin Bragg, from principal, Catskill High School, Catskill, N.Y., to superintendent, Germantown, N.Y.

Matthew Cook, from superintendent, Newark, N.Y., to superintendent, Onondaga-Cortland-Madison Counties BOCES, Syracuse, N.Y.

Joel Hagood, from superintendent, Walker County, Ala., to president, Bevill State Community College, Jasper, Ala.

Nyah Hamlett, from chief of staff, Loudoun County, Va., to superintendent, Chapel Hill, N.C.

Steven Hope, from interim superintendent to superintendent, Goshen, Ind.

Kenneth Saranich, from assistant superintendent to superintendent, Shelton, Conn.

RETIREMENTS

Laurie Atkins, superintendent, Polk County, Ga.

Susan Brown, superintendent, Germantown, N.Y.

John Burke, superintendent, Haysville, Kan.

Scott Campbell, superintendent, Widefield School District 3, Colorado Springs, Colo.

Art Cavazos, superintendent, Harlingen, Texas

Lorie Hackett, superintendent, Whitehall, Pa.

Mark Johnston, superintendent, Shenandoah County, Va.

Keith Kelly, superintendent, Mayfield Heights, Ohio

John Link, superintendent, Jackson, Mo.

Joylynn Pruitt-Adams, superintendent, Oak Park, Ill.

Kathleen Rodden-Nord, superintendent, Junction City, Ore.

Daniel Snowberger, superintendent, Durango, Colo.

Jan Vesely, superintendent, Kyrene School District, Tempe, Ariz.

Stephen Young, superintendent, Berlin, N.Y.

Michael Zoerhoff, superintendent, Kentwood, Mich.

HONORS

Gustavo Balderas, superintendent, Edmonds School District 15, Lynnwood, Wash., selected president-elect, Association of Latino Administrators & Superintendents

Francisco Durán, superintendent, Arlington, Va., selected president, Association of Latino Administrators & Superintendents

Melissa Sadorf, superintendent, Stanfield Elementary School District, Stanfield, Ariz., selected as U.S. Department of Education School Ambassador Fellow for 2020-21

DEATHS

Suzanne (Crispo) Marotta, 72, retired superintendent, West Springfield, Mass., Feb. 16

Gregg Mowen, 61, retired community superintendent, Department of Defense Schools, Tokyo, Japan, Jan. 4

News about AASA members' promotions, retirements, honors and deaths should be addressed to: Editor, *School Administrator*, 1615 Duke St., Alexandria, VA 22314. Fax: 703-841-1543. E-mail: magazine@aasa.org

Erasing the Woes From His Legal Pads

BY JULI VALENTINE

BIO STATS: KHALID N. MUMIN

CURRENTLY: superintendent, Reading School District, Reading, Pa.

PREVIOUSLY: superintendent, Caroline County Public Schools, Denton, Md.

AGE: 49

GREATEST INFLUENCE ON CAREER: Understanding that educators who motivate children to defeat the odds in beating poverty are in fact reframing the way students view their chances at success.

BEST PROFESSIONAL DAY: Aug. 16, 2018, when the state auditor general announced that the Reading School District had completed a plethora of recommendations — academic, fiscal and organizational — imposed by his office. He concluded, under my leadership, Reading had made the most miraculous "turnaround" he'd ever witnessed.

BOOKS AT BEDSIDE: *At the Crossroads of Fear and Freedom* by Robert L. Green, *A Promised Land* by Barack Obama and *A Hope in the Unseen* by Ron Suskind

BIGGEST BLOOPER: In the late winter of 2017, forecasters said a devastating weather storm system would dump record levels of snow on Reading. Being proactive, I closed schools the night before. The storm passed by the city leaving no precipitation and the temperature rose to 65 during the day. They really let me have it on social media.

WHY I'M AN AASA MEMBER: I am passionately connected to the professional development and advocacy for student success AASA consistently designs. Nationally, AASA provides forums for superintendents to remain current in effective education leadership.

WHEN KHALID MUMIN interviewed for the superintendent job in Reading, Pa., in 2014, he came away with two legal pad pages full of issues the district was facing. Reading's schools had recently been designated "financially distressed" by the Department of Education and "highly dysfunctional" by the auditor general and were heading toward a potential state takeover. Despite mounting challenges, he accepted the offer.

"When I took on this job, I had five predecessors in four years, but I looked in the mirror and said, 'You know what? Those five weren't one of me!'" says Mumin, who was honored as one of four finalists for 2021 National Superintendent of the Year.

The two legal pad pages from his interview turned into a strategic plan with five main points focusing on safe schools, academics, fiscal responsibility, communication and community engagement, and partnerships. Mumin says he began by keeping the kids in mind and pushing staff members to have empathy for all students in the district, where 99 percent qualify as underserved.

"It's all about inspiration and having that humanistic ability to be able to meet your staff where they are and move them forward," Mumin says. "You can't just talk the talk, you've got to walk the walk … filled with nothing but your head and heart in alignment for the kids that you're serving."

Six years later, the nearly 18,000-student district, located about 60 miles northwest of Philadelphia, is in a much better position.

"Our now-former Pennsylvania auditor general said this is the most miraculous turnaround he's ever seen in his career — that means a lot," Mumin says. "Now that can be seen as an accolade for a superintendent, but do you know what that statement did for my team, my community? They weren't the 'bad news bears' anymore! They are a district that models things nationally. I'm very proud of that."

The dramatic performance turnaround and subsequent boost in esteem are some of the things that helped Reading's assistant superintendent, Jennifer Murray, when she was a principal in the district. She says Mumin even inspired her to advance to district leadership.

"We're making lots of progress in different directions, we're becoming well-known in the county, as well as across the state and even in the nation," says Murray. "He definitely talked me into [coming to the central office] at first, but it's a leap I'm very glad I did with him especially."

Encouraging his students and staff to take leaps and then essentially getting out of their way so they can do so is a hallmark of Mumin's leadership. When the Reading communications director came to him with a new idea for the 2020-21 opening day staff video in which Mumin only appeared for about 30 seconds rather than the usual five minutes or so, he happily stepped aside for 9-year-old Jermaine, the "kid superintendent," to give Reading's teachers a pep talk. The video went viral with more than four million views from around the world.

"It shows, from a leadership standpoint, having a title is simply a title. You have to be open to rich ideas, you have to be willing to take risk to get to that end result," Mumin says. "Jermaine was the player that needed to be in the game and right now, we're winning off his influence. Selfishly, hopefully that inspires kids to want to become a superintendent one day."

JULI VALENTINE is digital content editor at AASA. E-mail: jvalentine@aasa.org

Greetings That Seemed Out of Place

One of Paul Imhoff's favored communication tools is to speak at small coffee-chat gatherings in private homes in Upper Arlington, Ohio, where he serves as superintendent. At times, the calendar really fills up, and Imhoff finds himself going from house to house to house.

One evening, he arrived at a home bustling with people. Imhoff went around the room, dutifully making introductions and thanking people for being there. After several minutes, someone he knew pulled him aside and asked what he was doing there.

"It turns out that I had accidentally crashed a wake!" reported Imhoff, the incoming AASA president. "Everyone was very kind as I apologized and made my way out the door and down the street to the real coffee chat."

Tales of Tigers

Erik Kincade found an unusual way to teach principles of good leadership to young students. He published a book, featuring a super-striped tiger, semi-striped tigers and a stripeless tiger, titled *Earn Your Stripes.*

Kincade, the decade-long superintendent of the Fairview School District in northwestern Pennsylvania, relates a story about Sam, the tiger with positive influences on her followers, and Edgar, a tiger who is lazy and selfish.

Working in Fairview where the district mascot is the Tiger made the choice of animal at the center of his illustrated book most fitting. A Kickstarter campaign launched by the superintendent led to the initial printing of 300 copies, distributed within his district and to all elementary school libraries in Erie County, Pa. He's since published two follow-up works full of personal improvement advice: *Hey Ralphie, You're Not a Tiger* and *Hey Ralphie, It's What's on the Inside that Counts.*

Noisy Nickname

Kenmare High School, located in North Dakota a short distance from the Canada Goose Hiking Trail, acknowledges the abundance of geese by using the Honkers nickname for its sports teams.

The school has created a mascot featuring Hank the Honker and a six-foot goose costume for patrolling the sidelines of athletic events.

The area's most populous bird is further promoted during Kenmare's annual GooseFest every fall.

SOURCE: *National Federation of High Schools*

SHORT, HUMOROUS anecdotes, quips, quotations and malapropisms for this column relating to school district administration should be addressed to: Editor, *School Administrator*, 1615 Duke St., Alexandria, VA 22314. E-mail: magazine@aasa.org. Upon request, names may be withheld in print.

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— Lillian M. Torrez, *Superintendent, Taos Municipal Schools, New Mexico*

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