

School Administrators Association of New York State

Vanguard

FALL
2022

Exploring
Educational
Leadership



VOICE

- AN INTERVIEW WITH
RUSSELL QUAGLIA
- "STORIES" FROM SAANY'S
50TH ANNIVERSARY
CONFERENCE



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What cons could there possibly be for switching to a new district in order to save commuting time?

Dear Kelly,

I only have 3 more years until my full retirement age, and I am considering changing districts for a few different reasons. By making the switch, I would save 30 minutes of travel each way, and make the same amount of money. Should I consider anything else (financially) before making the change?

-Always Driving

Dear *Always Driving*,

That is a great question. Being that we are in the Great Resignation, and there being an abundance of opportunities and new roles available in many school districts, it is hard to not consider alternatives elsewhere. Especially with gas prices being what they are and your commute being what it currently is. There are many factors which can play into making this decision, salary changes, a new role in general, etc. When considering this with an awareness to retirement benefits, you must be cautious with the decision you make. Many districts or BOCES

state in their contracts that to be eligible for health insurance benefits in retirement, you must have worked for that specific unit or employer for a given amount of time and retire from the employer. So, if someone worked at Employer A for 27 years, and then went to Employer B with only three years remaining to work, they may compromise that healthcare in their retirement piece, which can be a significant factor. That being said, these types of stipulations vary from employer to employer. My advice to you would be that you review each districts' contract thoroughly first to make the most educated decision.

Sincerely,

Kelly



QUICK
TIPS

Are you considering switching jobs? Consider this: Will your the new position jeopardize your eligibility with...

- Your NYS Pension?
- Healthcare benefits in retirement?
- Student loan forgiveness programs?
- Your ability to save for retirement?

If you're not sure, we suggest meeting with your financial professional to get some answers.



Kelly DeMay is a Financial Advisor with Equitable Advisors. Equitable Advisors partners with SAANYS to provide financial articles, seminars, guidance and planning for SAANYS members.

As a SAANYS member, you are able to receive complimentary meetings to review your financial situation and plan for the future.

To set up a complimentary meeting with a Financial Professional or submit a *question for Kelly*, please email Kelly.Demay@equitable.com, don't forget to mention your SAANYS membership.

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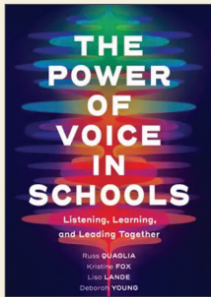
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FALL
2022

This magazine is published
three times a year by the
**School Administrators Association
of New York State**

8 Airport Park Boulevard
Latham, NY 12110
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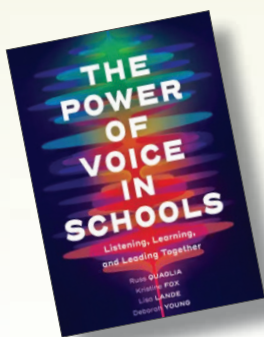
AN INTERVIEW WITH RUSSELL QUAGLIA

Giving Voice to Voice

By Ellen Ullman

You know what drives Dr. Russell J. Quaglia crazy? When people say they are going to give students voice. “You are not giving them voice,” says Quaglia. “You are giving them an opportunity to share their voice.”

It’s an important distinction, and one that Quaglia knows well. As the founder of the 40-year-old Quaglia Institute for Student Aspirations, he’s been described as America’s leading authority on the development and achievement of student voice and aspirations. He has written surveys, speeches, policy briefs, articles, and books on the subject, serves on several national and international committees, and works with hundreds of schools to provide customized voice and leadership training for students and staff.



Earlier in his career, Quaglia was studying student aspirations and became dismayed by hearing people say that kids don't have goals or that they have goals but aren't inspired to get to them. "It's an easy out to say, 'I want to be a doctor, but I don't like science class,'" he says. "We found an incredible disconnect and began to study what created that disconnect."

Quaglia's team learned that the disconnect was due to many factors, including self-worth and engagement, but one driver kept coming back: giving students an opportunity to share their voice. As he says, "We started to understand that it's not about what they want to be but about the person they want to become. Students questioned who they were in this process and the only way to find the who was to ensure that they felt comfortable enough to share their voice."

DEFINING VOICE

In order to ensure that everyone in your school district has a voice, the first thing to do is to clarify what voice even means. Here's how the Institute defines it: Voice is sharing thoughts and ideas in an environment underpinned by trust and respect, offering realistic suggestions for the good of the whole, and accepting responsibility for not only what is said but also what needs to be done.

Let's break that down.

The first component is sharing thoughts and ideas in an environment underpinned by trust and respect. Many people assume that it's easy to share thoughts and ideas, especially in this age of TikTok. But we need to look deeper. "In order to share ideas and suggestions that will impact decision making, there must be a foundation of mutual trust and respect," says Quaglia.

Building a culture of trust in a school takes effort, sincerity, and time. Teachers and administrators develop trust with students by displaying a genuine interest in them and their learning. Students and staff may be willing to offer ideas, but they will

see how those ideas are received and weigh the risk-reward for future sharing. Quaglia says that eye contact, appreciation for shared ideas, and open dialogue about different viewpoints all help us ensure that our ideas are appreciated rather than judged.

People are more willing to share their ideas in a culture of respect. Students respect teachers who are honest with them and take the time to know them as unique individuals with important perspectives to share.

In order to ensure that everyone in your school district has a voice, the first thing to do is to clarify what voice even means.

Teachers appreciate those same characteristics in their colleagues and administrators. When there is mutual respect, people are more likely to share their thoughts and ideas.

The second component of voice is offering realistic suggestions for the good of the whole. "With trust and respect as the foundation, it is important to be able to express not only what you think, but to offer realistic suggestions that benefit others," says Quaglia. But suggestions need to be realistic rather than noise, e.g., having a longer recess once a week rather than having recess all day every day. The goal is for people to offer realistic suggestions that are creative, inspiring, and achievable. Remember that the end goal is to support everyone's success. All stakeholders need to be willing to contribute ideas that consider the needs of others.

The third component is accepting responsibility for what needs to be done as well as what is said. "When well-planned action is taken, voice reaches its pinnacle. Too often, great ideas collect dust because no one takes responsibility for implementing the next steps," says Quaglia. If everyone is responsible, then nothing gets done. Voice includes taking action to make ideas a reality. Each of us must accept responsibility for bringing about the change we seek. Fully implementing voice includes taking ideas and turn-

ing them into action and accomplishments.

WHY VOICE MATTERS

Back in the days when many of the people reading this article were in school, people didn't ask us our opinions and thoughts. It just wasn't done. But in this time of authentic learning – in which we encourage teachers to connect their lessons to real-world issues, problems, and applications – it's impossible to do so without students having a voice. "Student voice is the gasoline that powers our initiatives," says Quaglia. "Without voice, students are running on air and will run out of gas."

Giving students an opportunity to share their voice can make a real difference and have meaningful impact. Data collected by the Quaglia Institute from 2009 through 2018 show that when students have a voice, they are three times more likely to experience self-worth in school, five times more likely to be engaged in school, and five times more likely to have a sense of purpose in school. Other benefits of listening to and acting on student voice include a higher level of collaboration between students and teachers, improving the school's environment and culture, and forming stronger relationships and connections.

During the pandemic, student voice became even more important and purposeful, says Quaglia. "When we all listen and learn, we create a powerful community while recognizing and celebrating individuality," he says. "This kind of community allows us to be in a place where we celebrate belonging without anyone losing their individuality. That's the power of voice."

VOICE IN ACTION

One of the first steps to take to make voice a part of your school is to gather data. Tools such as the Quaglia Institute's School Voice surveys measure conditions across an entire school. You can ask students, staff, and parents/caregivers to do quick online surveys that provide administrators with real-time reports. The next step

is to develop shared objectives and steps for improvement. In addition to school- or district-wide surveys, teachers can distribute individual classroom surveys to their students.

The Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) has worked with the Quaglia Institute since 2019. Together, they've created 13 schools of action and infuse voice into all areas, including curriculum development and discipline. In the first year, the district distributed 9,890 student voice surveys and 4,207 iKnow My Class surveys to learn from the voices of their students and work to grow and sustain practices that increase student engagement and achievement. Between the fall of 2019 and the spring of 2021, LAUSD saw gains on 47 of the 50 survey statements, including the following:

- Students respect teachers, up by 16.4 percent.
- Adults at this school listen to students' suggestions, up by 10 percent.
- Teachers make an effort to get to know me, up by 7.8 percent.
- Learning can be fun, up by 7.1 percent.

Working with students to analyze and understand the data helps create a school experience in which staff and students take shared responsibility for the health of the school community and work together on continual improvement. Recently, students were allowed to choose their own textbooks, with parameters set by their teachers.

The Maui School District, which has 30 schools, has also taken on voice as a primary focus. For the last three years, Maui has been building new schools with voice and aspiration as primary drivers. Students have been able to select mascots and to help define what the schools stand for.

STEPS TO TAKE TO GIVE STUDENTS VOICE

"A lot of people think voice is a zero-sum game — that I'm losing my voice if I'm letting you share yours — but that is absolutely not the case," says Quaglia. In actuality, the more you

let students have a voice, the greater your voice will become, he says. Your voice will be more insightful and inspirational. Voice grows exponentially when it's shared among students, colleagues, and administrators.

Schools can start encouraging students to share their voice by creating an environment that's underpinned by trust and respect. Students will be more likely to share what they're thinking when they feel safe. Classroom teachers can use different strategies to incorporate student voice, such as regularly asking for student input, meeting with students to set goals, and encouraging students to choose how they demonstrate their learning.

It's important to remember that all students need to be included in this work. "We need to be way more purposeful to listen to all students, including students with special needs," says Quaglia. "They are a voice that has not been heard to the level of what they have to offer." He cautions people to never assume that students who require greater attention already have voice and says that all of us — but especially students — have to be more cognizant and be taught to have better conversations.

"Voice is not just verbal. It is far beyond what we hear, and we cannot limit voice. We want it as a collective: student, teacher, parent, etc. It is critical to hear voices of all students, understand why they say what they say, what they feel, and how we can better help them express themselves," he says.

VOICE AND LEADERSHIP

Schools with a solid base of student voice are schools in which teachers and administrators have a voice. We often assume that principals have a voice because they are principals, but in a lot of cases they can only share what the central office allows them to share.

Quaglia says the key to infusing principals with voice is by opening channels of communication. He sug-

gests that principals be as honest and open as possible, sharing any restraints and pressure. "Don't just say no," he says. "Let teachers know the parameters you're under." The leaders who communicate and keep people up to speed on where we are and why are the most successful ones.

He recommends that leadership do these three things:

1. Assess how well you **communicate**.
2. Ask your staff if you can do things differently to create an environment built on **trust and respect**.
3. Figure out how to make it a **safe place** in which teachers are rewarded and celebrated.

When the potential of voice is fully realized, schools will look and feel different. They will be filled with cooperation, collaboration, and confidence, with the educational community working in partnership with one another. The Institute says that schools that have taken steps to implement

"We need to be way more purposeful to listen to all students, including students with special needs," says Quaglia. "They are a voice that has not been heard to the level of what they have to offer."

voice have seen fewer discipline problems, better attendance, more engaged students and teachers, and greater self-worth and respect between and among various community members.

"There's no way for students and teachers to reach their fullest potential if we aren't listening and learning what they have to say."

Learn more about School Voice and the work of the Quaglia Institute by visiting <https://www.quagliainstitute.org/>.

ELLEN ULLMAN has been writing about education since 2003. She lives in Burlington, Mass., and is the former editorial director for eSchool News.

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1

1:1 Mentor Coaching



SAANYS Mentor Coaching Services

Option
2

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“SAANYS mentoring has changed our administrative team...Our administrators have valued and cherished the time they have spent with their SAANYS mentor, who skillfully used questioning and scenarios to give them tools to solve their own challenges and build a plan to move forward with confidence and collaboration.”

Shelley Rossitto
Executive Director, IT & PD, Monticello Schools

Contact

For more information about this program, contact Karen Bronson, SAANYS director of professional learning, at kbronson@saanys.org, or Bonnie Tryon, SAANYS mentor coordinator, at btryon@saanys.org.





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Why SAANYS? Here's what this year's 50th Anniversary Conference attendees had to say...



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Tech Tools for Faculty Meetings

Making Meetings Fun



By Laurie Guyon

*SAANYS' 50th Anniversary
Conference Presenter*

We have all sat through meetings where someone is reading off a slide or telling you information that could have been in an email. Each time that happens, it's a missed opportunity to build community and collaboration with our staff. While the information is essential, there are better, more effective ways to communicate and work together toward a common goal. We don't have to dread the faculty meeting. Instead, we can look forward to it as we build bonds and share ideas. A few tweaks to our agenda and employing some of the best educational technology (edtech) tools can make a difference.

So many great edtech tools can help make your meetings more productive and engaging. Explore these typical problems and unique tools to see how to adjust your sessions. While some edtech tools are mentioned, plenty more are used within your district that you could use to make your meetings fun. Stick to what your teachers use or what your district pays for so that you can model great uses of these tech tools. Next, let's look at engagement and collaboration strategies to understand better what these tools can do for you during the meetings.

PROBLEM – DISENGAGEMENT

Just sit around any meeting and observe the behaviors around you. There will always be one teacher grading papers, another scrolling their phone, and yet another having a side conversation. Then, every few minutes or so, one teacher leaves for another meeting or event that they deem more important. All the while, you are reading off a list of essential topics, smiling, and telling staff how wonderful they are. Sometimes, the information you share is met with groans or frustration. Sometimes, no matter how hard you try, it seems like no one is listening. How can we make giving this information more effective?

THE FIX – ENGAGEMENT

Get teachers to use your district's technology. Showcase the tech tool in action. If you are new to the tool, be honest with everyone and say you are trying something new. There is no better way to showcase your growth mindset than to jump on the stage. There are so many fantastic edtech tools for presentations that take just a few minutes to prepare but offer a significant impact. Try using something you don't typically use. Instead, use this opportunity to showcase new and effective ways to use your district's available tools.

EDTECH TOOL – NEARPOD/PEARDECK

If your district has either of these tools, then you are already prioritizing engagement in the classroom. Both of these tools allow for interaction between teachers and students. But they

can also be used for meetings as everyone can log in and save a copy of the slides and all of the resources in their Google Drive. Nearpod will also save in Dropbox or to your email. You can also have teachers share their ideas with open-ended questions or with Nearpod's Collaborate Boards. This is a great way to keep teachers on the same page and engaged as you review your agenda.



PROBLEM – ONE-SIDED

Why do we have meetings? You know that some information has to be shared, and the message can be conveyed clearer if we talk it out. You hope teachers will be answered all at once, so the message is clear. These meetings are essential. It's also important to use this time to build your community and ensure your staff has a voice.

FIX – COLLABORATION

Just as teachers do group work in the classroom, you can use that teaching strategy in meetings. Use the time to ask questions and allow discussion and idea sharing. This will help teachers feel like they are part of the conversation and offer opportunities for building that community with your staff. For example, you are discussing a new rollout of the NYSED Computer Science and Digital Fluency (CS/DF) standards at your meeting. You want to gather your teachers' concerns, ideas, and struggles. This can be done to allow all teachers to have a voice in the discussion.

EDTECH TOOL – WAKELET/PADLET

Both of these tools have free and paid versions. Use them to capture notes from the small groups and give space to air out questions. They both allow any type of resource to be uploaded and offer a space to write out thoughts and ideas. These can then be used at each meeting to showcase growth within the work and as a teacher resource for stakeholder meetings and curriculum mapping. In the example about the CS/DF standards, the

teachers could build out three categories: what they already do, what they can easily tweak to fit the standards, and what support they need. It will also allow them to ask for professional development or strategies to make this rollout successful. Finally, it offers a space to ask questions and get support from each other.

There are many tools to gamify your meetings. These can be combined with a prize or giving back time to teachers. These can be team based or individual, depending on how you want to use these tools for engagement. Gaming is not always necessary or effective as it depends on the topic. However, if you can mix in games occasionally, it will help foster your community and keep them engaged. Many thrive on a bit of fun competition!

BINGOBAKER

BingoBaker is a one-time fee, and you have the platform forever. For \$25, it is an affordable option to get teachers engaged. Even with the free version, you can create your Bingo cards. These can be done online, or you can print them out. You can fill the spots with the keywords you will cover in your meeting. Then, when you play the game, teachers can fill in the areas as you say the words. For prizes, you can give gift cards to local places or a book for PD, or offer to cover their classes for 15 minutes. You can also reach out to the edtech companies for swag to give away at your meetings. This is great when using the tools within your staff meetings. If you have teachers who are ambassadors for certain edtech companies, tap them for

resources and ask them to demonstrate the device to your staff.

GIMKIT / KAHOOT! / BLOOKET

All three of these fun gaming sites have free and paid options. Teachers often use them for review games or as a fun activity in the classroom. In addition, these same tools can be used in meetings to share information. These platforms can be customized to include the content you must cover in your discussions. If you already use Nearpod, you can also use the Time to Climb game built into the platform. These tools are fun and easy to use for all. You will find that using these tools will create more smiles and engagement during your meetings.

Finally, some other tools can be used for a variety of purposes. These tools offer flexibility and allow for fan-

tastic collaboration within your meetings and beyond. Use them to gather information, share ideas, and hear from all of your faculty.

KAMI/CANVA

These excellent edtech tools allow for a fantastic amount of collaboration. Any document, PDF, slide, or image can be uploaded to their platform. From there, you can have all your staff on the same page. In Canva, use the Whiteboard feature to get teachers to share resources, ask questions, or annotate something you want to share. In Kami, you can have all collaborators working on the same page or multiple pages to capture their discussions and thoughts. These documents become compelling artifacts that can be shared with everyone and used as you build them throughout the year.

There are so many excellent educational tools that our teachers are using in their classrooms to engage students and to make learning more collaborative. We can utilize these tools for our meetings in the same way. We can ensure every teacher is actively involved, participating, and having their voices heard. Teachers will feel that these meetings are a great use of their time and will have new ways to use technology in their classrooms. The best part is that you foster a community within your staff where every member feels valued.

LAURIE GUYON is the coordinator for Model Schools at WSWHE BOCES.

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Essential Leadership Strategies for Navigating a Crisis



By Dr. John E. McKenna

*SAANYS' 50th Anniversary
Conference Presenter*

The beginning of the 2020-21 school year was one of the most challenging times that school districts have ever had to face. The COVID-19 pandemic was raging across our country and schools in New York State were mandated to implement extreme measures including social distancing, masking, and developing virtual learning models. School leaders had never faced these conditions before and many school districts struggled to prepare and adequately meet the requirements necessary to open schools.

The presenters of this workshop at the SAANYS annual conference gathered information from several school districts and utilized their practical experience when developing this presentation. Due to unexpected factors such as hiring timelines and social distancing requirements, a district they worked in was not able to successfully develop a virtual instructional model for students in grades 5-12 in time to start the 2020-21 school year.

There were approximately 2,000 of the 7,000 middle school/high school students who requested a virtual learning model. Approximately 100 staff members were needed to create a virtual academy capable of delivering instruction for 2,000 students, and hiring this many people was simply not possible within the given time frame. No virtual learning model had been developed, and given the social distancing requirements, there was not enough space to service the students in school. When the 2020-21 school year had started, 2,000 students were not receiving any instruction, and NYSED directed the district to deliver instruction to ALL students immediately. An

assistant superintendent was appointed as acting superintendent and given the directive to solve the crisis immediately. The authors of this presentation chronicle the steps the district took to solve the crisis and share the lessons they learned from the experience. They summarized their findings in *Eight Essential Strategies for Navigating a Crisis*.

The following is a summary of those eight strategies and the key attributes and actions that highly effective leaders implement to successfully navigate a crisis:

1. Possessing a Visionary Mindset with Ethical Purpose:

The highly effective leader:

- Communicates clear vision, mission, and goals.
- Creates specific action plans.
- Establishes a common moral purpose to unite people.
- Understands that followers must know and be connected to the purpose behind proposed changes.

2. Building Relationships, Trust, and Empowering Others:

The highly effective leader:

- Makes time to meet with individuals, small groups, and large groups to listen to their ideas and concerns.
- Understands that people are the greatest resource.
- Takes the time to learn the individual strengths of the staff.
- Forms teams to address specific problems and matches people to the appropriate task.
- Selects appropriate team leaders to facilitate committees/teams.

3. Developing and Sustaining a Culture of Creativity and Caring:

The highly effective leader:

- Recognizes that a culture based on empathy, caring, and kindness brings out the best in people.

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- Embraces Theodore Roosevelt’s philosophy, “Nobody cares how much you know, until you know how much they care.”
- Gets directly involved with the teams, rolls up sleeves, and helps on the front lines.
- Plans and leads professional learning activities.

4. Communicating Concisely, Transparently, and Accurately:

The highly effective leader:

- Understands they must set up specific systems and multiple methods to communicate to all stakeholders.
- Plans daily, weekly, and monthly correspondence to ensure consistent and timely communication.
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- Develops screencasts to highlight specific information.

5. Making Sense of Change and Enhancing Situational Awareness:

The highly effective leader:

- Understands that gaining situational awareness is a key element in navigating a crisis.
- Takes time to listen and gather information before constructing a plan.
- Knows that it is imperative to build a leadership team and keeps in constant contact with the team.
- Develops a structure of specialized teams to address unique situations and specific problems; these teams report back to the leadership team.

- Is intentional in building a vertical and horizontal team structure to constantly gather information and report on progress.

6. Enhancing Flexibility and Adaptability:

The highly effective leader:

- Knows they must be flexible and be able to adapt to an ever-changing environment.
- Embraces diverse opinions and is comfortable with dissent.
- Works cooperatively and collegially with others to find the “best fit” solutions.
- Encourages individuality, ingenuity, creativity, and imagination.
- Understands “situational leadership” and adapts and transforms their leadership style to meet individual situations.

7. Providing Resources and Support:

The highly effective leader:

- Makes sure people have proper tools, training, and support to do the job.
- Finds ways to provide time for professional learning activities.
- Understands you can’t tell people to do a job without the proper resources, training, and support.
- Prioritizes budget and spending and directs funding toward attaining specific goals.

8. Personifying Optimism and Seizing Opportunities:

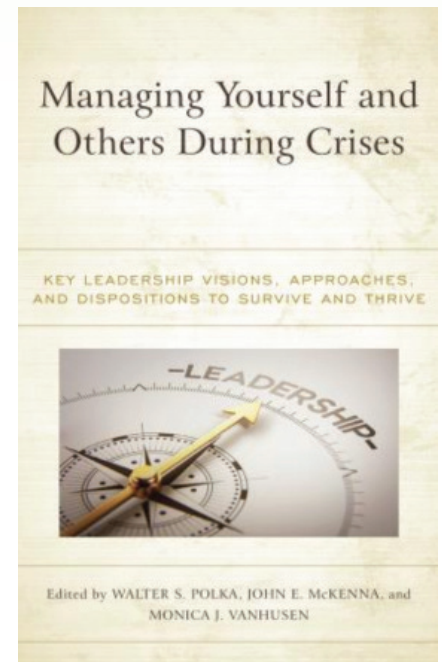
The highly effective leader:

- Understands the responsibility of being a positive “role model.”
- Understands that optimism and positivity have the power to transform an organization, and that conversely, negativity can also transform an organization.

- Understands that with crisis comes opportunity and to always look for the opportunities.
- Seizes the moment, establishes vision, and generates new ways of thinking and doing business.

These eight strategies, along with other ideas and methods leaders can employ when facing challenging times, can be found in the new book *Managing Yourself and Others During Crises: Key Leadership Visions, Approaches and Dispositions to Survive and Thrive*. This book was co-written and edited by Dr. John E. McKenna — one of the presenters of this workshop and a past president of SAANYS.

DR. JOHN E. MCKENNA is the assistant superintendent at Williamsville CSD.



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MINDFULNESS

Breath by Breath: Finding Calm Amidst the Storm



By Dr. Rochelle I. Mitlak

*SAANYS' 50th Anniversary
Conference Presenter*

At the end of June, during the 2021-22 school year, our district had persevered through the pandemic and decided to launch a big initiative in the fall of the following school year. Over 50 administrators gathered together in a room on campus to learn about this initiative and how it was going to be implemented in all K-12 buildings. Two presenters, one in person and one virtual, spent over two hours explaining the details of a product we were launching. After a 15-minute break, our group reconvened to debrief.

People came back into the room and there was frantic chatter. They sat uncomfortably in their seats and started scrolling through emails. At that moment, I, as one of the leads in this initiative, looked at the group, took a deep breath, and asked how everyone was doing. I surprised my colleagues and got their attention by telling them to take their hands off of their keyboards. After some nervous laughter and me saying, "This is not a directive," I repeated my request and said again, "But please take your hands off your keyboards."

I invited the group to take a deep breath and if it was comfortable to close their eyes. If closing one's eyes did not feel good, the administrators were invited to find a comfortable gaze down the tips of their noses. I proceeded to guide them. Take a moment and just breathe. Allow whatever you heard and thought to bubble up in your mind and just sit with that. After a brief pause, I continued. When you're ready, open your eyes, open an email, and write to me and my co-leader any thoughts, questions, or concerns you might have after hearing the presentation this morning. The room was silent as individuals continued breathing and then one by one opened their eyes, and began typing their thoughts. Their bodies relaxed. Their energy was focused. They took their time processing all that had been shared that day.

There was an immediate calming because we all stopped, took a breath or two, and allowed information to settle in before responding or reacting. This process is meditation and mindfulness in action. My ability to embed mindfulness in our daily work was possible because I, as a certified yoga instructor and meditation and mindfulness coach and practitioner, was sensitive to the tensions in the room and was able to dispel concern and anxiety by quickly offering a way to help my colleagues.

I became a seasoned practitioner of mindful breathing during 2020-21 as a way of coping with my own COVID-related story. My position in a school district in Westchester County was eliminated at the end of the 2019-2020 school year due to budget-

ary cuts related to the pandemic. I was offered a position and relocated upstate in August of 2020 to a town where I knew no one, leaving my oldest son to complete the fall semester of his senior year in college remotely from my home alone. During that first year, along with my regular yoga practice which I continued virtually, I found solace in nightly sessions of meditation. In addition, I enrolled in a virtual meditation and mindfulness training. Strengthening my own meditation practice enabled and inspired me to share this with my colleagues.

During professional learning sessions in the fall of 2021, I led teachers through brief guided breathing practices before launching into learning about teaching reading to elementary students. Teachers were thankful and asked for more. As a result, I offered virtual meditation sessions one day per week after school as a way of providing support. Each session was approximately 20-25 minutes. The reality, though, is that to benefit from a meditation practice, only one minute, practiced every day, can significantly impact the way we respond to stress.

Simply put, mindfulness is a way to help focus attention on what the breath, body, and mind are doing at a given moment without judgment or explanation of what was noticed. A mindfulness practice is used to help simply notice what is arising and not to respond or react. The point is to just notice.

Mindfulness as a practice became more commonplace in the 1970s when Jon Kabat Zinn established two centers at the University of Massachusetts (UMASS) and UMASS Medical School focused on mindfulness based stress reduction (MBSR). Mindfulness practices have found their way, and rightfully so, into classrooms and board-



rooms as individuals have become acutely aware of the stress they feel and want to find ways to cope.

The COVID-19 pandemic heightened the stressors that educators faced on a regular basis and at a pace that challenged the nervous system. As administrators, we have been faced with high teacher absences, increased negative student behaviors, and challenges from parents and the community on top of an already demanding set of responsibilities. In many cases we also balanced the needs of our families, who were undergoing their own stress and increasing anxiety.

Breathing, consciously and with intention, cannot make challenges go away. Mindful breathing, however, can help to balance our nervous system and enable us to work through the obstacles that we face on a daily basis and maintain our own strength and resolve. Taking a deep breath allows us to pause, to take a moment before we think about a response we might want to offer or a decision we might have to make to solve a challenging situation. Breathing deeply, though, does much more for us than just create a pause. Taking a deep breath actually helps balance the autonomic nervous system so that when we respond, or speak, or make a decision, we are doing so from a place where we have de-escalated a sense of reactivity. Instead of responding with our sympathetic nervous system and fight, flight, freeze, or faint, we can find balance and harness the

support of our parasympathetic nervous system and rest and digest.

Developing a consistent practice of focused intentional breathing can enable us to combat stress more automatically. In the same way that I offered a quick pause to the group I was leading because of my own comfort, ease, and habit of mindful breathing and meditation, individuals who practice mindful breathing can do this for themselves.

If you are someone who feels that you can't get your mind to quiet down or that you have too much going on to develop a practice, then you are a key candidate to breathe mindfully. The truth is that we can never stop our brains from thinking. Through mindful breathing, though, we can learn to step away from our thoughts.

We can notice them and let them just be. We can allow our thoughts to exist and not attach to them or develop stories to explain them. We can allow our thoughts to surface and not judge them.

Mindful breathing provided the path for me to survive the initial turmoil caused by the pandemic. We lived through masks and continue to get boosters to fight against its impact. This particular stress may subside but we will continue to face stressors in our lives, whether we are at work or at home. Developing a practice that brings us back to our breath when we are in the midst of juggling phone calls, addressing sub shortages, and conducting lockdowns is important. Mindful breathing gives us the tools to manage daily challenges so we

can find balance. Take a moment to breathe. Inhale and exhale. Feel your breath. Find calm amidst the storm.

Dr. Rochelle I. Mitlak is the academic administrator at Shenendehowa CSD.

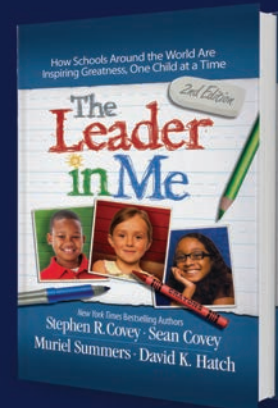
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Reflections from an Equity Team

The Positive Impacts of Conducting an Equity Audit



By Dr. Megan Wideman

*SAANYS' 50th Anniversary
Conference Presenter*

What does it take to empower a team of dedicated educators to make a difference in their own school? I had this question in mind as I embarked on my dissertation journey last year. The focus for my dissertation was to examine the culturally responsive belief systems of teachers in my school; how those belief systems influence instructional practices; and their level of preparedness to provide culturally responsive, sustaining education in our school.

I am an administrator in a suburban middle school where several teachers recognized a steady change in students' demographics over several years, but realized that as a school, we were not modifying our practices to recognize that shift. For my study, I assembled an equity team and helped facilitate an equity audit that analyzed longitudinal enrollment data, teacher survey results, and curriculum review information. This story describes how the equity team was impacted after they reflected on the findings, implications, and impact of conducting an equity audit as a group.

EQUITY TEAM

The first step in this journey was to assemble an equity team (ET) and build their capacity to conduct an equity audit within our school. In order to bring multiple perspectives and insights to the process, it was important to seek volunteers from a variety of teachers from each grade level, student support personnel, administrators, and students to be on the ET. It was essential to establish an ET with key stakeholders in the school because it encouraged collaboration and helped the faculty build a vested interest in strengthening the school's culturally responsive, sustained practices. The ET members took on the responsibility to help administer aspects of the equity audit, then participated in collaborative discussions based on their analysis to make recommendations for next steps.

Our first step was to establish group norms through an activity where the team brainstormed and identified some common beliefs, behaviors, and expectations for group processing. The ET identified four themes of relationships, perspectives, collaboration, and communication to be mindful about in order to encourage open and honest communication working as a group. The ET reflected that the group norms helped them be aware and thoughtful about varying perspectives and provided a safe learning environment for participants to have collaborative discussions.

The ET used a collaborative inquiry process (CIP) adapted from Well-

man and Lipton (2004), that included several phases for the CIP process. Teachers made predictions as to what the data might show, then observed, and took notes about the data to notice trends or patterns. The ET discussed what seemed surprising, unexpected, or unexplored in the data, then made inferences, asked questions, and formed explanations or conclusions from the data. The final step was to discuss the implications of their findings. The ET members believed it was critical to build in time to reflect individually and as a group following each meeting to make connections in their lives and with their teaching processes. ET members remarked that group reflections helped members understand perspectives of others, discover new ways of thinking, and widen individual perspectives by understanding other members' points of view.

EQUITY AUDIT

An equity audit is a systematic process of collecting and analyzing data to highlight internal realms of inequitable practices and policies. The team used the CIP to analyze information for three components of the equity audit. The first component in the audit was to examine longitudinal enrollment data that was broken down by race for total enrollment of students, accelerated courses, English Language Learners, and special education for the last five school years. The ET members found two main themes for program enrollment in advanced classes: there was a significant overrepresentation of white students, and the enrollment selection process was limited, which may have unintentionally excluded students of color from participating in accelerated programs. ET participants were surprised by the observations they made when reviewing the actual data about the severity of the disproportionality of white students over students of color overall within the advanced programs.

The second component of the equity audit was to administer an equity audit teacher survey to all teachers that captured their perceptions about equity awareness, school climate, classroom environment, instructional

strategies, student placement, professional development, and student recognition. The results showed several themes of how teachers believed the school should improve and sustain efforts throughout the school year to affirm, represent, and incorporate students' cultural identities in our school environment. The ET members were happy to recognize that the teachers certainly value students' identity but were concerned that the school did not physically or visually represent their cultures enough throughout the school. The ET wondered if students felt comfortable to express their identities in a school that welcomes and affirms their cultures.

The third component of the audit was to assemble a larger team of teachers to work with the ET to examine five units of our English language arts curriculum using the Culturally Responsive Curriculum Scorecard (Bryan-Gooden, Hester, and Peoples, 2019). The scorecard survey contained 30 questions that explore the extent of cultural responsiveness in our curriculums related to representation, social justice orientation, and teacher materials. The review determined that three out of five units were either culturally destructive or culturally insufficient in all areas of the scorecard. These units primarily contained dominant perspectives and voices of white male characters and authors, mainly portraying European culture; did not fully examine discrimination, bias, and deficit viewpoints; and made insufficient connections to the lives of students of color (Bryan-Gooden et al., 2019).

However, the curricular review discovered two curricular units were primarily culturally aware and responsive in all three areas in regard to the scorecard. The ET wanted to further examine the reasons behind the differences in the curricular units, and teachers shared insights about their purposeful intent to develop more culturally responsive units that integrated diverse literature, characters, perspectives, and themes. The ET believed the curriculum review was beneficial in helping them understand how incorporating a culturally respon-

sive mindset throughout curriculum writing positively influences teachers' preparedness to embed culturally responsive practices in our English language arts curriculum.

EQUITY TEAM REFLECTIONS

ET members reflected on how the audit impacted their thinking and professional practice in several ways. Their awareness about the lack of diversity in the curriculum, enrollment, and practices made them want to continue participating in the school initiative to implement culturally responsive practices. The ET reflected from the teacher survey that teachers seemed uncomfortable discussing topics related to race and social justice and would benefit from professional learning opportunities to help increase teachers' knowledge, comfort level, and self-efficacy to improve our culturally responsive practices.

ET members recognized how they became more reflective of their thinking, actions, and speaking in efforts to create a warm and welcoming environment in the classroom and school. It also prompted members to be more open to student input and feedback, and become more knowl-

edgeable about different cultures and backgrounds for students of color. Additionally, participants expressed interest in learning more about their implicit bias to educate themselves, and to overcome and grow their social consciousness as educators. Examining the equity audit data helped the ETs understand that the school should improve efforts to affirm, represent, and incorporate students' cultural identities in our school environment. The ET thought this realization helped teachers to be better prepared to provide opportunities throughout the school year to learn about other cultures and incorporate visuals that accurately represent students' cultures. The ET recognized that conducting the equity audit was also beneficial in helping them understand that being purposeful and intentional positively influenced the level of cultural responsiveness in their curriculum writing.

The final and most important realization from the ET members was understanding the value of building a strong foundation and increasing the number of teachers in the school who were being purposeful in becoming more culturally responsive. The audit helped raise personal and program

awareness, understand teachers' perspectives on how students are currently being supported, recognize the strengths and weaknesses of cultural competence in the current curriculum, and describe areas to provide professional learning opportunities for teachers. Establishing an equity team and helping them reflect on the equity audit was critical to empower these dedicated educators to make a difference in their own school.

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DR. MEGAN WIDEMAN is a middle school administrator for the Churchville-Chili CSD.





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Sara Hit the Jackpot:

Balancing Life and Leadership



By Sara Ortiz

*SAANYS' 50th Anniversary
Conference Presenter*

It was a cool, rainy morning in March. I woke up feeling a bit confused, a bit disconnected, very uneasy. New Yorkers were going to be “sheltering in place” for at least two weeks. In my home, my husband and I listened carefully to every cough, sniffle, and wheeze from our six-month-old and four-year-old, wondering if we should panic. We washed our groceries until they were soggy and our hands until they were raw. We kept our shoes at the door; cloroxed our door knobs and front gates; took our temperature every few hours.

From the outside world we were inundated with unknowns and a general aura of fear that streamed through our car's radio, our TV, our Apple news feed, Twitter, text messages, phone calls.

That morning, my four-year-old was still asleep, my six-month-old cooing in his crib. I woke up with my alarm and mentally prepared to “work from home,” a concept I had never considered in my 15 years as an educator. I threw on my Meadow Drive Elementary School T-shirt, swabbed some concealer under my tired eyes, and grabbed the stack of children's books I had stolen from my own children's bookshelves the evening before. I was unsure how my day would look, but I reached for my core values as an educator, a mother, and a human, and I knew that what my students would want — what they would need — was connection and the reassurance that I was fine, that we were going to be fine, and that life was going to continue, even if it was continuing in a new, unknown, strange normal.

So I put my phone into selfie mode to capture my image from the waist up and opened my favorite Elephant and Piggie book. I smiled for the camera and I read aloud to a live audience of zero, and a virtual audience of 388 children, aged four through eight, and all of their siblings and caregivers.

And for three months after that I did it again and again, each school day morning — reading, discussing the day of the week and the weather, sharing the news, telling an April fools joke, opening my home, my life, and my values to my learners. My goal was to offer them connection, hope, and a consistency of kindness in a time where those things sat precariously on

a ledge we couldn't see the end of.

Six months earlier, in July of 2019, I had just given birth to my second child when I was just 20 days into my new job as the principal of Meadow Drive Elementary School in Mineola, New York. The building was under massive construction, we were opening a full-day PreK program for the first time, and I was toggling between my role as a brand-new school leader and as a mother to my newborn and four-year-old. (Not to mention my roles as wife, daughter, and friend.) While nursing baby Dash on my couch, I was also committed to making sure that the school building was ready to open and run (minus three key rooms), that my staff felt supported enough to open the school without me (after knowing me for a VERY short 20-day period!),



and that the young (PreK - second grade) learners in the building would feel welcome, excited, and engaged. I was waking up to my crying baby in the earliest hours of the morning, and also strategizing the ways I could ensure that the “ball” of the school year would be rolling steadily enough for us to keep going smoothly upon my return. The timing of my start date as principal is not something I would wish on any new mother, and it was a

bizarre experience (to say the least?), but I leapt at the opportunity because I was excited to grow, to learn, and to lead this school and in this district. I was embarking on my professional dream: to run a joyful and child-centered early childhood elementary school.

What I could not have predicted about this dream was that my tenure as principal would begin at a time of huge life change, and then, huge global change...and that ALL of that change, all happening at the same time, would teach me a great deal about leadership and life.

Here is what I learned: Time and again — through stay-at-home orders, masks and distancing, anti-mask sentiments and fear-based rhetoric, and my family's shifting needs as we grew — I had to keep coming back to what was important to me, to my family, and to my deeper values in this odd and complicated world. Why was I here, in this role as an educator of young children? What was my priority in each moment? What were my goals for myself, for my team, for my students, for my work with their families? And how did these goals align with my life, my family, and my values? When the political climate shifted in 2020, how could I manage to lead individuals with whom I deeply, fundamentally disagreed? How could I manage to lead a school effectively with a group of families who were waiting for all of us educators to slip and fall and fail?

How could I champion my faculty and staff effectively when things were Just. So. Hard.? How could I be sure that every child (including my own) knew their value and worth and potential when there were many days we could not even let them into the building?

Through all of the craziness over my short three years as principal of Meadow Drive, what I kept coming back to was kindness. Teaching and

living kindness. Shouting out kindness. Prioritizing kindness. Connecting through kindness. While I have not collated the data around this concept to share in this article, I tell you with loads of confidence that this strategy worked. My connections with my staff are not measurable through graphs, but they are real and true and meaningful. My connections with my learners are not visible through percentage points, but I knew all of my learners' names and important things about each and every one of them (things THEY thought were important), and made sure they felt seen every single day. My connections with their families and my administrative colleagues are not graphable, but they continue to

make me smile and work harder and better and more effectively on a daily basis.

The life balance I was looking for as a principal, with a life, came down to leading through my most core value, which for me was kindness. Being kind, modeling kind, living kind, thinking from a lens of kind. Listening to understand, allowing myself to be wrong (sometimes), connecting to others as humans, communicating care and connection, leading with kindness and understanding.

My advice to any school leader with a life (and aren't we ALL school leaders with lives?), really to any leader of other humans, is to lead through your most core values first, but always

with kindness and with humanity. Listen to hear, to process, and to understand. Communicate to share, to know, and to connect. Build relationships by building trust. Do what you say, but only say what you mean and value. Know why you've chosen this profession and live by that deep value.

That is my story, my advice, my truth. Good luck out there because this world can certainly be unpredictable!

SARA ORTIZ is a principal at Middle School Drive in Mineola UFSD.

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Spinning a Web of Support: Leveraging Technology and Collaboration



By Jeffrey M. Green
and Michael LeGault

*SAANYS' 50th Anniversary
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In today's society we are constantly reminded of violence, and our nation's schools represent individual microcosms of our society. As a large comprehensive public high school in suburban upstate New York, Hilton High is no different. To not actively plan to address the ever-present threat of violence in our schools would be a disservice to the students, families, staff, and communities we serve. The old saying, "If you fail to plan, plan to fail," is an old saying for a reason.

In the midst of recovering from the COVID-19 pandemic, Hilton High staff have embraced a collaborative approach with the help of technological tools to better support all students while positively impacting our school and district community in response to threat assessments and DASA complaints.

Prior to implementation of our systematic changes, our documentation process consisted of hard copy paper threat assessments and DASA investigation documents. These paper forms would be completed by the appropriate assistant principal and then stored in a folder in different administrative offices. There was no simple way to share the results of a DASA investigation or threat assessment with relevant staff members involved in supporting students. When necessary, the specific document would be scanned and emailed to administrators and other staff involved in responding to the incident and the associated follow-up. Manual tallying would then occur on an annual basis for state reporting purposes. Concerns of a repeat offender would result in assistant principals racking their brains, sorting through stacks of papers, and searching emails.

Over the course of multiple

months our systematic implementation of new processes was undertaken with three guiding goals:

1. Improve investigations through use of templates and shared files.
2. Improve proactive and reactive documentation and communication with students and families.
3. Reduce repeat offenses with comprehensive follow-up interventions.

The ongoing work of investigating and responding is certainly never done, but the new structures and processes that were solidified in Hilton have been operational since the spring of 2021 and are now able to be shared with others contemplating how best to respond to ongoing DASA complaints and threat assessments we are repeatedly facing on a daily basis in our schools.

It all starts with a digital dashboard. We appropriately use the term “dashboard” for this electronic spreadsheet as it is a visual representation of data and instruments that can be of benefit to the user. One tab within the spreadsheet is a document generator that has “buttons” that can be clicked to generate the creation of one of three

different documents that are linked to a specific student who is selected from a drop-down menu containing the names of all enrolled students:

1. DASA investigation document in which the identified student is the alleged victim.
2. Threat assessment document in which the identified student is the alleged perpetrator.
3. Student support document that contains the identified student’s current grades, attendance, and behavior history.

All documents created from the use of this dashboard are stored in a centralized Google account that is only accessible by the high school administrative team. This is essential due to the frequent collaboration of the members of the administrative team and also to ensure that important documentation to support students will outlast all members of the administrative team and be accessible in the future if needed.

Also within the dashboard are tabs for comprehensive, up-to-date lists of each of the three different types of files that have been created (DASA investigations, threat assessments,

The dashboard interface is organized into three main sections:

- Administrator Filter:** A table with columns: Administrator, Grade Level, Generate Document if Course Average is Less Than, and Quarter. The selected row shows Administrator: LeGault, Grade Level: 12, Average: 65, and Quarter: Quarter 1. Below this is a button: "Generate Student Support Documents With Grades".
- Student Name Filter:** A table with columns: Student Name, Grade Level, Generate Document if Course Average is Less Than, and Quarter. The selected row shows Student Name: Student Not in Dashboard, Grade Level: (blank), Average: 100, and Quarter: Quarter 1. Below this is a button: "Generate Student Support Document With Grades".
- Student Number Filter:** A table with columns: Student Name and Student Number. The selected row shows Student Name: (blank) and Student Number: Student Not in Dashboard. Below this are three buttons: "DASA Investigation Doc", "Generate Student Support Doc Without grades", and "Threat Assessment Document".

and student support documents). This is helpful, with use of the Ctrl+F search function to be able to look back at previous investigations as needed. The day-to-day grind of a high school assistant principal's work can be a mental overload that makes it challenging to recall specific details for past events, but having access to those details at your fingertips helps in being able to respond appropriately in the moment and provide a safe and supportive environment for all students.

Another tab on the dashboard is used to document student visits to administrative offices and the corresponding notification to families. Being extremely transparent with our student interactions increases trust with both students and their families. If a student is removed from class and interacting with an administrator in a private setting, their parent or guardian is notified, whether the student is "in trouble" or not. It is simply a courtesy phone call or email to let the parent or guardian know about the reason for the conversation and to make ourselves available for further discussion if needed.

What this ends up looking like in real life is this: a student comes forward to a staff member with either a DASA-related concern or a safety and security concern. The appropriate assistant principal hears the concern, validates the student, and "launches" an investigation with a click of a button. When clicking the button to create the relevant document, an automated email is sent to all high school administrators that contains a link to the newly created document, either a DASA investigation or threat assessment.

The assistant principal then collaborates with colleagues as needed to investigate the situation, interview students, make recommendations for further action, contact parents and guardians, and complete the investigation. At any point in the process the principal and other members of the administrative team have access to the investigation document to be knowledgeable and able to assist as needed.

A similar process is followed for non-DASA and non-safety concerns, which are captured using the student support template. This type of student support process is often ongoing

over weeks and months involving numerous staff members and so is never fully closed or resolved, unlike an investigation into a DASA-related concern or threat assessment that can ideally be completed. The work of keeping our schools safe is not easy, and it is never-ending. Utilizing technology and collaboration helps make our work supporting students a little easier to manage, and that is certainly worth the time and effort it takes to implement systems and processes to make us more effective in supporting students.

MICHAEL LEGAULT is the assistant principal at Hilton High School and has been a school administrator for seven years. Serving as the school's safety and security liaison is just one of his numerous responsibilities. Michael has a passion for data analysis and enjoys taking a systems thinking approach to safety and security.

JEFFREY M. GREEN, EdD, has been a high school principal for eight years, the past five at Hilton High School. Jeffrey's focus is building a welcoming and affirming environment for students, staff, and families. Hilton High School is a 1,400+ student high school in Hilton, NY, a suburb of Rochester.

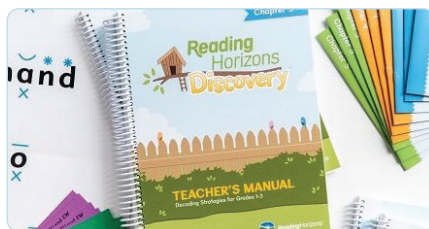
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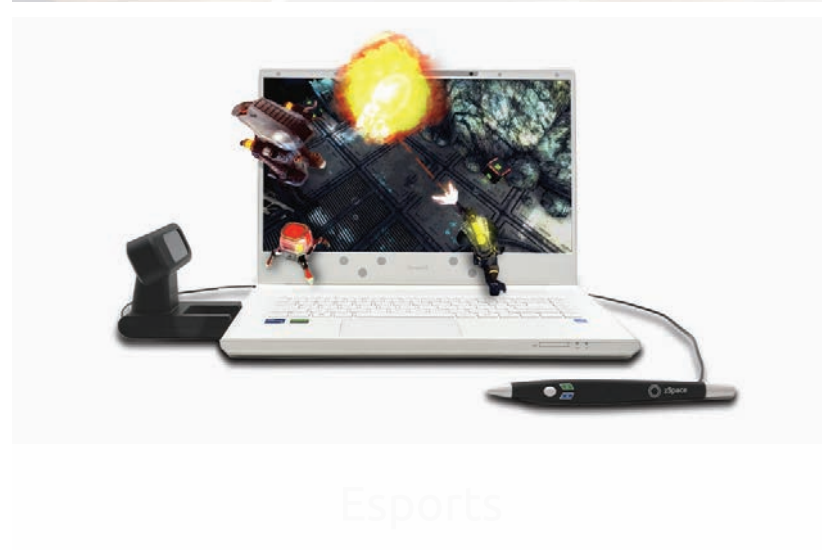
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10 Minutes for Professional Growth: Using the Mastermind Protocol to Support Principal Development



By Amy Konz
and Ed Rinaldo

*SAANYS' 50th Anniversary
Conference Presenters*

In the Madison-Oneida BOCES (MOBOCES) region, elementary and secondary school building leaders would meet face-to-face monthly for professional development, learning, and growth; however, the pandemic brought an immediate halt to these in-person interactions as of March 2020. Leaders' meetings in the region shifted almost immediately to a virtual meeting format during the remainder of the 2019-2020 school year, into the 2020-2021 school year, and still in the 2021-2022 school year.

With multiple school years of principal meetings implemented in a remote meeting format, it was important to quickly find a method for school building leaders to interact with one another as they would during an in-person meeting setting, highlighting their peers as collaborators and thought-partners.

Ed Rinaldo, staff and curriculum development director at Madison-Oneida BOCES, sought out an engaging and structured means of achieving professional development, growth, and learning for leaders across the region during monthly principal meetings. Using the Mastermind Protocol became the solution to the challenge presented. The Mastermind Protocol was presented by Jenn David-Lang, author of *The Main Idea* website, and Mitch Center of Center Educational Consulting, through online training Ed attended (<https://www.themainidea.net/school-leadership-mastermind/>). The purpose of the Mastermind Protocol is to provide a format for peers to obtain the advice

and insight of their colleagues. The Mastermind Protocol can be completed in as few as ten minutes, or with a few extra minutes, participant reflection can be included as well. Below is an outline of the Mastermind Protocol agenda for timing and content.

- Three minutes: The presenter gives an overview of the problem or practice.
- Three minutes: The group asks the presenter any clarifying questions.
- Ten minutes (time can be reduced if needed): The group discusses possible solutions of the problems that the presenter addressed. The presenter does not interact with the group at this time.
- Three minutes (if time permits): The presenter reflects on the solutions presented by peers.

In the Madison-Oneida BOCES region, principals volunteered each month to be the presenter at the following month's school building leader meeting. Topics shared by leaders during the Mastermind Protocol sessions of the meeting agenda included: prom, AIS practices, schedule development, graduation ceremony practices, and tier 1 interventions. Vince Pompo, school principal at W. A. Wetzel Elementary in the Vernon Verona Sherrill Central School District, said of the Mastermind Protocol in monthly principal meetings that "the use of the Mastermind Protocol at our monthly meetings reflects genuine collaboration among principals in the MOB-OCES region. Through the protocol, we learn from one another, share our challenges and successes, and most importantly, open the possibility of better serving all of our students."

If you would like to give the Mastermind Protocol a try, please check out this link (https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1rj_Vn6F-FMpWm-0FQS-xU3Y6EvGtzcXxhuNqo1JT-GVG4/edit?usp=sharing).

AMY KONZ, is the regional data leader at the Mohawk Regional Information Center.

ED RINALDO, is the staff and curriculum development director at Madison-Oneida BOCES.





LEADERSHIP
NETWORK

Supporting Each Other:

A Silver Lining of the COVID Pandemic



By Linda Doty,
Stephanie Griffin,
Donna Simmons,
Jennifer Sullivan,
and Mary Volkomer

*SAANYS' 50th Anniversary
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The Oswego City School District is nestled on the shores of Lake Ontario. We enjoy beautiful views of the lake, persevere through long hours of lake-effect snow bands, and serve a very diverse population of students and families. Our five elementary schools support the learning and academic needs of about 1,800 students. Each of our elementary buildings has one principal that oversees about 400 students and eight faculty members. During the 2019-2020 school year, we blissfully came to school every day to support our faculty and kids. We facilitated meetings in our libraries, cafeterias, or large instructional rooms.

We saw the faces of our faculty, students, and families. We noted their smiles, shook their hands, gave hugs, heard their laughter, sensed worry and stress. We conversed and built structures and initiatives that helped us best support the teachers and kids in our buildings. Our instructional world changed on March 16, 2020.

By March 17, 2020, our public schools looked very different. Gone were the kids, teachers, and faculty. They were replaced by computer screens, emails, and text messages. The role of the building principal became isolated and lonely. It was difficult to support our teachers without having that personal contact. It was difficult to lead without the use of intrinsic and instinctual interpersonal cues. Although connected through wires and technology, the connection was as scrambled and pixelated as an inconsistent internet strength.

Schools are made for kids, teachers, and communities. They are busy and lively places. When they stand empty they can be cold and isolating places. Almost immediately the loneliness of leading a school building through a computer screen set in. Each of the five elementary principals began to see that we needed support and help as we braved what no one had been through before. What began as phone

calls to each other and spontaneous Google Meets turned into a network of support and kindled friendships. We needed each other as we navigated this unknown and new territory of online learning, digital meetings, and empty schools.

Together the five of us scheduled weekly and sometimes daily meetings. These meetings started with the development of a way to share common communications to our faculty regarding everything related to teaching and learning during a pandemic. We knew that with consistent, regular, and common communication our faculty would feel more supported and willing to continue to persevere through the rough waters of online instruction. What we came to learn is that these meetings would help the five of us develop a strong sense of community with one another. We ended up building a structure for us, the building principals, to share, commiserate, celebrate, and problem solve the many unique situations that were caused by the pandemic. We shared our own visions for our individual schools, asked each other questions, shared our fears and worries, and provided each other with a safe space to share, learn, and grow together. We now have a strong, supportive, and collaborative administrative team. With each other to lean

on, we face each day knowing that someone had our back, our hand, and would be there to help us through any future challenge.

We have maintained our collaborative group. We continue to meet regularly, share ideas, create goals, and build our teachers' instructional practice so that all students in our district benefit from the best teachers and learning environments. We know that OCSD is stronger because of our team's commitment to each other. Instead of five elementary schools, we are one school district. Together we support our faculty, students, families, and each other!

Linda Doty is the principal at Charles E. Riley Elementary School in the Oswego CSD.

Stephanie Griffin is the principal at Frederick Leighton Elementary School.

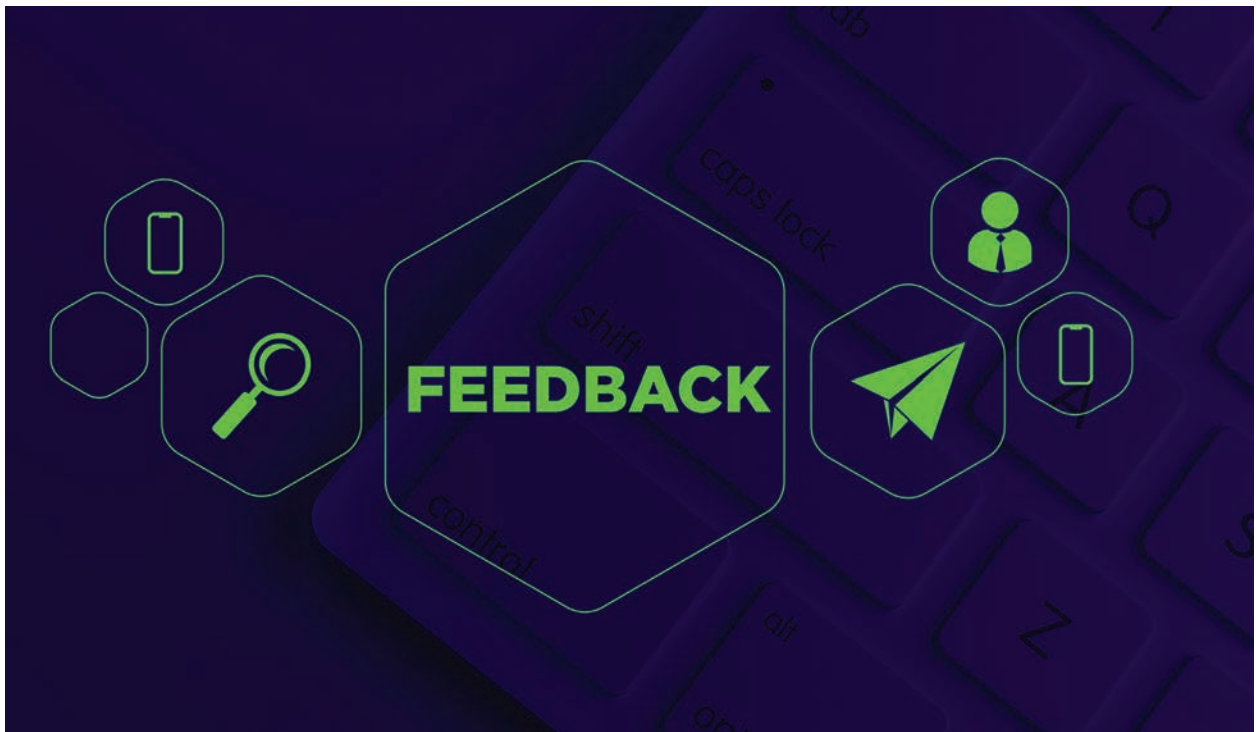
Donna Simmons recently retired and previously worked as the principal at Fitzhugh Park Elementary School.

Jennifer Sullivan is the principal at Minetto Elementary School.

Mary Volkomer is the principal at Kingsford Park School.

Can You Hear Them?

Giving Voice to Our Students



By Anna Rose Sugarman

What's that you say? We often ask each other to repeat what was said if we have not heard the other person's ideas or comments. But when have we asked students what exactly helped them learn anything in the last lesson or the lesson that they are currently engaged in? Some students have been reporting that they are not asked for feedback for learning until the end of the year when it no longer has any impact on their own learning. What about now during the age of COVID-19?



We are confronted with the reality that without student input, we will not be able to keep them engaged in learning. No longer are they a captive audience. Student choice has come to the forefront. They can choose whether to “join” a Google Meet or Zoom meeting or not, by checking in or dropping out during the session or not showing up at all.

We live in an age in which everywhere we travel we are asked for feedback on how the service was, whether in a restaurant or hotel, on a plane, even in a restroom. Interactions within our computers take in constant feedback when we are shopping online to enhance our shopping experience directing us to our exact match in need. Companies are making billions on this. Our students interact with this format through social platforms like Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, etc. In schools, for the most part, our practices need to improve in asking for feedback on our service. The simple question, what helps you learn best? needs to be asked of students every day in order to improve instruction and create a better instructional match between the student and the proposed curriculum. How will we know what’s working if we don’t ask?

In meeting our district goals this year, we have been conducting research on student voice, asking students how they learn best and under what circumstances; whether the use of 1:1 devices works for them in their learning or not; how often they are asked by their teachers for feedback on what works for them in their learning; and in general, what we could do to make their experiences at our schools more productive and better for them. Our modest long-term goal has been to have teachers ask students at least biweekly, if not more often, how the materials, resources, and instructional practices are helping them learn.

An idea that we found successful this year was to gather groups of students from different levels of performance in different schools and ask them a series of questions about learning in our district. Questions were developed by administrators to survey the students. Audio recordings

were taken of student responses, analyzed, and then culled to put into videos for staff. These videos were shared during faculty meetings allowing teachers to hear their students. This process was much more effective than using questionnaires and asking teachers to read student responses. As teachers heard their students’ voices, they were moved to action to meet their needs.

There are a number of ways that districts can garner student voice to learn about how students learn best using an online platform and in the future as we begin to design asynchronous learning options. Teachers can study video clips of their students during learning segments simply by recording their sessions online. In reviewing the videos, teachers can analyze the interactions to see what engages students, how long students can engage in continuous online instruction, and observe what isn’t working. This should provide for a quick turnaround for teachers in their practice. Shenendehowa has been using Teaching Channel Plus for this process in our new teacher induction program for the last four years with great success for new teachers.

Using Google Forms, some teachers ask their students for feedback at the end of the week to enable them to shift their planning for upcoming classes. Some teachers reinforce student voices throughout the learning sequence. When beginning a class, they ask students to tell them what worked in the last session and then take a quick check midway through the lesson asking what worked for them so far. Virtual post-it notes can also be used as tickets out the door allowing students to indicate what worked best (or didn’t) during the lesson. Flipgrid is an electronic tool that students enjoy using. They can answer a prompt that the teacher proposes regarding instruction and record their responses using their phones or a Chromebook.



Another side of this equation is the feedback cycle. Are we able to take it? Can we hear what our students are saying without rationalizing our point of view or insisting that the students shouldn’t have a say because of their age. Brene Brown talks about courage. Sometimes it just takes courage to listen to and respond to student feedback.

We are now living in a time when student voices are needed more than ever. The stakes are high. The time is now. We are the ones to empower students in their learning experiences by asking them, how do you learn best? We cannot afford to lose learning opportunities day after day just because we don’t ask...and have the courage to hear them.

ANNA ROSE SUGARMAN is the professional learning coordinator at Shenendehowa Central School District.



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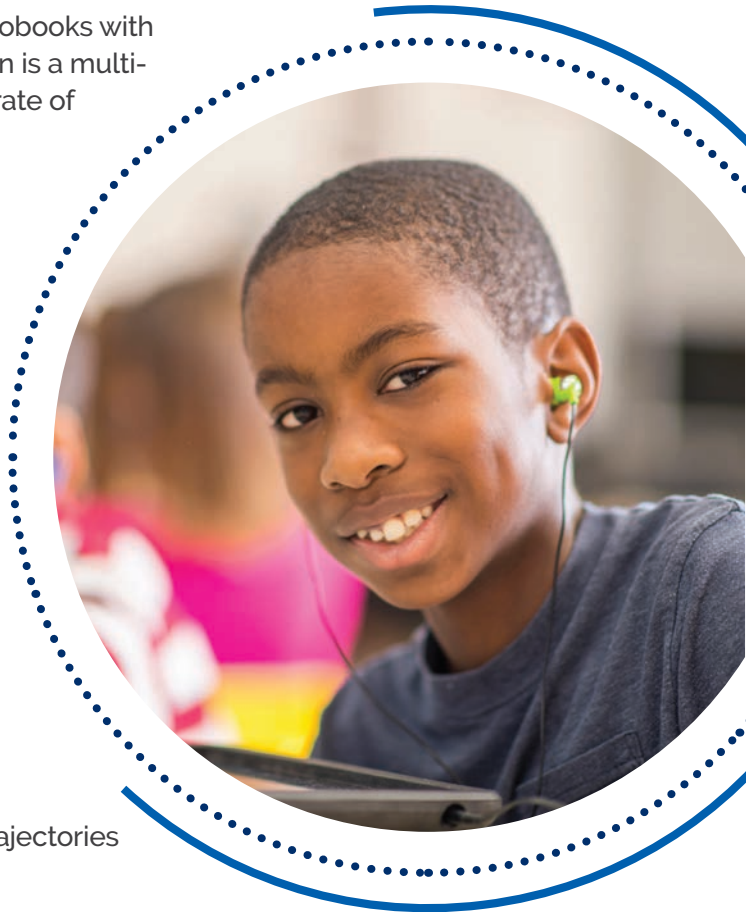
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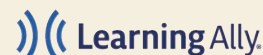
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