



## *A Sacred Space:*

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*12 Expert Teachers  
Share Stories of  
Resilience, Success  
and Leadership*

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## Letter from the Founding Director



When I set out to establish the Center for Educational Opportunity, whose mission is to advance educational research in order to strengthen and empower fragile communities from the bottom up, I could not have imagined the depth, breadth and scope the research would span beyond the walls of the classroom and across academic disciplines.

I am especially pleased to have the inclusion of the voices of twelve of the nation's best K-12 teacher-leaders, who are on the front lines educating students in fragile communities, provide local context and national focus in this white paper, "A Sacred Space: 12 Expert Teachers Share Stories of Resilience, Success and Leadership."

This collection of diverse teachers share from rural, urban and tribal, settings. Among them you'll find that they are reflective practitioners who seek to provide culturally relevant education, are committed to diversifying the teacher pipeline, expose their students to learning abroad, promote racial equity among their peers and still manage to exceed national testing standards and cultivate student achievement.

Their proximity to students and families can help us find connections between policy and practice. And there is much we can learn from what they have to say in order to measurably improve outcomes for students and families in our nation.

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*Dr. Kathaleena Edward Monds is a Professor and the founding director of the Center for Educational Opportunity at Albany State University. Dr. Monds has worked with K-12 educators in the region since 2007 by hosting and teaching economic education workshops in her role as co-director of the Center for Economic Education. In 2013 she was selected by the Georgia Department of Education to assist with gathering open-source economics curriculum for use by families, and in 2015 was invited to speak to the U.S. Department of Education on the importance of international education initiatives at HBCUs.*

## Acknowledgments

A project of this magnitude involves many people and we would like to acknowledge the contributions of the many individuals and organizations that made this paper possible.

Tall Poppy, LLC was honored to coordinate this work on behalf of Albany State University. We would like to acknowledge the leadership of *Dr. Kathaleena Monds, Founding Director, Center for Educational Opportunity (CEO)*. Her vision fueled this work at every step of its development.

Albany State University and Tall Poppy, LLC are grateful to Jennifer Jiles, editor extraordinaire for her patience and diligence; and to Jemelleh Coes and Kemi Oyewole for their expertise in research and overall vision.

We would also like to thank the Center for Advancing Opportunity at the Thurgood Marshall College Fund for its support of this work. We appreciate greatly Dr. Ellen Sherratt, Dr. Jilliam Joe, Mr. Wesley Williams, and Ms. Joy S. Jones for conducting external reviews of this paper.

Finally, we express tremendous gratitude to the twelve outstanding educators who contributed their thinking, their stories, and their passion to this paper. They are experts in their craft and their energy and commitment make a difference in the lives of students daily.

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# Introduction

## Against the Odds:

The offer was \$20. He was offered \$20 to read the book and follow up with a summary of what he had read. The offer placed on the table was proposed by his teacher, who felt that all other avenues to persuade him to read the book had been exhausted. She wanted him to read not only to improve his reading skills but also because the chosen novel was the powerful coming of age story by Walter Dean Myers, one to which his teacher thought he might be able to relate.

Ray was in 8th grade and had just received his first set of “weight to move,” slang to describe a person who had been provided drugs to sell by another individual. Ray told his teacher that he needed to sell drugs because his mother was struggling to provide for their family, despite having three jobs. He said that he had gone looking for jobs in the community but businesses would not hire him because he was too young, and no one in his community could afford to offer him money for lawn maintenance or household tasks for which he could do for tips. Ray felt stuck. So did his teacher. This was not a solution. This was a band aid. The solutions require surgery. The offer was \$20.

There are far more youth living in circumstances similar to Ray than we as a nation are ready to admit. The teachers who meet children like him – kids facing a myriad of challenges life presents to them – carry stories like these with them every day.

Those educators are parts of communities that have been under-resourced, under-funded, and continually forced into the margins of America. They are left with few options but to continually search for innovative ways to help students succeed. Many of the teachers also encourage and empower their colleagues to do the same by displaying their own ability to lead from their classrooms and other educative spaces.

This paper is one of the first commissioned by the Center for Educational Opportunity, the educational research arm of the Center for Advancing Opportunity. The Center for Educational Opportunity was established in 2018 to “promote research, innovation, and inquiry into issues relevant to K-12 education in order to improve products and services within the educational marketplace, especially for those living in fragile communities” (Monds, 2018). Its intended audience is educators, particularly those working in fragile communities; preparers of educators; school administrators; parents; and policy makers who make important decisions that impact the work of educators.

**Educators are parts of communities that have been under-resourced, underfunded, and continually forced into the margins of America. They are left with few options but to continually search for innovative ways to help students succeed.**

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<sup>1</sup> Monds, K. (2018). Center for Educational Opportunity. Retrieved September 18, 2019, from Albany State University website: <https://www.asurams.edu/academic-affairs/ceo>



**“Fragile” is used to describe the daunting, precarious endeavor of transitioning out of poverty rather than as a descriptor of the communities or the people who live in them.**

In this report, 12 accomplished educators from across the United States **share their stories of teacher leadership in fragile communities**. These stories reveal joys, challenges, impact, and lessons for educators and non-educators that are privileged to learn more about their experiences.

The Center for Advancing Opportunity defines fragile communities in the United States as “characterized by high proportions of residents struggling in their daily lives and possessing limited opportunities for social mobility” (2019, p. 3).

The word “fragile” is defined as easily broken or destroyed, tenuous, or weak (“Fragile,” 2019). All of these features connote a lack of vigor counter to the ingenuity required to live in poverty and the independence teachers strive to cultivate. The term “fragile communities” also runs the risk of reinforcing notions of inferiority and minimizing systems that perpetuate inequality (Griffin, 2014). With these dangers in mind, the contributors to this report emphasize they are committed to education because of the brilliance and resilience evident in their students, schools, and communities. Thus, “fragile” is used to describe the daunting, precarious endeavor of transitioning out of poverty rather than as a descriptor of the communities or the people who live in them.

## **What we know about fragile communities**

Though the previous discussion introduces the concept of a fragile community, it is made concrete in the 2019 State of Opportunity in America report. The report is based on a Gallup-administered survey of fragile communities across urban and rural areas across the United States in the summer of 2018.

In order for a census tract to be defined as a fragile community, the tract must be among the lowest 25 percent in the U.S. for at least three of the following four domains (measurement criteria in parenthesis):

- 1. Employment (employment and labor force participation rates)**
- 2. Poverty (percentage of residents below and twice below the poverty level)**
- 3. Education (percentage of adults with a college degree)**
- 4. Composite score (five-aspect well-being index).**

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<sup>2</sup> Center for Advancing Opportunity. (2019). *The state of opportunity in America* (p. 2, 72).

<sup>3</sup> Fragile. (2019). In Merriam-Webster.com. Retrieved from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/fragile>

<sup>4</sup> Griffin, A. (2014, September 22). *Questioning the deficit*. Retrieved September 18, 2019, from The Education Trust website: <https://edtrust.org/the-equity-line/questioning-deficit/>



In the 2018 survey administration, 5,784 of 36,000 surveys were completed. For more detailed analysis of subgroups, larger shares of the population were surveyed in the following: Birmingham, Alabama; Fresno, California; Chicago, Illinois; and North and Central Appalachia.

The 2019 report found the following characteristics of fragile communities.

**Figure 1: Characteristics of Fragile Communities**

| Residents ...  | Fragile Communities | U.S. Overall |
|--|---------------------|--------------|
| are nonwhite   | 81%                 | 33%          |
| say they are “living comfortably”  | 18%                 | 45%          |
| say there were times in the past year they did not have enough money to buy food they or their families needed | 41%                 | 23%          |
| say they have been diagnosed with high blood pressure  | 46%                 | 28%          |
| say crime in their area has decreased in the last year   | 11%                 | 42%*         |
| have a quality of life rating (out of 10)  | 6.2                 | 6.9          |
| have a bachelor’s degree or more   | 12%                 | 33%          |
| are extremely satisfied with the quality of K-12 schools in their area (among parents of school-aged children) | 9%                  | 32%†         |
| say that a college education is very important today   | 62%                 | 53%‡         |

\* Comparison to October 2018 Gallup survey data (“Crime,” 2019)

† Comparison to 2018 Gallup survey data question asking K-12 parents about satisfaction with the education their oldest child is receiving (“Education,” 2019)

‡ Comparison made to late June 2019 Gallup survey data (“Education,” 2019)



The State of Opportunity in America suggests that though residents of fragile communities face many challenges across numerous domains, **they deeply value education**. However, these residents are not satisfied with the quality of public education in their neighborhoods. Parental dissatisfaction is unsurprising given low academic outcomes and teacher retention at the high-need schools that proliferate across fragile communities (Baker, 2017; Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017).

The educators whose stories fill this report will share how they have interrupted these bleak trends by stepping outside of school walls, investing in teacher development, and creating systems for students' social-emotional learning.

Accordingly, education is viewed as the most accessible and durable vehicle for achieving the American Dream. In this paper, we learn from 12 educators who work with students in fragile communities. Their stories are divided into three sections: Training and Offering Ongoing Support to Educators; Education Beyond the Classroom; and Social and Emotional Learning. Their stories will take you from a reservation in Montana to the inner-city schools of Minneapolis and beyond.

Below, please find brief descriptions of the stories that you will read and the educators from whom you will learn in the body of this paper.

## Training and Offering Ongoing Support to Educators

Most people in the United States say that teachers are honest and ostensibly deserve respect but there is limited public discourse on training and offering ongoing support to educators (Brenan, 2017). Thankfully, contributors to this report have made supporting and advocating for educators their life's work. Anna Baldwin orients and develops non-Native teachers of Native American students; Casey Bethel and Lee-Ann Stephens empower teachers to be leaders for social and racial justice; Laurie Calvert and Monica Washington explain ways support networks help shoulder the Herculean task of teaching; and Erica DeCuir outlines her strategy for broadening the teacher training pathway.

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<sup>6</sup> Baker, B. D. (2017). *How money matters for schools*. Palo Alto, CA: Learning Policy Institute.

<sup>7</sup> Carver-Thomas, D., & Darling-Hammond, L. (2017). *Teacher turnover: Why it matters and what we can do about it*. Retrieved from Learning Policy Institute website: <https://learningpolicyinstitute.org/product/teacher-turnover>

<sup>8</sup> Brenan, M. (2017, December 26). *Nurses keep healthy lead as most honest, ethical profession*. Gallup News. Retrieved from [https://news.gallup.com/poll/224639/nurses-keep-healthy-lead-honest-ethical-profession.aspx?g\\_source=Economy&g\\_medium=newsfeed&g\\_campaign=tiles](https://news.gallup.com/poll/224639/nurses-keep-healthy-lead-honest-ethical-profession.aspx?g_source=Economy&g_medium=newsfeed&g_campaign=tiles)





## Education Beyond the Classroom

Though education is centered on schooling and in classrooms most of the times, three of the teachers who submitted essays for this paper illustrate the value of education beyond the classroom. Kelly W. Elder established a program to expose students of all incomes to traveling the world; Sarah Ballew Welch built an initiative that brings literacy to the birthing room in a rural community; and Abdul Wright organized his school around a family facing the intertwined problems of poverty and opportunity (Butler <sup>10</sup>et al., 2015).

Decades of research and expanded funding have highlighted the importance of social-emotional learning (Grant <sup>11</sup>et al., 2017). Three of the teacher leaders featured in the paper are testaments to the success of social-emotional initiatives. Kareem Neal facilitates restorative justice trainings that bridge divides between diverse student groups; Kelisa Wing disrupts the school-to-prison pipeline through relationship building; and Kimberly Worthy confronts the impacts of systemic oppression through a trauma-informed classroom.

Each of the contributors will show that teacher leaders are a key element of school improvement in the United States. Whether viewing this report as an educator seeking to expand impact, a researcher desiring first-hand accounts of school leadership, or a community member exploring best practice in schools, reading the narratives that follow will move you toward those ends or toward advocacy for the change educators teaching children in fragile communities are striving to achieve.

**Reading the narratives that follow will move you toward those ends or toward advocacy for the change educators teaching children in fragile communities are striving to achieve.**

## How educators were selected

We initially began this work by focusing solely on educators who worked in fragile rural communities. Quickly, we realized that if we wanted to tell the breadth of stories that we desired, we would need to expand that vision to include educators working in a variety of school settings, all working with fragile communities.

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<sup>10</sup> Butler, S., Danziger, S., Doar, R., Ellwood, D. T., Gueron, J. M., Haidt, J., ... Reeves, R. V. (2015). *Opportunity, responsibility, and security: A consensus plan for reducing poverty and restoring the American Dream*. Brookings Institute.

<sup>11</sup> Grant, S., Hamilton, L., Wrabel, S., Gomez, C., Whitaker, A., Leschitz, J., ... Ramos, A. (2017). *How Every Student Succeeds Act can support social and emotional learning*. <https://doi.org/10.7249/RB9988>



**We created a list of potential educators based on the following types of diversity:**

- Race/ethnicity;
- Gender;
- School setting;
- Developmental level of students taught;
- Number of years teaching;
- Diversity of experiences.

All of the educators on which we focused on have been recognized for their excellence in classroom teaching, through local, state, or national awards. Some are National Board Certified Teachers; some are State or Regional Teachers of the Year; others have served in a variety of fellowship programs;

We sent out an exploratory email explaining what we were doing and seeking interested participants. We then interviewed the potential participants to ensure that they met our criteria of teaching in or with students in fragile communities. Finally, we used a diversity grid to ensure that we were holding true to the diversity requirements listed above.

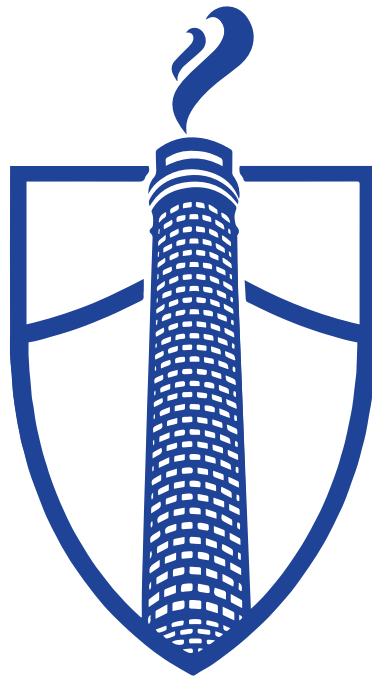
We provided each contributor with a template to follow in telling their story. We asked them to provide us with a(n):

- Introduction
- Challenges
- Solutions
- Outcomes
- Lessons for Educators

We are extremely grateful to each of these expert educators for sharing their stories. Please see Appendix B for a demographic overview of these contributors.

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## **Training and Offering Ongoing Support to Educators**





## Culturally Relevant Education in Tribal Settings

**Anna East Baldwin – Flathead Reservation, Montana**

### Introduction



After I graduated from teacher school in 1999, I was lucky to receive no teaching position offers except the one on the Flathead Indian Reservation at the tribal alternative school. People would say, “Oh, you’re going to teach there? Wow. Good luck. I hear it’s rough.” Even then, this rubbed me the wrong way. Aren’t kids just kids anywhere you go? Well, yes and no, and I was about to find out why.

First, some facts: most teachers are white. In Montana, if you are teaching students of color, those students are probably Native American. Eleven percent of Montana’s school-aged population is tribal members or descendants, while about 90 percent of teachers are white. This means that most reservation teachers are different ethnically from their students. Also, although some white teachers do grow up on the reservation and remain to teach there, many teachers have not experienced reservation culture. They bring their own experiences and expectations of student behavior and priorities to their classrooms, as all teachers do. However, these expectations often do not match what they find.

### Challenges

If you have never been exposed to reservation culture, teaching on a reservation can be a confusing experience. Unlike many teenagers who do not grow up on a reservation, many kids here relate to their own families and community ahead of anything else such as social life or broader teen culture that might include music and sports, although these are a close second. Children’s best friends are often also their cousins and they will spend a weekend helping family at a funeral before participating in some kind of social outing. The importance of education assumes a different meaning in many tribal cultures in which public schools are reminiscent of assimilation and can take a back seat to the many other experiences a family can offer.

Culturally, the community where I live and teach belongs to more than one tribe and because of the historical phenomenon called “allotment,” the reservation itself is majority-white. These circumstances can cause race-based misunderstandings and tensions on the reservation around issues such as land and water management. The effects of removal, forced assimilation, and cultural destruction have taken a similar toll on tribal people and can result in substance abuse, poverty, and unhealthy lifestyles.



Yet, Native people continuously display resistance, resilience, and innovation in the face of continued deliberate disenfranchisement by all branches of the federal government. The other important characteristic of this place is its rural nature; kids here have more in common with rural areas across Montana than any other type of region. They are ranchers, horse people, mountain explorers, small-town denizens— and fit into all that comes with those labels.

## Solutions

It took years for me to begin understanding the place where I eventually settled and have continued to teach. Then, I had to embrace a truth: I would never belong to it. This reservation does not belong to white people, no matter what their land deed says. Accepting this fact helped me to place myself in a service role in everything I did: teaching, directing federal programs for my district, even winning awards, including the tribes' distinguished educator award. All these activities are in service of the people of this community, to which I do not belong. Making my peace with this essential fact of life helped me adopt the best attitude for humility and building community trust.

Small schools do offer opportunities to grow, although one sometimes has to think creatively to find them. In my role as grants manager for the district, I have sought ways to orient new teachers to the reservation— something I really needed when I landed here 20 years ago--by carving out funds to design a program called “Jump into the Jocko Valley.” I have directed projects for teachers to build tribally-specific and authentic teaching materials in partnership with tribal experts. I have found ways to redesign cultural experiences for students so they are diverse and more comprehensive than a one-day event.

Before I became grants manager, I focused on designing teaching units that were tribally specific and culturally appropriate, using tribally authored texts and critical thinking strategies to induce children's' analytical skills. I was careful to facilitate as much classroom work as I could in place-based learning opportunities and wrote unit plans for the state department of education and other agencies. Several of these projects were published and a documentary was made of me teaching one of those units over about six weeks. These products reach beyond my classroom every day and help other teachers figure out how to fit themselves into a community to which they do not belong but which they serve.

Besides the benefit to others, it was important for my students to see themselves in the curriculum. If we could read a local Native American author's work, take a field trip to the setting, and maybe even talk to the author herself, it would be a much richer literary experience. Reading about a wilderness expert's approach to fish conservation, partnering with the biology teacher in the high school to study conservation and fish ecology, and inviting that author-expert to the classroom to talk about his life: inspiring and relevant.



**My other advice involves the self: humble yourself. Self-identify neither as a savior nor as a conqueror but as a servant; keep your mind and heart open to new ideas and unfamiliar ways and attitudes.**

## Outcomes

My experiences have not all been shiny success stories. I have been accused of racist teaching practices, speaking for Native people when I have no business doing so, contributing to the suicide problem, prioritizing one tribe over another, and other more generic teacher mistakes such as favoring girls over boys. Some of these criticisms might have a grain of truth, while I know others do not. Some of them certainly hurt my feelings more than others. And after each criticism, I tried to learn to be more sensitive, more compassionate, and more careful.

Additionally, during times of concentrated trauma and tragedy, which the reservation community undergoes periodically, teachers here can experience intensified caretaker fatigue; it takes a toll on every aspect of one's job satisfaction.

While teaching on a reservation certainly has its challenges, particularly if a teacher lacks familiarity with tribal communities, it is also hugely rewarding. Serving a community with high needs can result in a feeling of fulfillment when things go well. The sense of camaraderie with colleagues experiencing the same successes and failures is focused and concentrated. Learning about an unfamiliar culture can, by itself, feel like an accomplishment.

## Lessons for Educators

There are two pieces of advice I can offer to a non-Native teacher aiming for a career teaching on a reservation. First, learn. Learn about the community, find out who the heroes are, what the hardships might be, how families feel about public schools. Do this by asking questions but also by observing quietly, without judgment.

My other advice involves the self: humble yourself. Self-identify neither as a savior nor as a conqueror but as a servant; keep your mind and heart open to new ideas and unfamiliar ways and attitudes. Do not place your expectations of students' priorities and behavior over their own and always to remember that you are a guest.

**Anna Baldwin** served as a high school English teacher on the Flathead Reservation in Western Montana for 20 years before transitioning to the grant's manager position for her district in 2019. Anna has led professional development in national venues and served as a Teaching Ambassador Fellow for the U.S. Department of Education in 2016-2017. She is the recipient of the Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribes Distinguished Educator Award and is the 2014 Montana Teacher of the Year.

# Supporting Teacher Leadership in Fragile Communities

Casey Bethel – Douglasville, Georgia

## Introduction



Fragile communities are the struggling pockets of society. The families live in the harshest conditions and find it extremely difficult to break the cycle. People in fragile communities desire better but it is saddening to recognize the tremendous obstacles they face. These areas are routinely barren of economic opportunities and are consequently the most crime-ridden. Where education could be viewed as the great medicine for both ailments, schools in these areas are often steeped in low performance. A smarter, more talented population would find better jobs or start successful businesses, avoid crime and

turn things around. Consequently, teachers in fragile communities often see themselves as the “gate-keepers” to advancement.

## Challenges

I can attest to this because it explains my entire teaching career. For 15 years, I have taught in one of the roughest metro-Atlanta neighborhoods. Ninety-nine percent of the students at my high school are students of color and 88 percent of them are economically disadvantaged. The community surrounding the school is marked by high un-employment and transiency.

As parents shuffle between apartment complexes taking advantage of discounted-rent offers and move-in specials, children bounce from school to school, robbed of consistency that is vital for academic success. Gifted students are sprinkled in but go on to impressive achievements and make good stories, but on average the school has performed near the bottom in eight out of eight state tests for 19 years. At one point the drop-out rate teetered near 50 percent. Even amid all this, I have never wanted to teach anywhere else. These students need the most, and this place, to me, is the best one to make a difference in their lives.

**Schools in struggling areas suffer because of the difficulty in retaining effective teachers and because those who stay get burned out from working in such a stressful environment.**

## Solutions

Three years ago, my family and I began the “Teach Your Heart Out Conference.” The goal of the conference is three-fold. First, we equip teachers with best classroom practices so that they can adequately teach all types of students in all types of environments. Second, we celebrate and uplift teachers in a way that fuels their passion and reminds them of the joys and possibilities in teaching. Every student, especially those in fragile communities, need teachers who believe in what they do and have the energy to do it well.



Finally, we empower teachers to see themselves as change-agents capable of crafting a healthier society through emphasis on vital issues such as equity and social justice. We get teachers believing that change, which starts in a classroom, can spread to and heal a community. To accomplish all of this effectively, we have enlisted a cadre of 23 award-winning, dynamic, focused, and driven teacher-leaders from around the country.

## Outcomes

We held our inaugural conference three years ago in Atlanta to positively impact our own community first. We still maintain regular communication with the 400 teachers in attendance that affirm their inner batteries remain full with the energy and strategies learned at the convening.

We have now hosted conferences in Nashville, Houston, Las Vegas, and Miami, each time benefiting more than 400 teachers, and their students and communities by extension.

Our hope is to spread an infectious zeal for education with every community in America because only education can cure society's ills.

## Lessons for Educators

I have always been committed to seeing my community get out from under the dark cloud overhead. More recently, my experiences as the State Teacher of the Year have allowed me to grow as a teacher-leader in important ways that make me better for my community and those like mine.

Teacher-leadership has widened my vantage point and elevated my concern beyond just the school, and has helped me to develop the vision and courage to do more to address our challenges. I now have the privilege of traveling throughout my state and others. It is as helpful to witness other fragile communities and validate that my neighborhood is not alone, as it is to pinpoint what is missing when I am treated to glimpses of more fortunate areas.

Schools in struggling areas suffer because of the difficulty in retaining effective teachers and because those who stay get burned out from working in such a stressful environment. My teacher leadership is now manifested through the vision of what it would look like if every school housed teachers who were super-charged and enthusiastic about their jobs and have the courage to promote that vision. For the first time, I feel capable of doing something to spark positive, sustainable change.

**Casey M. Bethel** is a 15-year high school science teacher and the K-12 Science/STEM Coordinator in Douglasville, Georgia, where he coordinates curriculum, resources and professional development for 34 schools. He is the 2017 Georgia Teacher of the Year and a runner-up for National Life-Changer of the Year. After losing his wife, Elise, who was a teacher, to breast cancer, Casey and his family founded the non-profit Pink Santa Hat Movement to support and uplift other educators around the country who are balancing their day-to-day school responsibilities while fighting this terrible disease.



# How to Build a Professional Learning Network

Laurie Calvert - NBCT – Mayodan, North Carolina

## Introduction



It may seem hard to believe, but even after teaching for 14 years, there was a time not long ago when I had largely forgotten about the enormity of the work. On one level I knew, of course. While taking an eight-year hiatus from teaching to work on teacher advocacy and leadership in Washington, D.C., I made an effort to let others know how difficult teaching is for educators across the country. I talked

with policymakers about the demands on teachers, the meetings, IEPs, bus duty, hall duty, money collection, professional development, meetings, new standards, data analysis, and the record-keeping. But honestly, part of my brain had lost the sense of what a teacher's mind and body go through on the job, the scope, and magnitude of it all.

## Challenges

I was reminded very quickly when I returned to the classroom last fall and was confronted with my own exhaustion and anxiety. I was quite aware that returning to teaching in North Carolina after a lengthy absence would challenge me. I would teach in a fragile school community, where the average household income is \$28,553; in a rural school, where more than 98 percent of students qualify for free or reduced meals; and in a Southern state where the odds are low that [children in poor families will ever free themselves from intergenerational poverty](#). As if to underscore the challenge awaiting me, as I prepared to move, I received an ominous report from the substitute teacher covering my classes: "These students can read, Ms. Calvert, but they really don't want to."

Looking back on that school year now, I understand why I floundered. I had forgotten content and lost comfort with once-familiar teaching strategies. The new technology left me spinning. Higher state standards and complex uses of data required knowledge I did not possess. Within a few days of starting, I posted a message to teaching colleagues on social media, "Will I ever not be tired again?" From my laptop that night I read their unequivocal responses. No. Really, no.



## Solutions

The good news for those who feel daunted by the work is that anyone can build his or her own professional learning network by making time and working intentionally. Here are a few strategies to get started.

- 1. Intentionally seek the company of strong teachers.** Make time to attend workshops, conferences, Twitter chats and anything that has you brushing up against other accomplished teachers. Get to know people and learn about their strengths and interests. When I was at the U.S. Department of Education, I kept a spreadsheet of teachers' contact information and their interests, including the subjects and grades they teach. Then when I needed something (or had something to offer), I could reach out to the right people.
- 2. Ask the important questions and listen.** Make good use of time that you have with strong teachers by asking how they are solving the same problems that plague you in the classroom. During down time an AP Institute at Wake Forest this summer, I asked teachers how they deal with conundrums like these: How do you motivate reluctant readers? What strategies work the best to help secondary students to catch up in reading skill? What books have worked for you in the classroom? Several teachers sent me lessons, others provided links to texts, and many regaled me with tales of their successes -- and failures.
- 3. When you learn something critical, plan time to do the deeper work.** Just before returning to teaching in North Carolina, I had lunch with former English teacher and colleague at the U.S. Department of Education, Dan Brown. Dan is an exceptionally bright teacher leader who loves to talk about the latest book he is reading.

**My informal network of teacher-leaders encouraged me to lean into the challenge, and they sustained me with encouragement, ideas, knowledge, validation and resources.**

When I asked him what he would do differently if he were returning to the classroom, he told me he would focus much more on equity, on making it his responsibility to help every student learn. He also recommended a book that shifted his perspective about how to do this, [Why Students Don't Like School](#), by Daniel Willingham.

In the few weeks before I started teaching, I read the book, which offers a cognitive psychologist's insights into how the mind works in a classroom. But the material was heady stuff, and at the time, I found myself too busy to process Willingham's ideas fully. At the end of the school year, as I reflected on my students' learning, I pulled out Willingham's book again and reread it. Then I carved out a chunk of each week to work on a plan to incorporate his insights into my lessons. (Incidentally, Dan also recommended, [Deep Work: Rules for Focused Success in a Distracted World](#), by Cal Newport. That's how I learned how to carve out the time.)



## Outcomes

Despite being behind, I did survive and have a pretty successful year. The question I think about is, how? In fact, how do any teachers summon the energy, knowledge and skills needed to do the work well over time?

My partial answer is that I did not do it alone. I would not have been able. Over my 22-year journey in education, I had met many great teacher leaders and they became my biggest resource. My informal network of teacher-leaders encouraged me to lean into the challenge, and they sustained me with encouragement, ideas, knowledge, validation and resources. They sent me stuff—good, useful stuff. When I realized I didn't have enough grade-level books to interest reluctant readers, colleagues funded books for my classes through Donors Choose and Go Fund Me. I set up the donation pages, but they gave generously, and we raised more than \$7,000. When I needed ideas to reinvigorate students with low reading stamina, an AVID science teacher in Florida sent me her favorite "brain breaks." When I did not know how to handle a controversial conversation about race in class, teachers came through with advice, warnings, resources and links. One teacher from Oregon even sent me packages of herbal and chai tea.

Reaching out to my informal network of teacher leaders required some courage, but not a lot of effort. Most of the work had been done years earlier when the relationships were formed. Over coffee, at seminars and conferences, during Twitter chats, and at speaking engagements, I had connected with countless interesting teachers and kept up with many, sometimes sending encouragement and opportunities their way. I learned that a personal teacher-leadership network operates like other meaningful relationships. You give and you get. It really is a two-way street.

## Lessons for Educators

No other profession on the planet is as important as teaching. It is true. Other jobs may bring meaning and dignity, but in at least one respect, teaching cannot be matched. That is because in our profession, **who is doing the work, and how well he or she does it**, changes lives. Every day, every hour, my intentions, my attitude, and my decisions leave an imprint on young people who are just coming into their own. This makes the job of teaching more than just "important." It is sacred.



The good news for those who feel daunted by the work is that anyone can build his or her own professional learning network by making time and working intentionally. Here are a few strategies to get started. When most teachers enter the profession, we already know this. Still, if we took a poll, I suspect we'd find that few among us were aware of the massive amount of work we were setting ourselves up for. Good teachers take responsibility for the learning of every student in every class. That is huge. To accomplish this, we intentionally improve our knowledge and practice, build relationships, and advocate for our students' needs in the school, the district, the state and the nation. Any one of those tasks could be a full-time job—and that's before factoring in the numerous additional duties that come with teaching.

There are no easy answers to time dilemmas for teachers. There will always be more work than any one individual can do. As Hyman Roth told Michael Corleone in *The Godfather II*, "This is the business we have chosen." But teachers can save themselves a great deal of anxiety by cultivating their own personal networks of teacher leaders who help sharpen them and ease the burden. Nowhere is this more important than in fragile communities, where the quality of our work means everything.

**Laurie Calvert** is a 15-year National Board Certified Teacher at McMichael High School in Mayodan, North Carolina. From 2010-2018, she served as the first Teacher Liaison at the U.S. Department of Education and worked in leadership positions at two nonprofit education organizations, the National Network of State Teachers of the Year and Learning Forward. She is the author of *Moving From Compliance to Agency: What Teachers Need to Make Professional Learning Work*



# Diversifying the Teacher Pipeline

Dr. Erica DeCuir – Albany, Georgia

## Introduction



By most accounts, Albany, Georgia is considered a fragile community—one that contains “high proportions of residents who face daily economic struggles and possess limited opportunities for social mobility” (Gallup, 2019, p. 3). People often mistake the city for Albany, New York, but this Albany is a small urban center located in rural southwest Georgia. It reflects many dualities; it’s both city and country, an economic hub yet economically depressed, and a beacon for higher education with the state’s highest unemployment rate (Pirani, 2018).

According to the latest U.S. Census (2018), the city includes about 75,000 residents who are approximately 73 percent African-American, 23 percent White, 2 percent Hispanic, and 2 percent multiracial. The estimated median household income is \$31,843; the median household income in Georgia is \$52,977. Almost 33 percent of Albany residents live in poverty. The area’s poverty contributes to a minimal production of “locally grown” teachers.

Most of the teachers are transplants from the Atlanta metropolitan area, drawn to the city as college students attending Albany State University, the local historically black university. As an associate professor of teacher education at Albany State, this is where my story begins. I oversee middle and secondary teacher preparation programs, and my mission is to maintain a diverse teacher pipeline to serve high-needs secondary schools throughout southwest Georgia.

## Challenges

My role is not an easy one; recruiting college students with large student loan debt to work as underpaid teachers in rural Georgia is a huge challenge. I have had to develop strong teacher leadership skills to engage other departments in promoting secondary education among science, math, history, and English majors. I also coordinate conferences and symposiums to attract students to the profession.

Retention is the second challenge. Heavy state regulations for Georgia teacher certification makes it difficult for every education major to become a teacher. In addition to teacher certification exams for entry to and exit from the teacher preparation program, the many hours required to perform clinical practice in local schools prevents them from obtaining full-time employment.

To retain students, I have found innovative ways to leverage resources at the University, from locating scholarships and institutional funding to coordinating course schedules that free up entire days for part-time or freelance work. These experiences have shaped my views on policymaking in teacher education, which tend to disadvantage poorer students. Education majors in Georgia incur costs for teacher certification exams, test preparation or tutoring fees, transportation expenses for traveling to practicum school sites, and other licensure requirements such as edTPA (a \$300 performance-based assessment). Students living or working in fragile communities like Albany struggle to meet these financial demands while paying for both college and living expenses. They attend college to improve their socio-economic status, not sink deeper into economic despair.



## Solutions

There are far too many economic burdens placed on future teachers and I use my voice to argue for a reversal in educational policy. I volunteer for state-level meetings and task forces that shape new policies, participate in letter writing campaigns to local politicians, and encourage education majors to contact their state representatives.

I am passionate in my advocacy; high regulation plus high costs discourage many good teachers from working in needy school districts within Southwest Georgia. I know the impact of my advocacy has helped many education majors to fulfill their dreams of becoming a teacher. I have received countless emails, text messages, and hand-written notes from students over the years, accompanied by pictures of smiling kids in classrooms.

## Outcomes

I know the impact of my advocacy has helped many education majors to fulfill their dreams of becoming a teacher. I've received countless emails, text messages, and hand-written notes from students over the years, accompanied by pictures of smiling kids in classrooms.

**My advice to any teacher educator working in fragile communities is to get to know the intimate needs of education majors—their transportation, housing, and mental health needs—and customize teaching programs to adjust to their lives.**

My advice to any teacher educator working in fragile communities is to get to know the intimate needs of education majors—their transportation, housing, and mental health needs—and customize teaching programs to adjust to their lives. This may include arranging car-pools, blocking course schedules, and using digital software to complete practicum hours. It may also mean flexible deadlines, reserving class time for homework assistance, and virtual office hours to assist students in completing class projects.

*Dr. Erica DeCuir is an associate professor of Teacher Education at Albany State University. Her research centers on culturally-responsive teaching, K-12 teacher preparation, and the professional development of college and university faculty. She is the founding director of the Summer Learning Academy, a STEM-based summer enrichment program that promotes culturally-responsive practices for teaching STEM to culturally and linguistically diverse learners. She is a Chancellor's Learning Scholar (2018-2019), the Albany State Teacher of the Year (2018-2019) Governor's Teaching Fellow (2016-2017), College of Education's Teacher of the Year (2017), and Curriculum Internationalization Faculty Fellow (2016).*

# Promoting Racial Equity Among Teacher Leaders

Dr. Lee-Ann Stephens - St. Louis Park, Minnesota

## Introduction



I am a racial equity instructional coach, who coaches 43 teachers, in a small district in an inner ring suburb of Minneapolis, Minnesota with approximately 4,000 racially and linguistically diverse students and 386 licensed staff. Every licensed staff member, including counselors, social workers, and nurses, has a racial equity instructional coach. We talk about race and the impact of racism. Our mission is to build

the will, skill and capacity to disrupt systemic racism that impacts student achievement and experiences in our district.

I coach teachers to see themselves in all students, not just the ones who look like them. In Minnesota, we do a pretty decent job of educating white students because the majority of our teachers are white and they can see themselves in white students. Even if they are not achieving at high levels, they believe they should be, so they teach to that expectation. I have witnessed teachers teaching to a lower expectation for our black, brown and indigenous students. Our disparities reflect that. Schools are not impervious to the racial and cultural biases that play out in society. Those attitudes creep their way into the classrooms and black, brown and indigenous students are on the receiving end of those negative attitudes. Once those negative attitudes are uncovered, the work of racial equity transformation can occur.

## Challenges

Coaching teachers on racial equity has its challenges but I believe it is one of the most important roles that I have ever had. Those challenges can range from those who do not believe race matters to those who see themselves as saviors. When I begin to feel discouraged by those challenges, I have to remind myself why this work is important to me.

I do this work for the white teacher who never realized the impact of race on her life and the privileges that she has received, and is now seeking to understand her own racial identity. I do it to assuage the irrational fear that we have of our black boys. I do it to reveal that a single perspective perpetuates stereotypes that are harmful to our students, as writer and novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie so eloquently reminds us in her TED Talk, "The Danger of a Single Story." I do it for the white male teacher who is extremely racially conscious and needs to move into the arena of anti-racism. You see, a non-racist knows that racism exists, but an anti-racist knows it exists and takes action to dismantle it. I do this for the teacher who needs help facilitating a conversation about race with a group of her students.



## Solutions

There is no greater time to be a teacher-leader in racial equity than right now. I am part of a team of nine racial equity coaches exposing and doing our best to disrupt systemic racism that plagues our educational system. I have full support from my administration but it was the teachers who decided that this was what they wanted. They recognized that what we were doing was not working and we needed to make a systemic change. I am also a part of an interracial group, as no one racial group can do this alone. I need others to advance the work. I am a teacher helping teachers to be champions of racial equity in their professional lives and their personal lives. I am a teacher helping teachers to show up as their authentic selves every day. As a racial equity coach, I implore teachers to examine their belief systems and how they were “racialized” growing up, because we teach to our beliefs; therefore, we teach who we are.

## Outcomes

Very often people will ask me about the impact of racial equity coaching on student outcomes. My response is that it is about changing our practice. It is about being a reflective practitioner and understanding that work begins with us, as educators. It is about seeing how our beliefs show up in our classroom through our instruction and our interactions with our students of color. It is about the messages we send to all our students. It is about whose voices we hear and whose we silence.

**I get to unapologetically disrupt policies and practices that have not benefited all of our students. I get to demarginalize the marginalized and humanize the dehumanized. I do it because our students from our most fragile communities cannot wait any longer.**

## Lessons for Educators

Why do I continue to do this work? I do it to remind teachers that it is okay to love their students from our most fragile communities. It is okay to make mistakes and to admit those mistakes. That admission demonstrates humanity. One does not need to have all the right words, just the right heart. Why do I do this work, the work of racial equity? I get to unapologetically disrupt policies and practices that have not benefited all of our students. I get to demarginalize the marginalized and humanize the dehumanized. I do it because our students from our most fragile communities cannot wait any longer.

**Dr. Lee-Ann Stephens**, Minnesota Teacher of the Year 2006, has been an educator for 30 years with K-12 teaching and leadership experience. She currently serves as a teacher on special assignment with the St. Louis Park Schools in St. Louis Park, Minnesota, as a Racial Equity and Instructional Coach. She is an affiliate with Pacific Educational Group: Courageous Conversations about Race. She serves as an Inclusion Advisor for Integrated Schools and an advisor for Students Organized for Anti-Racism. She holds a Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership. Her scholarship focuses on the needs of Black and Brown students in Advanced Placement classes.





# Effective Strategies to Impact Policies and Practices for School Change

Monica Washington – Texarkana, Texas

## Introduction



Teaching in an urban community in Memphis, Tennessee, may not be work that some educators would describe as desirable, but I am extremely thankful that my teaching career began in an urban school setting. Sometimes understaffed, often thinly resourced, the ground is fertile in that environment for teacher-leaders to emerge. My previous schools were mostly urban—small, medium-sized, and large urban schools. In Memphis, my students were primarily African-Americans, while in Texas my students came from diverse backgrounds and cultures. Their needs, like their cultures, were varied.

## Challenges

The ground is fertile for teacher leaders to emerge in the environment described above. In some instances, students needed additional time and academic assistance from me. In some cases, they needed me to be their advocate for circumstances both inside and outside of school. Other times, they needed me to encourage them to be deeper thinkers and more compassionate and engaged citizens.

**Breaking through the wall of “this is what we’ve always done” can be a daunting task for teacher-leaders.**

## Solutions

When I formed an advocacy committee with my colleagues and sought input from students and parents, those issues carried much more weight with administrators and were subsequently acted upon. We met regularly to discuss concerns about practices and policies. Some of those discussions were initiated by our own observations while colleagues and students brought others. Our group created potential solutions before meeting with our administrators and followed-up to ensure that positive change occurred. The decision to listen, serve as trusted ambassadors, and craft solutions helped tremendously with our progress.



## Outcomes

Despite any leader's best efforts, there will be setbacks and frustrations that arise as we work as teachers. The greatest barrier I have encountered in teacher-leadership is the realization that those school priorities that often live in mission and vision statements fail to exist in our relationships and policies with students and their families. The great irony in school change is that we often implement new programs without wanting to make the shifts in thinking and policy that allow those programs to be effective. Breaking through the wall of "this is what we've always done" can be a daunting task for teacher-leaders. However, inequitable school practices and policies have shown me that it is necessary to partner with administrators and colleagues to examine the "why" behind practices as well as maintain transparency and honesty about which student populations are adversely affected by those practices.

When we ask the following questions, we are putting ourselves in a better position to understand where change is needed to make the necessary shifts to implement it: "Why are we doing this?" "What groups are we serving through this policy?" "Which groups are not represented?" and "How can we provide greater access to school-wide programs?"

## Lessons for Educators

What I have learned in my 22 years in education is that the best educators are those who seek first to listen and serve. My unsuccessful ideas were those that came without the input of my colleagues, my students, and their families. For example, when I thought of ways we could improve upon discipline or academic policies, I shared those ideas with the appropriate school leaders. Sometimes those ideas failed to move beyond conversation. On the other hand, when I excelled, it was because I asked questions and then worked alongside students, parents, and colleagues to make positive change.

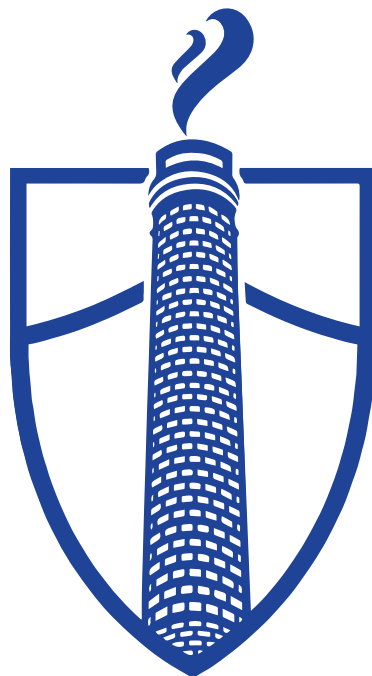
If I were to give advice to anyone who wants to venture into educational leadership from either the role of a teacher or administrator, I would say to always be proactive and solutions-oriented.

It is important to consider all perspectives when making suggestions for school or classroom improvement. Remember that leadership can feel isolating at times, but rewards come when we improve the school experiences for students and for our peers. In addition, I would ask aspiring leaders to leverage their experience. Early career teachers can bring fresh ideas, and veterans bring wisdom. Leaders at all levels of experience have valuable insight. Finally, the unique needs of students and their communities should always inform our voice and drive the work that we do.

**Monica Washington** has over 20 years in education with the majority of that time spent teaching secondary English. She is an instructional coach and manager of inclusive and responsive educational practices for BetterLesson. Monica is the 2014 Texas State Teacher of the Year as well as a member of the board of directors for The National Network of State Teachers of the Year and the National Education Association Foundation.

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## Education Beyond the Classroom





## Educating Students on the Rural Fringe

**Kelly Elder, NBCT - Helena, Montana**

### Introduction



Montana is geographically, and in many ways economically, isolated from the rest of the United States. Having just over one million people in the fourth largest state in the Union, there is a population density of only seven people per square mile. Over 30 percent of our state's one million people live in three relatively urban counties with the other 700,000 distributed sparsely throughout the remaining 53 counties.

Professional educators in this vast rural land constantly strive to connect their students with the outside world, while providing equity of opportunity to all. With over 1,050 students in grades 6-8, my middle school is one of the largest in the West. To build strong relationships between staff and students, we use the "school within a school" concept, allowing my teaching team to have daily instructional contact with fewer than 130 students.

### Challenges

These efforts combat the fact that there is a sizeable sub-population within our school coming from fragile communities. Over 40 percent of our district's middle school students receive free/reduced lunches. Many of my students live in the rural fringe, often coming from poor households without access to the internet, heating beyond a wood stove, and other amenities most of us take for granted. They will one day be first-generation college students, if such aspirations are cultivated and become a reality. The barriers to such an education and the ensuing social mobility are many. Indeed, our schools and our community often struggle with providing equity of opportunity for all students.

### Solutions

In 2013, I took a group of 7th and 8th graders to Central America. Thus, began a tradition of a biennial international spring break experience, exposing our students to the world around them. Our week-long vacation allows students to experience foreign lands and cultures during the recess. However, students from fragile communities, while invited to participate, were excluded due to financial constraints. This inequity needed to be addressed. In the spring of 2019, two at-risk youth were 'scholarshipped' for a 10-day adventure in Costa Rica and Panama. The time, energy, and support needed to make this a reality proved to be far beyond what I envisioned going into the process.

First, I wanted to identify students who came from backgrounds limiting their social mobility, but for whom educators saw aptitudes and promise for success. With administrators' support, I approached the counselors and fellow educators to help identify those facing major obstacles to social mobility. Nine students were identified as scholarship candidates.



A letter was sent home informing the parents that their child had been nominated to apply for a scholarship to attend the 2019 Spring Break International Experience. Further, parents were told the only financial contribution the scholarship recipient would need was \$100. All transportation, food, passport fees, and incidentals, would be covered if their child was selected to participate. If a child wanted to apply, they were asked to respond to the following prompt: “Why would you like to go on this spring break experience, and how will you grow or benefit if selected to participate?”

Students weren’t given any formatting stipulations and it wasn’t required to be typed to avoid any barriers for the potential applicants. Eight of the nine completed the application. I then removed the names from each response, numbered them candidates 1-8, and sent them to a group of parents who had traveled along with their own children in prior years. These community members ranked the anonymous written responses. The problem was trying to choose just one. In the end, given the rooming numbers we had with boys and girls, we were able to offer two of the students the scholarship.

Unfortunately, one of the students selected skipped school and got caught shoplifting the week after being selected. For the integrity of the program and not wanting to risk a brush with foreign security forces, that student had to be told he could no longer participate. Having selected seats on the airline and completed lodging reservations, I decided to invite the third students on our list.

Many barriers to moving forward without hiccups soon appeared. For example, all travelers need a passport. The two scholarship families and I agreed on a day in early January that we would go to the U.S. Post Office to have pictures taken and submit passport applications.

Though I had sent the passport applications and explained all requirements beforehand, things did not go as planned. Neither family had completed their paperwork.

When the postal clerk called one of the boys forward, he went to the desk with his mom and an uncle. The clerk asked about the boy’s father.

“He isn’t here,” replied the boy.

“We need both parents to be here,” said the clerk.

“He’s dead,” the mother blurted.

A number of people in the lobby turned to look.

The mother was asked if she had the death certificate. Agitated, she called someone on the phone and asked them to bring the document.

*Many of my students live in the rural fringe, often coming from poor households without access to the internet, heating beyond a wood stove, and other amenities most of us take for granted. They will one day be first-generation college students, if such aspirations are cultivated and become a reality.*



Meanwhile, the dad for the other boy had not shown up. The next day, he told me he had gone out to cut firewood and was out of cell service. After waiting more than an hour at the post office, we were forced to get back to school without anyone sending in their materials. In the end, after four visits to the post office and another to a local retailer to get paperwork notarized by a dad who had not seen his child in seven years, we were able to pay an additional fee to expedite the processing. Finally, every student had a passport in hand by departure day.

### Outcomes

This odyssey demonstrates the reality some students face in trying to transition from poverty to prosperity. As professional educators, it is imperative we provide equity of opportunity to all young learners, allowing those from fragile communities to have experiences that help build a bridge to social mobility. While providing scholarships for these two youth did just that, the additional time and effort required to ensure students from fragile environments could participate cannot be overstated.

When we travel again in 2021, I plan to have three students traveling supported by scholarships. I sincerely hope we can offer the experience in a manner that provides more support and assistance so that those students' experience is of higher quality and goes smoother.

### Lessons for Educators

Indeed, the biggest obstacle in providing for our youth – especially those from fragile communities -- is expending the extra effort and devising and implementing supports to ensure a level playing field as a means to foster success.

We must continue to find and/or create solutions to barriers that prevent children from those communities from having opportunities to expand their experiences by moving past the boundaries that threaten to limit their possibilities.

These life experiences help remove the blinders that prevent some youth from seeing options and opportunities in life that lie before them.

**Kelly Elder** has taught 6th grade World Geography for over a decade at C.R. Anderson Middle School in Helena, Montana. Mr. Elder began his career working as a Montana Exchange Teacher in Kumamoto, Japan. He holds National Board Certification in Early Adolescence/Social Studies-History, is 2017 Montana Teacher of the Year, is involved with the Montana chapter of Educators Rising. He was one of five teachers of the year to represent U.S. educators on a weeklong-investigation of Finland's Educational System in 2017 and served in South Africa as a National Education Foundation Fellow in 2018.

# Birth to Five Literacy: Community Outreach and Advocacy

Sarah Ballew Welch – Blue Ridge, Georgia

“The truth does not change according to our ability to stomach it emotionally.”  
— Flannery O’Connor

## Introduction



I grew up in the county where I now work as an educator — in fact, it is the same district where my great grandmother once taught in a one-room schoolhouse. Nestled in the Appalachians, Fannin County is located at the point where Georgia, Tennessee, and North Carolina meet. While our community was at one time held afloat by the Levi’s plant, textile jobs began to be outsourced in the late 1990s, and the plant closed. The focus then shifted to real estate until the 2008 recession.

Now, the leading industry in our community of approximately 25,000 people is tourism (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). Our downtown is flush with specialty boutiques and high-end restaurants. Our population doubles on weekends, especially during peak seasons. However, this situation creates an illusion of affluence that does not apply to the majority of families in our district. Our school system serves children from both extremes, and the disparity is noticeable. Our population of economically disadvantaged students ranges from 55 percent to 72 percent across all schools (Georgia Department of Education, 2019).

## Challenges

Literacy is the foundation for improving the lives of our students. To best impact our community and ultimately influence economic consequences, we must consider literacy from a systemic perspective.

In Fannin County, we have redesigned our paradigm. Previously, the role of the school system began when a student walked through our doors in kindergarten. As we strive to better serve the “whole child,” we should consider brain development, language acquisition, and access to print. We must extend our influence beyond the walls of the school, and this redefinition of boundaries is where I have spent the majority of my time for the past two years.

The Teacher Leadership Exploratory Consortium (2011) identified standards for the teacher leader; “Improving Outreach and Collaboration with Families and Community” and “Advocating for Student Learning,” are both embodied in this work. Establishing community networks and advocating improved literacy outcomes have become my consuming passions, partly as a result of an instance that occurred during my first-year teaching.

**Literacy is the foundation for improving the lives of our students. To best impact our community and ultimately influence economic consequences, we must consider literacy from a systemic perspective.**



I waltzed into my first classroom (in another “fragile” community) at the age of 22 with only my English literature degree and a stubborn personality. After weeks of frustration with one student for failing to do his work, he brought me a letter. The student, whose mother helped him write every word, apologized for not doing his work and explained that it was because he could not read. This letter ineffably overwhelmed and shamed me. What I faulted as a lack of effort was in actuality a total inability to read. This formative classroom experience directly led me to define my role within my “fragile” community.

## Solutions

Two years ago, I began meeting with organizations to survey available resources for families in our community and ways that we could work together to improve the delivery of existing services. The L4GA grant served as a vehicle for discourse. As a result of many honest conversations, our Birth-to-Five Literacy Outreach project manifested. Through the generosity of our local school board, we have distributed 1,000 backpacks of books to newborns and three-year-olds across our community.

In examining community data, approximately 22% of the babies here are born to mothers who have not completed high school (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2019). Many reasons can exist for this number but the majority of those mothers probably did not have an ideal educational experience. We needed to impact literacy at the family level.

However, one of the chief barriers was logistics. The original plan was to give every newborn a literacy bag at the hospital; however, access to medical care is becoming a growing concern in rural communities. In our case, the hospital remains, but families must drive a minimum of 30 minutes to arrive at a medical facility equipped for labor and delivery.

According to a recent poll by National Public Radio, the Robert Woodward Foundation, and the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, one in four rural Americans said they are unable to access required healthcare (2019, p. 6). To overcome this barrier, we expanded our network of community partners, and now families may pick up bags at the local health department, pediatrician offices, Family Connections, and other locations. High school students in teaching and early childhood pathways assemble the bags, and drivers’ education students deliver them while gaining hours on the road.

13 U.S. Census Bureau. (2019). *Quick facts: Fannin County, Georgia* [Data file]. Retrieved from <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/fannincountygeorgia/IPE120217>

14 Georgia Department of Education. (2019). *2018 College and Career Readiness Index (CCRPI)* [Data file]. Retrieved from <http://ccrpi.gadoe.org>

15 Teacher Leadership Exploratory Consortium. (2011). *Teacher leader model standards*. Retrieved from <http://www.nnstoy.org/teacher-leader-model-standards/>





## Outcomes

In addition to our Literacy Outreach project, one of the most significant cornerstones of this campaign has been the heightened degree of community involvement. From partnering with Home Depot for holiday toy-building to the local Swan Drive-in Theatre to show films, we are improving engagement. Also, our work with the University of North Georgia (UNG) has been incredibly beneficial; “FCSS Reading Role Models” will serve as the UNG Scholars’ Service-Learning Project for the second year.

## Lessons Learned

Educators across the nation are working tirelessly in diverse and fragile communities. However, perhaps one of the most poignant lessons I have learned is that one person cannot do it all. It is not sustainable and you must grow your capacity for others to expand your work.

Teacher-leadership is about making choices and forging new relationships. Circumstances can facilitate involvement but an individual must decide to discard complacency and actively work to make changes. Become an advocate for a positive change, and others will follow suit. Literacy is the foundation for survival in this world, and its development, or lack thereof, can have generational and/or societal economic repercussions.

**Sarah Ballew Welch** is currently serving in a new position for the Fannin County School System as the Director of Instructional Services and Policy in Blue Ridge, Georgia. Prior to this position, she served as the district’s literacy coordinator and secondary English teacher. She is a 2015 Georgia Teacher-of-the-Year Finalist, and a Round I recipient of Governor’s Office of Student Achievement (GOSA’s) Innovation in Teaching Grant. She has served on a Georgia House of Representatives Committee and on various Advisory Councils for the State Department of Education. Currently, Ms. Welch’s leadership efforts focus on aligning available resources/services for economically disadvantaged families and promoting the love of reading in her community.

16 Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2019). Kids Count Data Center [Data file]. Retrieved from <https://datacenter.kidscount.org>

17 National Public Radio (NPR), Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, & Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health. (2019, May). Life in rural America, part II. Retrieved from [https://media.npr.org/documents/2019/may/NPR-RWJF-HARVARD\\_Rural\\_Poll\\_Part\\_2.pdf](https://media.npr.org/documents/2019/may/NPR-RWJF-HARVARD_Rural_Poll_Part_2.pdf)



# Educational Equity and Social Justice

Abdul B. Wright – North Minneapolis, Minnesota

## Introduction



I recently participated in a meeting in which we talked about ways to increase the number of students of color in teacher preparation programs. I believe this commitment is vital to the creation of more equitable education institutions. Key to that is the way we amplify the pipeline of educators of color: we must brand equity in educational institutions and convey its importance in its truest form - as one of, if not the most important social justice issue - an issue that permeates through fragile communities across America. Without education, doors to success and pathways towards a better future

are forever hidden to those who aspire to a way out of circumstances that do not cultivate the sense of hope and belief necessary to make it in this world. This is especially needed when the deck has been stacked against you.

This meeting made me think of Yohana, a friend of mine from college who had recently migrated to America from Ethiopia. I had never met anyone who was so determined to do well in school. We would study together in the student commons and our mutual respect for each other's work ethic and commitment to bettering our lives so that we could pay it forward allowed our friendship to grow.

## Challenges

Education has been the only real means to break down oppressive systems and create opportunities for marginalized people residing in communities where voices of the brightest and most determined have been silenced.

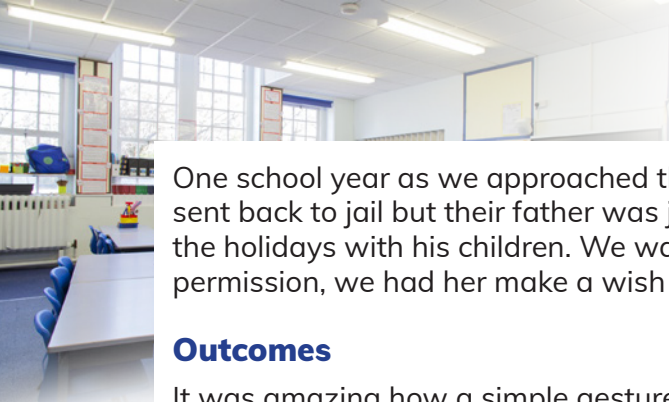
I once had the privilege of teaching three sisters, all from the same family, all two years apart. The oldest was full of attitude. I knew from her morning demeanor whether or not I should smile and say good morning or if I should keep it moving. Regardless, I needed to make sure that she had breakfast because her family lived in a shelter and she started many mornings without food.

Two years ago, I taught the youngest sister. When she started to miss huge chunks of time, we learned that their mother had been hospitalized and in a coma for almost three weeks. The week we were set to be with our families for the holiday break, her mother had passed away. Of all the things happening in their young lives, truancy court was what they were most concerned about.

**Education, for so many, is hope—the architect of doors to soon be opened. We have to view it that way. We have to create opportunities and take stands and, as educators, we are on the inside.**

## Solutions

Recalling our attempts to make a positive impact on the sisters' lives, I want to share a brief story. The middle sister was a little bubblier, but a lot more volatile than the other two girls. As a student, she was determined, self-motivated and had one of those big smiles that can light up the room. Yet, she also carried some of the heaviest burdens of any young person that I had ever met.



One school year as we approached the winter break, we learned that the girls' mother had been sent back to jail but their father was just recently released from jail and was ready to spend the holidays with his children. We wanted to ensure that they had a great Christmas, so with permission, we had her make a wish list for each of her siblings and another list for her father.

### Outcomes

It was amazing how a simple gesture like Christmas gifts made a tremendous difference in their lives. I had to overcome a lot of obstacles in order to achieve success in school and in life and this is why my experience with the girls struck me. I was not always the best student but I knew that education was important. I just didn't understand how important. What friends like Yohana and my courageous students have taught me is that life happens to all of us. And it is not always fair. It was never meant to be fair. But education should be different.

Education, for so many, is hope—the architect of doors to soon be opened. We have to view it that way. We have to create opportunities and take stands and, as educators, we are on the inside. We have already chosen a side. We have chosen the side of justice; a just world that affords young people, of all socioeconomic backgrounds, of all shades and lived experiences, the opportunity to achieve and excel. We must create opportunities for students who come from circumstances that are less than ideal.

### Lessons for Educators

Yohana taught me about her life, openly and without many filters. As a result, I learned more about her and from where her sense of urgency and responsibility came. She told me how her father was back home in her country working to send her younger siblings to America. How her aunt, with whom she lived, had four children of her own and how she felt as if she was a burden in their household. She shared with me how being in America was going to pave the way for the rest of her family. She told me that after graduation, she planned to begin her career and send for her family members' one at a time. My perspective on education and its role in the lives of all people, specifically people of color or who come from different cultures, broadened exponentially. And I took this wiser, more aware perspective with me into the classroom.

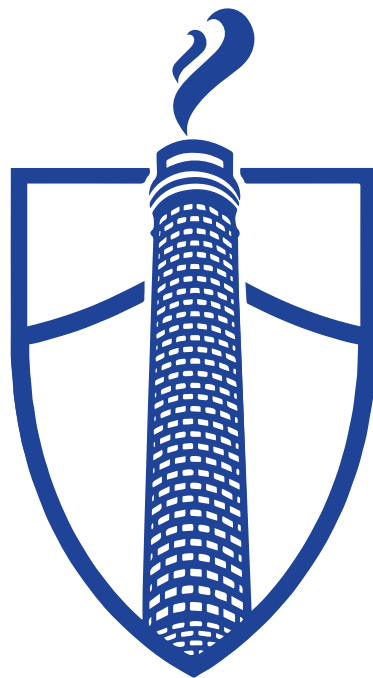
As educators, our lived experiences shape our perspectives and ultimately impact our actions, biases and commitment to our work. Similarly, the lives our students live outside of the classroom directly impact their success inside of school. And for many, the systems that have been created determine the burdens, barriers and circumstances they encounter. There is no separating the intersection of life and school.

Education has and will forever be the symbol of hope and freedom. And as we continue to fight for rights, we must understand this issue dictates the trajectory of life for generations of young people to come. It can never be just if it is not justice for all.

**Abdul Wright** is an eighth grade Language Arts teacher and Instructional Coach and Data Team leader in North Minneapolis. He received the Minneapolis PeaceMaker award from the city of Minneapolis in 2015, received “the You've Made a Difference” award from Cristo Rey Jesuit High School in 2015 and 2016, and is the recipient of the 2016 Minnesota Teacher of the Year award, the first black male to receive the award, the youngest, and the first from a Charter school. In 2018, Mr. Wright was identified as a Minnesota African American Heritage Award Honoree. He also serves as the board chair of Mastery Charter School in North Minneapolis.

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# Advancing Social and Emotional Learning



# Restorative Justice and Community Building

Kareem Neal, NBCT – Phoenix, Arizona

## Introduction



Throughout my 23-year teaching career, I have always taught students with severe cognitive delays and who live in urban areas. I currently teach at Maryvale High School, one of the largest comprehensive high schools in the heart of Phoenix, Arizona. My school has approximately 3,000 students, all of whom receive free lunch. A large portion of the students are first-generation American or undocumented Americans. I have also always been attracted to teaching students who are typically overlooked and/or mistreated in our country. I feel that they need teachers like me,

as much as I need students like them. Like me, the factors in their lives over which they have no control affect them deeply and dramatically.

I decided to become a teacher based on a fluke. I was a second semester junior chemical engineering major at Seton Hall University when I stumbled upon the Special Olympics. I was helping to set up for the weekend event when a volunteer asked me if I would go meet some of the athletes because they were fascinated by how tall I am. I met some of the athletes and immediately fell in love with how authentic they all were. I knew, at that point, that I was going to be a special education teacher. From the beginning, it felt like an easy job because of how much I loved the students. However, I had always immersed myself in my classroom and never really considered the communities around me. That changed when I started teaching at Maryvale.

Before Maryvale, I had always taught at “special schools” (schools that only had students with cognitive delays). Being on a comprehensive campus somewhat forced me to pay attention to an entire community of students for the first time in my teaching career. When I did, I developed a new passion for social justice. Some of the feelings I had growing up about race and class came roaring back to the surface. I became aware of the fact that there was an entire community of students who felt marginalized, sensed that the world wasn’t for them, and battled with holding on to their culture versus assimilating in order to succeed. I knew that I had a larger responsibility than to just educate the students in my classroom.

## Solutions

Outside of my classroom, I have always been a reluctant leader. Being around students who were living in such harsh conditions and facing tremendous obstacles gave me the push that I needed. Connecting with people and motivating them is easy for me. I recognized that one of the ways that I could help the community where I taught was to figure out a way to encourage them all to realize that they wanted a stronger sense of community and connection.

Several years ago, when my district decided that schools would introduce restorative justice/restorative practices, I knew that I wanted to be a big part of the implementation. I obtained one of the four district restorative trainer positions and dove into the work.



Currently, I give between one and five monthly restorative justice trainings in my district, with the large majority of them being held at Maryvale High. I am convinced that the community building aspects of restorative justice is just what our school needs to address issues such as inclusion, immigration concerns/ideology, class/poverty, and language differences.

In terms of reaching other communities, I have done training sessions outside of my district but within Arizona. I have held a couple of trainings on a national scale. However, my focus is Maryvale. This upcoming semester, I have two trainings a week for the first two months.

I really cannot think of another way to address the issues of students who have severe cognitive delays to students and who are also high achievers and college bound. I want all students to feel connected to each other on our campus. I want them to feel the value of their communities and cultures, and walk with pride. I want them to realize that no one has the right to exclude students because they are all peers.

I also want the teachers to confront and address their biases to become better teachers and advocates for our students, all of whom require more than just typical lessons and instructors.

*I have also always been attracted to teaching students who are typically overlooked and/or mistreated in our country. I feel that they need teachers like me, as much as I need students like them.*

## Outcomes

Thus far, the most promising sign that the trainings are working is that student participation has doubled in clubs like Panthertown (social justice club), MECHA (club that celebrates Chicano/Latinx culture), GSA (gay straight alliance) and Be A Leader Club.

And in the first two weeks of the current school year, a student started a Best Buddies Club in which general education students and special education students do projects and other activities together. One other student is starting a Bloom360 club to address gender roles and dating violence.

Also, teachers are coming to me with information about the restorative circles they are doing in their classrooms in an effort to build community.

I taught my first restorative justice class yesterday, which to my delight was completely full. Teachers are starting to buy-in.

One more affirming event demonstrating that teachers are engaging in the program is that I was even invited to two Professional Learning Community (PLC) meetings to do some community building/restorative conversations to help staff members who were not getting along.

## Lessons for Educators

Fortunately, I have a larger platform since becoming the State Teacher of the Year. I have really been able to bring awareness to the need for restorative justice on campuses, particularly campuses in communities that are typically overlooked or looked down upon.

Outside of my forum, what is really necessary for spreading this work, is being prepared and showing passion and commitment. Every time I show up to give a presentation, I know that I need to bring the passion and be prepared to run a smooth session where people are engaged and I can address any questions they have.

Students with cognitive delays will always hold a special place in my heart, yet I am thankful to the students of Maryvale for opening up the space for all students. Our students who are most in need of passionate educators cannot be overlooked or underestimated. They have changed my life and given me renewed purpose. They deserve every ounce of our efforts.

**Kareem Neal** is a self-contained Special Education teacher in Phoenix, Arizona. He has taught students with severe cognitive delays for 22 years. He is the 2019 Arizona Teacher of the Year award, won the Arizona Education Association's Diversity Grant, the Maryvale Revitalization Committee's Educator Excellence Award, and is Vice President of the Phoenix Union High School District's Black Alliance. He was honored by the National and State Directors of Teacher Education and Certification (NASDTEC) as the West Coast Diversity Grant recipient, and was recently awarded an honorary doctorate from Northern Arizona University for his contributions to special education in Arizona. His passion is connecting all students in their schools, including those who are typically marginalized.



# Dismantling the School-to-Prison Pipeline

Kelisa Wing – Arlington, Virginia

## Introduction



Life was definitely tough for me in the inner-city neighborhood where I grew up. When I was a teenager, I realized my purpose in life was to give back and make life a little easier for youth than I had it. I always wanted to go back to where I grew up and serve. One major reason why I felt compelled to do so is that when I was a student, my middle school felt like a prison to me. We had police officers in the building. Our teachers had little patience for disciplinary issues, relationship building or teaching in general. We were considered castaways, statistics, and kids destined to be six feet under or behind bars by our 18th birthday. I not only survived: I thrived.

Today, I work with military-connected students as an educator in the Department of Defense Education Activity (DoDEA), which is responsible for planning, directing, coordinating, and managing prekindergarten through 12th grade educational programs on behalf of the United States Department of Defense.

## Challenges

Almost two million students in the United States have a parent serving in a branch of the military. While our students can access many basic amenities such as health care, dental care, and housing, they have unique challenges that require care and attention from the educators who work diligently to meet their needs.

These challenges include parents with frequent deployments, especially as the United States has been involved in war for almost 20 years. One of the impacts of the multiple separations is a 42 percent increase in divorces for service members (Oleszczuk, 2012). Another very real issue for military-connected students is the imminent danger that their parents face while deployed to war zones. I will never forget one year having to assist a student whose father died in Afghanistan. I also will not forget the feelings we had as our community dealt with the loss of more than 30 service members while they were deployed to Iraq. It was very real and every one of us in the community dealt with the tension and trauma of knowing that at any moment something could happen that would change our lives forever.

Military-connected students have a very high level of resiliency developed as a result of moving constantly, making new friends regularly, and having to be without one or sometimes, both of their parents. Working with such irrepressible students has resulted in me becoming more resilient in the face of adversity.

## Solutions

As a teacher leader, I have leveraged my influence to be a voice for the voiceless. I speak nationally and internationally at conferences about the power that relationships can have in dismantling disparate systems. I tell the stories of my students and colleagues to audiences in the hope that learning about them will somehow help our world to be a better place. I also leverage my influence to create equitable learning opportunities for all students.



I believe in all students and their ability to overcome challenges they face daily. This inspired me to create Stop, Teach, Affect, and Reach (STAR), a school-wide student mentorship program in which every child had an adult mentor/advocate. Initially, it was difficult to persuade anyone to coalesce around the idea of a student mentorship program, but after people watched my students experience successes through their experiences in the program, they wanted to be a part of the initiative.

## Outcomes

Mentors help students set goals, work through conflict, and prepare for change. While students were engaging in behavior that was favorable and not getting in trouble, it was through the relationship building and bonding, empathy, and the willingness to address implicit biases that allowed our educators to address students' needs. Through implementing STAR, there was a reduction in disciplinary issues by 74 percent.

Many students find themselves entangled in the criminal justice system for disciplinary issues that should be handled in the classroom or at the school level. This work led me to write a book called, "Promises and Possibilities: Dismantling the School to Prison Pipeline," which provides practical advice to educators on how to dismantle disparate systems from their classroom.

**Many initiatives fail because people do not persist long enough to see them manifest from initiation to implementation to institutionalization. Educators must persevere and display resiliency.**

## Lessons for Educators

The best advice I can give educators who want to engage in this work is to stick with it. Many initiatives fail because people do not persist long enough to see them manifest from initiation to implementation to institutionalization. Educators must persevere and display resiliency to see change and transformation come to fruition.

I am not sure I would do anything different from the path we took to give students as many opportunities as possible for success. The struggles made the journey an experience from which we all could grow and learn. The pitfalls, failings, successes, and triumphs informed our actions in effecting real change in the students' lives.

One other important lesson learned is to always celebrate the small wins and to not look down on small beginnings. Our students learn more from what they see us do rather than what we say. I am honored to be able to give my students lessons that I did not write but that I lived through service, belief, and love.

***Kelisa Wing** has been an educator for 13 years. She taught 8th-grade Language Arts and Reading to military-connected children at Faith Middle School in Fort Benning, Georgia, has been an Elementary School Assistant Principal, and is now a Professional Development Specialist for the Department of Defense Education Activity. Wing honorably served in the U.S. Army for six years and attained the rank of Staff Sergeant. She is the author of *Weeds & Seeds: How to Stay Positive in the Midst of Life's Storms* and *Promises and Possibilities: Dismantling the School to Prison Pipeline*. She is a 2017 State Teacher of the Year, a 2016 Association of Supervision, Curriculum, and Development (ASCD) Emerging Leader, and the 2017 University of Maryland University College (UMUC) Outstanding Alumnus of the Year.*



## Reclaiming Humanity in Trauma-Informed Classrooms

Kimberly Worthy – Washington, D.C.



### Introduction

When you come from privilege, you do not think about your sense of safety, control, comfort, freedom, choice, and positive, constructive self-worth. You are born with all of it, for you are born human. You know it, and everyone in society knows this about you.

When you are born in the margins, you are told from your birthing experience until your death, that you are less than human, and that you must always think about your sense of safety, control, comfort, freedom, choice, and search for your positive, constructive self-worth. **Let that sink in.**

### Challenges

For the last 19 and half years, I have taught in urban schools throughout the United States and in South Africa in the following cities: Atlanta, Brooklyn, Las Vegas, Tampa, Cape Town, Johannesburg, and, for the longest run, in Washington, D.C., my home. In all of these schools, the majority of my students lived in fragile communities.

**For the sake of this paper, I will define fragile communities as:**

Communities where there is a vicious cycle of poverty and violence that creates constant feelings of unsafety, discomfort, and insecurity; where there is political oppression of your rights, your voice, and your freedoms carried out by the police and other figures of authority, including teachers, and, thus, creating and sustaining a negative and destructive self-worth.

I have chosen to teach children who live in fragile communities for 19 years because it is my responsibility to reclaim my students' humanity. I, too, have been dehumanized in this fragile state we live in; I connect with my students, and relate to their lived experiences. I humanize their stories, to begin the process of reclaiming their humanity.

### Solutions

After being named the 2009 Washington, D.C. Teacher of the Year, I was given the amazing opportunity to teach and learn in South Africa. My experience began in 2011. It was then and there where I was trained in the most important skills I have ever received as an educator. There, I learned to be a "Trauma-informed Teacher," and how to lead a "trauma-informed classroom." Since then, I have committed my practice to include reclaiming the humanity of my students in the face of power, class, gender, and economic oppression, and who struggle through their unique adolescent development in my safe classroom environment. .

I was trained in a school in South Africa then-called LEAP Science and Math School; training took place in their Life Orientation (LO) class. The leaders of LEAP believe that reclaiming humanity is a fundamental requirement for student learning and success in oppressive and psychologically destructive fragile communities, such as their townships and our urban pockets of poverty.

In South Africa, humanity is referred to as “Ubuntu,” and the purpose of the Life Orientation class at the LEAP schools is to reclaim “Ubuntu” - the sense of safety, control, comfort, freedom, choice, and a positive and constructive self-worth – humanity. LEAP explains that “Ubuntu” (humanity) has been lost all throughout the world and that this has destroyed many people’s souls; it has destroyed relationships with each other, and it has removed feelings of freedom, peace, creativity and the motivation to succeed from the lives of many people. Humanity, as explained by LEAP, is the key to being. LEAP believes that “Ubuntu” can be reclaimed through non-judgment, trust, honesty, caring, having the difficult conversations, growing, and changing.

In LEAP’s LO classes, students are modeled as to how to care for one another, hold one another accountable for choices, be responsible for their own choices, and how to give freely and unconditionally to others. In LEAP’s daily LO classes, students and facilitators have the difficult conversations about oppression, death, AIDS, gender issues, sexuality, drugs and alcohol, families, abandonment, career goals, etc. The entire school engages fully, deeply and honestly in those difficult conversations about oppression and all of the many ways it manifests in their society and schools. The students, faculty and staff courageously share their feelings, which are almost always connected to one form of oppression or another. They have these discussions daily in a safe space called Life Orientation.

*I was able to create a constructive, productive, positive and humane way to legitimize, validate, confront, stand up to and resolve the impacts of oppression my students faced.*

As a teacher-leader, I was able to incorporate LO into my school, when I returned to the United States in the fall of 2011. Unlike LO in LEAP in South Africa, which is held with staff as well, I have only been able to institutionalize it with students here in D.C. At one school I had it incorporated daily; at my current school, I am only able to have LO once a week in my class. As I continued to be trained by LEAP’s leaders via Skype, I was able to create a constructive, productive, positive and humane way to legitimize, validate, confront, stand up to and resolve the impacts of oppression my students faced here in America.

My version of LO has been an opportunity for my students here in the U.S. to develop and feel a sense of safety, control, comfort, freedom, choice, and a positive and constructive self-worth, which inspires their desire to achieve emotional and academic success. My students have been able to address their pain, break down their walls, and open paths to their success. These natural feelings of humanity are important to have in order to be stable, productive, motivated and successful in life, especially in school.

## **Outcomes**

This year, I taught a student I will call “Claude” to protect his identity. Claude slept in all of his classes, including mine. Teachers spoke terribly about him and made comments such as, “He’s such a loser; all he does is sleeps in class,” and “His classmates began saying the same things about him.” Although he trusted me enough to confide in me that his mother was diagnosed with cancer, he still slept in class. I reached out to his family, as I was concerned about the medical signs I saw. Though we spoke, no one took action.



Then, it happened. We were in our circle during class time. Claude never shared. But that day was different; Claude was moved to share. He raised his hand and said, “My dad is a drug dealer. They call him Billy Porter like the famous drug dealer Billy Porter. I used to live with my dad...” Right at that moment, Claude’s heart broke before us, and he began to wail and yell...loudly. None of us had ever seen him like this before; all he had ever done was sleep in all of his classes and stay to himself.

Several class members got up to console him, including the boys. But many other boys stayed in their seats, angry with their fists balled up, and tears streaming down their faces. They could feel him and his pain and anguish.

Claude continued through his screams and tears, “I used to live with him before I came here and before he was locked up! I’m scared! I don’t want anything to happen to my dad while he is locked up! And my mom has cancer! I don’t want her to die! She won’t talk about it. She just goes to the hospital a lot but I don’t know what’s going on. I’m scared.”

The yells continued. The class poured all of their love onto Claude, refusing to let him go.

### Lessons for Educators

Trusting the process means allowing the moment to be. It was raw for everyone. I did not rush through the feelings for the sake of time, for in this process, time is not the number one value; one’s feelings are, their humanity is most important. When time permitted, his classmates sat down, shared their stories of empathy, relatability, humanity.

From that day forward, Claude was no longer sleeping in his classes. He was smiling, energetic, and completing his assignments. His classmates saw him differently as well and he appreciated that they saw his humanity, versus seeing him as an “other”: a stupid, lazy thug from the hood. Those days were the heaviest and the lightest days, for at the end of the class, students have released heavy weights that have prevented them from laughing, seeing, feeling, expressing, soaring. And even though the students knew the answer beforehand, they would run up to me the next day, “Do we have LO today, Mama Kim?”

They look forward to every chance they get to reclaim their humanity in this fragile state.

**Kimberly A. Worthy** is an innovator, author, speaker, and educational consultant with a lifelong passion for empowering and educating communities she serves. A tireless advocate for educational excellence in urban schools, Kimberly is the 2009 District of Columbia State Teacher of the Year and the National Alliance of Black School Educators Marcus Foster Distinguished Educator Award for 2009. For the last 19 years, Kimberly has taught throughout the United States and South Africa, where she trained to become a Trauma-based educator. A native of the District of Columbia, Kimberly is a graduate of Spelman College and is a member of the National Alliance of Black School Educators, Pi Lambda Theta International Honor Society & Professional Association in Education, Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc., and the National Network of State Teachers of the Year.





## Concluding Thoughts

The power of an effective teacher can have a deep and far-reaching influence on students and their development. Educators can inspire deep thought about subject matter, expose minds to new ideas, and even help to shape decisions students make well into adulthood. Teachers can transform students' lives and change their futures.

**For children, education lives both within and beyond the school walls** (Beames, Higgins, Nicol 2012). A robust education rife with a full context of experiences helps students to connect with the world, understand a variety of perspectives, and ignite an ongoing love for learning. **These experiences are particularly critical for children** in fragile communities. **Yet enabling them requires** a community-based approach involving innovative strategies, fluid planning and decision making, a multifaceted support system, and, most importantly, teacher leaders willing to be boundary spanners and seek innovative strategies in the pursuit of change.

Educators who teach children in fragile communities face unique challenges that cannot be alleviated without a community-based approach involving innovative strategies, fluid planning and decision making, a multifaceted support system, and teacher leaders willing to be boundary spanners and seeking innovative strategies in the pursuit of change.

Through the case studies in this paper, teacher leaders collectively outlined and referenced six truths that undergird the dispositions and actions that are critical to continual progress and advancement in fragile communities:

- Valuing education beyond the classroom;
- Ensuring training and other ongoing support to educators;
- Attending to the importance of social-emotional learning;
- Honoring the importance of support for educators – several of the educators highlighted what a sense of isolation can do to discourage teacher retention;
- Appreciating a deep understanding of the cultural needs of students and the community; and
- Recognizing that teacher leaders are a key element of school improvement.

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Beames, S., Higgins, P. J., & Nicol, R. (2012). *Learning outside the classroom*. [electronic resource]: theory and guidelines for practice. Routledge. Retrieved from <http://search.ebscohost.com.proxy-remote.galib.uga.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=cat06564a&AN=uga.9919771399402931&site=eds-live>



Through these six truths, the teachers in this paper tell us that they need support from both inside and outside the school itself. They tell us that teachers and teacher leaders who are successful in working with fragile communities do the following:

- Advocate for time, tools, and training;
- Engage in ongoing training and support in culturally relevant teaching, trauma-informed practices through both formal and informal professional learning;
- Support the social and emotional needs of students as having those needs met are foundational in student success and to the prevention of the school-to-prison pipeline (Aspen Institute, 2018). (Aspen Institute, 2018).
- Create school-wide mentoring programs, allowing time and space for educators to reflect on their own biases and areas of growth and relationship-building;
- Enable data analysis, stakeholder engagement, and build advocacy skills;
- Engage and support one another in actions that are innovative and courageous.

### **How policy makers and system leaders can help**

System leaders/communities can help to provide teacher leaders time, tools, and training – particularly to support culturally-relevant and trauma-informed teaching. Time, tools, and training are especially limited in fragile communities.

Casey Bethel describes, space that: 1) equips teachers with best classroom practices, enabling them to adequately teach all types of students in all types of environments 2) celebrates and uplifts teachers in a way that fuels their passion and reminds them of the joys and possibilities in teaching and 3) empowers teachers to see themselves as change-agents capable of crafting a healthier society through emphasis on vital issues like equity and social justice can be pivotal in ensuring that teachers are prepared to work with fragile communities.

It is important to note that this sort of training requires tremendous resources that include time and tools, both of which are limited in fragile communities. These constraints become even tighter when working with fragile communities, as there are often additional tasks and demands placed on teachers (Ingersoll, Merrill, May 2016).

Fragile communities are often designated as “fragile” in part because of a lack of tools and resources (Center for Advancing Opportunity, 2019), even though they are an essential part of success. As such, educators who work in these communities must make the best use of the resources available to them and also elicit support from partners in education. Therefore, providing the time and space for educators to work collaboratively is essential.



## Final Thoughts

Teacher leaders recognize the power, impact, and necessity of teacher leadership as it distributes responsibility effectively and allows educators to work cooperatively within their communities toward the benefit of their students. Additionally, teacher leadership has been an outlet for the educators in fragile communities. It allows them opportunities to advocate for their students both inside and outside of their schools, dive into data to uncover root causes of trends and issues, and provides platforms to discuss the most critical issues with their colleagues, a crucial factor in continuing to engage in this work.

Good work in fragile communities persists and that is largely attributed to the relentless educators who serve those populations. For students who live in those communities, their greatest chance at success rests with the high-quality teachers, parents, caregivers, families, and community who literally and figuratively go beyond the boundaries of their prescribed duties. The educators included in this report are speaking their truth in love and in mutual respect. inspired and informed by their personal and professional lived experiences. They each reflect the multiplicities of wisdom, insight, devotion, and commitment towards excellence in their respective professional journeys.

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19 "Pursuing Social and Emotional Development Through a Racial Equity Lens: A Call to Action," The Aspen Institute, May 2018. <https://www.aspeninstitute.org/publications/pursuing-social-and-emotional-development-through-a-racial-equity-lens-acall-to-action>

20 "Pursuing Social and Emotional Development Through a Racial Equity Lens: A Call to Action," The Aspen Institute, May 2018. <https://www.aspeninstitute.org/publications/pursuing-social-and-emotional-development-through-a-racial-equity-lens-acall-to-action>

21 Ingersoll, R., Merrill, L., & May, H. (2016). Do Accountability Policies Push Teachers Out? Sanctions exacerbate the teacher turnover problem in low-performing schools--but giving teachers more classroom autonomy can help stem the flood. *Educational Leadership*, 73(8), 44.



## Appendix: Project Team

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### Jemelleh Coes

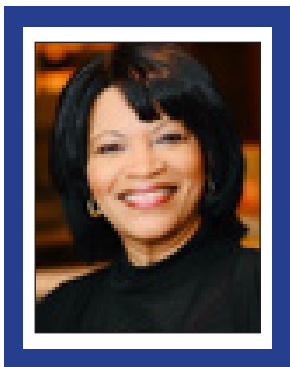


Dr. Jemelleh Coes is Georgia's 2014 Teacher of the Year. She spent six years teaching English/language arts and math in both the general and special education setting. She spent the last four years as a teacher educator at the University of Georgia, helping to prepare middle grades teachers. Most recently, Jemelleh has joined the faculty at the Institute on Human Development and Disability at the University of Georgia. She also serves as a teacher mentor for classroom teachers throughout the state.

Dr. Coes received her Bachelors and Masters at Georgia Southern University and her Ph.D. in Educational Theory and Practice with credentials in Educational Law and Policy and Disability Studies from the University of Georgia.

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### Jennifer Jiles



Jennifer Jiles is an award-winning communications leader, writer, content editor, producer, and college educator who has worked with more than 15 organizations in a range of industries as an employee or consultant. Her communications management and marketing management extends to nonprofit organizations and higher education institutions, including leadership roles with historically black colleges and universities.

Jennifer has been a published writer for more than 25 years and the diversity of her writing and editing spans corporate and institutional magazines, digital content, annual reports, speechwriting, annual reports, corporate communication, media, book editing, and reviewing college textbooks for publishing houses. Fueled by her passion for education and teaching, since 1999, Jennifer has been on faculty as an instructor of communication for several graduate and undergraduate courses at Georgia State

University, a major public research university. She also oversees graduate students' coursework-related research as part of her role as instructor.



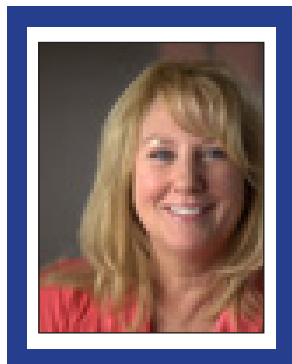
## Kemi Oyewole



Kemi A. Oyewole is a doctoral student and Institute for Education Sciences Fellow at the Stanford Graduate School of Education. She is interested in K12 educational policy implementation, organizational studies, and networks. Prior to arriving at Stanford, Kemi worked as a mathematics teacher in Boston Public Schools and completed the Boston Teacher Residency. She graduated from Spelman College with a Bachelor of Arts degree in economics and mathematics and earned a Master of Education degree from the University of Massachusetts, Boston. Kemi has been awarded the National Science Foundation Graduate Research Fellowship, Truman Scholarship, and Stanford Alumni Association Community Impact Award.

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## Peggy Stewart



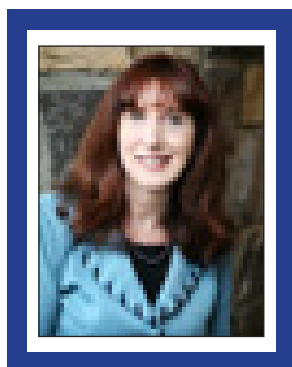
Peggy Stewart is the 2005 New Jersey State Teacher of the Year, a Princeton University Distinguished Secondary School Teacher, and a National Board Certified Teacher. Stewart is an independent education consultant and is a learning consultant for the Foundation for Educational Administration. She previously served as the Director of Professional Learning for the National Network of State Teachers of the Year and serves as Chief Learning Officer for Tall Poppy.

Ms. Stewart has extensive experience in designing and facilitating professional learning. She served as Chair of the New Jersey Professional Teaching Standards Board and is currently on the Board of Trustees for Learning Forward New Jersey. Stewart was a member of the Consortium that developed the Teacher Leader Model Standards and led the development of the National Network of State

Teachers of the Year's (NNSTOY) "Teachers Leading" professional learning courses that she facilitates with educators around the nation.

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## Katherine Bassett



Katherine Bassett is an education innovator and advocate. Throughout her career, she has advocated for students to receive the highest-quality of education regardless of their zip code or family circumstances. She is the CEO of Tall Poppy, LLC and the former President and CEO of NNSTOY.



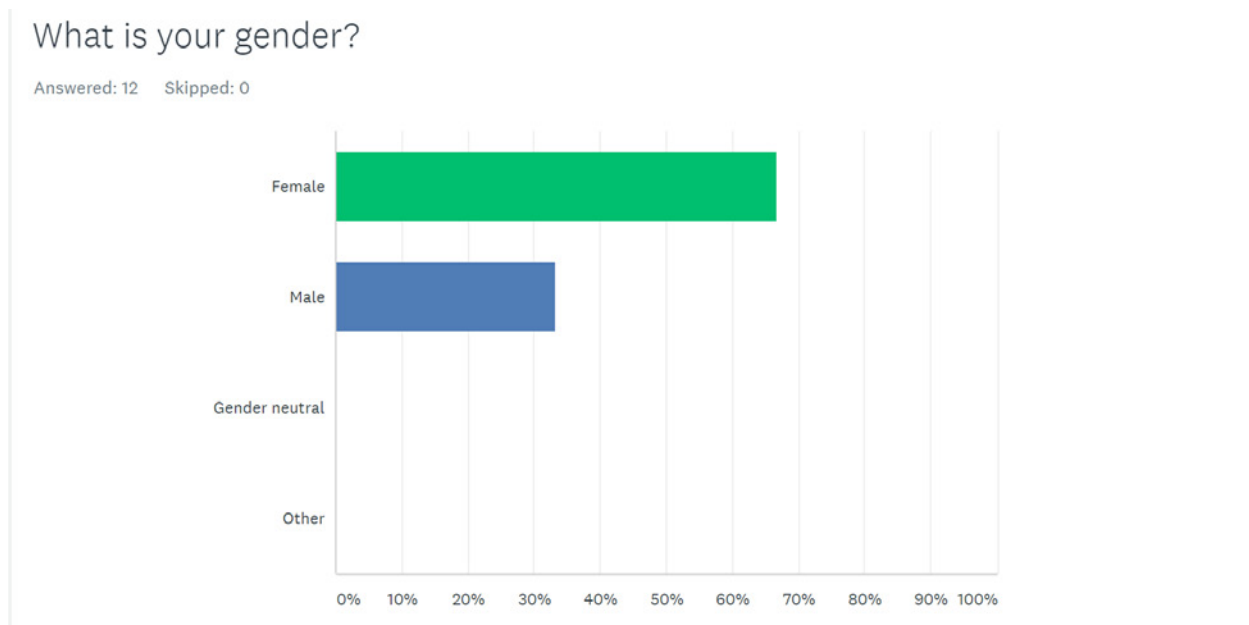
She served as Director of Policy and Partnerships for the Center for Educator Effectiveness at Pearson, and Director of Educator Relations at ETS. She has facilitated the work of a consortium to develop the Teacher Leader Model Standards and served on the committees that revised the InTASC standards and defined learning progressions for those standards. She co-facilitated the development of the Model Code of Educator Ethics and has led the development of the Teacher

Leadership Initiative competencies and Capstone project for the National Education Association, the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, and the Center for Teaching Quality. Bassett spent 26 years in the classroom as a middle school librarian and served as New Jersey's 2000 State Teacher of the Year.

## Appendix B: Demographic Data

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All 12 contributors completed the demographic survey. The results are below

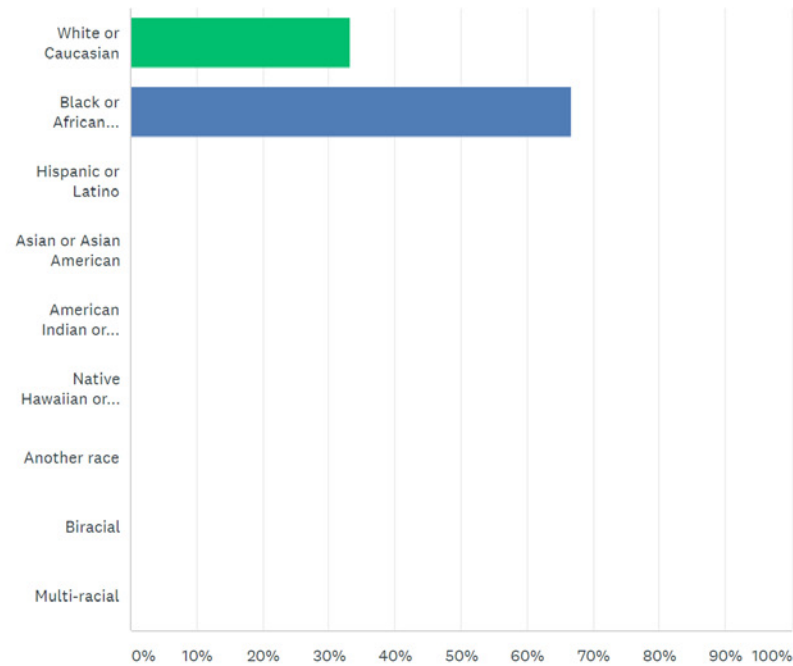


There were 8 females and 4 males contributing.



## How do you identify your race/ethnicity?

Answered: 12 Skipped: 0

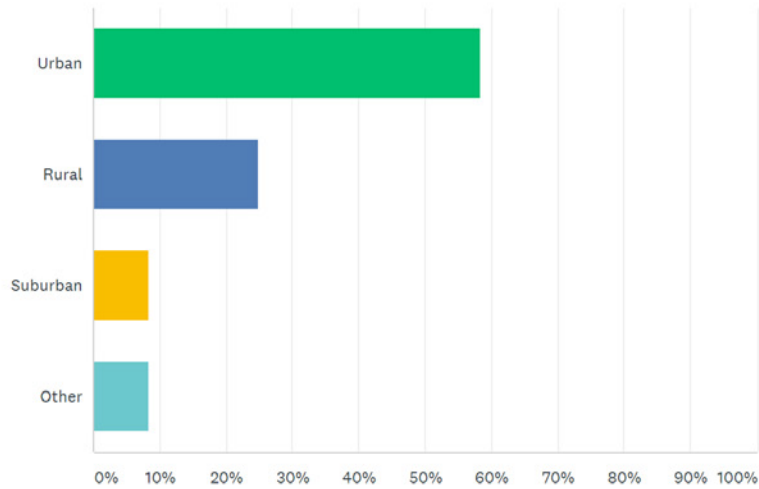


| ANSWER CHOICES                            | RESPONSES |
|---|-----------|
| White or Caucasian                        | 33.33% 4  |
| Black or African American                 | 66.67% 8  |
| Hispanic or Latino                        | 0.00% 0   |
| Asian or Asian American                   | 0.00% 0   |
| American Indian or Alaska Native          | 0.00% 0   |
| Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander | 0.00% 0   |
| Another race                              | 0.00% 0   |
| Biracial                                  | 0.00% 0   |
| Multi-racial                              | 0.00% 0   |
| <b>TOTAL</b>                              | <b>12</b> |

There were 4 contributors who identified as White and 8 who identified as Black or African American. No other racial or ethnic categories were selected by contributors.

## Which best describes your school setting?

Answered: 12 Skipped: 0



| ANSWER CHOICES | RESPONSES |
|----------------|-----------|
| Urban          | 58.33% 7  |
| Rural          | 25.00% 3  |
| Suburban       | 8.33% 1   |
| Other          | 8.33% 1   |
| <b>TOTAL</b>   | <b>12</b> |

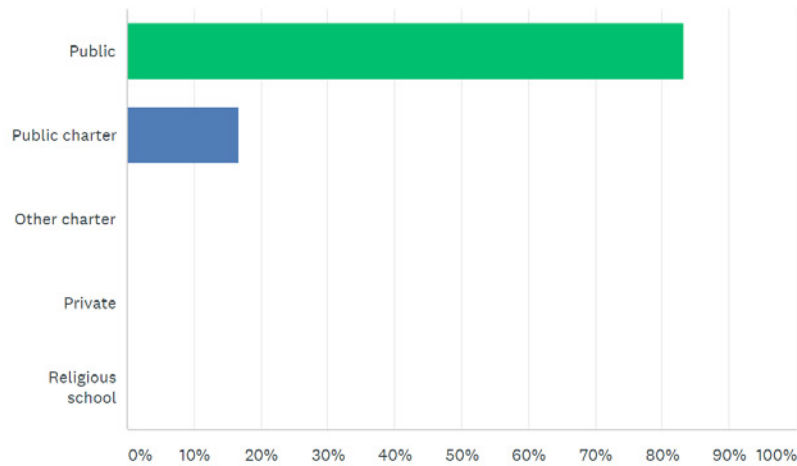
The contributors identified their school settings as:

- Urban 7
- Rural 3
- Suburban 1
- Other 1



## Which best describes your school structure?

Answered: 12 Skipped: 0

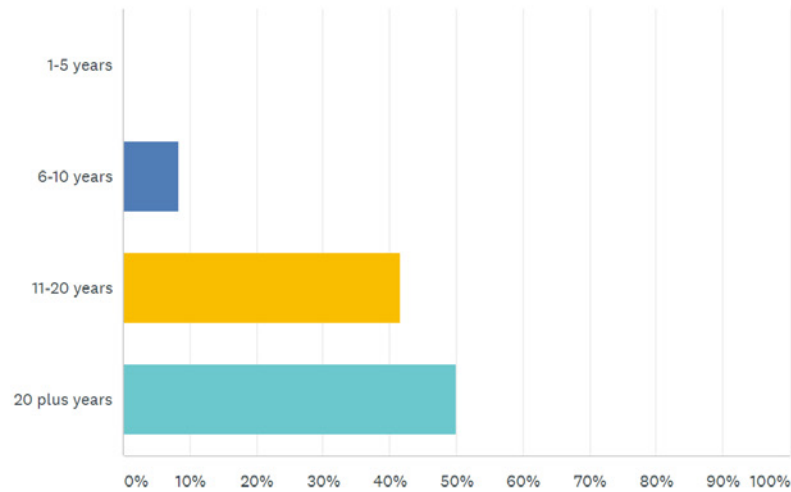


| ANSWER CHOICES     | RESPONSES |
|--------------------|-----------|
| ▼ Public           | 83.33% 10 |
| ▼ Public charter   | 16.67% 2  |
| ▼ Other charter    | 0.00% 0   |
| ▼ Private          | 0.00% 0   |
| ▼ Religious school | 0.00% 0   |
| <b>TOTAL</b>       | <b>12</b> |

10 contributors identified their school structure as public and 2 as public charter.

## For how many years have your been professionally working in education?

Answered: 12 Skipped: 0



| ANSWER CHOICES  | RESPONSES |
|-----------------|-----------|
| ▼ 1-5 years     | 0.00% 0   |
| ▼ 6-10 years    | 8.33% 1   |
| ▼ 11-20 years   | 41.67% 5  |
| ▼ 20 plus years | 50.00% 6  |
| <b>TOTAL</b>    | <b>12</b> |

The majority of our contributors have been professionally involved in education for more than 20 years. 6 chose this category, 5 chose 11-20 years, and 1 6-10 year. No contributor selected 1-5 years.



## In what state do you currently teach?

Answered: 12 Skipped: 0

Contributors identified their current employment as being located in the following states:

|                |   |
|----------------|---|
| Arizona        | 1 |
| Georgia        | 3 |
| Maryland       | 1 |
| Minnesota      | 2 |
| Montana        | 2 |
| North Carolina | 1 |
| Texas          | 1 |
| Virginia       | 1 |

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What subject area(s) do you teach? If you do not teach a subject area, please list your current position.

Answered: 12 Skipped: 0

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Our contributors currently work in a variety of educational positions. These include:

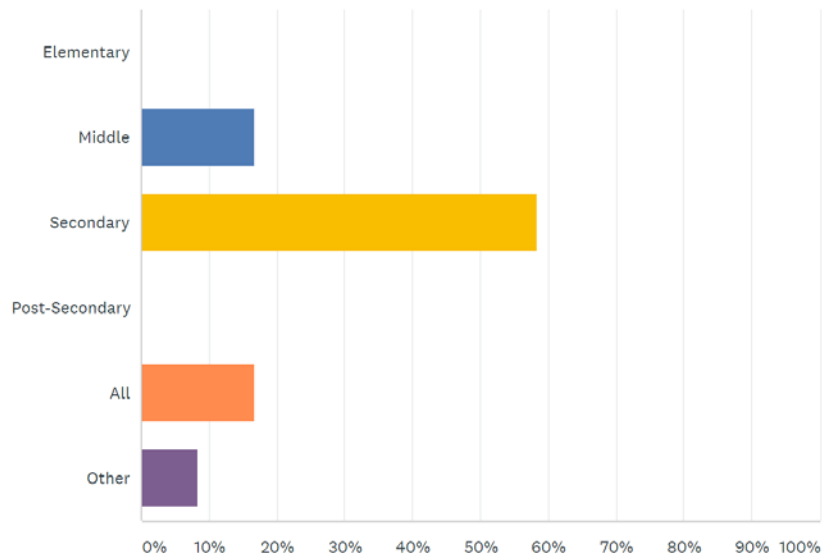
|  |   |
|--|---|
| Social Studies/History                     | 2 |
| English Language Arts                      | 2 |
| Science                                    | 1 |
| Instructional Coach                        | 1 |
| Grants Manager                             | 1 |
| Associate Professor, Teacher Education     | 1 |
| Self-contained Special Education MIID/MOID | 1 |



|   |   |
|---|---|
| Racial Equity Instructional Coach             | 1 |
| Director of Instructional Services and Policy | 1 |
| P-12 Professional Development Specialist      | 1 |

### Which best describes the developmental level of the students you teach?

Answered: 12 Skipped: 0



Our contributors self-identified as teaching the following developmental levels of students:

|                |   |
|----------------|---|
| Elementary     | 0 |
| Middle         | 2 |
| Secondary      | 7 |
| Post-secondary | 0 |

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## Center for Educational Opportunity

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*This research study was supported by a research grant from  
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