



# *The Pennsylvania* **ADMINISTRATOR**

**EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP**

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Directors -  
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✓ ***2022 PA  
Educational  
Leadership  
Summit -  
Register Today! -  
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***Plus...PA Teacher Shortage,  
School Therapy Dogs & Legal Corner***

Magazine of the Pennsylvania  
Principals Association

**WINTER 2022**



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*The Pennsylvania Administrator* is published three times a year in the Winter, Spring and Fall by the Pennsylvania Educational Leadership Foundation and the Pennsylvania Principals Association, 122 Valley Road, Enola, PA 17025. (717) 732-4999. It is entered as third class mail in Dauphin County, PA.

Articles printed in the publication may be divergent in the point of view or controversial, but the Pennsylvania Principals Association feels that members can best be served through discussion and debate of issues. The articles published in *The Pennsylvania Administrator* represent the ideas and/or beliefs of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the ideas and views of the Pennsylvania Principals Association unless so stated. Paid advertisements printed in the publication do not denote endorsement by the association.

This publication is designed to provide accurate and authoritative information in regard to the subject matter covered. It is printed with the understanding that the association is not engaged in rendering legal, accounting or other professional services through the publication. If legal or other professional services are required, Pennsylvania Principals Association members should contact the state office or the services of other competent professionals. Printed in the U.S.A. *Postmaster*: Send address changes to Pennsylvania Administrator, 122 Valley Road, Enola, PA 17025. Copyright 2006 by the Pennsylvania Principals Association.

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*Editor's Note ...*

It is a *new* year, and after the challenges the past two years have thrown our way, we can only hope that it is a promising year filled with new opportunities and amazing possibilities. If you are seeking to expand your knowledge and grow your learning, there's no need to look any further. The PA Principals Association offers numerous professional development opportunities for members to earn Act 45 PIL credits, including totally online Micro-Credential courses (see page 20) and in-person PIL workshops that we can bring to your district. Additionally, the **PA Educational Leadership Summit** is being held at the Lancaster Convention Center from August 7-9, 2022 (see page 11) and our **LEAD22 Conference** is scheduled for October 16-18 at Kalahari Resorts Poconos (see page 17). **In the near future, you will receive information on how to register for both events or visit [www.paprincipals.org](http://www.paprincipals.org) to register and for more information.**



Don't miss our regular features in this issue including *Legal Corner* and *READERS FOR LEADERS*, as well as articles covering topics such as PA's teacher shortage, school therapy dogs and school threat assessments. There is still time to write and submit an article for consideration in our upcoming spring theme issue, ***Student and Staff Mental Health & Social Emotional Learning***. **The deadline to submit an article is March 11, 2022.** For article specifications and criteria, go to: [www.paprincipals.org](http://www.paprincipals.org) and choose **Publications** from the Main Menu, select **The Pennsylvania Administrator** and click on **How to Submit an Article**.

Enjoy this issue!

Sheri L. Thompson, Editor

**PA Principals Podcast - 3 in a Quarter**

**New Episodes on 1<sup>st</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> of Each Month!**

The Pennsylvania Principals Association's podcast, "**3 in a Quarter**," was launched in January and new episodes will be released twice a month. The podcast focuses on **three issues or takeaways** each episode and is intended to be only **15 minutes in length** (or a quarter of an hour).



The podcast is meant to meet the needs of busy principals by allowing them to tune in during their commute, workout, etc. Please Like our podcast and Subscribe to it by searching for **3 in a Quarter** and clicking on **Subscribe**. Remember to use the hashtag (**Did You 3 in a Quarter?**): **#DY3Q**

Visit the link below to listen to our podcast:

<https://www.paprincipals.org/resources/pa-principals-association-podcast-3-in-a-quarter/>

**DATES TO REMEMBER**

**August 2022**

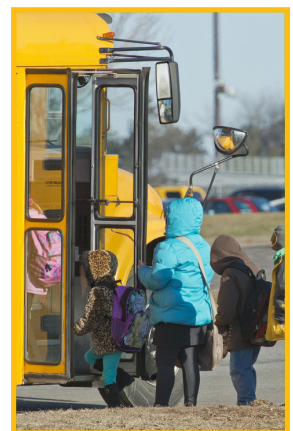
7-9 ..... PA Educational Leadership Summit  
Lancaster County Convention Center  
Lancaster, Pennsylvania

**October 2022**

16-18 ..... PA Principals Association LEAD22  
Conference  
Kalahari Resorts Poconos  
Pocono Manor, Pennsylvania

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## REGULAR FEATURES

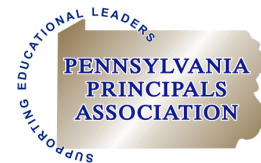
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Michael I. Levin, Esq.



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## The Numbers Don't Lie

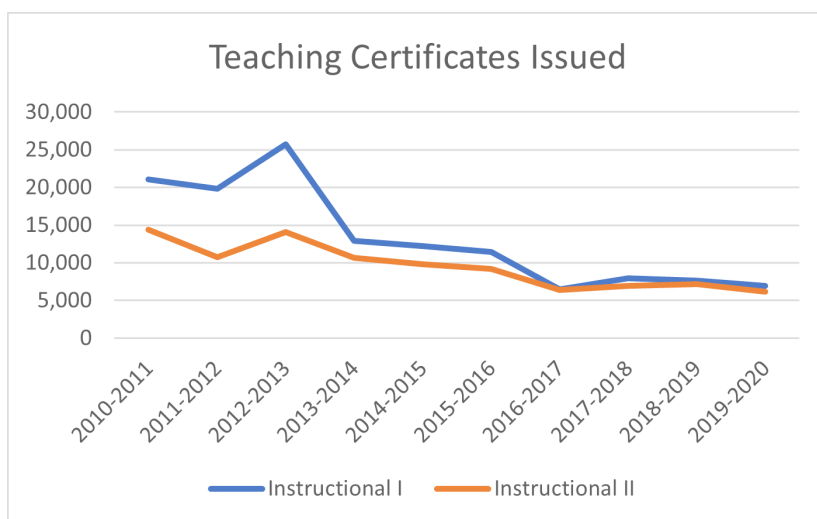


By Dr. Eric C. Eshbach, PA Principals Association Executive Director

*"The numbers don't lie – there continues to be a problem, and it's getting worse, not better."* Janee Briesemeister, a senior policy advocate for a consumer advocacy group, made this statement in 2005 when reporting on the number of complaints about cell phone service. She went on to say, "The staggering increase in complaints is further evidence that reform is needed in the wireless phone market so consumers can get a fair shake." She noticed a 38% increase in the number of complaints filed between 2003 and 2004. Of course, she was spot-on in her assessment as the number of complaints has sky-rocketed over the years thanks to unwanted robocalls, declines in customer service satisfaction and the fact that everyone now has a cell phone. I would imagine Ms. Briesemeister might attribute a similar statement to the crisis Pennsylvania is experiencing in terms of the number of educators being certified in our commonwealth.

Statistics from the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) indicate that there was a 67% decrease in the number of Instructional I certificates issued when comparing a 10-year period from 2010 through 2020. (See Figure 1) That includes a 50% decrease in one year (2013-2014) and another 43.5% decrease in another year (2016-2017). It should come as no surprise that we see a similar decrease of 57% in the number of Instructional II certificates issued in that same 10-year period. These numbers are alarming, but not surprising to those of you who are trying to hire teachers. Notice that the numbers reported (the most up to date on the PDE website) are PRE-PANDEMIC numbers. I am confident we will see this trend continue and that the quote I opened this column with will hold true: *It's getting worse, not better.*

Figure 1



Principals report the challenges of finding properly certified candidates to fill vacant teaching positions, especially in certain historically hard-to-staff certificate areas (physics, chemistry, special education, foreign languages, etc.). Additionally, past efforts associated with finding the best candidate or the perfect fit have been sacrificed as hiring for quality has given way to simply finding "a warm body with the proper certificate." However, the challenges principals face extend beyond the hiring of teaching staff. These challenges include finding the next assistant principal or even mentoring someone to replace them as building leader upon their resignation or retirement. And we know the number of individuals walking away from the principalship continues to rise.

The data from PDE referenced above, also shows a decrease in Administrative I certificates between 2010-2011 and 2019-2020 (38%). It is indicative of the same problem we are having with teachers: The decrease in certificates issued has and will continue to result in a shallow pool of candidates for an increasing number of jobs. Most revealing, however, is that on average, over that 10-year period, only one-quarter of those who have earned their Level I Administrative Certificate convert those to Level II (i.e., they have completed the necessary requirements over three years to earn their Level II Administrative Certificate). (See Figure 2 on next page) This means that 75% of those who have earned the right to be a principal, choose not to do so. Perhaps something is disillusioning candidates to actually take the step into the principalship. I'm sure many candidates realize that they are not cut out for the position. Realistically speaking, there are many who earn a

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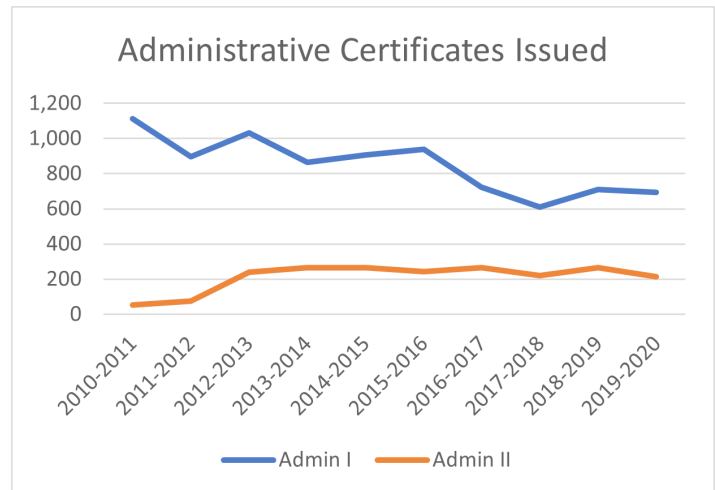
Level I certificate who do not have the talent or fortitude to do these jobs. However, “The numbers don’t lie – there continues to be a problem, and it’s getting worse, not better.” Our ability to find and retain high-quality principals will be even more difficult than it has been in the past.

In my opinion, this data provides an opportunity for principals to reflect on the problems associated with the struggle to find school leaders as well as solutions to preserve and nurture our profession. First, this data is indicative of the fact that qualified candidates are disillusioned with what the school leader position offers. You have, no doubt, heard the comment, “I wouldn’t want your job!” Why is that? Perhaps, it is the fact that as a teacher, they may make more money on a per diem basis, have their summers free and have the protection and support of a union. We, as an association, need to focus our efforts on pushing for changes to the law governing principal compensation (Act 93 of 1984) and improve it to include rights and protections. Private meetings held between PA Principals Association leadership and key legislative leaders cause me to believe that we can get real and lasting change to Act 93 accomplished in the near future.

Second, this data shows me that we need to make a conscious effort to identify the next cadre of school leaders. Just because someone is a great teacher, does not mean that they will be a great (or even adequate) leader. The qualities of those positions are starkly different. This means, it is necessary to be cognizant of what those qualities are and who on your staff possesses those qualities. There are many resources that can help you determine and encourage leadership among your staff. Some important books in my understanding, and fine-tuning of these skills, are *Leading at the Edge*, by Dennis N.T. Perkins; *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership*, by John Maxwell; and *Strengths Finder 2.0*, by Tom Rath.

Third, we need to stop bad-mouthing the principalship and administration in general. These positions have never been easy, yet each of us was encouraged to become an

Figure 2



administrator because someone in our professional circle knew what it meant to be a principal. Someone saw in you the potential and leadership qualities that caused them to believe that you would fit wonderfully into this rewarding profession. When I was a teacher, my principal encouraged me to keep trying even when I didn’t get the first position to which I had applied. He didn’t say things like, “This job is awful, and we need more people like you to join us in the mire.” Instead, he said, “I see potential in you, and you have what it takes to lead.”

We are well aware of the importance strong school leadership has on student achievement. In times of crisis, we cannot afford to squander opportunities to build leaders and encourage our most talented to join us in this seminal work. While we can expect challenging times thanks to the data regarding the number who seek certification, we must prepare to meet that challenge by ensuring there is a next generation of high-quality school leaders. *Take some time this week to identify the strong leaders who surround you and encourage those individuals to join us.*

## Submit a Review for Magazine Feature... READERS FOR LEADERS

We are seeking educational book reviews for our newest magazine column, “**READERS FOR LEADERS**,” but only for books that you have found valuable and would “recommend” to your colleagues. Educators are constantly looking for new ideas to use and share, but do not always have time to read new books. It is our hope that this column will provide you with the latest in contemporary readings.

Book reviews should be no more than 350-400 words, written using APA style and must be submitted as a Word document (with a brief biographical sketch and a photo of the author). Authors may not be the book’s author since the purpose of the review is **to provide information and NOT to sell books!** In addition, authors **MUST include a written statement of any connection to the publication being reviewed. For example:** *The book being reviewed is part of a book selection for a principal certification course (OR...Administrator Professional Development). I have no affiliation with the author(s) or publishing company(ies) of the book(s) in the submitted book review(s).*

**The deadline to submit a book review for the next magazine is March 11, 2022.**

# Meet Your PA Principals Association Board of Directors

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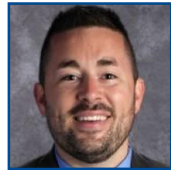
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(E) - Elementary  
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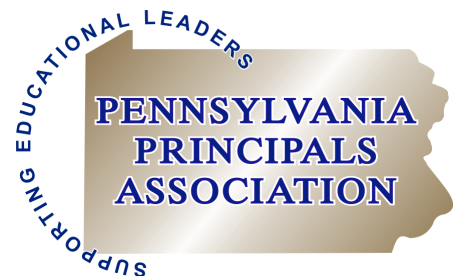


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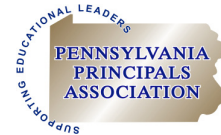


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# From the Desk of the Assistant Executive Director

## Never Stop Learning



By Dr. Michael S. Snell,  
PA Principals Association  
Assistant Executive Director

We enter this world inquisitive and with a sense of wonderment. As a small child, we take in everything in front of us – people’s faces, smells, tastes and Elmo! We enter school and learn even more. Next, our professional career kicks off with much to learn until it fades for some. Why is that? Why do people think that when they achieve a certain status or position, learning is not necessary or worse, “I don’t have enough time.” Here is the rub with that thinking:

- **People are counting on you!**
  - **Personally** - Your family needs you to be the *best you – you can be*. They need you to learn about parenting children, small engine maintenance and teaching a child to drive! Your family watches your every move. How do you continue to grow and learn at home by yourself and with your family? What are you modeling for them?
  - **Professionally** - Those whom you lead professionally are counting on you to never stop learning. Leadership is a gift. One that comes with numerous responsibilities and a need to be a little better each day and each year. How do you model lifelong learning for your faculty and staff each year? What are you modeling for them?

- **Don’t play small**

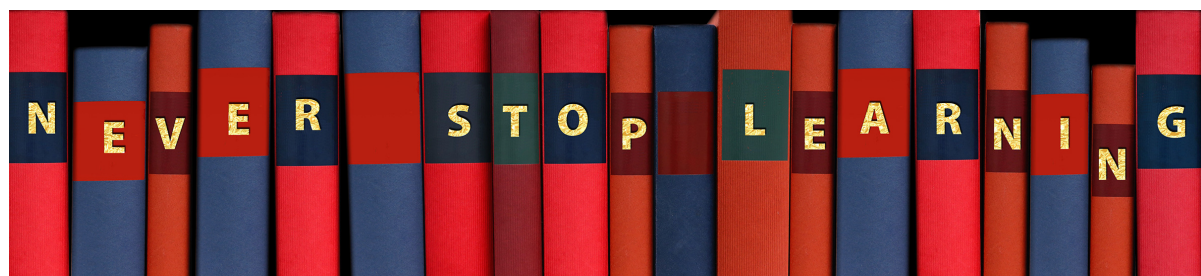
- **A favorite quote of mine from Marianne Williamson’s poem, *Our Deepest Fear*:**

*“Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be? Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won’t feel insecure around you.”*

- **Your playing small does not serve the world.** You matter, and you make an impact both at home and at your school. How you grow your impact is up to you and your perennial desire to be better. Stand up and be counted, whether at home or in the office.

How to keep learning? Start with these three things:

1. **Read** daily
  - Blogs, books, eBooks, join a book club. Consider reading 30 minutes each morning or prior to bed. Make it a habit and stick to it. You will be amazed at how many books you can read if you spend just 30 minutes a day...reading! As a leader, it is your job to see around the corners, see what is coming next and prepare. Good ideas come from reading. And reading for pleasure counts, too!
2. **Learn** something new
  - What is something you wish you could learn? Music, a craft, a language? About a year ago, it was woodworking for me. Find a community and dive in. I bought my first miter saw, table saw and other tools and signed up for an online class that taught me basic woodworking. You are NEVER too old to learn something new. Think of it as exercising your brain while improving your memory and fighting off the effects of aging.



3. **Collaborate** with others to learn
- Finally, work with others to learn, read and grow. A community of like-minded people will serve you well as you grow older. This can be your family, friends or folks you meet in an online community or just your community. There is positive peer pressure and enjoyment that comes from teaching and learning from and with others.

What will you do now? What is the next actionable step you can take to read, learn and collaborate? Is there a book

club at work, home, church or elsewhere? Write down your next step and deliver on being a better you! Tell your spouse, significant other, children and colleagues. Take the lead, if necessary! *Never stop learning!*

I am honored to be the Association's new Assistant Executive Director and work to support educational leaders across the state. A passion and major focus of my role is **professional development**. Please reach out to me at [msnell@papprincipals.org](mailto:msnell@papprincipals.org) with thoughts and suggestions as to how the Association can support you and provide quality professional development to our members!

## Submit an Article for The Pennsylvania Administrator: Spring 2022 THEME Issue

### *“Student and Staff Mental Health & Social Emotional Learning”*

The Pennsylvania Principals Association is seeking articles for its **Spring 2022 THEME issue of *The Pennsylvania Administrator* magazine. The theme for this issue is: “Student and Staff Mental Health & Social Emotional Learning.” Articles based on this theme will be considered for publication in this issue by the Editorial Review Board.**

*Due to COVID-19, social unrest and other prevalent issues, our schools and communities have experienced vast disruptions to their security and the structure of their daily routines. As a result, our students and staff may have experienced or may be experiencing a myriad of strong emotions, as well as stress, anxiety and/or depression. We recognize this and want to know how you are handling these mental health and social emotional issues in your school.*

Your article should include any (or a combination) of the following:

- Stress and anxiety
- Trauma-informed practices
- Mental health of students
- Mental health of staff
- Social Emotional Learning (SEL) best practices
- Crisis intervention
- Self-care

**Effective immediately:** Submissions that are sent to us as scholarly papers (dissertations) will be returned for a rewrite before being reviewed by the Editorial Review Board. In addition, articles that are determined to require extensive editing, or are not in APA style, will also be returned for revisions before being considered for publication.

For additional article criteria and specifications, go to: [www.papprincipals.org/publications/the-pennsylvania-administrator/how-to-submit-an-article/](http://www.papprincipals.org/publications/the-pennsylvania-administrator/how-to-submit-an-article/)

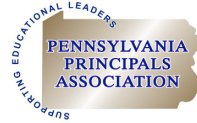
To submit an article, please send to Sheri Thompson at [sherit@papprincipals.org](mailto:sherit@papprincipals.org) by March 11, 2022.

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# Stress & Anxiety Management Series for PA Principals



*The PA Principals Association and Campus Outreach Services have partnered to bring you three individual sessions led by expert presenters on how to effectively handle and manage stress and anxiety in your daily lives.*

## **“The Balancing Act: Managing Stress & Anxiety”**

We all know that it is not just students who are suffering from the unparalleled stress occurring during this time of COVID-19. What is needed is a brief, but practical, course in how to effectively handle the stress and anxiety administrators now face. This workshop will be offered in three, 30-minute blocks to ensure participants have time to practice the many ideas and methods presented.

*Session 1 was held on January 10, 2022 and Session 2 was held on February 15, 2022.*

**Session 3: Monday, March 14, 2022 at 4:30 p.m. EST**

**Presenter: Jonathan Robinson - “Quick Ways to Handle Stress”**

***Master life-long methods to reduce stress in under two minutes.***

- Time and task management strategies and routines to best balance professional and personal responsibilities.
- How to reenergize and bring joy to your faculty and staff.

**Registration: <https://attendee.gotowebinar.com/register/9039376880582311435>**

**For session description and presenter information, visit: <https://www.paprinincipals.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Expert-Presenters-stress-anxiety-workshops.pdf>**

*Please Note: No recording or photography is permitted in any of the sessions.*

### ***Free Resources and Programs from our friends at Campus Outreach Services.***

#### **Complimentary access to Wellness-Connect Series.**

- Monthly 23-minute web sessions with national authors and experts
- Topics include stress, social media, bullying, substance use, sexual harassment and diversity
- Perfect for Professional Development, Student Leaders and Parents

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##### **Sample Contents:**

- Risk Management Templates
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- Healthy Relationship, Sexual Misconduct and Title IX Resources
- Health Education Materials
- Wellness Curricula and Facilitation Guides
- Complimentary Peer Leadership Training Sessions

***Free for the first 250 to register.*** Sign up with your preferred email address here:

**<https://campusoutreachservices.com/newsletter-sign-up/>**

# Pennsylvania's Teacher Shortage: What, Why and How to Fix It

By Dr. Gregory A. Taranto



**About the Author: Gregory A. Taranto, Ph.D.,** is closing in on his second decade as the principal of Canonsburg Middle School (CMS), Canon-McMillan School District. He is also an adjunct professor for Pennsylvania Western University - California in the Department of Secondary Education and Administrative Leadership. CMS is a state and national Schools to Watch Middle School and was recently named a best middle school in U.S. News and World Report.

Dr. Taranto was the PA Principal Association's 2012 Middle School Principal of the Year, the recipient of the PA Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development's 2012 Research and Publication Award and the recipient of the PA Principals Association's 2013 Frank S. Manchester Award for Excellence in Journalism. Additionally, he served on Gov. Wolf's Education Transition Team and on the PA Principals Association's Editorial Review Board.

It is safe to say that all school districts in Pennsylvania and across the country are facing a teacher shortage. Once a problem for states where teacher pay was far below the national average is now a problem in every state due to a myriad of reasons. If you are a principal and reading this, then you have experienced not having enough qualified candidates for open positions or scrambling around in the early morning hours to fill coverages.

## Teacher shortage

Every state in our union is seeing a record shortage in the teaching profession (Buttner, 2021; Garcia & Weis, 2019). This shortage has a dramatic trickle-down effect on student learning and achievement (University of Massachusetts Global, 2020). Teachers in more specialty fields such as mathematics and science are even more difficult to find. Here are some alarming statistics (Modan, 2021):

- 48% of 6,000 teachers surveyed in November said they are considering changing jobs;
- 34% changed careers to leave teaching in the past month; and
- 11% considered taking a leave.

In the United States, more teachers leave their profession than any other profession with over 8% leaving annually. Let us compare that to other countries that we like to compare to as it relates to student achievement...Finland and Singapore who see only 3-4% year attrition rates. In some areas of the country, teacher attrition is nearly 50% over a five-year period (Taranto, 2011).

These high attrition rates result in positions going unfilled creating larger class sizes and a reduction in course offerings especially in those math and science areas (i.e., physics, chemistry, etc.).

## Why did this happen?

In order to find solutions to this problem, we must explore how we got here in the first place. Unfortunately, it is just now that people outside of our profession are seeing the impact of many years of poor decision-making as it relates to the field of education.

Evaluation systems that bog down educators with paperwork and regulation have been a failure. A recent study has confirmed what many educators in the field already knew which is the multi-billion-dollar effort to reform education through standardized testing, using

growth measures and teacher reform have resulted in a null effect in moving student achievement (Bleiberg, Brunner, Harbatkin, Kraft & Springer, 2021). In fact, one can argue that it has had a negative impact. Pennsylvania's teacher evaluation system (which has changed yet again), creates a paperwork nightmare for administrators and teachers. This valuable time takes away from quality lesson planning, student engagement and professional



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development. We spend more time justifying what we are doing than doing what we are supposed to doing!

Compensation to attract professionals to the field of education is simply lacking. Teacher compensation has declined relative to those college-educated peers since the early 1990s (University of Massachusetts Global, 2020).

The manner in which our educators are treated has steadily declined over the years resulting in poor morale and discouraging our youth from the profession. Again, in countries such as Finland, Singapore and China, educators are held to the highest regard. In the United States, we are ranked 16<sup>th</sup> which is in about the middle of developed countries as far as respect and support for educators (Strauss, 2018).

### How can we fix it?

Federal and state legislators have to first recognize there is a problem then understand their decision or the predecessors' decisions have greatly contributed to this problem.

First, while there has been a trend for less emphasis on standardized testing, it is still there and takes up a lot of time. More importantly, it has narrowed our teachers' foci with a generation of teachers who grew up with NCLB, believing standardized testing is the end all, be all. We have to move to teaching a holistic approach to education. This frees teachers up by allowing some autonomy to be creative and understanding all aspects of education (the arts, wellness, social studies, etc.) are just as important as math and reading.

Standardized testing can still exist but making it a piece of the puzzle instead of the entire puzzle is the goal. If we can determine college placement on a three-hour SAT or ACT, then certainly we can develop an end-of-year exam in that same time period. By doing so, we are giving back weeks of valued instructional time to our students, and ultimately, why teachers go into the profession.

“**If we are able to boost new teacher pay, then we will more likely attract more people to go into the profession.**”

Next, simplify the educator evaluation system. Unfortunately, Act 13 did not simplify Pennsylvania's evaluation system and has created more questions than answers. A more efficient system that respects and trusts local decisions will result in more time spent on lesson planning and professional development. Most importantly, it will boost morale creating an

environment of trust and ambition.

Third, more funding for school districts will go a long way. If we are able to boost new teacher pay, then we will more likely attract more people to go into the profession. The additional funding can also help reduce classroom sizes which equates to more attention to individual students. How can this be done? It does not have to be through raising taxes. In Pennsylvania, we have more cyber charter schools than any other state. It is time for genuine cyber charter school reform to determine the actual cost to educate a cyber student. This will result in hundreds of thousands of dollars going back to many school districts.

Finally, new teachers need intense support when entering the field. Organized and sustained teacher induction programs have been proven to help reduce teacher attrition (Ingersoll, 2003; Taranto, 2011). Induction programs that involve sustained professional development and an assignment of a qualified mentor will help new teachers establish secure footing in our field.

While this list seems like an oversimplification of the solution, it is achievable and can certainly spark the conversation for real change to address our teacher shortage problem. Please reach out to your local, state and federal legislators. *It is time for a real conversation.*

For further information, please contact Dr. Taranto at [tarantog@cmsd.k12.pa.us](mailto:tarantog@cmsd.k12.pa.us)

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## FEATURING KEYNOTE SPEAKERS:

**Ruby K. Payne, Ph.D.**

[www.ahaprocess.com](http://www.ahaprocess.com)



**Dr. Ruby K. Payne** is the authority on working across economic classes to create sustainable communities where everyone can live well. As a former high school teacher and principal, she understands the unique challenges facing schools and communities around the country. In addition, her efforts have achieved a global reach.

After changing the conversation in education to focus on poverty, Dr. Payne's work expanded into social services, criminal justice, healthcare, the workplace and emotional poverty.

Two recent publications won Independent Publisher Book Awards: **Emotional Poverty in All Demographics** and **Before You Quit Teaching**. She has written or co-authored many other books, including **Bridges Out of Poverty**. Her book, **A Framework for Understanding Poverty**, has sold 1.8 million copies and continues to help people achieve success.

In 1996, Dr. Payne founded aha! Process, a publishing and consulting firm which has received awards for its publications. Dr. Payne has also published books with Solution Tree Press and the Association for Middle Level Education.

She lives in Texas with her husband, Tee. She loves having time with her son, Tom, and his husband, Carlos, as well as Tee's children and grandchildren.

**Muriel Summers**

[www.leaderinme.org](http://www.leaderinme.org)



For more than two decades, **Muriel Summers** was at the helm of A.B. Combs Elementary. The highly diverse school is featured across the world for its innovations in leadership. It carries the honor of being the world's first Leader in Me school, with Muriel as co-author of the book by the same name. Currently, 5,000 schools in over 50 countries are replicating and building upon Muriel and her staff's leadership model, which sees all adults—and ALL students—as leaders.

Following Muriel's recent retirement from Wake County Public Schools, she joined FranklinCovey Education as its lead Global Ambassador. She presents at international, national, state and local educational conferences on topics such as: Reinventing Leadership One Teacher, One Student at a Time; Making a Difference in Students' Social-Emotional Lives; and Empowering Students and Teachers from the Inside Out.

Muriel's school was named a National Blue Ribbon School of Excellence by the U.S. Department of Education and a Number One National Magnet School in America (only school recognized twice). Muriel also received numerous prestigious awards including The Order of the Long Leaf Pine, awarded by the Governor of North Carolina as the highest honor a North Carolinian can receive, as well as Principal and Teacher of the Year.

Muriel is the proud mother of two children, and is enjoying her new role as grandmother.

# BOOK REVIEW:



## *Five Practices for Equity-Focused School Leadership*

*Reviewed By: Dr. Susan M. Sibert and Dr. DeAnna M. Laverick*



Do all students in your school have equitable access to opportunities, services and education?

Any principal would want to answer that important question with an empathic “Yes!” Yet the answer may not be a simple “yes” or “no.” In fact, it might be “I don’t know.” Published by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development in 2021, *Five Practices for Equity-Focused School Leadership* is a timely guide for school leaders who seek a roadmap to making educational equity changes in their schools. Four educators, Sharon I. Radd, Gretchen Givens Generett, Mark Anthony Gooden and George Theoharis, formed a collegial work group in 2013 to discuss and study how school leadership practices can purposely impact educational equity. While the authors’ work culminated into the writing of this book, their work relationships over a period of

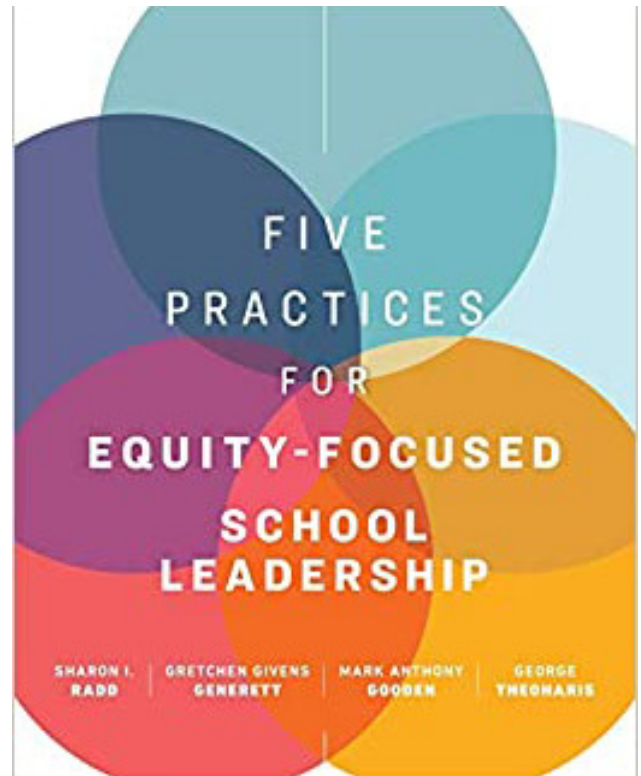
about seven years reflect one of the five effective school leadership practices, which is developing leadership teams. The authors contend that a traditional leadership model of decision-making, all-knowing, leader-in-charge is not effective in equity-focused school change.

Because many of Pennsylvania’s schools have limited forms of diversity, some school leaders may think the topic of equity-focused school leadership is not applicable to their schools.

However, because all schools have some diversity, the authors suggest a deep reflection on exploring six identities: race; disability; socioeconomics; language; sex, gender, identity and sexual identity; and religion. But before school leaders explore those areas, the authors further suggest a review of what they call “The Stories We Tell About Why We Don’t Do Better,” which is the title of Chapter 2 of this 15-chapter book. One such story is that working on building an equity school is not a main priority of time, like focusing instead on test scores or uninterested students or parents. Throughout the chapter, each of the six myths is debunked, and school leaders are provided opportunities to “pause and reflect” answering questions that could lead to plans for change.

“Pause and reflect” sections with questions, school story vignettes and team activities are also featured throughout the 246-page book. Questions to consider could be for a single school leader to stop and think about the information presented or to serve as discussion questions for teams of school leaders or school teams formed by school leaders, to study this topic within their own schools.

Another chapter, “Prioritizing Equity Leadership: Adopting a Transformative Approach,” may be the most important chapter for consideration during such a challenging time in our nation’s educational history. There is never a shortage of work for school leaders, but certainly not during this unprecedented global pandemic. With so many other issues taking center stage, prioritizing to focus on leadership for school equity is more important than ever. Furthermore, the uncomfortableness of looking in the leadership mirror, then reflecting that image back onto the entire school by reviewing such topics as social justice and classism, may make the study of equity-focused leadership unappealing. But the book’s authors counter that uncomfortable factor by providing statistics on equal education access opportunities for underrepresented groups in our country, like disproportionality in school discipline for students of color and exclusion for students with special needs. The authors further acknowledge that because the majority of teachers and school administrators are not persons of color, most of the book’s readers will be white. Following deep reflection, the authors suggest an equity audit to begin the process of collecting and analyzing school data, in part to identify equity gaps and gain understanding of how services are delivered, which is needed to plan for systemic and systematic change. Inclusion is a key factor in forming an audit team, while the role of the school principal is paramount to influencing change.



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A sample equity audit is included in the book's appendix. The audit collects basic information, like student and staff demographics, as well as student services statistics, such as English as a Second Language and Individualized Education Plan student numbers. Other data collection tools are also provided, like building observation forms to determine environmental readiness, which leads to the bigger picture of organization readiness for change. The format and method of the survey on environmental readiness for change could range from individual interviews to a paper or online survey of many employees to gather such information as student open expression of religion and sexual identity. A building observation tool is provided for walk-through observations throughout the school to observe, for example, whether the decorations on the walls are representative of the students served.

QR codes appear throughout the book and when scanned, take readers to additional information on topics of discussion, such as a YouTube video about autism or a website with the most recent United States Department of Justice statistics on hate crimes. Readers are challenged to consider not only ethical and moral considerations, but also laws related to topics like religion and the First Amendment, for instance.

*Five Practices for Equity-Focused School Leadership* is an informative, foundational read for school leaders interested in examining personal and school leadership experiences on equity issues impacting students and other stakeholders served. The book offers a framework for change and a number of surveys and auditing and observation tools which can be used to study your own school in an effort to lead equity-focused, systemic change.

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Radd, S. I., Generett, G. G., Gooden, M. A. & Theoharis, G. (2021). *Five Practices for Equity-Focused School Leadership*. Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

**About the Authors:** *Susan M. Sibert, D.Ed.*, is a Professor and Coordinator of the Administration and Leadership Studies Doctoral and Principal Certification Programs at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. Dr. Sibert received the PA Principals Association's 2020 Manchester Award for Excellence in Journalism. A former public-school principal, she can be reached at [smsibert@iup.edu](mailto:smsibert@iup.edu) and welcomes comments and collaborations.

*DeAnna M. Laverick, D.Ed.*, is a Professor and the Chair of the Department of Professional Studies at Indiana University of Pennsylvania (IUP) and currently supervises principal interns. Prior to teaching and leading at IUP, she was an educator in the PK-12 public school system. She can be reached at [laverick@iup.edu](mailto:laverick@iup.edu)

## Submit Your Video to "School Spotlight"

The PA Principals Association has introduced an initiative exclusive to members. The **"School Spotlight"** is a regular feature on the new **YouTube channel**. The idea behind this is to give our members the chance to do something that they normally don't do... brag!

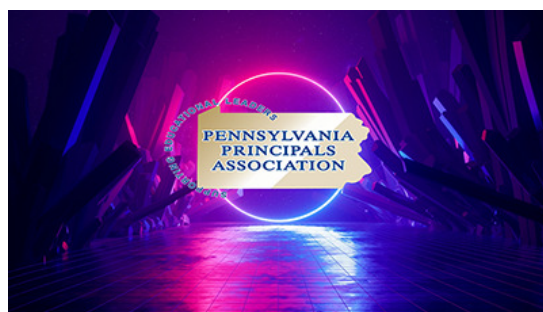
There are so many amazing programs being implemented across Pennsylvania that go unnoticed. These videos will put the spotlight on the many amazing initiatives that are helping our students. **Below you will find a link for directions on how to record and submit a video of your own.**

Remember, we want anything that you feel is helping your students grow academically, socially or physically. *So, get out there and record a video of what your staff and students are doing!*

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# Survival Strategies from the Antarctic: Purpose and Hope in a Time of Uncertainty

By Dr. Matthew Meakin



**About the Author: Dr. Matthew Meakin** has recently become the Assistant Superintendent at Northern York County School District. He previously served for the past 12 years as high school principal in the Littlestown Area School District.

Dr. Meakin was recognized by the National Institute of School Leadership as a Distinguished Principal in 2016. He earned a doctorate from Widener University in 2014 and received Widener's Outstanding Dissertation Award for his work in the field of ethical leadership. Dr. Meakin resides in Littlestown with his wife and two sons.

In the best of times, education appears to be in a constant state of flux as philosophical battles rage about the ultimate goals of education, concepts of equity and academic best practices. The past two years or so have seen increased turmoil as our daily engagements have shifted from how to maximize the student experience to questions of physical, social, emotional, mental and educational survival. Although these questions have seemed overwhelming, we will survive, we will reestablish a sense of control of our educational destiny and we will flourish. I know this because we are leaders, and that is what is expected of us and that is what we will do. Our initial task is to develop the survival strategies to see us through the current turmoil.

I find inspiration in Alfred Lansing's *Endurance: Shackleton's Incredible Voyage* (2014). Lansing's masterpiece is an account of Ernest Shackleton's 1914 failed attempt to become the first person to cross the Antarctic. After setting sail, Shackleton and his crew of 27 seamen soon became lodged in the ice packs of the Weddell Sea. Shackleton quickly had to change his approach from an attempt to gain status as the greatest Antarctic explorer to one of mere survival. After 10 months trapped in the ice pack, his ship was crushed, and the men were left 1,200 miles from land with diminishing supplies and three small lifeboats. As the pack melted, they took to the open sea to begin an unbelievable journey, which culminated without the loss of life, in the harshest conditions known on earth. In this story of the greatest endurance against all odds, I find hope and encouragement. I suggest these strategies as a way to navigate our current turmoil.

## Survival Strategy #1: Know Your Context

Shackleton's initial goal was to traverse the Antarctic continent. Yet when his ship became stuck in the ice pack, he immediately shifted into survival mode. He quickly accepted his circumstances and determined a new course of action. His efficient data analysis and willingness to adjust saved valuable time and resources. No energy was wasted on "what if" and "why us."

I have seen remarkable acceptance of our current context in education. Teachers have switched their preferred teaching styles to become effective online and hybrid teachers. They have pared down curriculum to the essentials and introduced variety to assessments. They have become more efficient, more thoughtful and more sensitive to the needs of their students. But others have floundered as they pine for a simpler, pre-pandemic time of routine, calmness and standardization.

As educational leaders, we need to help our teachers understand their new context. We may need to adjust how we help students meet academic goals. We must also increase our focus on the emotional and social well-being of our students. Even when this time of crisis has past, education should not and cannot return to exactly as it was before. We should be mindful to prepare our teachers for this shift and help them accept our context.



*Continued on next page*

### **Survival Strategy #2: Accept the Here and Now**

Shackleton's vessel, "The Endurance," was an immaculate ship. No expense was spared in the design and materials. Shackleton staffed the ship with a variety of diversely skilled sailors. He formed teams carefully, gave each specific roles and established a clear chain of command to manage the never-attempted trek across the Antarctic. And when the ship stuck fast in the ice, he scrapped his plans and moved swiftly from long-range goals to the "here and now."

Shackleton teaches us that as educational leaders we cannot hesitate to change our plans when the context dictates. In pre-pandemic times, we may have used research-based systemic design to structure long-range plans. These plans still have value, but they will be harder to achieve without addressing the current. For example, we are noticing that younger elementary students are experiencing more social adjustment challenges than previously. It would be foolhardy not to address these needs now. We may have to adjust these students' long-range goals, but if we don't accept the urgency of meeting their immediate needs, there is little hope that their academic potential will be realized in the future. The time to act as a visionary educational leader will come, but we must prioritize the needs of those we serve in the present.

### **Survival Strategy #3: Act Decisively**

Throughout his ordeal, Shackleton never failed to act decisively. He digested as much scientific information and personal opinions as he could and then made precise, clear decisions which he explained in detail to his crew. As conditions worsened, decisions became the difference between life and death, but Shackleton never wavered from his duty to act. He confided some doubt and anxiety in his diary as the weight of responsibility grew heavier each day, but he never lost hope for their survival or the courage of action. His message of hope to his staff never changed.

Educational administrators make hundreds of decisions every day. In times of crisis, people want leaders to be present, visible and active. They want to know that decisions have been made and actions determined to support those decisions. Hesitation and indecisiveness can breed fear and doubt, and those feelings are the antithesis of what is needed in survival mode. As educational leaders, we must stay the course and present a hopeful message to our constituents. Sure, there will be times of self-doubt, but our leadership is needed more than ever.

### **Survival Strategy #4: Monitor and Manage Your Resources**

The Endurance was fully loaded with the supplies, tools and personnel for a successful expedition, but when she became stuck in the ice pack, many of the items she carried became practically useless for their original purpose. As the ship was crushed and began to sink into the depths of the Weddell Sea, Shackleton ordered every salvageable material to be lifted from the ship. Over the

next two years, the men used the materials in inventive ways to aid their survival. At one point, nails were removed from the ship's boards and hammered through the soles of shoes to gain traction on a particularly difficult climb up a sheet of sheer rockface encrusted with ice. Planks were used to raise the sides of the lifeboats to give more protection from the giant storm waves that threatened to capsize them. And every piece of each animal they encountered was used for food, clothing and heating oil.

As educational leaders, we need to maximize our resources as we fight for survival. We have material and human resources to monitor and manage. We should ensure that our spending priorities are closely aligned with the new physical, social, emotional, mental and educational needs of our students and staff. In addition, we need to assign our teaching and non-instructional staff wisely. So, we must look carefully at student needs and design new schedules and coverages to align the needs of students with the skills of our staff. We may need to create new teams to realize new goals, and we may need to cut back on initiatives and programs and focus on fewer areas likely to provide the greatest chances of success. It is also important to streamline personnel responsibilities so as to not overburden our staff or distract them from our survival goals.

### **Survival Strategy #5: Never Lose Sight of the Horizon**

No matter how desperate their plight seemed, Shackleton never lost sight of a brighter tomorrow. At their lowest point, starving, frozen, trapped in a barely seaworthy vessel unsuited for the storm that engulfed and threatened to extinguish them at any second, Shackleton kept a close watch on the horizon. He charged his best land spotter with the seemingly pointless task of ignoring their awful state and scanning the horizon for land and safety. They did their best to keep track of their current location and steered toward the promise of survival, the promise of belonging and the promise of a flourishing future.

As educational leaders, this is where we can encourage and inspire our staff, students and communities by showing them that we understand where we are now, and we will care for their immediate needs, yet we will not be distracted from our purpose of an equitable education and meaningful preparation for all our students. We will see the horizon, and we will steer toward a brighter future. If we know our context, accept the here and now, act decisively and monitor and manage resources, we can still achieve the higher goals of our practice. Our students will too survive, they will develop a sense of belonging and they will ultimately flourish, due in part to our leadership and the survival strategies we employed in a time of crisis.

For additional information, please contact Dr. Meakin at [mmeakin@northernnyork.org](mailto:mmeakin@northernnyork.org)

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**Dr. Lisa Strohmman**

[www.drlisastrohman.com](http://www.drlisastrohman.com)



**Dr. Lisa Strohmman** is a clinical psychologist, author, public speaker and the founder and director of Digital Citizen Academy. She established Digital Citizen Academy to proactively prevent and educate students, educators and parents on the issues resulting from technology use and misuse. Dr. Strohmman has spent more than a decade working with adolescents and families in her private practice and a career working with schools to address challenges with student mental health and well-being.

In addition, Dr. Strohmman was a Visiting Scholar for the FBI working on homicidal pedophilia when Columbine occurred giving her the opportunity to be on the front lines of how technology impacts our youth. She has continued to work with law enforcement and the FBI on safety and cybercrimes involving adolescents, while also lending her knowledge and guidance to the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children.

Dr. Strohmman attended the University of California, Davis where she received a Bachelor of Science in psychology, graduating Magna Cum Laude. She then completed a joint, integrated program in law and psychology at Villanova and Drexel Universities.

**Andrew Marotta**

[www.andrewmarotta.com](http://www.andrewmarotta.com)



**Andrew Marotta** is an energetic and enthusiastic leader who has put his positive imprint on his beloved Port Jervis High School (PJHS), in Port Jervis, NY. With the release of his first book, **The School Leader: Surviving and Thriving**, (2<sup>nd</sup> edition), Andrew is expanding his impact on the education leadership community. His second book, **The Partnership: Surviving & Thriving**, is a guide for parents to better assist their children in school by working closely together with schools.

In his personal life, Andrew is a loving husband to his wife, Jennifer, and a supportive father to their three young children. In his professional life, Andrew has been at PJHS for 16 years, serving as Assistant Principal for seven years and Principal for the past nine. He has led the transformation of PJHS, helping to raise the graduation rate from a low 60% to almost 90%. Andrew is a former men's Division I college basketball official, taking many leadership lessons from that time in his life to his leadership in schools and with school leaders. He lives the words in his logo: Energy, Enthusiasm, Extra, Effort & Excellence!

Learn more at [www.andrewmarotta.com](http://www.andrewmarotta.com) and through his #ELBlog & #ELB podcast: Education Leadership & Beyond found on Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter @andrewmarotta21 and Instagram #ELB #ELBlog #survive thrive #keeprolling

# Supporting Schools with Therapy Dogs: One School's Experience

By Dr. Chad M. Watters, Tracey DeRosier and Dr. Rachel Holler



**About the Authors:** **Dr. Chad M. Watters** taught for 10 years in the Central Bucks School District (CBSD) and is in his 16<sup>th</sup> year as an administrator. He has been a principal at the elementary and middle levels and is the proud principal of Central Bucks High School East. Dr. Watters holds a bachelor's degree in elementary education, a master's degree in education and a doctorate in educational leadership.

**Tracey DeRosier** has been an administrator in the CBSD for the last four years, proudly serving as the House Principal of the Class of 2021 and Class of 2024 at Central Bucks High School East. Previously, she served the Hatboro-Horsham School District as a high school social studies teacher and assistant principal for 19 years. Mrs. DeRosier holds a bachelor's degree in history and secondary social studies education and a master's degree in education.

**Rachel Holler, Ed.D.**, is an Assistant Executive Director at the Bucks County Intermediate Unit (IU), and has been with the Bucks IU for the past six years. Dr. Holler has been a member of the PA Principals Association since 2002, serving as both a middle and high school principal for seven years in the Norristown Area School District. She also serves on the Roxy Therapy Dogs Board of Directors.

Figuring out what school was going to look and feel like during the global pandemic has been challenging, and looking for ways to honor and celebrate the seniors of the Class of 2021 as they concluded their high school career, in the manner they deserved, was no easy feat. On Friday, June 4, 2021, the Central Bucks School District (CBSD) hosted a modified prom at The Fuge in Warminster, with dining inside and dancing outside under the stars. The weather was perfect, our students were dressed to the nines and they danced it out until the celebration wrapped up at 10:30 p.m. The evening was a complete success.

Everything changed on Saturday morning with one phone call. We had learned that after the prom, there had been a horrible car accident in the Poconos involving four of our students resulting in one fatality, one student in critical condition and two others with non-life-threatening injuries.

We quickly had to pivot from basking in the glow of a wonderfully successful prom to planning how to best support our students and staff through this tragedy. Our crisis response required the coordination of internal and external resources to support students, staff and the larger community. Of all the external resources organized and provided to our school, all of which served important and valuable roles, none were more consistently utilized by our students and staff like the **Roxy Therapy Dogs**.

On Monday morning, volunteer therapy dog teams were positioned in our atrium to welcome and greet our students and staff. The presence of the dogs created a magnetic attraction drawing people together. A safe space was created for students to be mindful with their own thoughts, while for others, it was a time to be together to casually engage in conversation to process their thoughts and feelings. And for others, the presence of the dogs created a state of normalcy...permission to smile, to laugh and to talk about something else when it might not have felt appropriate to do so otherwise. With each interaction, the stress level throughout the school began to gradually reduce; the healing process had begun, and it was incredibly powerful to witness.

What was most moving was how the contact comfort of the therapy dog teams engaged the most quiet and reserved students, and, in some cases, these would be the same students who would never seek out an adult for support. We responded by placing key staff members throughout the atrium who



Central Bucks East High School prom tweet.



Central Bucks East High School teacher, Sara Yoder (center), pictured with Roxy Therapy Dogs.

Continued from previous page

could observe the interactions, causally stepping in to engage, building quick rapport with students through the shared experience and triaging as needed. This ensured anyone who needed an individual check-in, or a higher level of support, was connected with the appropriate resources.

With the support of the therapy dog teams, we were able to create a calm and safe school environment to support our school community through the roller coaster of emotions that concluded the 2020-21 school year.

If your school or district does not have a therapy dog program, we encourage you to consider exploring this type of program. The CBSD has a long-standing relationship with the Roxy Therapy Dogs. The program began in 2005 with founder, Diane Smith, offering therapy dog visits at her son's elementary school with her dog, *Roxy*. Students with reading challenges were encouraged to read to *Roxy*. This single classroom visit grew into five programs within the Central Bucks community (<https://www.roxytherapydogs.org/>). Currently, 80 therapy dog teams support and comfort school-aged children in the following programs: Elementary School Reading Inspiration, Student Specialized Support, Secondary School Stress Relief, Courthouse Companionship and Pediatric Comfort. As an all-volunteer, 501(c)3 non-profit organization, the mission is to support children through friendly, calm and loving therapy dog visits. Therapy teams (handler and dog) complete rigorous training and achieve state and team certifications through approved agencies, and volunteers range from high school students to retired couples to working professionals.

What are the first steps you can take if you would like to advocate for a therapy dog program in your school or district? If you are looking for research to highlight the benefits of the human-canine relationship, look no further than the Roxy Therapy Dogs website (<https://www.roxytherapydogs.org/benefits-of-animal-therapy>). In addition to research, the organization's most recent initiative is a Certificate of Excellence program to offer professional learning opportunities for not only therapy dog teams but also for other audiences such as parents, health care providers and educators (<https://www.roxytherapydogs.org/certificate-of-excellence>). Recent programs focused on insights into the child with autism and insights into the mental health and emotional wellness of children and are available on the website. The latest program in October-November 2021 focused on responding to traumatic events affecting children and was created in part to better prepare handlers and their dogs to respond to circumstances like the tragedy after the prom. Registering for one or more of these programs

“**With the support of the therapy dog teams, we were able to create a calm and safe environment to support our school community through the roller coaster of emotions that concluded the 2020-21 school year.**”

may also support a school or district before taking the next step with a therapy dog program.

An additional source for research to advocate for a therapy dog program is the Human Animal Bond Research Initiative Foundation (<https://habri.org/research>), where you will find an online research hub that houses, classifies and archives research and information on the science of the human-animal bond. For example, numerous scientific studies have demonstrated that there is a positive effect on endocrine responses after interaction with a companion animal (Odendaal & Meintjes, 2003). More specifically for adolescents,

a review of multiple studies concluded that animal-assisted therapy can improve adolescents' mental wellness, quality of life and long-term mental health conditions, particularly for those who have experienced trauma (Hoagwood, Acri, Morrissey & Peth-Pierce, 2017).

What about students with dog allergies? Thankfully, allergies do not present a challenge very often. Every parent must submit a permission slip for their child before a therapy dog will visit a classroom. Some students with mild allergies may be able to touch the dogs but must wash their hands right after the visit. Some parents will provide permission for their child to be across the classroom from the dog due to their allergy. In certain severe cases, the therapy dog team will not visit that particular classroom for the year. After over 15 years of visiting classrooms, the growth of the program is a testament to its success – and the benefits outweigh any logistical challenges, including allergies.

While we sincerely hope that your school or district does not face a traumatic event, it is comforting to know that a therapy dog program is available to support students during times of wellness as well as times of crisis. Please reach out to any of us to learn more about the benefits of therapy dog teams and how you can take the next steps to make them a part of your school community!

For additional information, please contact the authors at: [cwatters@cbsd.org](mailto:cwatters@cbsd.org); [tderosier@cbsd.org](mailto:tderosier@cbsd.org); and [rholler@bucksiu.org](mailto:rholler@bucksiu.org)

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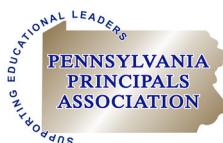
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# School Threat Assessments: The Administrator's Role

By Joey Melvin



**About the Author: Joey Melvin** is the Director of Center for Safe Schools. He has spent more than 19 years in law enforcement and was formerly deputy director of Delaware's Comprehensive School Safety Plan. He is also an instructor and Region 3 director for the National Association of School Resource Officers. The Center for Safe Schools at Center for Schools and Communities serves as a statewide resource for educators, parents, law enforcement and others on school safety, bullying prevention and youth violence prevention.

As schools across the country are months into a return to semi-normalcy, we've quickly been reminded of the importance of efforts to prevent violence. Complacency is a concern for any institution when they are forced to confront long-term negative impacts, and the need to remain vigilant is essential to keeping schools safe. The past year and a half have impacted students, staff and families and likely adversely affected student discipline incidents and mental health concerns. The concern for threats against our schools is prevalent across Pennsylvania and the United States.

Schools have made tremendous progress in mitigating threats over the past decade, much to the credit of research and experiences that have enhanced prevention protocols such as threat assessment. The "threat assessment team" has become common terminology in the field of school safety. The consensus that has been clearly communicated to our educational institutions is that multidisciplinary teams must work collectively in order to conduct a comprehensive threat assessment. "Relationships with agencies and service systems within the school and the surrounding community are critical to identifying, assessing, and managing students who are on a path toward carrying out a school attack" (Fein, Vossekuil, Pollack, Borum, Modzeleski & Reddy, 2004).

Best practices related to threat assessments have been implemented voluntarily and through legislative mandates across the United States. Many schools are now required to establish Threat Assessment Teams within their buildings, providing a significant step toward violence prevention. "The United States Secret Service and the United States Department of Education believe that the use of a school threat assessment protocol is the most important part of a school violence prevention program" (Wisconsin Department of Justice, 2019). Unfortunately, best practices written into an emergency plan and then housed on a shelf or in a Google drive are only valuable when they are followed.

The action of investigating threats has traditionally fallen to the responsibility of law enforcement, and schools are accustomed to volleying these types of incidents to their respective agencies. The current suggested practice is for administrators and other school staff to become part of the investigative team. This integration is often met with hesitation, understandably so. School administrators, specifically those overwhelmed with finding substitutes, addressing discipline issues, dealing with bussing shortages and calling back disgruntled parents, are often not prepared or eager to play the role of detective.

That said, the administrator's participation in conducting threat assessments is integral to both the incident's outcome and the mitigation of future incidents. "Using a systematic approach to assess a student's threat to cause harm, such as behavioral threat assessment, can help determine the seriousness of the threat and inform an appropriate response" (Carlton, 2021, para. 14).

A multidisciplinary effort to conduct threat assessments provides a comprehensive process to collect evidence related to the incident and the student in question. The ability for a school administrator to collect statements from a staff member is often logistically much easier than it would be for a law enforcement officer. For example, a school's access to demographic information tremendously expedites the assessment process. Accessing contact information of witnesses, targets and suspects in support of law enforcement's role is crucial and in no way a violation of the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA).



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Threats of violence are often reported at times that require a swift response. A staff member reporting they found a “hit list” in a student’s journal during the first period requires a response much different from a similar concern reported on a Saturday night. The establishment of a team also allows for some variability subjective to each specific case. Some assessments may rely more heavily on a school counselor or psychologist who may have an extensive history with a student, while other assessments could require investigative efforts to be handled by a dean or administrator. The establishment of the threat assessment team provides more fluidity in the process to best suit the incident and students involved.

Documentation is another critical component of the multi-discipline threat assessment approach. Law enforcement will document their criminal investigation with reports, search warrants and arrests. A parallel effort of documentation should also be occurring by the schools. Most infamous cases of school-related attacks by students led to the post-incident discovery of pre-attack indicators. Additionally, investigations have often identified significant changes in student behaviors leading up to the attack. “This information can be useful if the student comes to authorities’ attention again, or if at some point in the future investigators need to determine whether the subject has changed patterns of thinking and behavior” (Fein et al., 2004).

Today, there are several web-based options to assist schools in conducting and securely documenting threat assessments. Web-based threat assessment programs can guide administrators through the process – no matter their current level of experience – and help ensure consistency. Companies such as Public Consulting Group (PCG) and Navigate have developed platforms that incorporate best practice assessment templates from the National Threat

“**Administrators who take vigilant roles in the formation and training of their threat assessment teams will be more adequately prepared for these dynamic incidents while increasing mitigation efforts.**”

Assessment Center (NTAC) and the Comprehensive School Threat Assessment Guide (CSTAG). The documentation of threat assessments allows schools to better monitor student risk while also archiving all efforts and interventions taken by the school to ensure the safety of students.

As research continues regarding the effectiveness and best practices of school-based threat assessments, the value of a team approach remains significant. Utilizing comprehensive strategies to address all school-safety related issues is paramount, especially when conducting threat assessments. Administrators who take vigilant roles in the formation and training of their threat assessment

teams will be more adequately prepared for these dynamic incidents while increasing mitigation efforts.

For further information, Mr. Melvin may be contacted at [jmelvin@csc.csiu.org](mailto:jmelvin@csc.csiu.org) or [info@centerforsafeschools.org](mailto:info@centerforsafeschools.org)

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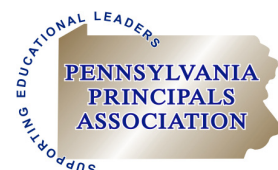
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## Reflect on Your Current Pace

I recently listened to a podcast where the host, Carey Nieuwhof, author of *At Your Best: How to Get Time, Energy, and Priorities Working in your Favor*, shared that, “Time off won’t heal you when the problem is how you spend your time on” (Nieuwhof, 2021). “Eighty-eight percent of leaders report that work is a primary source of stress in their lives and that having a leadership role increases the level of stress” (Center for Creative Leadership, 2020). We see it all too often in principals, working at an unsustainable pace just trying to make it to the next break. We make it to the break and think we are recharged, only to feel like there was no break at all as we fall back into our familiar habits. Nieuwhof goes on to say, “A sustainable pace is the cure for an unsustainable pace. Not time off” (Nieuwhof, 2021). I recently went home absolutely exhausted, realizing I had missed getting home for dinner with my family six out of the past eight days. I began to notice the detrimental effects at home as I felt exhausted and unfocused. I was also not as sharp in my conversations, thinking and decision-making at school. Overall, I was not functioning near my absolute best. I rationalized by saying there was an upcoming extended break and I would have some quality time off. However, the extended break would not change anything unless I changed how I spend my time “on.” I had been here numerous times in the past as well, and knew my unsustainable pace needed to change for me, my family and the entire school.

## Self-Care is More than Time Off

From talking to school leaders, many are tired of hearing about “self-care” and what they can do with their time off to refresh and rejuvenate for their time “on.” The Center for Creative Leadership also found that “more than 90 percent of leaders cite they manage stress by temporarily removing themselves, either physically or mentally, from the source of their stress” (Center for Creative Leadership, 2020). The temporary removal from stressful situations through self-care is essential, but it will not have a significant, long-term impact on the health and longevity of principals. It is time for principals to seriously reflect on how they are spending their time “on” throughout the day-to-day and week-to-week. Self-care not only involves much-needed time off, but more importantly, self-care also involves revamping what time “on” looks like. Many principals are working at an unsustainable pace causing them to function far below their maximum capacity.

## What Can We Do?

The process of obtaining a sustainable pace begins with honest self-reflection. During the unsustainable pace, principals are often unable to stop the “doing” long enough to do the “thinking.” Following are five actionable tips with self-reflection questions for principals to examine how they can improve how they spend their time “on” to function at their best. *By controlling our own pace, we, as principals, will have a greater capacity to function at our absolute best.*

1. **Reflect** - How are you spending your time “on”? Spend some time documenting your day-to-day and week-to-week schedule. What patterns do you notice? When are you most productive, least productive? Do your days align with your vision and mission, or have they become a never-ending to-do list with no clear focus? Lastly, how do you feel physically, mentally and emotionally? Are you at your best?
2. **Look and Listen** - What are teachers and staff saying? What is your family saying? How are they feeling? What trends do you notice? What is the current culture of the building? How about the culture at home? Ask those close to you to provide you with honest feedback.
3. **Simplify** - Are you trying to do too much? Are you trying to do too much at the wrong times? What are your district/building priorities? How can you simplify those priorities to several focus areas? What can be removed from your plate?
4. **Empower** - Are there areas you can empower others through delegation by putting others in their strength zones to allow you and others to work at your absolute best?
5. **Control the Controllables** - What are you trying to control that is not within your control? Have you found these areas draining your mental, emotional and physical energy?

## It’s Time

It is time for principals to move out of the vicious burnout cycle. The current pace for many principals is not sustainable and leaves principals functioning at a level far less than full capacity. The Learning Policy Institute noted, “Nationally, the average tenure of a principal is about four years, and nearly one in five principals, approximately 18 percent, turn over annually” (Levin & Bradley, 2019). As building leaders, it is time to set the example of self-care through not only how we spend our time off, but how we spend our time “on.” Principals are in the business of people, and we need to take care of ourselves to best take care of all of those around us. If not, we will continue to function far less than our best, falling into the vicious cycle of exhausting ourselves toward a break, spending the time off recovering, only to exhaust ourselves once again.

For more information, contact the author at [zbauermaster@warwickisd.org](mailto:zbauermaster@warwickisd.org)

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Charles Beckley, II  
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Dr. Brandon Brown  
Stephanie Bruno  
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Jason Clifford  
Nicole Cooper  
Ryan Creange  
Rebecca Culbert  
Andrew Czekner  
LaVonda Daniels  
Danielle Davis  
Amanda Deutsch  
Tracy Dudash  
Matthew Edwards  
Carol Elliott  
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Ashli Gilbert  
Steven Haddon  
Dr. Jason Hamer  
Hannah Hamilton  
Wayland Heath  
Matthew Heckmann  
Erica Heindl  
Jonathan Hoffman  
Julissa Jimenez  
Samantha Kahler  
Susan Kanopka  
Nancy Keeling  
Lindsay Klousnitzer  
Dr. Eric Knorr  
David Kochenour  
Jacob Kump  
Christa Langdon  
Julianne Lanich  
Sadiyah Lewis-El  
Ryan Long  
Philip Ludwig  
Michael Malec

### District

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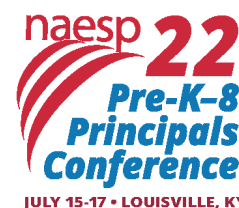
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Franklin Area SD  
Central York SD  
South Western SD  
Warren County SD  
Saucon Valley SD  
Beaver Area SD  
Aspiring Member  
Northeastern SD  
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Scranton SD  
Grove City Area SD  
Armstrong SD  
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North Penn SD  
New Kensington-Arnold SD  
Harbor Creek SD  
Conewago Valley SD  
Scranton SD  
Chartiers Valley SD  
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Juniata County SD  
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# LEQ – A Perpetual Journey

By Corey T. Mosher and Dr. Thomas J. Starmack



**About the Authors: Corey T. Mosher** has served as the Principal at Athens Area High School in the Athens Area School District for the past five years. Formerly, he was the assistant high school principal for two years. Prior to his administrative experience, he taught math and science at Northern Tioga School District. He also spent 14 years in law enforcement and served as Chief of Police in Lawrenceville, Pennsylvania.

Mr. Mosher holds a bachelor's degree in criminal justice and a master's degree in education from Mansfield University of Pennsylvania. He earned a master's degree in educational leadership and a Superintendent's Letter of Eligibility from Edinboro University of Pennsylvania.

**Dr. Thomas J. Starmack** is a Professor in the Pre-K-12 Educational Leadership Program at Bloomsburg University of Pennsylvania and Chief Consultant for FLEX Consulting, LLC. He is also a former secondary mathematics teacher, school principal and assistant superintendent.

Dr. Starmack also conducts professional development for school and district-level administrators and serves as a consultant for Pre-K-12 school districts in Pennsylvania and other states. He earned his doctorate in education at the University of Pittsburgh.

The Athens Area School District (ASD) journey started in 2018. The leadership team included the superintendent, curriculum director, all building principals and assistant principals and met monthly as most school districts teams do. These administrators are driven to do what is best for our students, our district and our community. However, Superintendent, Craig Stage, realized the need for external support and contracted a regional consultant to build the leadership capacity within each member of the administrative team and also the collective whole.

Looking back, the administrators in the room were some of the most intelligent people we knew, but something was missing. At each building, one could surmise that things were going great; student achievement was being addressed and building-level goals were put into place. Then, gather us all in a room, and we could not effectively communicate or understand each other's drive and passion for education.

The process of renewal was used to begin the change process. One aspect of changing a department, building or system is that change must start by changing ourselves as individuals. The process of renewal is critical in determining what is working with individuals and groups within a system. Athens ASD's administrative team studied the process of renewal early in their journey, and every member completed a deep self-reflection (unzipping ourselves to figure out who we are, who we wanted to be and how we wanted to interact as a team). The process provided guiding questions leading to the development of an action plan for the renewal process. From the renewal process, two themes surfaced across the team:

**1)** how to handle past and current conflicts; **2)** improving communication to enhance relationships and team synergy.

Leadership is about relationships, and with any relationship, conflict is a natural phenomenon. How leaders approach and handle conflict has huge implications on relationships and goal attainment, both personally and professionally. Thus, leaders need to be equipped with the knowledge and skills to effectively find win-win situations whenever possible. A series of learning regarding the concept of *Fierce Conversations* by Susan Scott (2004) was used to enhance team members' knowledge and skills. There were, and continue to be, difficult conversations; however, we now refer to them as necessary "fierce conversations," and team members have gained confidence in meeting conflict when it arises.

Although individuals were demonstrating growth, the team was still not reaching their fullest potential. So, the consultant developed a Pennsylvania Department of Education-approved (PDE) Act 45 program for Athens ASD administrators on **Leadership Emotional Intelligence (LEQ)**. We think it is fair to say our initial thought was, "How in the world is this going to help our team?" Little did we know, we were at the beginning of one of the greatest professional and personal journeys ever experienced by many of the team members. We were asked to read, *What Makes a Leader*, by Daniel Goleman (1996) that



Continued from previous page

explored five main skills of LEQ: self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy and social skills. Most educators understand the ability to increase our Intelligence Quotient (IQ) or our growth mindset. However, most team members were not aware that we could increase our LEQ, which turns out is the most effective tool in being a compassionate, caring, sensitive and effective leader.

Each team member travelled along an individual path for quite some time. Team members engaged in a variety of activities practicing each of the five LEQ skills of self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy and social skills. During the process, each of the activities and skills started to feed one other and became the key to unlocking the greatest potential in those that we lead and work with. The team also explored the idea of a *brain hijack* or *amygdala hijack*; learning that we feel before we think, thus often allowing our emotions to impact our effectiveness in decision-making. Spending a few hours together once or twice a month, exploring various aspects of LEQ, allowed the team to build relationships and implement the new knowledge and skills in our individual buildings as well as across the district. From these learnings, the team was able to approach situations and problem-solve in new ways.

There was obvious change in how individuals were working through conflict, and the level of trust among the team was rising. There was a change in our administrative team, and slowly but surely, we started working more effectively together, understanding each other's perspectives and working toward district goals and the development of a positive climate and culture across the district. We were improving as a team; visibly noticed for a positive change in our leadership and our ability to lead together. Through the process, a common LEQ language was established and often referenced by team members.

One of the activities that allowed individuals to thrive and the team to become more cohesive was the development of a check-in or sounding board when faced with an emotionally charged situation. We developed phone notecard lists in which we would call at least one person who was like-minded and at least one other person to hear what we did not want to hear. The activity helped us to pause, do an emotional "gut-check" and added value to everyone's perspective. The pause creates less emotional reactions, provides a much broader basis for decision-making and involves many more stakeholders in the process.

“

***Team members engaged in a variety of activities practicing each of the five LEQ skills of self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy and social skills.”***

Building capacity within each leader is the starting point. Often a team cannot reach synergy without a major conflict (Kotter & Rathgeber, 2005). Then on March 13, 2020, that major conflict came. Yes, Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>, a date not soon forgotten. Likely, most people only associate negative thoughts and memories with COVID-19, but we associate it with many positives. In fact, the pandemic changed our administrative team forever in a most profound and positive way.

Imagine sitting in a room with 10 administrative colleagues watching the news, reading new daily guidance and trying to decipher how to move a district forward in the midst of a pandemic. There were so many thoughts, opinions, political views and strong emotions surrounding the pandemic, yet we were supposed to sit in a room and "figure it out." Information changed daily, new rules, guidelines and recommendations with no clear path to success and a very grim outlook on the future. This could tear most people apart and create irreparable damage to relationships, but the most profound thing happened to our team. We became closer than ever. The knowledge and information team members had gained through the activities that we led and participated in, and this *little concept of LEQ* suddenly came to fruition at lightspeed. *Who would have thought that the work we were doing would turn out to be one of the greatest professional development journeys we could have ever imagined?*

In light of the pandemic news, the team collaboratively crafted a message that was delivered to our students, parents and community members to ensure the health and safety of all. The focus was still on education with a new emphasis on moving everyone's social, emotional and mental health needs to the forefront of our decision-making process. We utilized our learning about being emotionally hijacked, implemented the seven steps to making good decisions (Campbell, Whitehead & Finkelstein, 2009), and as a cohesive unit, were able to offer learning options to our families, while maintaining an in-person learning environment as a primary focus. Team members were able to have difficult conversations with each other. Each administrative meeting would start by expressing our personal feelings and emotions and applying our knowledge and skills to manage those emotions to keep our district moving forward.

COVID-19 has actually helped make us a strong, united and determined group of leaders who were driven to use our LEQ to make decisions in a challenging environment and continue to lead through a pandemic. Our LEQ journey

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# Leaders as Change Agents in Secondary Transition: An Evidence-Based Approach

By Matthew Flanagan, Dr. Hillary Mangis and Jacki Lyster



**About the Authors:** **Matthew Flanagan** is an Educational Consultant at the Pennsylvania Training and Technical Assistance Network (PaTTAN) Harrisburg. Prior to working at PaTTAN, he was a senior research associate and professor at George Washington University and a middle-school special education teacher in New Jersey. He serves as the Early-Career Researcher-At-Large on the board for the Division of Career Development and Transition within the Council for Exceptional Children.

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**Jacki Lyster** is an Educational Consultant at Pennsylvania Training and Technical Assistance Network (PaTTAN) East with 25+ years of experience in the field of education. She co-leads the Middle School Success: Path to Graduation (P2G) State Personnel Development Grant project and the PaTTAN Secondary Transition Initiative.

## A Call to Action

Evidence-based practices (EBPs) are those educational strategies with research to show their direct impact on student acquisition of knowledge and discrete skills necessary for post-school success. (ESSA, 2002; Test, Bartholomew & Bethune, 2015). To support staff in the design and implementation of high-quality transition plans and course of study, supervisors need strong working knowledge of relevant EBPs and best practices for adapting them to context. However, current implementation of transition specific EBPs is inconsistent across schools and agencies (Plotner, Mazzotti, Rose & Carlson-Britting, 2016; Trainor et al., 2020). While many factors contribute to these challenges, research suggests that staff perceptions of leader buy-in are linked to implementation fidelity (Damschröder, Reardon & Lowery, 2020). At the core of the lack of implementation is the need for teachers to be aware of and to feel supported to implement EBPs given that many report a lack of awareness of EBPs and how to integrate them with fidelity into their work (Plotner et al., 2016). As school leaders, “if we want to see change, we need to do the change, walk the walk. This applies in schools as much as anywhere else. If we want students to be learners, then teachers need to be learners. If we want teachers to be learners, then principals need to be learners... principals need to be the first learner in their schools” (Knight, 2017, p. 76).

Often, in secondary transition, EBPs and data-driven decision making are applied inconsistently (Plotner et al., 2016; Trainor et al., 2020; Flanagan & Kutscher, 2020). By being aware of and supporting EBP for secondary transition, leaders can improve the likelihood of positive post-secondary outcomes for youth with disabilities. This article aims to present four EBPs for consideration as a catalyst for leading secondary transition change: interdisciplinary collaboration; evaluation of transition practices, programs and services; providing information on transition programming and services; and prioritizing transition service delivery. We provide checklists for each area and encourage school leaders to use them as they reflect upon current transition including what’s working and what can be improved. Finally, we wrap up this article with information about the Transition Discoveries Systems-Level Intervention, a comprehensive model for the design and implementation of high-quality transition programming.

“**By being aware of and supporting EBP for secondary transition, leaders can improve the likelihood of positive post-secondary outcomes for youth with disabilities.”**

## EBP 1: Interdisciplinary Collaboration

Parental expectations, parent involvement, self-determination and social support have been linked to positive post-school outcomes for employment and postsecondary attainment (Mazzotti et al., 2020). Therefore, young people and their families should be front and center in the transition planning process, from designing a plan to evaluating and improving the programs and services designated within it. Youth engagement in transition planning should be prioritized by school leaders as an ongoing instructional opportunity for young people to develop self-knowledge as well as knowledge about post-school options. Peltier (2015) found that teams that foster self-determination and provide opportunities for students to be involved in goal setting and decision making, while also creating responsive services based on students’ interests and preferences create better opportunities for student success.

At the heart of successful transition planning is the leader helping to ensure interagency collaboration between youth and families, schools, agencies and community partners, while serving as a strong advocate for the goals and needs of students with disabilities (Peltier,

2015; Test, Bartholomew & Bethune, 2015). The school leader can play a key role in creating a positive school culture (**Checklist 1**) while also being open to surveying for stakeholder feedback and to engaging stakeholders as members of the transition planning team and process.

**Checklist 1: Strategies for Positive School Culture in Transition Programming**

Reflect on how the following goals/strategies are addressed in your school. What is currently occurring and how? What's working? What could be improved (e.g., priorities)? Use a scale of "Strength" "Potential Medium Priority" or "Potential High Priority" when reflecting.

- Engage youth and families in the secondary transition process.
- Actively support engagement of community partners (e.g., employers, non-profits) in the design and implementation of transition plans, programs and services.
- Facilitate interagency collaboration (e.g., Occupational Vocational Rehabilitation, Office of Developmental Programs, Office of Long-Term Living, Department of Human Services) for students with disabilities and their families.
- Co-create with youth, families and stakeholders a vision of effective secondary transition programming aligned with the district's educational mission.
- Advocate for an inclusive school culture with high expectations for all students.

### EBP 2: Evaluating Transition Practices, Programs and Services

Post school outcomes by-and-large (Mazzotti et al., 2020) are strongly predicted by the quality of the transition programs and structures of support for their implementation that school leaders are tasked to lead. Just as formal and informal assessments should be used on an ongoing basis to drive decisions about transition plans and a course of study, the activities and services within them must also be continuously evaluated and improved if transition goals are to be met and updated annually. As you review **Checklist 2**, reflect on how your school currently evaluates programs and the factors that impact their effectiveness.

**Checklist 2: Strategies for Evaluating Transition Practices, Programs and Services**

Reflect on how the following goals/strategies are addressed in your school. What is currently occurring and how? What's working? What could be improved?

- Use a framework of effective transition practices as a way of identifying gaps in current programs and services
- Formatively and summatively collect information from youth, families and stakeholders about:
  - ⇒ Frequency and effectiveness of current transition practices, programs and services.
  - ⇒ Stakeholder access to knowledge, information and training around transition practices (e.g, implementation factors).
  - ⇒ Youth and family access to knowledge, information and training around transition planning.

### EBP 3: Providing Transition Information and Resources

Active decision making by youth and families regarding transition activities and services requires working knowledge of current options (Parrish, 2006). However, for it to occur, educators must be prepared to serve as knowledge-brokers about the transition planning process. Leaders can also empower educators, youth and families to share their knowledge of transition in-context and to collaborate on defining models of effective practice (Kester, Flanagan & Stella, 2021). As you review **Checklist 3**, reflect on how your school currently provides transition information and resources to all stakeholder groups.

**Checklist 3: Strategies for Providing Transition Information and Resources**

Reflect on how the following goals/strategies are addressed in your school. What is currently occurring and how? What's working? What could be improved?

- Create and update individualized measurable annual post-school goals based on assessment data.
- Create a comprehensive course of study with related services and activities that support transition.
- Staff understand terminology and eligibility requirements and can share with youth and families.
- Staff support youth and family awareness of relevant agencies and community partners.
- Before, during and after student-led IEP meetings, create and implement instructional programming that supports student knowledge of transition programs and practices as well as goal setting and self-advocacy skills.
- Engage youth and families in the creation of accessible learning materials such as brochures, videos, toolkits, handouts, etc.

### EBP 4: Prioritizing Transition Service Delivery

When considering post-school outcomes for all students, it is critical for leaders to prioritize the delivery of transition services that lead to youth and family engagement in the short term and positive post-school outcomes after graduation. Given that the role of a designated transition coordinator is required under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA, 2004), to be successful, leaders must allocate resources (e.g., time, funds, personnel) to develop partners in the community and create school-based systems that support secondary transition experiences for all students with disabilities. Using **Checklist 4**, evaluate your current strategies for prioritizing transition service delivery.

**Checklist 4: Strategies for Prioritizing Transition Service Delivery**

Reflect on how the following goals/strategies are addressed in your school. What is currently occurring and how? What's working? What could be improved?

- Beginning in elementary and continuing through secondary programming, offer a continuum of services and activities that promote career awareness and preparation, career acquisition, career retention and advancement, and entrepreneurship.
- When creating transition plans, align services and activities to individual student goals for employment, postsecondary education and independent living (if appropriate).
- Designate sufficient time/staffing to complete transition coordinator responsibilities.
- Providing consistent and appropriate staff development on relevant evidence-based transition practices, programs and services.

### Next Steps

Now that you've reflected upon your school's current strategies using the checklists above, taking steps to address areas of need begins with adopting the use of the Transition Discoveries Systems-Level Intervention (TDSLII) (Kester et al., 2021). The TDSLII begins with using the Transition Discoveries Quality Indicator Survey (TDQI) to collect data from youth, families and stakeholders about current transition practices. This community approach to program evaluation simultaneously supports interagency collaboration as well as youth and family engagement in and knowledge of transition planning. However, collecting data is just one piece of the process. During the TDSLII, based upon the data collected, communities of youth, families and stakeholders develop a plan to improve areas of transition practices, programs and services identified as the highest priorities for improvement. Together, youth with disabilities, family members and stakeholders between systems (education, agencies, employers) can share knowledge and resources necessary for prioritizing transition service delivery.

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For further information about implementing the TDSLII, please contact the authors at [mflanagan@pattan.net](mailto:mflanagan@pattan.net),

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## LEQ – A Perpetual Journey

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has also allowed our team to be more impactful within each individual building, across the district and has even helped us to eliminate inconsistencies that staff would often point out in the past. The various knowledge and skills of renewal, fierce conversations and LEQ have helped us navigate difficult conversations with all stakeholders. COVID-19 was the conflict no one wanted but allowed our team to realize its potential. The current school year brought two new principals to our team, thus the knowledge and skills

learned are taught and implemented with both new members as well as with our business manager, technology director and head of maintenance. Greater knowledge and skills around conflict, communication and LEQ can assist anyone to be a more effective leader and person.

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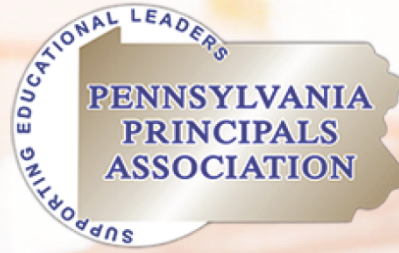
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# Encouraging New Teacher Integration into Professional Learning Communities

By Dr. Nicole B. Forrest



**About the Author: Nicole B. Forrest, Ed.D.**, serves as an Assistant Principal and 12<sup>th</sup>-grade administrator at West Chester East High School in the West Chester Area School District where she started her administrative career five years ago. Previously, she spent seven years as an English teacher in secondary and post-secondary settings.

Dr. Forrest received a Bachelor of Arts in English literature from West Chester University of Pennsylvania; a Master of Arts in English literature from the University of Delaware; a Master of Science in educational leadership from St. Joseph's University; and a doctorate in leadership and innovation from Arizona State University. Her doctoral work focused on instituting an innovation that assists new teachers with integrating into professional learning communities (PLCs). Follow her on Twitter @nicoleeducator

We all can recall those first few years in the profession. While I am sure they were marked by unbridled enthusiasm, there may have been undertones of fear and anxiety, particularly when interacting with veteran teachers. As the years progressed, and you became a veteran, those fears and anxieties around engaging with peers most likely mitigated. My question for you as a building leader is: If we know new teachers can experience discomfort or hesitation working with their peers as they navigate their first few years of teaching, then why are we not providing support to help them build their self-efficacy to engage with their peers?

This question inspired me to explore ways I could build new teacher self-efficacy around professional learning communities (PLCs). As a young teacher, I recall the challenges I had with finding my place amidst a sea of veterans. Because of this experience and the observations I had as an administrator watching new teachers enter their PLCs, I created a course for my district's new teachers, the PLC-Orientation Modules (PLC-OM). My thinking was, if we could empower new teachers to engage with their PLCs, then perhaps these collaborative networks could be even more effective.

## Why Do PLCs Matter?

The research supporting the benefits around collaborative communities like PLCs is abundant as PLCs allow for collegial support which all teachers, especially new teachers, need (Haynes, Maddock & Goldrick, 2014; Brown, 2016; DuFour, DuFour & Eaker, 2008; Thessin, 2015). DuFour et al. (2008) define PLCs as "educators committed to working collaboratively in ongoing processes of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve" (p. 14). Through data-informed collective inquiry, these collaborative, teacher-centered networks have the potential to break down barriers between teachers while also focusing on student learning.

I aimed to develop new teacher self-efficacy around PLCs because teacher collaboration can reduce teachers' feelings of isolation, increase teachers' confidence and even eliminate teacher burnout (Reeves, Pun & Chung, 2017; Burns, Bae & Snyder, 2017). According to Bandura (1977), self-efficacy is one's belief in his/her ability to accomplish a task or achieve a goal at a proficient level. Self-efficacy grows from a variety of experiences, an individual's disposition, and the environment. Efficacy beliefs can drastically affect motivation levels and how one acts and feels which is why ensuring strong PLC self-efficacy is so important. If school leadership better supports new teachers and gives them the skills to effectively work in a collaborative setting, those efforts could encourage new teachers' growth and contributions to their PLCs.



## What is a PLC-OM?

To develop new teacher self-efficacy for PLCs, I created the PLC-OM, a synchronous and asynchronous course designed to give new teachers the skills to effectively integrate into and contribute to their PLCs. The PLC-OM was job-embedded and consisted of four

modules which were completed over 13 weeks. The first module, *PLC Protocols and PLC Best Practices*, provided an overview of PLC functioning as outlined by my district's PLC protocols and the scholarship surrounding PLCs including how these groups function in a collaborative and student-focused manner. The second module, *Communication and Collaboration*, highlighted practices around communication and collaboration which are key to a PLC. The third module, *Assessment and Data Analysis*, reviewed data procedures and how common formative assessments are a primary focus of PLC work and can enhance student learning. The third module also detailed how teachers could implement and analyze assessments within their classrooms and have data-informed conversations with their PLC peers. The final module, *Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS)*, included a review of MTSS protocols and best practices; MTSS, an intervention framework for K-12 schools, is a core feature of PLCs in my district.

Throughout the 13 weeks, participants read articles, watched videos and responded to various posts. They also wrote open-ended reflections that allowed them to explore freely their thoughts and perceptions of how their PLCs were doing based on their increasing awareness of PLC practices and protocols. For each module's culminating activity, we met as a collective group and discussed participants' learning and questions. As the facilitator, I also closely monitored their responses on the discussion boards and offered feedback and support. At the conclusion of the course, I conducted focus-group interviews and administered a post-innovation survey which I compared to the pre-innovation survey.

### What Do New Teachers Need for PLC Integration?

The unique experience of being a new teacher during the COVID pandemic brought on additional challenges for new teachers who had to navigate not only their new positions, but also a global pandemic and the disruption and conflict it caused within the education system. When analyzing my data, I discovered that, perhaps more than ever given the pandemic, new teachers understood that isolation can be the death knell to innovation and growth which is why they craved opportunities to collaborate with peers and stay connected.

Having a respectful, trusting and safe space was essential for new teachers' growth. With a sense of community

and strong relationships, new teachers shared they felt comfortable contributing to their PLCs and engaging in risk-taking. Having healthy group dynamics was also integral to new teachers' having positive views of their PLCs. Part of working well together meant that PLC members were open to social and intellectual exchange including new teachers' contributions.

To increase their self-efficacy around PLCs, new teachers needed opportunities where they could authentically grow their practice and knowledge base and engage with others which is exactly what the PLC-OM offered. The content, collaboration and my role as the facilitator all worked in concert to increase new teacher self-efficacy and provide the support and guidance they needed to be successful and feel empowered to act within their PLCs. Practicing respectful collaboration and participating in

growth-oriented dialogue assisted new teachers' self-efficacy and learning. Having knowledge around PLCs gave new teachers clarity within their own PLCs and permitted them to develop their voices and gradually move from the outskirts to full(er) participation. The PLC-OM also influenced new teachers' attitudes toward PLCs as they were able to gain an understanding of what these groups are actually supposed to accomplish. Having this understanding led some new teachers to feel confident in contributing to their PLCs by the end of the study. Being new can be challenging for some, but if new teachers have the opportunity to truly develop their voice within a safe, collaborative environment, they can learn how to contribute and can

therefore strengthen their self-efficacy.

### Where Do We Go from Here?

When a school engages in the PLC process, new teachers can find the support they need to enhance their instruction while creating connections with colleagues. School leaders should not just assume that new teachers will find their place on their own or that they will just figure it out with their PLC. Having a structured opportunity like the PLC-OM where new teachers could learn about PLCs and all they have to offer better prepared new teachers in my study to engage with their PLCs.

As school leaders, we must recognize that new teachers are a vulnerable population and need various supports to increase their self-efficacy. Collaboration does not come easy to some, and with the many challenges that new teachers already face, it is incumbent upon us to ensure that they feel fully prepared to engage with their PLCs. The first step toward this preparation is giving them an introduc-

**“ To increase their self-efficacy around PLCs, new teachers needed opportunities where they could authentically grow their practice and knowledge base and engage with others which is exactly what the PLC-OM offered.”**

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tion to what a PLC is and is supposed to accomplish and all the possibilities PLCs can bring. If we harness the power of PLCs and empower our new teachers to act within these

collaborative communities, then PLCs can truly be vehicles of change and growth. For more information, you may contact the author at [nforrest@wcasd.net](mailto:nforrest@wcasd.net)

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*Dr. Haldeman, Dr. Patschke & Dr. Ross are PA Principals Association Board Members and Practicing Administrators*

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# The Pursuit of Excellence: An “Inside-Out” Approach to Continuous Improvement

By Dr. Brian R. Miller, Dr. Kristen Justus and Rachel Hathhorn



**About the Authors:** Since 2013, **Dr. Brian R. Miller** has served as the Superintendent at Pine-Richland School District (PRSD) in Pittsburgh and is in his 26<sup>th</sup> year in education. PRSD is recognized as a high-performing school district across all indicators receiving the Mid-Atlantic Alliance for Performance Excellence (MAAPE) Mastery Award in 2020 and the MAAPE Excellence Award in 2021. In addition, Dr. Miller is entering his 10<sup>th</sup> year as a senior examiner with the Baldrige Performance Excellence national program with five years as a team lead.

**Dr. Kristen Justus** is in her fifth year in her role as Assistant Superintendent for Elementary Education and Curriculum at PRSD. Now in her 18<sup>th</sup> year in education, she has also held positions as principal, assistant principal and German teacher. Dr. Justus has served one year as an examiner regionally for MAAPE and one year at the national level.

**Rachel Hathhorn** serves as the Director of Communications at PRSD. Her career spans 22 years in communications in education. Most recently, she has served three years as an examiner for MAAPE and is president-elect for the Pennsylvania School Public Relations Association.

## Introduction

The purpose of this article is to **introduce the Baldrige Excellence Framework** and share how the framework was used to drive action (and thinking) at Pine-Richland School District (PRSD). “Inside-out” refers to both people and processes. We know that meaningful change in any organization requires the collaborative effort of staff and stakeholders. We also know that sustained change is built on the underlying foundation of key work processes and systems. At either the district or building level, **a continuous improvement mindset is critical to performance excellence in education.**

In late November 2021, the Mid-Atlantic Alliance for Performance Excellence award program (MAAPE) program announced that **Pine-Richland School District has been named a 2021 Excellence Award recipient.** The Excellence Award is MAAPE’s highest award level. “*Notably, Pine-Richland School District will be only the seventh organization to earn the Excellence Award in the past 15 years and the first education sector excellence award winner,*” said Bob Bitner, MAAPE president and CEO. MAAPE, a 501(c)3 organization serving Pennsylvania, New Jersey and Delaware, is focused on helping organizations achieve improved levels of performance by identifying and recognizing role-model organizations and sharing their best practices and strategies. **MAAPE is one of 31 state and regional Baldrige-based award programs across the country.**

PRSD is located in the northern portion of Allegheny County, and serves 4,550 students K-12 through 500+ staff. Composed of the Township of Pine and Richland Township, the school district covers 31.4 square miles in a community of approximately 25,000 residents and has experienced continuous growth since the early 1990s. Pine-Richland is noted for having a strong academic reputation, a community that values the importance of education, a wide range of educational programs, first-rate facilities, strong financial practices and a systematic approach to communication and engagement. Pine-Richland is also known for diverse opportunities in the arts, athletics and other co- and extracurricular activities. This article will share examples of the impact of the Baldrige Excellence Framework on Pine-Richland School District.

## Baldrige Background

Beginning in 1987, through the U.S. Department of Commerce and National Institute of Standards and Technology, the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award recognizes exemplary U.S. organizations and businesses that demonstrate an “*unceasing drive for innovative solutions to complex challenges, visionary leadership and operational excellence*” ([nist.gov/Baldrige](https://www.nist.gov/Baldrige)). The Baldrige Award is the highest level of national recognition for performance excellence that a U.S. organization can receive. The Baldrige Excellence Framework is a tool that has helped our district improve. This article is designed to tell the story of how the framework made an impact at Pine-Richland. The framework is not prescriptive. Instead, it is designed to ask questions. It is up to each organization how to address those questions. Examples include:

- How do you conduct your strategic planning?
- How do senior leaders create a focus on action that will achieve the organization’s mission?
- How does your organization ensure responsible governance?
- How do you determine educational program and service offerings?
- How do you build and manage student, parent and other customer relationships?

It is helpful to see how these questions develop from basic to more detailed. Here is a simple example of that progression of questions:

- How do you develop strategy?
  - How do you conduct your strategic planning?
    - What are the key process steps? Who are the key participants? What are your short- and longer-term planning horizons?

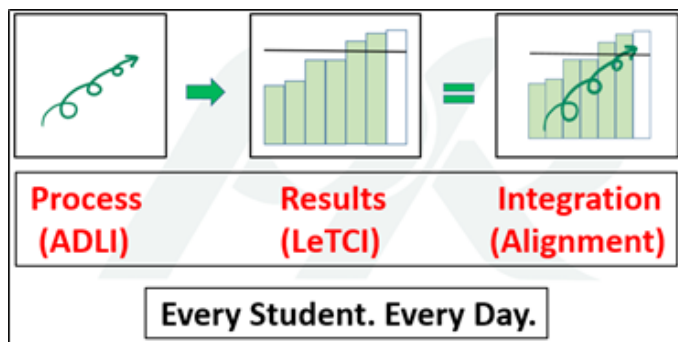
In response to the questions, there are two key acronyms used in the Baldrige Performance Excellence Program (BPEP) that help organizations evaluate performance. **The process acronym is ADLI, and results acronym is LeTCI.**

### Pine-Richland

At Pine-Richland, we have translated those acronyms into images that help us consider growth (Figure 1). The PRSD mission is to **focus on learning for every student every day**. The green “continuous improvement” loops illustrate that improvement is not usually a straight line. Per Baldrige Performance Excellence (BPE), **ADLI stands for approach, deployment, learning and integration**. Is there a systematic (repeatable) approach? Is it deployed to relevant areas? Has it been refined through cycles of learning? Does it integrate with areas important to the organization? For a practical example, let’s look back at the questions above. “How do you conduct your strategic planning?” Is there a systematic approach or set of steps (A)? Has that approach been refined or improved over time (L)?

The results histogram provides a visual way to evaluate performance. Per BPE, **LeTCI stands for levels, trends, comparisons and integration**. Whether it relates to student achievement or parent satisfaction, we need to understand how we are doing (L). When we evaluate results over time, we are beginning to understand trends (T). When we evaluate our performance against some form of benchmark, we have started to identify relevant comparisons (C).

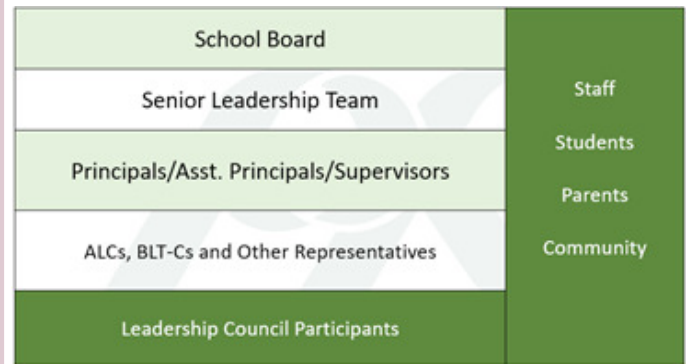
Figure 1 – Performance Excellence



### Which is more important...process or results?

We often ask this question during interviews for leadership positions. Even more than the answer to this “trick” question, we are interested in hearing the thought process of the person. We would respond to that question by saying, “it depends on the maturity of the organization.” Even though we do not talk about ADLI and LeTCI too much in everyday language in our schools, we do use the images to illustrate the concept. At Pine-Richland, we used the concepts to build strong, sustainable processes and systems from the “inside-out.” We started with people and a leadership system that promotes alignment of key staff and stakeholders (Figure 2). Our department and grade level chairpersons are known as the Academic Leadership Council (ALC). Our Building-Level Technology Coaches are noted by **BLT-C**. Other leadership councils are formed based on topic (e.g., Healthcare, Transforming the Future and Technology).

Figure 2 – Leadership System



We will build on the strategic planning questions shared earlier to illustrate how we used the framework at Pine-Richland. In Figure 3, we see the strategic planning process used to develop the four-year, long-term plan. We had more than 400 people participate in at least one town hall meeting over the five-month period used to develop our plan. We say that our mission, vision and values (MVV) are our compass. The strategic plan is our map. We used the Baldrige Excellence Framework questions to help us determine “how” we would accomplish this important work. Different school districts – or organizations – can approach strategic planning in different ways. This is why the framework is “not prescriptive.” The important part is that effective organizations are intentional about strategic development.

Figure 3 – Strategic Planning Process



- Step 1: Use gallery walk to revise SPP with input from key leaders
  - Step 2: Review current plan/results; environmental scan
  - Step 3: Review/affirm MVV; confirm SPP with BOE
  - Step 4: Communicate process, timeline and invitations to all stakeholders; specific invitations to key stakeholder groups
  - Step 5: Hold town halls organized into small table groups to maximize input. Gain consensus on MVV and long-term goals. Gather initial input regarding short-term actions.
  - Step 6: SLT reviews input and refines the draft SP.
  - Step 7: Review progress with BOE and update SP documents placed on the district website for transparency.
  - Step 8: Superintendent updates all stakeholders on progress (ongoing).
  - Steps 4-8 repeat a total of 3 times over a 5-month period.
- As an example of engagement and inclusion, more than 400 people participated in at least one TownHall.

Continued from previous page

To learn more about this example, we invite interested readers to visit our website at [www.pinerichland.org](http://www.pinerichland.org). On the main landing page, you will see a channel for Strategic Plan. Embedded in that location are a **series of short podcasts** that describe our MVV (mission, vision and values), strategic planning process and the pursuit of excellence. We have other examples, such as the in-depth program review process on the website, that gives you an idea of how ADLI translates into action for students, parents and staff. Some staff member reflections of this work include:

*“Over the past several years, I have witnessed a shift from a focus on individual improvements to an overall emphasis on core processes in our school system,”* said Principal Steve Smith. *“This shift has kept us away from creating a ‘flavor of the month’ process improvement program to truly developing a culture that embraces continuous improvement.”*

*“This award is significant and results from our administration’s sustained intentional effort to work collaboratively and cooperatively with all stakeholders to solve short-term and long-term challenges,”* said Pine-Richland Education Association (PREA) President, Chris Vins. *“As a third-grade teacher and the president of PREA, I am fortunate to have the opportunity to be a part of our district and this unique process.”*

### Getting Started

At Pine-Richland, one of the first places we started was to consider our organizational profile. The organizational profile is a “snapshot” of our organization and strategic environment. The questions asked us about the following: educational programs and services; mission, vision and values; workforce; major assets; regulatory requirements; key relationships with suppliers, partners and collaborators; and the competitive environment ([nist.gov/baldrige/baldrige-organizational-profile](http://nist.gov/baldrige/baldrige-organizational-profile)).

For school districts or universities, there are many people who may not be familiar with the Baldrige program and framework. These potential barriers are worth addressing. Examples include:

- **Awareness**...of the framework
- **Understanding**...requires time and commitment
- **Complexity**...the full framework can feel overwhelming
- **Buy-in**...of senior leaders and the school board
- **Stability**...turnover of senior leaders and/or board
- **Discipline**...to sustain focus
- **Commitment**...to the investment
- **Time**...process before results requires patience
- **Deployment**...throughout the leadership system and organization in relevant ways

As we know from many years of hard work, the framework is the opposite of an “educational fad or shiny object.” Performance excellence is a journey built on disciplined action and time. However, the pursuit of excellence also leads to some of the most rewarding improvements for student, parents and staff. Each of the authors of this article have received training as examiners through either BPE and/or MAAPE. **We would be glad to share more information with you.**

### Conclusion

The Baldrige Excellence Framework is a tool that has helped our organization improve. It is not prescriptive. At Pine-Richland, we appreciate the feedback from the MAAPE process about district strengths and our opportunities for improvement. The framework is not a magic wand or quick fix. Instead, it provides a set of questions and a way of thinking about continuous improvement that can help deliver sustainable results. **For more information, please visit the BPEP, MAAPE and/or PRSD websites via the reference list below.**

### References

Baldrige Performance Excellence Program. Gaithersburg, MD: U.S. Department of Commerce, National Institute of Standards and Technology. <https://www.nist.gov/baldrige>  
Baldrige Performance Excellence Program. (2021). *2021-2022 Baldrige Excellence Framework (Education): Leadership and Management Practices for High Performance*. Gaithersburg, MD: U.S. Department of Commerce, National Institute of Standards and Technology. <https://www.nist.gov/baldrige>  
Mid-Atlantic Alliance for Performance Excellence. [www.midatlanticape.org/](http://www.midatlanticape.org/)  
Pine-Richland School District. [www.pinerichland.org](http://www.pinerichland.org)

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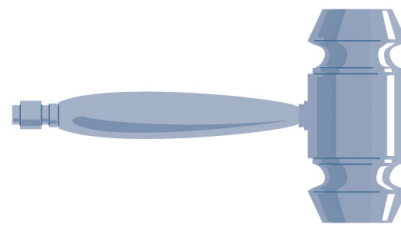
# Welcome NEW Secondary Members

Enrolled Between 7/19/2021 - 12/10/2021

## SECONDARY

<u>Name</u>	<u>District</u>	<u>Name</u>	<u>District</u>
Melissa Achuff	Warwick SD	David Krakower	Spring-Ford Area SD
Ruth Ackerman	York Adams Academy	Gavin Lawler	Pottstown SD
Robin Alozie	Bethlehem Area SD	Michael Leister	Tulpehocken Area SD
Ryan Amos	Wyoming Valley West SD	Gregory Locy	Ringgold SD
Brigitta Anthony	Millcreek Township SD	Scott Long	Solanco SD
Elizabeth Babbitt	Bethlehem Area SD	Jason Lucia	Central Westmoreland CTC
Wendy Bailey	Northern Potter SD	Corinne Lyczkowski	Pennsbury SD
Jason Beals	Carlisle Area SD	Lisa Lyons	Manheim Township SD
Brendan Bell	Chester-Upland SD	Gina Mahouski	Pine-Richland SD
Dr. Dennis Best	Centennial SD	Brett Marabito	Ligonier Valley SD
Todd Best	Fannett-Metal SD	Lisa Mauro	Ringgold SD
Melissa Betar	Allentown City SD	Dianntha McCaughtry	Millcreek Township SD
Patrick Blaskiewicz	Wayne Highlands SD	Nathan McGlynn	Eastern York SD
Terrence Bomar	East Stroudsburg Area SD	Mike McManus	Greencastle-Antrim SD
Nicole Bouhana	Bethlehem Area SD	Kelli McNaughton	Keystone SD
Allison Brazunas	Tredyffrin-Easttown SD	Alicia Measel	Neshannock Township SD
Brent Brockman	Mechanicsburg Area SD	Erin Miller	Kennett Consolidated SD
Dr. Bridget Bujak	Philadelphia City SD	Garrett Miller	Slippery Rock Area SD
Paulina Burns	Ligonier Valley SD	Michael Minnick	Indiana Area SD
Joshua Cable	Hampton Township SD	Amanda Miranda	Bethlehem Area SD
Gretchen Cammisso	Upper Darby SD	Casey Miskimmin	Franklin Regional SD
Jennifer Carolla	Quakertown Community SD	Joseph Nagle	Northwestern SD
Louis Ceccarelli	Hopewell Area SD	Scott Newell	Riverview SD
Shawn Cerully	Greater Altoona CTC	Ben Newhard	Waynesboro Area SD
Katie Church-Rivera	Erie Public Schools	Tara Newhouse	Eastern York SD
Dr. Sharon Cohen	Great Valley SD	Staci Norris	Neshannock Township SD
Nicole Coldren	Scranton SD	Todd Outman	Wellsboro Area SD
Zachary Cowher	Slippery Rock Area SD	LaShawna Page	Erie Public Schools
Michael Craddock	Warren County SD	Eric Palmer	Greater Altoona CTC
Jeffery Craig	Scranton SD	John Paone	Bucks County Technical HS
Dr. Erin Crimone	South Fayette Township SD	Karisa Peifer	Eastern Lancaster County SD
Katherine Daly-Robertson	Slippery Rock Area SD	Jessica Pellegrino	Greater Latrobe SD
Julie Davis	Exeter Township SD	Scott Peterson	Marion Center Area SD
Richard Dempsey	Scranton SD	Erin Powell	Harrisburg City SD
Tracy Dominick	West Shore SD	Laura Rakoczy	Manheim Township SD
Dave Dunsavage	Conestoga Valley SD	Dana Rapoport	Philadelphia City SD
Keera Dwulit	Avonworth SD	Brannan Raptosh	Claysburg-Kimmel SD
Lynn Eberlin	Sullivan County SD	Dr. Brandon Richards	Sharon City SD
Elysia Ehrich	Spring Grove Area SD	Tara Richards	Bethlehem Area SD
Dennis Engles	Scranton SD	Aida Rivera	Bethlehem Area SD
Dan Eskesen	Coudersport Area SD	Vanessa Robtison	Council Rock SD
Claire Fauzey	Pennsylvania Cyber CS	Matthew Rodkey	Homer-Center SD
Jason Fisher	Warren County SD	Nicholas Sajone	North Schuylkill SD
Jennifer Flannery	Neshannock Township SD	Joseph Scoboria	Daniel Boone Area SD
Jonathan Fried	Comm. Charter Academy CS	Niki Scyoc	Mifflin County SD
Curtis Funkhouser	Berks CTC	Michael Selvenis	Greater Altoona CTC
Ron Gallagher	Carmichaels Area SD	Jessica Semler	Mars Area SD
Courtney Gallagher	Mars Area SD	Brad Shrum	Line Mountain SD
Alexis Greaves	Philadelphia City SD	Caitlin Siko	Greater Johnstown SD
Ryan Gregory	Bucks County Technical HS	Morgan Spaulding	McGuffey SD
Tarah Gross	Millersburg Area SD	Kelli Strawser	Juniata County SD
Dr. BenjaminHammond	Cheltenham Township SD	Erin Stroup	Lower Moreland Township SD
Jenna Handra	Canon-McMillan SD	Brittany Taylor	Canon-McMillan SD
Tiffany Hansen	Renaissance Academy CS	Samuel Taylor	West Allegheny SD
Howard Hanson	School District of Lancaster	Jonathan Treese	Solanco SD
Keri Harrington	Altoona Area SD	Julia Vicente	Eastern Lebanon County SD
Colleen Hartman	Exeter Township SD	Matthew Volland	Windber Area SD
Dina Hathaway	North East SD	Andrea Walker	West Shore SD
Brian Higginbotham	Ligonier Valley SD	Michael Walker	Northern York County SD
Andrea Hockenbury	Mifflinburg Area SD	Marc Walter	Loyalsock Township SD
Justin Hoffacker	Fairfield Area SD	John Warnero	Elk Lake SD
Stacey Hoffman	Eastern Lancaster Co. SD	Ty Wartman	Schuylkill Haven Area SD
Eric Johnson	Frazier SD	Beth Whitney	Allegheny IU 3
Marqui Jones	Manheim Township SD	Wesley Winters	South Western SD
Ray Kelly	Johnsonburg Area SD	Ashlee Woodson	Bethlehem Area SD
Jeffrey Kelly	Derry Area SD	Nicole Zernick	Greater Altoona CTC
Kim Kladitis	Farrell Area SD	Kelly Ziegler	Mechanicsburg Area SD
Mark Klink	Waynesboro Area SD		

# Legal Corner



By Michael I. Levin, Esq., PA Principals Association General Counsel

## Addressing Critical Speech from Students, Parents and Community Members



Recently, we discussed the topic of regulating off-campus student speech as addressed by the U.S. Supreme Court in *Mahanoy Area Sch. Dist. v. B.L. by & through Levy*, 141 S. Ct. 2038 (2021). That discussion led to some questions from administrators related to online speech, not by students, but instead from parents or members of the community. More specifically, admin-

istrators raised the issue of what to do when students, parents or community members make or post critical or disparaging remarks about administrators at public meetings of the school board or on social media.

No doubt that many administrators have been on the receiving end of unflattering comments made by students, parents and community members. Such examples can span the spectrum, from parents voicing displeasure at grading or disciplinary matters related to their children, to voicing opinions on more broader topics such as racism, student safety, curriculum, sports programs or health measures. Some remarks are aimed at the school district as a whole, and some are aimed at particular school officials. Some are accusatory, personal in nature and/or offensive. Sometimes it is not the comments but the tone or manner in which the comments are presented that is objectionable.

The question then is what, if anything, can the school district or the administrator do about such comments?

Unlike student speech in school, outside of limited school forums (board meetings or school-sponsored events), schools and school administrators have limited control, authority or jurisdiction to regulate or restrict speech by parents or community members and even less authority to “punish” such speech. When it comes to social media in particular, unless the social media platform utilized by an adult is one provided by the school, that authority is almost non-existent as to online speech. Even during school board meetings, speech may be protected, at least to some extent.

Even where the school has such limited authority, a recent decision by the U.S. District Court for the Eastern

District of Pennsylvania, albeit decided in a different context, provides some overarching guidance related to this topic. In *Marshall v. Amuso*, No. CV 21-4336, 2021 WL 5359020 (E.D. Pa. Nov. 17, 2021), attendees of school board meetings whose public comments were interrupted or terminated pursuant to board policies brought action against the school district and its solicitor to obtain a preliminary injunction to prevent the application of those policies that restricted their speech at public meetings. Granting the injunction, the court held that the school district’s policies which prohibited certain comments constituted viewpoint discrimination in violation of the First Amendment, free speech clause.

Applicable to this discussion, the court noted that the First Amendment protections for free speech apply to speaking at public school board meetings which are considered limited public forums. *Id.*, citing, *City of Madison, Joint Sch. Dist. No. 8 v. Wis. Emp. Rels. Comm’n*, 429 U.S. 167, 174-75, 97 S.Ct. 421, 50 L.Ed.2d 376 (1976). The court continued:

In a limited public forum, “[c]ontent-based restrictions are valid as long as they are reasonable and viewpoint neutral.” *NAACP v. City of Phila.*, 834 F.3d 435, 441 (3d Cir. 2016). However, “viewpoint discrimination is impermissible in any forum.” *Ctr. for Investigative Reporting v. Se. Pa. Transp. Auth.*, 975 F.3d 300, 313 (3d Cir. 2020), cert. denied sub nom. *SEPTA v. Ctr. for Investigative Reporting*, No. 20-1379, — U.S. —, — S.Ct. —, — L.Ed.2d —, 2021 WL 4507651 (Oct. 4, 2021).

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“[I]n determining whether the State is acting to preserve the limits of the forum it has created so that the exclusion of a class of speech is legitimate, [the Supreme Court has] observed a distinction between, on the one hand, content discrimination, which may be permissible if it preserves the purposes of that limited forum, and, on the other hand, viewpoint discrimination, which is presumed impermissible when directed against speech otherwise within the forum’s limitations.”

*Rosenberger v. Rector & Visitors of Univ. of*

*Continued on next page*

Va., 515 U.S. 819, 829-30, 115 S.Ct. 2510, 132 L.Ed.2d 700 (1995). “When the government targets not subject matter, but particular views taken by speakers on a subject, the violation of the First Amendment is ... blatant.” *Id.* at 829, 115 S. Ct. 2510. “The government must abstain from regulating speech when the specific motivating ideology or the opinion or perspective of the speaker is the rationale for the restriction.” *Id.* *Apropos* of the case at hand, “[i]f the topic of debate is, for example, racism, then exclusion of several views on that problem is just as offensive to the First Amendment as exclusion of only one.” *Id.* at 831, 115 S. Ct. 2510. *Id.* at \*4.

In a nutshell, what the court said is that in a limited public forum although school districts can limit the content (the topics) of discussion, the school district cannot restrict the speaker’s viewpoint (opinions) offered as to those topics.

The court further noted that a viewpoint need not be political; any form of support or opposition to an idea could be considered a viewpoint. *Id.* at \*4 citing *Matal*, — U.S. —, 137 S. Ct. 1744 at 1766. Moreover, in response to the argument that such speech may be offensive, the court noted that “Giving offense is a viewpoint.” *Id.* at \*4 citing *Matal v. Tam*, — U.S. —, 137 S. Ct. 1744, 1763, 198 L.Ed.2d 366 (2017). “[D]isfavoring ideas that offend discriminates based on viewpoint, in violation of the First Amendment.” *Id.* at \*4, citing *Iancu v. Brunetti*, — U.S. —, 139 S. Ct. 2294, 2301, 204 L.Ed.2d 714 (2019). The court further asserted:

The School Board has also censored and terminated comments deemed “abusive” because they include comments deemed offensive racial stereotypes. While this Court does not address the School Board’s or its employees’ assessment of whether the speech was offensive or to whom, suffice it to say that the First Amendment protects offensive speakers. The Policy terms invoked to terminate the offensive comments (“abusive” and “personally directed”) “prohibit speech purely because it disparages or offends.” *Ison v. Madison Loc. Sch. Dist. Bd. of Educ.*, 3 F.4th 887, 894 (6th Cir. 2021); see also *Texas v. Johnson*, 491 U.S. 397, 414, 109 S.Ct. 2533, 105 L.Ed.2d 342 (1989) (“If there is a bedrock principle underlying the First Amendment, it is that the government may not prohibit the expression of an idea simply because society finds the idea itself

offensive or disagreeable.”). This, too, is impermissible viewpoint discrimination. *Id.* at \*5.

Simply stated, the court held that the fact that the content of the speaker’s comments may be “offensive” to some does not permit the school district to restrict the speaker’s comments.

Finally, in terms of restricting “personally directed” comments, the court noted that “Calling for a School Board member’s resignation, for example, is ‘personally directed’ and could be considered ‘irrelevant’ to an underlying issue or problem but it could also be considered highly relevant to the School Board member’s role in creating or failing to address or solve the issue or problem.” *Id.* at \*6. The court further noted that personally directed opinions by citizens as to decisions to hire or fire employees are relevant to its business. The court held that by “[c]haracterizing criticism of a District employee’s possible wrongful conduct or competence as ‘personally directed’ or ‘abusive,’ the District itself demonstrates the overbreadth of its policy.” *Id.* at \*8.

What this means is that such personally directed accusations of incompetence or wrongdoing, etc., as long as they are related to the topic of discussion, are not impermissible and cannot be restricted, especially if “positive” personally directed comments are permitted without restriction.

Although the court indicated that school districts can certainly limit public speech to the stated purpose of the forum, and regulate clearly defined inappropriate or illegal conduct, as the above-referenced decision indicates, the school district is limited in its ability to restrict or limit parents and community members from commenting on applicable school matters and school personnel, even in limited public forums. On social media, that ability is almost non-existent.



Given the aforementioned legal and logistical limitations attendant to regulating otherwise public speech, what is left for school administrators to do in terms of online comments and criticisms? In brief, administrators can attempt to publicly “set the record straight” or they can seek legal redress if the circumstances warrant it. These two options each presuppose that the criticism or comments are inaccurate or out and out falsehoods. The first option also must presuppose that publicly “setting the record straight” will not violate or infringe upon the rights and privileges of any other person such as a student or staff member.

What this means is that administrators must first assess whether comments directed at them bear any response at all. The first issue should be whether the comments are so egregious as to require or necessitate any type of corrective response. This determination should be based upon an analytical approach and not be based upon ego or pride. In addition, the decision should be viewed as broadly as possible, estimating and considering the logical path that further comments will take. (The goal should be to avoid making matters worse). The second issue is whether a response is even appropriate under the circumstances. This will depend upon the circumstances at issue. The third issue is to whom such a response or explanation is to be made and in what manner. (Who is the intended audience?) To the extent that a response is deemed necessary and appropriate, the administrator should make sure that the response as crafted does not violate the rights of any other individuals, especially students or staff. To the extent that the offending comments are related to the administrator’s employment, the administrator should also review and clear the response with the school district’s administration. To the extent that such comments or response implicate the school districts responsibilities, the school district’s administration should review the matter with its solicitor.

If on the other hand, the administrator believes that the public comments are false and defamatory and professionally or personally harmful, the administrator may wish to seek legal counsel to determine whether any legal action is merited. Although such advice is entirely fact-intensive and beyond the scope of this article, the following is a brief overview of such matters.

As noted by the Pennsylvania courts, “Defamation, of which libel, slander, and invasion of privacy are methods, is the tort of detracting from a person’s reputation, or injuring a person’s character, fame, or reputation, by false and malicious statements.” *Joseph v. Scranton Times L.P.*, 959 A.2d 322, 334 (Pa.Super.Ct.2008) (citing *Zartman v. Lehigh County Humane Soc’y*, 333 Pa. Super. 245, 482 A.2d 266, 268 (1984)).

In order to successfully establish a claim for defamation, a plaintiff has the burden of proving:

- (1) The defamatory character of the communication.
- (2) Its publication by the defendant.
- (3) Its application to the plaintiff.
- (4) The understanding by the recipient of its defamatory meaning.

- (5) The understanding by the recipient of it as intended to be applied to the plaintiff.
- (6) Special harm resulting to the plaintiff from its publication.
- (7) Abuse of a conditionally privileged occasion.

42 Pa.C.S. § 8343(a).

Once a plaintiff establishes these elements, the defendant has the burden of proving the following, when relevant to the claim:

- (1) The truth of the defamatory communication.
- (2) The privileged character of the occasion on which it was published.
- (3) The character of the subject matter of defamatory comment as of public concern.

42 Pa.C.S. § 8343(b).

In *Mzamane v. Winfrey*, the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania outlined Pennsylvania defamation law. *Mzamane v. Winfrey*, 693 F. Supp. 2d 442 (E.D. Pa. 2010). The court noted that the purpose underlying defamation law is to compensate an individual for pecuniary harm to one’s reputation inflicted by a defamatory statement. *Id.*, 693 F. Supp. 2d at 471, citing *Wilson v. Slatalla*, 970 F.Supp. 405, 414 (E.D.Pa.1997). As explained, under Third Circuit jurisprudence, in federal claims, the court must apply a two-step approach when presiding over a defamation action. The court must determine: “(1) whether the defendants have harmed the plaintiff’s reputation within the meaning of state law; and (2) if so, whether the First Amendment nevertheless precludes recovery.” *Id.*, 693 F. Supp. 2d at 476, citing *Marcone v. Penthouse Int’l Mag. For Men*, 754 F.2d 1072, 1077 (3d Cir. 1985) (quoting *Steaks Unlimited, Inc. v. Deaner*, 623 F.2d 264, 270 (3d Cir.1980)). What this means is that in addition to determining whether such comments are defamatory as provided under the aforementioned state law, the federal court will also analyze whether the comments are protected by the First Amendment.

Moreover, the court in *Mzamane v. Winfrey* offered the following guidance:

A statement is deemed to be defamatory, “if it tends to blacken a person’s reputation or expose him to public hatred, contempt, or ridicule, or injure him in his business or profession.” ... “When communications tend to lower a person in the estimation of the community, deter third persons from associating with him, or adversely affect his fitness for the proper conduct of his lawful business or profession, they are deemed defamatory.” ... “It is not enough that the victim of the [statements] ... be embarrassed or annoyed, he must have

suffered the kind of harm which has grievously fractured his standing in the community of respectable society." ... Importantly, only statements of fact, rather than mere expressions of opinion, are actionable under Pennsylvania law. ... In order for an "opinion" to be deemed capable of defamatory meaning under Pennsylvania law, it must "reasonably be understood to imply the existence of undisclosed defamatory facts justifying the opinion." ... The statements alleged to be defamatory must be viewed in context.

*Id.*, 693 F. Supp. 2d at 476-477 [citations omitted].

In addition, as noted by the court, the Pennsylvania Supreme Court has explained that:

[W]ords which standing alone may reasonably be understood as defamatory may be so explained or qualified by their context as to make such an interpretation unreasonable. Thus, we must consider the full context of the article to determine the effect the article is fairly calculated to produce, the impression it would naturally engender, in the minds of the average persons among whom it is intended to circulate.

See *Thomas Merton Ctr. v. Rockwell Int'l Corp.*, 497 Pa. 460, 442 A.2d 213, 216 (1981).

Similarly, the Superior Court of Pennsylvania has recognized that "the literal accuracy of separate statements will not render a communication 'true' where ... the implication of the communication as a whole was false." *Dunlap v. Phila. Newspapers, Inc.*, 301 Pa. Super. 475, 448 A.2d 6, 15 (1982). As noted by the District Court, courts applying

Pennsylvania law have found that even where the complained-of statements are literally true, if, when viewed *in toto*, the accurate statements create a false implication, the speaker may be liable for creating a defamatory implication. *Id.*, 693 F. Supp. 2d 477-78 [citations omitted].

As noted, in order to assert defamation an administrator must show a pecuniary harm to one's reputation inflicted by the defamatory statement, that the statement is more than merely embarrassing or annoying, that the statement is not otherwise protected by law, and that the statement is a statement of fact rather than mere opinion. As stated above, whether and to what extent a defamation lawsuit is advisable or even viable is a question to be determined by the circumstances and should be determined with the advice of legal counsel.

Also noted above, administrators have limited options regarding critical comments made by parents and community members especially outside of any school related forum. Although "setting the record straight" and defamation lawsuits may prove to be viable options under certain circumstances, each comes with its own set of issues which need to be evaluated. In the end, in many circumstances, it may very well behoove the administrator to simply ignore the comments and to move forward. Again, that will depend upon the circumstances.

School administrators are always under heavy scrutiny in exercising their responsibilities in the governance of their schools and programs. When addressing public comment, it is imperative for school administrators to consult with central administration, solicitors and possibly private counsel to ensure that any response, if any, is proper under the circumstances.

Finally, school administrators must carefully evaluate whether any intended reaction to public attacks by students, parents or others will violate any school district rules or expectations. Taking action may feel good in the moment but result in unintended consequences that may make matters worse.

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