



# FROM SEED TO APPLE

*Inspirational stories from Washington's classrooms,  
featuring the 2020 Washington Teachers of the Year*

**FOREWORD BY ROBERT HAND**  
2019 Washington State Teacher of the Year

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**10TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION**



*From Seed to Apple* was first published in 2010 and featured the 2011 Teachers of the Year, including State Teacher of the Year Jay Maebori, whose new piece you can read in this 10th anniversary edition. The 2009 Washington State Teacher of the Year Susan Johnson of Cle Elum-Roslyn High School first conceived of the idea for a collection of reflections from the Teachers of the Year. As a member of the Central Washington Writing Project, Johnson understood the power of stories to connect people. She believed stories from classrooms across our state would help the public better understand the complexities of the teaching profession.

Since 2011, every class of Teachers of the Year has published a volume of *From Seed to Apple*. The stories featured in past volumes are full of the joys and frustrations of teaching, and they are remarkably relevant years later. Perhaps this is because they speak in their own way to the important truth that all great teachers understand—a positive relationship between educator and student is the foundation of learning.

This expanded volume is triple-sized and features the voices of students, administrators, parents, and a legislator, as well as our 2020 Teachers of the Year. Ten years later, real stories continue to provide a unique window into the experiences, motivations, and passions that drive education across Washington and connect us to each other in new ways.

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Except in the case of student authors and where a student's parent is the author, the names of all students featured in this publication have been changed.

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*This book is dedicated with gratitude to our communities and is shared in honor of the students of Washington state whose diverse experiences and abilities are celebrated in these stories.*



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## ROBERT HAND

2019 Washington State  
Teacher of the Year

Mount Vernon High  
Mount Vernon School District

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## Foreword

As Washington's Teacher of the Year, two of the most important ideas I have reconnected with are these:

1. Teaching is hard. Growing up is harder.
2. The most important part of a teacher's job is not to talk, but to listen.

It is so easy to get overwhelmed with what we do that we often lose sight of why we do it. It's true...teaching is hard. But there is a reason why we show up and do it every day. Because no matter how hard it is to teach, we know it's much harder to grow up. We love our students, and we know they need us. More importantly, we know we need them. The future leaders of our world are in our classrooms every day. And they are facing challenges we never had to face when we were kids. Growing up has always been hard. But it's harder now than it's ever been before. And that is why the job of an educator is one of the most important jobs there is. And it's why one of the most important parts of a teacher's job is not to talk, but to listen.

I've always believed in the power of stories. But this year, I remembered I need to spend as much time listening to stories as I do telling them. I remembered that the classroom I teach in is not mine. It is ours. Every time a new group of students enters the classroom, it becomes ours. And it becomes unique. Every student has a story to tell, and there is tremendous power in their stories. We are better teachers when we listen to and support our students. And we are a better community when we listen to and support our teachers and schools. We are all in this together.

The more we listen, the more we can learn. And the more we learn, the more we can love. The stories you are about to read are powerful reminders of why we teach. Prepare to be inspired.



**JENNA YUAN**

*Chair, Legislative Youth  
Advisory Council*

Eastlake High School  
Lake Washington School District

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## From Learner to Leader

*Dynamic stories ignite the spark of  
civic engagement*

Within the past year, I've been elected to lead a council of my peers, given a speech to hundreds of teenagers at the state capitol, and testified at a legislative committee hearing. However, if you could travel back in time and tell my younger self that I'd one day participate in these amazing opportunities, I would never have believed you. After all, I was shy and quiet. I preferred reading in the library to socializing during recess and would sooner die than raise my hand in class. I rarely even spoke in the classroom—much less volunteered to speak publicly in front of a room full of people.

My parents immigrated from China almost twenty years ago, which makes me a second-generation immigrant and the first American citizen in my family. As a result, conversations at our dinner table were dominated by chatter about school, work, vacation, my grandparents, getting a pet—anything but American

politics. Since they could not vote (and had been born in a country where the right wasn't granted to citizens at all), I remained unaware of its importance. Through no fault of their own, the cultural context they grew up in was vastly different from America's lively culture of participatory democracy. Since political socialization is largely determined by one's family, I didn't grow up with the same level of political awareness as some of my peers.

Combined, these factors meant that I would probably be the last person you'd earmark as a future leader—or even someone who would be civically engaged at all. In fact, before 8th grade, I would have agreed with you. I was perfectly content to remain in my comfort zone of skating along in school without really engaging with my learning. I believed social studies and the political system were boring. To me, social studies classes simply consisted of memorizing names and dates, with no critical thinking required at all.

That all changed when I was in 8th grade. In Redmond Middle School (as I'm sure is the case at every middle school), rumors spread rampantly, and I had heard negative things about my new social studies class. Apparently, the teacher didn't use a textbook, assigned unnecessarily difficult work, and—gasp—*forced you to participate in class*. On the first day, new binder filled with first-person historical texts and carefully color-coded worksheets in hand, I was already prepared to hate the class.

But surprisingly, I didn't hate the class. In fact, I began to look forward to it every day. It was far from memorizing names and dates. Instead, we read the mesmerizing stories from history that I hadn't ever even heard before—not only Jefferson's musings about the Constitution, but the stories of the pre-Columbian inhabitants of North America, enslaved peoples before the Civil War, and civil rights activists in the 1960s. Unlike my previous experiences, class didn't feel like an episode of Jeopardy, where we were interrogated endlessly about mundane facts. Our teacher actually asked us for our perspectives. Was Japanese internment necessary during World War II? Should the US have dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki? Despite my previous unwillingness, I found myself engaging more and more, eager to discover not just the "what" of history, but the "why." In fact, for our year-long project, I chose to write a 10-minute long speech to present in front of the class. Surprisingly, I didn't feel scared or intimidated. I loved my self-selected topic—Betty Friedan and 1960s-era feminism—so much, the speech seemed to write itself, and when it came time to present, I knew I was confident in what I'd created.

That one social studies class in 8th grade changed my life. I believed I was simply learning about history, but in reality, I learned how to become a good civic leader. Giving me the opportunity to actively engage with material and develop perspectives helped me develop the critical thinking skills and confidence necessary to go forth and bring my views to the real world. In fact, I believe all of my peers and I developed into good leaders



during that class. We didn't all suddenly become more confident or more inherently intelligent. Instead, we gained the true tools to engage with our communities in meaningful ways: to listen to others, to think about our own views, and to change in what we believed.

I am so grateful I now know the importance of civic engagement. I have the agency to create change, fight for what I believe in, and go forth to become the best citizen I can be. No matter where my future takes me, I know that being equipped with awareness of the institutions and systems around me and having the confidence to speak out has created possibilities that the shy kid I used to be could never even have imagined.



**REID SUNDBLAD**

*2020 Puget Sound ESD  
Regional Teacher of the Year*

Chinook Middle School  
Highline School District

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## Choose Your Own Adventure

*Students face epic decisions every day  
that determine their path*

As a young reader in elementary school, my favorite books to check out from the school library were the *Choose Your Own Adventure* book series. At the end of each page the main character (and reader) faced a decision. The reader got to decide what they wanted the character to do, and that would determine which page the reader turned to in order to continue the story.

While these stories of facing dragons and outrunning zombies were fun to read, the truth is that my students are confronted with their own version of these same things. The obstacles for my students may not be fantasy creatures or mythical monsters, but they are just as terrifying. And they are real. Every single one of my students is living out a *Choose Your Own Adventure* book daily. They come to a point multiple times a day when

they must make a decision. These decisions are nothing like the decisions I had to make as a youth. They are more complex, they are more personal, and they are more life altering.

Emmanuel, a 14-year old-boy, lives in a loving home with his mother, father, and two younger sisters. One night, Emmanuel's father made the poor decision to drive while intoxicated, which consequently led to him hitting a parked car. Still under the influence of alcohol, Emmanuel's father fled the scene. Upon returning home and seeing the faces of his family, Emmanuel's father knew that he had to teach his young and impressionable children a lesson that you must own up to your mistakes, and so at 2 am, he reported himself to the local police. As a result of teaching his children a valuable lesson, Emmanuel's father put himself in the position where he was subsequently given deportation orders to return to El Salvador. Every single morning, Emmanuel wakes up to choose his own adventure: does he turn to page 12, in which he goes to school, or does he turn to page 23 and stay home with his father because that may be the last day they spend together?

Eighth grader Francisco, another 14-year-old boy, lives at home with his single mother and younger brother; his father has never been in the picture. For a majority of his 7th-grade year, Francisco's attendance was abysmal. In a given school week, he may have been present one or two days, at most. His mother worked nights, and while she was working, Francisco had a difficult time sleeping because he had no way to contact her in the case of

an emergency; no way to hear her voice in times of fear. His daily choose your own adventure was between page 32 where he stays awake all night and watching over his brother, thus missing school the next day or page 29 where he goes to sleep, but with the fear that something may happen to him and his brother while his mom is away.

Seven boys were going through their 7th-grade year, each with their own personal struggles. Two were constantly being written up for their behaviors in the classroom. Two were facing peer pressure from every angle due to their demeanor. One was balancing work and school as he tried to earn money to help his mother pay the bills. One was adjusting to a new school. One was struggling with the recent death of his father. As seniors in high school, each boy came face to face with the same choose your own adventure dilemma: turning to page 26 graduates them from high school. Turning to page 39 puts them in the place where they don't earn their diploma.

Each of these young men are members of an all-boys mentoring group that I began in 2013 called "Los Siete," which is Spanish for "the seven." Los Siete represents the seven core values our group. It also pays homage to the original seven members, of which all but one identified as Latino. It was a group that began and continues to serve as a supportive brotherhood for young men, predominately of color, to hold each other accountable for living out the seven core values of Los Siete daily: respect, academic responsibility, trust, integrity, equality, courageous leadership, and loyalty. As the

teacher and advisor of this group, my responsibility is not to choose the page for my boys, but instead to help guide them to choose the page that is best for them and the goals they have set for themselves.

Emmanuel typically chooses page 12, which takes him to school instead of staying home with his dad. They are spending most weekends together while the dad fights alongside his lawyer to find a way to remain in the United States. Francisco chooses page 29 every single day, he goes to sleep instead of staying up all night, because now he has a cell phone to call mom whenever he needs. Ever since I helped put a phone in his hand, his attendance has been flawless. And the final story of those seven boys, the original members of Los Siete, six out of the seven chose page 26 and earned their high school diploma.

Just like my boys, I too am creating and living out my own version of a Choose Your Own Adventure story through the daily choices and decisions I make in my professional and personal life. I turned to page 7 when I was approached to leave teaching at the middle school level and work at a neighboring high school; I turned to page 7 when I strongly considered leaving the teaching profession in 2017; I turned to page 7 when I had to decide which relationships were most important for me to spend time cultivating in my life; and I turn to page 7 every morning when I wake up with a smile on my face because I know who, and what, is in store for me that day.

On page 7 are the faces of the more than 160 young men of Los Siete and the countless more to come. They are my choice every time.



## GUY KOVACS

*2019 Middle Level Principal  
of the Year*

Kalles Junior High School  
Puyallup School District

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# Because of Mr. Warren

*Our experiences shape our leadership*

I have witnessed the power of public education firsthand. Schools work to level playing fields, remove barriers, and create hope. I know how schools can lift a child out of poverty and change a life's trajectory. I have seen positive and encouraging educators build self-esteem, share new opportunities, and instill a love of learning in young minds. I understand how teachers, administrators, coaches, and other caring adults can help a young boy leave his anger and loads of poor choices behind and get on a road of becoming just like those who made a positive difference in his life. Schools can mold and influence. They can give direction and purpose.

To me, formal education is first and foremost about hope. Education was my great equalizer. I am the boy mentioned above. I did not come from a family with the resources or role modeling that some of my peers had. I did not have a family culture that encouraged dinner conversations around changing the world or going to college. My dyslexic father dropped out of high-school.

My adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) were many. I was just like our 30 million students today who get free or reduced-priced lunch. I understand the trials of students who often have “life” on their mind when they arrive at school. I am not a victim, but a survivor, and my school experiences were a major part of getting on, and keeping on, the right path.

As an adult who worked his way out of such circumstances, I am proud of the grit and determination that my formative years built within me. However, I know that the growth and stability I later enjoyed in life happened because many caring adults chose to see me as a child with potential instead of a child with deficits. None more so than Mr. Warren, my 8th-grade US History teacher at Baker Junior High in Tacoma, Washington.

Eighth grade, in a 7–9 junior high system, can be an interesting time for many kids. They are not the fresh, bright-eyed 7th-grade students, and they are not the older, high-school freshman in 9th grade. For some, there is a lost sort of feeling and for most there is the chorus that grades “do not count yet.” I was a typical 8th-grade student who found my own struggles. I came from a family that did not talk about goals, college, what happened at school that day, or even how I was feeling. I had much to learn. I typically solved problems with my size and strength, rather than my words and intelligence. I was a 14-year-old who had already been involved in drugs and alcohol, late nights out, and more late-night poor choices than I like to admit. Multiple fights and being handcuffed by school security paint a bit of the picture.

Mr. Warren chose to take a pretty raw and often challenging teen and spend the needed time to get me on the right path. He spent quality time with me after class, greeted me in the hallways, popped into conversations with friends just to say hello, asked me how I was doing, called me by name, pre-taught, re-taught, built up my confidence via well timed questions, called home, and held me accountable. I specifically remember him coming to our fall football games and taking the time to talk with me afterwards. There was always the expected congratulatory comment, but he also took the time to ask me how I thought I did and what I learned during that specific competition. He must have known what that meant to me, as he made most of my sporting events that year and the next. As an educator, I now know these actions take some time and effort, but not much when you consider how much those efforts can change lives.

In 1848, Horace Mann said, “Education, then, beyond all other devices of human origin, is the great equalizer of the conditions of men, the balance wheel of the social machinery.” I am privileged to be an educator in the state of Washington, where our state constitution declares, “It is the paramount duty of the state to make ample provision for the education of all children residing within its borders.” The historic promises exemplified in Mann’s words, and in our state constitution, speak to the charge of all educators. That charge is to fulfill the promise of hope that public education offers. I get the opportunity, multiple times a day, to be someone’s Mr. Warren. I get to build relationships and provide hope. I get to be the caring adult that some students need in their lives. I get



to do this on a personal level, but I also am in the unique position as a junior-high principal to create systems that empower, motivate, and focus everyone on my staff to do just the same.



## LISA SUMMERS

2020 Capital Region ESD 113  
Regional Teacher of the Year

A G West Black Hills High School  
Tumwater School District

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# Getting My Ducks in a Row

*Knowing a student's strengths is the key  
to unlocking their potential*

I had just gotten home from finishing a full day of teaching. It was my 38th birthday. I fully intended to enjoy the beautiful spring sunshine on my face and catch a few minutes of relaxation before my husband returned home from his day of work. As I sunbathed, I thought, “Finally, just a little bit of peace and quiet.” Until I heard blaring music coming from the silver Saturn Vue driving up my driveway.

Four of my students jumped out of the car. Walking up to my house were soon to be graduating seniors Emily and Jessica, and nearly done with their freshmen year, Whitney and Alli. All four girls became fast friends meeting one another on the varsity girls’ soccer team that fall. In fact, they were inseparable. I met them at the front door.

“We brought you the most special birthday present ever.” My suspicions and spidey-senses knew something was up. One of them rushed back to the car to grab a rather large cardboard box and placed it in front of me. The four girls, each giggling with excitement, all pitched in and shouted, “Happy Birthday!” Emily, bursting at the seams, shared, “We wanted to get you something so you would never forget us!”

The girls continued to watch with excitement as I stared at this odd box. I opened the box to find four ducklings; four very real, very much alive, ducklings. My jaw dropped. The girls, proud of their gift to me, went on and on about how I had been like their mama duck and how they were like ducklings.

“Meet Alli, Whitney, Jessica, and Emily.” They had named the ducklings after themselves. I thought to myself, “Of course they have.” I was in shock and wondering what the heck I would do with ducks. Eventually my husband came home from work only to learn that we were the owners of four ducklings. He listened to the girls tell their story and share the ducklings’ names. Then he asked, “What were you thinking? Ducklings?”

I will never forget those four amazing young girls, ducklings, now grown women. I didn’t need a box of ducklings as a gift to remember each of them. Mama Duck never forgets her ducklings even when it’s their time to leave the nest. I should tell you that I did return their gift. The ducks ended up living at a nearby farm.

I am proud that I got it right for these four little ducklings. This Mama Duck may look calm on the surface but boy do I paddle hard underneath. I work diligently to make sure I use the most effective strategies and tools to get my students to trust and respect me. What I learned from these ducklings is that if I pay attention, observe, and listen I can teach each student from their strengths.

Let's just be honest, Alli is the sweetest of these ducklings. She is a quiet observer. She needs to check the water temperature before she starts swimming. Alli was afraid to fail. She worried that she would do something wrong or make a mistake. She was reluctant to try. I learned quickly that Alli is an analytical learner. She needs to process information, make observations, and compare ideas. Alli learns best when she can present information in a sequential manner and have time to process and apply what she's learned. Alli needs the time to put forth quality work. Last minute surprises or rush jobs, limited direction, confusing communication, and inadequate time were major obstacles to Alli's success. Because she was organized, thoughtful, precise, and detailed, I needed to provide her specific and immediate feedback. When you clearly communicate with Alli and give her time, she exceeds all expectations and goals.

Whitney is no farmed duckling. She is 100% wild. This duckling is all about the adventure and fun. She is impulsive, unpredictable, creative, innovative, and outgoing. She is easily distracted, often off-task, and has the potential to drift out into troubled waters. Offering Whitney choices respected her need for control and

individualism. If I didn't give her choices, I could risk her rebelling, being bored, and losing interest. Choices worked. My goal was to empower rather than control her. Just like a duck is a natural swimmer, Whitney is a natural influencer. She is no follower. She shines when intentionally allowed to be in the spotlight as an influencer of classmates, teammates, and groups. She would lead and organize games and fitness activities. Other students appreciated her help. After all, she made learning fun and memorable.

Many thought Jessica was the duckling who most resembled Mama Duck. And she does look a lot like me. We even convinced other students that she was my daughter. She was the duckling master: independent, strong-willed, decisive, and a natural leader. I'll admit, I have a lot in common with this duckling. She doesn't like wasting time. She is all about the what, why, and how. I knew that I needed to help her find the joy and fun in learning. She needed a "to do" list in order to get things done, but I wanted her to also enjoy the journey. I would add an element of fun to her task, assignment, or goal. She learned to enjoy dressing up in costumes or playing a character. It was her idea to have a class dance-off competition where we all witnessed her amazing and now famous moonwalk. I could count on Jessica's leadership and quick decision-making to mentor, to teach, to counsel, and to coach others while adding some spontaneity and fun. This helped Jessica to loosen up a bit and helped students to enjoy her teaching and direction. I am sure this is why she connected so easily with both Alli and Whitney.

Emily is the giving duckling. She is a loyal friend, family member, pet owner, teammate, co-worker, and student. This duckling would give her last morsel to her flock. She thrives in teams, families, and groups. She doesn't want to let anyone down. She certainly doesn't want to leave anyone out or be left out herself. Emily has a huge heart, giving her time, resources, and energy without hesitation. She will do more for others than herself. Giving Emily truthful and honest acknowledgment, encouragement, and appreciation, made her feel valued, respected, and cared for. Establishing a positive rapport and relationship with Emily, helped build a loyal and strong connection between teacher and student. Anything less and she would question her self, stop caring, give up, and quit. I learned that Emily needed opportunities to utilize her strengths to support others. It's why I would call upon her help to teach and look out for others.

It's why she was a wonderful teacher's assistant for me, and captain for the varsity soccer team.

Those four ducklings all successfully left the nest. They each continue to be a part of my life, and I continue to be a part in their lives. Seven years ago, our family chose Emily to help care for our preemie daughter when I returned to teaching. There was no one we trusted more than her. Jessica invited me to be on the panel of her master's dissertation presentation. She was prepared, smart, and assertive. She passed with flying colors. My fondest memory of Alli was watching her read to my daughter, and my daughter pretending to read to her. Alli reminding us all that we all need

to spend quality time together. It was fun and very special having Miss Lowe (Whitney) student teach with me. I welcomed the opportunity to help her develop and grow as a physical educator.

Alli, Whitney, Jessica, and Emily all adventured off to four-year universities, earning teaching degrees. Today, they are all mama ducks. Emily and Alli earned degrees in early childhood education. Emily is currently teaching abroad in Shanghai, China as an International-Baccalaureate Director for Early Childhood Education. Alli teaches kindergarten at George Elementary in George, Washington. Both Whitney and Jessica earning degrees in physical education. Jessica teaches at Tollefson High School in Tollefson, Arizona. Whitney recently relocated to Reno, Nevada in pursuit of the perfect secondary teacher gig. Each of the four is doing amazing things for their students and communities.

Some teachers use a “duck test” to figure out their students. The test implies if it looks like a duck, swims like a duck, and quacks like a duck, then it probably is a duck. But, I have learned that no two ducks are the same. My students are complex, like my four little ducklings. All students look different. All students swim through life differently. Each student’s quack is unique and authentic.

It’s sometimes hard for a teacher to articulate why they teach. In my 24 years of teaching, I am most proud of the unique and lasting relationships that I carefully cultivate with my students. Developing positive, respectful relationships with my students has been key to unlocking their potential and unlocking my own

potential. And because I want to connect, empower, and motivate my students to be successful, I learned quickly not to intentionally ruffle any feathers. What has been successful for my students and my teaching is a student-centered approach. I challenge and encourage others to invest in building relationships. Learn about each student; get to know how each student is motivated and what they are capable of.

I am one proud teacher and Mama Duck. The real gift these young women gave me and continue to give me is time together, love, laughter, and kindness. Hung up on a wall in my office is a quote from James Comer, “No significant learning can occur without a significant relationship.” With the right kind of care and inspiration, we all can sustain nurturing relationships to help students along their way and make sure each one has the ability to fly independently.







## LILY VILLA

*Member, Legislative Youth  
Advisory Council*

Mabton Junior Senior High School  
Mabton School District

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# We Were Surrounded

*One determined teacher can make  
all the difference*

We thought there was no way to leave; no way to escape the fog that surrounded us. The fog was thick and cold—almost like the smoke that surrounds our valley in the summer—but this was year-round. It seemed to grow thicker every day to the point we could barely see the other side, the place we dreamed of going. The dark fog made us believe that we were nothing. We were just scum, and “goal” was not in our vocabulary. It was so dangerous that we got addicted to more than just video games, we watched the people closest to us lose the things that made them so special and unique. We could see the light that was once inside of them disappear.

The fog continued to stick around us even when we were able to get out of its grasp. The fog was none other than our community’s stigma. It told us we could never go to college. Graduating high school is the farthest we would ever go. The only thing we could be was a farmworker.

This hurt us more than anyone will know. We continued to go through school accepting the mediocre work we did and being happy about our grades that allowed us to pass through to the next semester. In knowing the stigma, the teachers did not care either. They were unmotivated to keep us determined and without their encouraging attitude, who would expect us to care either?

When other schools would come to play sports they would say, “Wow! They actually have eligible players?” This was all we could hear and all we focused on while playing. We continued to think that this was the community’s only expectation for us, so we shouldn’t have higher ones. Our parents did not have high expectations for us either; the only reason we went to school was because it was required. Once we graduated—if we graduated—we would continue working in the fields; like we’d been doing since we were 12.

Even though we did not see a good future, we still had hope. Sometimes it was the only thing we could hold onto. We would hope that we could at least make it into the local community college. The most important moment for our community is in June when the seniors would walk across the stage and accept the purple diploma. The gym would be full of people and smiles; along with tears. Even though this seemed like the end, it wasn’t. The fog was still surrounding us.

Until one teacher came to run the fog away. He was able to see right through it, our yearning to go farther than what was expected. He taught us the subject he knew

and favored, history. He was a New Yorker; the type of person you would never expect to come and settle down just outside the Yakama Reservation and a short drive away from the Hanford Nuclear Site. When he arrived, everyone asked “How did you end up here?” or “Why didn’t you go somewhere better?” He replied, “to teach you the things that everyone is scared to tell you.” From then on he taught us the history of the world that we had been deprived of before. He taught us how our town was thriving in the early 1900’s, we had been a large town due to the Northwest Pacific Railroad. Our town had a theater, hotels, and multiple restaurants but it all came to a close when a fire struck our town and brought it to ashes. We continued our own research, studied our own people, and created projects about our town that no one would have expected.

We kept growing; not forgetting the things he taught us and the lessons we had learned from him about life. Even though he tried his hardest some of our classmates lost the battle against the lightless fog, becoming addicts and drinking. The fire that was within them was put out, and the person we once knew was gone.

That teacher gave us a new-found motivation and the drive that we had been searching for. Now we are prepared to leave the fog, to be on our own and be able to come back and help others escape.

We’ve found the strength within ourselves to keep striving, to continue to learn and make use of our education to our own advantage. Every choice we make

now is focused on making life better. The fog that once surrounded us to the point we could not breathe, is now gone. We used our knowledge to tear it down so that it can never rise again. Now we live a daily cycle of creating goals and completing them. We are free of the thing that was holding so many of us back because of the guidance and support of just one teacher. Even when we are not looking, the most unexpected thing can come in and change everything for the better.



## MALIA RENNER-SINGER

2020 North Central ESD 171  
*Regional Teacher of the Year*

Cascade High School  
Cascade School District

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# My Brother; My Hero

*How a high school hate crime still defines a teacher's practice*

When I was 17 years old, my brother was the victim of a hate crime at our high school.

But let me begin by explaining some things. First, know that my parents and myself are white. When we were both two years old, my brother became my brother through adoption; he is a person of color. Honestly, this was something I never really noticed as a child because he had always been my normal. But my brother noticed, or was made to notice, that he was “different” due to the color of his skin. He was always much more aware of people’s reactions to our family in public and the different ways that the two of us were treated. Middle school was the first time he remembers

being called a racist word by another student: “chink.”\* I remember his anger, that he was called such a thing and that it was a racist term for a person of Chinese descent. My brother was born in Korea.

Second, know that my brother and I were raised in Washington’s state capital, Olympia. In 1980s and 90s southeast Olympia, the kids at our schools mostly looked like me: white. Growing up in a white family, being educated in schools where more than a 90% of students and 100% of teachers identified as white, meant that my brother did not have many adult role models or peers who looked like him.

Third, know that my brother is one of the best people I know. He is kind, funny, and charming. You can’t be in his presence for more than five minutes without starting to love him. Where I was quiet and shy, he was social and talkative. Where I was studious, he was physically active. As someone who liked to move, school was sometimes a struggle. And because he was so social and funny, he sometimes got in trouble with teachers. He also is not a push-over. He has never been afraid of confrontation.

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*\*I recognize that this term will make many readers uncomfortable. I’ve decided to leave it in to honor my brother’s experience and at his request. He was 11 at the time of the incident. I hope that the uncomfortableness a reader feels by seeing that term in this context helps the reader begin to understand what it would be like as an 11-year-old to be called that term in reality.*

In the mid-1990s, my brother and I attended a medium-sized comprehensive high school in Olympia. Many people connected to the school at that time will probably remember this incident: someone broke into the football field and burned a swastika symbol into the grass. But despite this very public act of racism and intolerance, most were unaware of both the subtle and the overt racism that existed at the school, including the fact that there was a small group of white students who identified themselves as a part of a racist hate group. They called themselves HTP—Hell to Pay.

One day in 10th grade, my brother was walking into our cafeteria when he was called “a little piece of rice” by another student. My brother and his friends (many of them large football players) confronted the student and there was almost a fight in the school cafeteria. From that day forward, my brother became the target of HTP’s actions, especially at school. Someone was walking behind him and spit tobacco juice all over his back. They followed him around school and figured out where his locker was. They left notes threatening his life in his locker. They figured out where his girlfriend’s locker was and left notes threatening her life. And one of the most frightening nights of my life was when I came home on a Friday to discover that my brother was bruised and shaken, with swelling on his face that made it difficult for him to open one of his eyes. He had been attacked while walking home from his girlfriend’s house. A truck had pulled over, several white teen-aged boys had gotten out and, for no reason other than hate, beat him severely.



My parents were advised to get a restraining order against one of the leaders of the group, which they did. But other than that, all the consequences for HTP's actions seemed to be happening to my brother, not them. My brother could not trust the school system to protect him. Instead, he had to rely on the goodwill and moral conscience of individual educators, students, and families to advocate for him and educate our community about discrimination. But that wasn't enough then, and it isn't enough now.

I will never forget the night that my brother told me that he just "wished that he was white." How could this beautiful, amazing, kind, funny, outgoing young man think this about himself? I felt completely helpless, angry, and afraid.

So I decided not to leave high school. I could no longer afford to be the little girl who didn't notice what was happening in the world around me. I channeled my anger and frustration into thinking about schools. I couldn't understand how this system could so blatantly fail to protect my sibling from hatred and physical and emotional pain. And so, I chose to be a part of that system by becoming a high school teacher. Since my own 9th-grade year in 1992, the only time I have not been a part of a high school were the four years I attended college.

I constantly see my brother in my high school students. Racism, hate, injustice, and inequity have not disappeared from our students' lives. Our students still hear overtly and subtle racist comments from both their peers and adults, still go to school in a system that holds different

expectations for white students and for students of color, and still share my brother's feelings of being targeted, isolated, and alone.

But I go to high school every day knowing that I can help make school a little better at supporting our students.

When I help a homeless student figure out how to fill out the FAFSA, it's on behalf of my brother. When I read and edit a scholarship essay written by an undocumented student, it's on behalf of my brother. When I show my students how much I care about them and their future, it's on behalf of my brother. My brother exhibited an incredible amount of bravery in the 1990s by just showing up to high school every day; our students show the same bravery today by showing up to a system that still doesn't fully protect them or completely meet their needs. It's our job, as educators, to recognize and be inspired by that bravery and to continue to confront systematic barriers on their behalf.





**DAVE GAMON**

2009 Northeast  
ESD 101 Regional  
Teacher of the Year

Northwood Middle School  
Mead School District



**HEIDI SCOTT**

Parent

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## Education Saves Lives

*Why contextual learning matters*

Heidi Scott caught up to me with tears in her eyes, “Did you hear what happened?” We were walking through Riverfront Park in Spokane to pick up our kids who had just finished marching in the Junior Lilac Parade. “You saved her life. That unit saved Elaine’s life.” We had just completed our Diagnostic Challenge, in which teams of students work together as physicians in an ER to diagnose and treat patients. Heidi’s daughter Elaine had discovered something about herself during that unit that would change all our lives.

## **Heidi's story:**

*Looking back, it's easy to beat ourselves up as parents. All the symptoms were there but we didn't know it. When Elaine was beginning her 7th-grade year, she started to grow thin. We figured it was just a growth spurt, so we didn't pay much attention. She also began to turn pale. Her skin was like a porcelain doll. We thought that was just the way she was maturing. We have mostly Scandinavian blood on both lines, so it didn't worry us.*

*As winter set in, Elaine was always tired. She would fall asleep sitting up and couldn't wait to go to bed every night. It seemed kind of excessive compared to her normal, energetic self, but we hadn't ever had a 13-year-old before, so we just assumed that teenagers get tired. That's what growing up does, right?*

I remember Elaine getting faint in class one day in early December and walking her down to the office. I should have picked up on the fatigue and pale complexion, but I thought she was just ill.

## **Heidi:**

*When she started school after the holiday break, Elaine continued to get skinnier, paler, and more tired. She asked me if she could take a second water bottle to school because she was always thirsty. Sure. No big deal. It's winter, and the air is dry. Here you go.*

We had just finished our Diagnostic Series and were preparing for the Team Diagnostic Challenge. As a

science department we had made the decision to align our frameworks with CTE targets (Career and Technical Education) and 21st Century Skills. We began working on our CTE endorsements and transformed our curriculum from a content-based model to a context-based model that focused on the type of team problem solving that makes a difference in our community. We began with a problem or issue in society and then built the content to help teams address and solve real world issues like hunger, cancer, heart disease, Alzheimer's, and diabetes.

### **Heidi:**

*In March, Elaine came home and said that she was learning about diabetes in her science class from Mr. Gamon. She said it was weird because every symptom she was learning about was something she was experiencing. I kind of laughed with her and we talked about the power of suggestion. I told her that if she was learning about leprosy, she'd probably start to think she had that too. I joked about "Dr. WebMD" a little bit, and that was the end of it. For a little while.*

*A few weeks later, she came to me and said, "Mom, I'm really worried I might have diabetes." Again, I told her that she was probably just worried because of what she was learning about in school, and not to be afraid. We don't have diabetes anywhere in our family, so I was certain she didn't have it.*

*But we made a deal that we would prove to her, once and for all, that she didn't have diabetes. That way she could move on and not worry any more. Our neighbor's*

*daughter had type 1 diabetes, so I figured they could help. They invited us to come and test her blood.*

*The neighbor told us later that the minute she opened the door, she knew that Elaine was diabetic. She was so thin and so pale, the mark of a diabetic child in ketoacidosis. She tested Elaine's blood and when the number came up on the meter, she began to cry. Her exact words still ring in my mind, "Are you ready for this? You have a diabetic child and you need to get her to the emergency room right away. And pack a bag because you're going to be at the hospital for a week." Normal blood sugar should be around 100. Elaine was at 375.*

*When we arrived at the pediatric ER at Sacred Heart, I was puzzled that they just took our word for it that we were worried about her being diabetic. I figured they'd want to test her blood. But they didn't. They must have known by looking at her, just like our neighbor. Eventually they confirmed it. Elaine had type 1 diabetes.*

*They also told us how sick she really was. They determined her A1C level (which should be below 5.7% and is considered diabetic at 6.5%) was at 15.2%, almost too high to measure. They also said that it was reasonable to assume that her recent blood sugars had been in the 700–800 range. Elaine's endocrinologist told us that it was a surprise that she came in conscious to the hospital. He was pretty certain that, if left untreated even two more days, she would have been in a coma or worse.*

*Once her body began to get the insulin it had lacked for months, her appetite went through the roof. It seemed like she ordered one of everything on the menu at every meal, and she ate it all. She put on almost 10 pounds in four days. Her face got pink and healthy and she suddenly had energy again. She said, “Mom! I didn’t know you could feel this good!”*

*Just a generation ago, our daughter would not be with us today. Not just because of modern medicine, but because of the impressive curriculum that is now being taught in Washington state’s public schools. Elaine’s life was saved because of what she learned in science class. We’re so grateful to Mr. Gamon for teaching our daughter and helping her apply her knowledge to her life. Elaine’s education offered her meaningful and compelling lessons that really inspired her to think. Because of this, she is dedicating the rest of her life to help children who face similar health problems.*

The truth is Elaine solved the mystery herself. All students can do what Elaine did—use their learning to solve real problems impacting their communities—if we simply make the content of our courses relevant to their lives. Elaine will graduate soon and plans to eventually work for Doctors Without Borders. It turns out her education will likely end up saving many lives.







## TAMARA CARABALLO

2020 Northwest ESD 189  
*Regional Teacher of the Year*  
Glacier Peak High School  
Snohomish School District

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# Crayons Aren't Just for Kindergarten

*Using science to tackle fear of failure  
and embrace “messy” learning*

Remember that new box of 64 crayons with the spiffy crayon sharpener in the back? I recently bought just such a box for a quilting project, and it truly evoked the very same joy and wonder that I experienced at age five. We walk into kindergarten and are not afraid to color outside of the lines and yet we leave high school afraid to pick up a crayon. That powerful box of 64 crayons is a symbol of our initial ability to wonder, question, and be curious. Where does that ability go? Have we used up all our questions by age five?

I finished college with a biology degree that represented years of diligent work and flat out failed to get into medical school. Suffice it to say that my foray into teaching began as an accidental journey. I did not always know that I was a teacher. Rejection from medical school landed me in a junior high school with a challenging population. I was to

inspire and instill a love of learning, specifically science concepts, in children more concerned with survival than science. At the end of that first year, I soundly rejected the offer to attend medical school to become a doctor. I was a teacher.

My decades in the classroom have taught me many things. I know that learning is messy. It takes practice, perseverance, and persistence to get to the grit of understanding. Learning is not about grades, the right answer, or the perfect test score. It is pretty much a guarantee that most concepts, scientific or otherwise, aren't really "learned" during the first several encounters. Successful learning is about curiosity and good questions—all of which are often preceded by a bout, or several bouts, of persistent floundering.

Curiosity should drive the learning process and is ultimately a core fundamental value of all learning. Embracing uncertainty and following a spirit of inquisitiveness leads to great adventures. It is through our misguided attempts to delve into a concept, make a model, or develop a lab protocol that we really gain understanding.

Extracting DNA from a strawberry is a foundational biology lab. Last year I held up a strawberry in one hand a piece of yarn in the other. The yarn represented DNA in the strawberry. I wrapped the yarn in cyclohexane to represent the nuclear membrane and placed it in foam peanuts (cytoplasm w/organelles) all within a cardboard box (cell wall).

Their mission—get the DNA out and separate from all other cell parts. They had access to a cart loaded with typical kitchen materials like soap, vanilla, salt, etc. Next to each material was a descriptor regarding chemical properties of each item. It was quiet for a moment, and then it was a mess. But within that mess I began to hear conversations about what to use and why.

“Soap breaks lipids.”

“Didn’t we learn something about a phospholipid membrane?”

“Vanilla smells good!”

No one got it right, but the next day when we did it with standard lab protocol, they understood the “what” and the “why.” They were also pleasantly surprised to see that they had correctly matched each ingredient to its function in removing the DNA; they just hadn’t placed them in the right order.

Curiosity that leads you to explore, to try, to fail, to try again, to reflect, and to seek more information because you have a passion to know, be, or do is learning. Understanding what doesn’t work is vitally important and leads to critical thinking. Unfortunately, most students want to know about points or grades and the mess can be an intimidating prospect. Students are worried about getting the right answer and have often lost the ability to ask the good questions, color outside the lines, and to make a joyful, “learning-intentioned” mess.

Reflection, revision, and perseverance take great chunks of time, and time is often the scarcest of commodities when it comes to teaching. Project-based learning, career-connected learning, design thinking, and the maker movement are all phenomenal ideas. They require that the teacher be more of a guide which can be a paradigm shift for many of us in the classroom as we strive to develop a culture of questions and work to destigmatize failure. For example, a finished project that has gone through the intensity of the design thinking process begins with students researching the intended audience. They need to empathize, think outside of themselves, and define the needs of the potential user. Students need to ideate or question-storm which is where the creativity should run wild. The crayons need to come out of the box and move outside the boundaries of conventional wisdom. We have to teach students to ask lots of “whys” to get to the “what ifs.”

Next comes prototyping based upon previous work. In a world of instant gratification, this is a step that creates great anxiety. It is possible—in fact, rather likely—that there will be problems on the first few test runs. There may be problems all the way to the end of the unit or semester. It may never work like students thought, but what does work is the learning process. Persistence, grit, curiosity, and permission to fail are on the rubric here, not a letter.

As a teacher, I strive to get students to understand that they should be more terrified of regret than fearful of failure. Failure is your first attempt in learning! Yet in a

world that feels unstable to many, the sense of anxiety haunting our students is frightening in its consequences. Beautiful, sharp, organized crayons still in that box are a symbol of learning yet to come. Our job is to help students embrace the color, move outside of the lines, be messy, curious, skeptical, and learn with joy and curiosity.





## MATTHEW BREWER

2014 North Central ESD 171  
*Regional Teacher of the Year*

RISE Academy  
Soap Lake School District

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# A Place for Everyone

*A determined student challenges a young teacher's bias*

**Y**ou don't belong here."

Without really thinking about them, the words were out of my mouth. The object of my attention, a young student sitting quietly in the back, turned a bright red and slunk lower in her seat. The entire class looked at me and then at Angela. I can't imagine how humiliating this moment was for her on the first day of class. The look in her eyes was pure pain as I tried to helpfully explain that she had come to the wrong class, that she didn't belong in the seat she was in.

I was a new science teacher with lots of confidence and big ideas about what a good student looked, talked, and acted like, and Angela wasn't it. I'd never seen her actually try on any assignment in my class. I wasn't even sure she could read. She'd started fights in my class and ignored every attempt I made to help her. Based on the tiny fraction of her life that I had witnessed, I decided



that she was an apathetic mess and would never amount to anything. To my great discomfort as I write this, it felt a little bit like justice to single her out in front of the “good students.” She’d disrupted my class enough times I thought I would return the favor. As I watched her squirm under my gaze, I made it clear to Angela that she didn’t fit my conception of what type of student belongs in an honors class. Basically, honors students looked and acted like me, and I didn’t have time for students who didn’t fit that image. Angela was Latina, and her family struggled with poverty. To my “educated” mind, she was definitely not “honor student” material.

It feels awful to type this, but I’d completely written Angela off. She was only 17, and I already knew her life and how it was going to turn out. I was certain that Angela was a waste of time and I really wasn’t interested in giving her another chance. Luckily for me, Angela was more open-minded and gave me a second chance.

At the end of what must have been an excruciating class for her, Angela waited until everyone else had left. Trembling, she approached me and asked for a moment of my time. “Mr. Brewer, I know I’ve screwed up before, but I really want to try this year. Please let me stay in the class.”

Back then, the most important thing for me was to preserve the sanctity of the class I was teaching. I couldn’t let just anyone take an honors class or it would, in my mind, dilute the prestige of it. I tried to convince Angela that she didn’t deserve to be in the class and that it would be too hard for her. I told her she didn’t have the skills to be successful, and it was necessary for her

to go back to the freshmen science class in order to prove herself. I was logical and firm like I knew what was best for her. Today I realize that my attitude wasn't only wrong, it was overtly racist and came from a sense of privilege I never realized I carried. I had a paternalistic attitude towards my students that I'm still fighting today. It isn't easy to confront such ugly racism, especially when it comes from yourself, but it's my journey and I'm glad my students are patient with me as I make it. Students like Angela have to fight so many systemic obstacles in their lives, and it saddens me when I contribute to them. When I stood in front of Angela telling her that she wasn't right for the class, I was simply one more challenge for her to overcome.

Despite my best efforts to convince her otherwise, Angela insisted that she could do the work. Reluctantly, I told her I'd give her a two-week trial. She smiled and thanked me.

Imagine that, she thanked me for embarrassing her in front of her classmates. For telling her that she didn't belong with them and that she wasn't good enough. For making her beg for a chance.

She thanked me.

It's been years since that moment and I still can't believe how thoughtless I was. How could I tell a student brave enough to show up that they didn't belong in my class? I'd focused so much on what my students were learning that I'd forgotten about my real job. Angela taught me that I didn't know nearly enough about the art of teaching.

Angela taught me about second (and third) chances when she gave me a second chance to be her teacher. Angela taught me that every student deserves a place to belong. Angela taught me that I didn't really know my students, and I had no business writing their life stories for them. Angela taught me that I needed to check my privilege before I judged my students. Luckily for me, Angela stuck with it and showed me that she did belong in my class. I became a teacher to change the world, but I'm still surprised by how much my students actually change me.

I still see Angela every once in a while, and I always get an enthusiastic hug. Not only did she crush my Honors Biology class, she was accepted to and graduated from college. She then went on to earn her master's degree and she now works in a local school district helping minority students get into and succeed in college. She's a bright and driven young woman. I am so thankful that I was merely a speed bump on the road to her dreams and that she was able to succeed despite my best intentions.

Since Angela, I haven't said the words "you don't belong here" to a student. I've learned that there is a place for every student in my classroom and that it's my job to help them find their place. I try every day to be a helper on their journeys, not an obstacle. I've learned that I don't get to write my students' stories, I only get to be a part of them.



**JAY MAEBORI**

*2011 Washington State Teacher  
of the Year*

Kentwood High School  
Kent School District

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## Lectures Don't Fix No Students

*Listening to students is an intervention  
we all can do*

They filed in together. Some expressionless, some with a dubious look of “I don’t know why you asked me to come here today.” All of them uncomfortable.

The dozen or so teachers and administrators seated in the audience tried to look welcoming. I was one of them, wearing my awkward we’re-glad-you’re-here smile and making intermittent eye contact. I certainly understood why six young African-American gentlemen might feel uneasy as invited guest panelists in front of an assembly of adults.

If the set up were different—if they were told they were in trouble, to step outside the classroom, to not go anywhere, and to wait until I came to speak to *them*—they would feel much more at ease. That was the reality they experienced every day.

I was as guilty as anyone of doing this classroom discipline two-step, especially in my early years as a high school English teacher. Student is bored. Student feels unsuccessful. Student acts out to get attention or make life more interesting. Stressed-out teacher reacts swiftly to the first signs of another misbehavior by this student, who is a no-show at detention, gets suspended, misses instruction, falls further behind, returns feeling lost, acts out again. And so on. And so on. And so on.

These six students had this discipline dance memorized, practiced, and performed. Maybe that's why they call it a routine.

As they squirmed in their chairs on a make-shift stage in the school library, I realized these guest panelists had never felt listened to by us. Why? Because none of us had ever listened to them—actually *listened* to them—before.

An administrator hand-picked and invited these students to speak to us as the culminating activity of a book study we recently completed. The book was called *Reading Don't Fix No Chevys: Literacy In the Lives of Young Men*, by Jeffrey D. Wilhelm and Michael W. Smith. We learned from this study that the content of our curriculum needed to be relevant to the students we served, especially our young males, and if we could provide more student choice and connect with their interests, it could help them achieve. This was one of the most important discoveries of my life as an educator. And yet, those revelations were dwarfed by what happened next.

“Y’all are always judging us,” one panelist said. “You made up your mind about me and how I was gonna be the first time you met me.”

Silence.

“It’s always us versus you. And you always gonna win,” another panelist said. “You have the power.”

I could hear my heart beating in my chest.

“If a student is Black, you treat us different than other students,” yet another said. “Like, you don’t really mean to. But that’s how it happens and how we see it.”

Now, we were the ones squirming uncomfortably in our seats.

One young man hadn’t spoke at all yet. He was invited to share his thoughts with the assembled adults. He sat quietly for more than a few seconds, slouched in his chair with a I’d-rather-be-anywhere-but-here posture. Most of us were sure he would pass. The awkward silence lingered.

And then this:

“You give up on us.”

Teachers turned slowly toward each other, wondering a little at who those words might be directed toward.

“You guys are tough on me. My parents are tough on me,” he continued. “But I know my parents ain’t going anywhere. They’re not gonna give up on me. My teachers give up on me.”

My heart took a deep dive into my chest. He didn't share this in any melodramatic way. This was just a child finally getting to share how he had been feeling since elementary school. He shared because adults finally were willing to listen.

My memory raced through a history of students and interactions with them.

How many times had I given up on students? More importantly, how many times did they think and feel I had given up on them? Perception can be reality in a high school classroom, after all.

In this age of restorative justice, I'm reminded that I could listen more and talk less. We all could.

Listening restores relationships. Allowing all students to have a voice is just.

On this afternoon, these young men were asked to give, and we were asked to receive.

The message was delivered loud and clear. I think often of that day in the school library when six young men were courageous enough to share candidly how they felt about us and their lives in school. Since then, when I interact with any student, I am more aware. I do what I can to send the message "I will not give up on you." Sometimes, I am successful. Sometimes, I am not.

None of us are perfect. None of us get it right each and every time.

But all of us can listen. All of us can try.

Expensive intervention programs might be effective in some schools and in some situations with some students. Professional development centered around ways to reach “at-risk” students and help them more are well intentioned. But that afternoon in the school library was a professional development no adult instructor could deliver because it came from the source—from the students we serve. It does not cost us a dime to listen, though it might come at the expense of our egos.

Instead of another rendition of the discipline dance—send a student to the office, get sent back into my classroom—I can do something different. I can listen and really hear what my students are feeling and experiencing. Every student wants to be heard. And by listening I can build a bridge to the relevant education all our students deserve.







## STEPHANIE KING

2020 ESD 105 Regional  
Teacher of the Year

Granger High School  
Granger School District

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## Where Are You From?

*A new teacher's assumptions are challenged by getting to know her students*

I remember the day I received the phone call. The principal from Granger High School wanted to set up an interview with me for the English position I had applied for. It was spring 2010, and Granger was one of 42 districts I'd applied to. I was willing to go anywhere in the state that would take me. I immediately Googled Granger after I hung up the phone. Okay, I thought, this middle of nowhere eastern Washington high school was about to interview a 22-year-old with minimal experience.

After the interview, I decided to drive through this town with no stoplights. There were these dinosaur statues everywhere, bars on the windows, and graffiti on most of the structures I passed. Within a half hour of finishing my tour of Granger, I received a phone call that would change my life. I cried after I accepted the position, both in relief that I had a job and in fear of the unknown. Granger was nothing like where I came from,

aside from being a small town. I grew up in Westport, a fishing community in coastal Washington. The real coast, not what eastern Washingtonians call the coast but westsiders know to be Puget Sound. Granger is in the lower Yakima Valley of south-central Washington.

My first day of school I was terrified. I thought I was going to be shanked in the hallway for wearing or even being the wrong color. Granger may have been a small agricultural town, but it had a heavy gang presence when I first started here. I had my own preconceived notions of the population I was there to teach; uneducated, hostile, potentially dangerous toward someone like me. And then I met them. Faces. Names. Families. My students. No longer data or statistics. They were kids. Even as 17- or 18-year-old seniors, they were kids.

One of the kids, who has had the biggest impact on my teaching and personal life, was CJ. CJ started playing soccer for me when she was in 8th grade, and in the course of six years she and I became extremely close. I was always tough on her because I knew she was capable of more than she showed both on the field and in the classroom. CJ had an older brother who was arrested during her senior year, and this led to harassment from other students. Her younger sister, a sophomore at the time, was suspended for fighting when sticking up for CJ and their family. CJ was in jeopardy of not graduating because she couldn't pass the math portion of the state test, so I signed her up for the ACT and SAT for additional opportunities to meet standard. She was recruited to play soccer in college, but she couldn't afford to buy

the gear required by her college team, so I bought what she needed as an early graduation gift. She didn't know what to register for when it came to course selection, so I took a day off to go with her to her orientation.

Because of my relationship with CJ, I wanted to help her. Whatever she needed, I was there. Through my experiences with many students like CJ and over almost 10 years in the classroom, I have come to the realization that I must get to know my students beyond the surface. My relationship with CJ started when she was only 13 years old and demonstrated the qualities typical of the average middle school student. But she showed me along the way that she wanted to work hard. I noticed the effort she put into her academics and athletics outside of the time we spent together in school. She would update me on her family's financial hardships and grew comfortable enough to ask me for help when she needed it. If I hadn't developed this relationship with her and many other student athletes, then I would still have the negative disposition I had when I started ten years ago.

While social structures beyond their control may hinder the opportunities available to many of my students, I work to offset these limitations every day. I have brought in college in the high school with the University of Washington so students can establish college transcripts. I started Knowledge Bowl so Granger students can participate in high level academic competition. I choose to coach girls' soccer to be a role model for females outside of the classroom. Now, when

people ask where my own kids will go to school, I am proud to say that my daughters will attend Granger, just like their dad did. This community—my community—is open and welcoming. The families here truly want what is best for their kids, just like anywhere else. The town and district have supported my own endeavors as an educator, and that has ultimately benefited the students in my classroom. My students prove every day that they aren't defined by others' stereotypes about our town.



## ANALISA MCCANN

2020 Northeast ESD 101  
*Regional Teacher of the Year*  
Broadway Elementary School  
Central Valley School District

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# Cultivating Safety

*A teacher's journey from "trauma-inducing" to "trauma-invested"*

I was a trauma-inducing teacher. I used punitive punishments to try to change my students' behavior. I used a behavior clip chart where students had to clip up their clothespin for behaving well or clip down their clothespin for acting "naughty." I kept students in for recess and had them put their head down for not completing their work. I called the office to remove students from my room who were being defiant or unsafe. I publicly shamed students. And I felt terrible, but I was doing this because I thought that was what "behavior management" was. When I entered the teaching profession, I thought I was supposed to give consequences for bad student behavior. I didn't realize that their behavior was a result of something more. Something underlying. For these students it wasn't about an "I won't," but "I can't."

Thankfully I have become educated on childhood trauma and how it can affect the development of the brain. Through reading professional books and attending

conferences, I have learned that behavior is not attention seeking but connection seeking. I now understand that part of my job as a teacher is to help students learn how to regulate their emotions and give them strategies for calming down.

On the last day of 1st grade, Connor's mom was in tears. She was not crying sad tears; they were tears of happiness. Her son had a successful year in school, something he had never once experienced. While I know I made a difference in his life; my life was the one that changed when Connor entered my classroom at the beginning of 1st grade.

Back-to-School night was an exciting event for students, families, and teachers. It was a time for students to see their classroom, meet the teacher, and get important information. However, it also provided me the opportunity to get to know my families.

I walked Connor. Six years old and beaming with excitement to look around the classroom and meet new friends. His mom and I started to talk. She candidly shared that kindergarten was an extremely difficult year for Connor. He was kicked out of the room daily, put in time-out, would lose recess for a week at a time, and was frequently suspended. As a single mom, she would often have to leave work to pick him up from school, which made it hard to keep a job. Connor's dad was incarcerated. His family was doubled up with another family. Connor was a student experiencing trauma. The day I met Connor and his mom was the day that I made a commitment to keep Connor in the classroom. Every. Single. Day.

Connor was entering my classroom with a brain wired to be in a constant fight, flight, or freeze mode. He was set up to fail in an education system that did not understand trauma and does not prepare teachers to create trauma-invested environments. You see, the traditional idea of school is that students come to us and we expect them to conform and adapt to our expectations as teachers. However, as teachers, it is our responsibility to conform to their way of learning. I was determined not to fail him.

This was easier said than done. When Connor started throwing furniture, screaming, or threatening other students, it was hard to want to keep him in the class. My initial reaction was to call our behavior interventionist and have him removed from the classroom even though I knew this was trauma inducing to Connor. His behavior made me feel powerless. But I also realized that Connor had no strategies to regulate his emotions so when he got upset, he only knew to resort to unsafe behavior; fight, flight, or freeze. Simply put, he would go into survival mode. When he was in survival mode, his brain's capacity to learn was disrupted. In order for me to keep Connor in my classroom his first lesson in 1st grade would not be about reading, writing, math, or science, it had to be about how to regulate emotions and manage his stress.

When students feel unsafe or dysregulated, no learning can take place. I realized Connor's success depended on two things: relationship and regulation.

We all know that one positive adult relationship can change a student's life. That is what Connor needed from me. I visited him before school at breakfast, which



allowed us time to talk and build trust. I would often play tag with him and his friends at recess. If problems arose, I was there to help facilitate problem solving, until he could do that on his own. Connor loved special jobs around the classroom such as cleaning messes at the end of the day. He especially loved calling his mom to share he “stayed safe” while the rest of the class cheered. Little by little, Connor began to trust me, and I started to see the payoff of truly investing in a relationship. Becoming trauma-invested, means that you are creating intentional relationships with students to help them feel safe and secure in their environment.

While I had a break spot in my classroom for all students to use, Connor needed his own space. He picked a small rocking chair in my room and filled a box with tools he selected that would help him calm down. Connor selected a fidget spinner, etch-a-sketch, stress ball, a water bottle filled with glitter, and most importantly, books. He would articulate that reading, particularly books about dinosaurs, would help him go from his downstairs brain to his upstairs brain. If Connor became dysregulated, he would go to his spot and out of the corner of my eye, I’d see the rocking chair swaying back and forth. One might walk into my room and see Connor in a rocking chair while the rest of the students are on the carpet and think, “that student isn’t learning,” but actually the opposite is true. Instead of being excluded from the classroom, Connor was still a part of our learning environment and would continue to participate from a space that was safe for him. His break spot was his haven; a spot he could “stay safe” in. Sometimes he would even leave fitness or library

when he was upset and find his way back to my room to go to his break spot. I realized that Connor's learning looked different from other students, and it became my job to accommodate that need.

Over time, Connor's confidence in himself grew. He started participating more and had strategies to regulate when he became upset. Did Connor have a perfect year? No. But, Connor learned to love school and learning itself which is the most important foundation for a successful school experience.

Over the summer, Connor's family was evicted from their apartment and became homeless. Connor continues to face adversity and continued trauma. His success is dependent on having a supportive teacher and school who truly understands childhood trauma. Connor taught me more in a year than any trauma book or consultant could. And thanks to him, I became equipped to make a difference for many more students to come.

I know there are Connors all over our classrooms in Washington state. Unfortunately, not all Connors have a teacher who truly understands childhood trauma and is willing to change their practice to meet their needs, but it is our responsibility to do so! When Connor first started demonstrating unsafe behavior, I realized that if I was truly going to keep him in my class every day, I needed to understand his trauma and alter my teaching to meet his needs. Becoming trauma-invested is not another item on a list of skills to check off, but a philosophy. I know I will forever be on a journey of becoming a "trauma-invested teacher," and I ask that you join me.





## KATHRYN LEBUIS-HARTMAN

2020 Olympic Region ESD 114  
*Regional Teacher of the Year*

Roosevelt Elementary School  
Port Angeles School District

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# Fostering Connections

*A journey from teacher to Mom*

**M**y journey as a teacher has been my journey as a parent. It is only through interweaving the two roles that I have found success in both avenues of my life.

One December I got a call from the school secretary letting me know I was getting a new student after the winter break. As is my custom, I called home to welcome the parent and child to my 3rd-grade classroom and find out important information for a smooth transition into our room. When I talked to the foster parent, I discovered a 9-year-old boy from the foster care system was coming to our small rural community from two hours away. She didn't have a lot of information about the boy except his name (Tyson) and that he had a 5-year-old sister, Kira, who was not yet in school. Often, foster parents don't know a lot of details or have a background story about the kids coming into their homes. I readied my classroom and prepared the best I could to meet him.

When Tyson entered my room, I saw a little boy, with only one front tooth, who looked like no one else in our class. He had an immediate, “I’m only here because people are making me,” look and an, “it’s me against the world” attitude. I knew he was going to give me a run for my money. His behaviors and body language told me this little boy had experienced a lot of trauma. Later, I learned that Tyson had spent the last five years shielding Kira from the experiences he had endured. Kira was a shy, but happy little girl who immediately adjusted to life in a new environment. Tyson had absorbed so much that life had a different impact on him.

Whenever Tyson felt threatened or inadequate (which was quite often), he would turn to the typical fight or flight mentality. He always picked the flight response. His favorite location to go to if he couldn’t escape through the nearest door was to run to the bathroom. If we were lucky, he would barricade himself in a stall, and a staff member would work to reset him. But if he were particularly triggered, he would go to the extreme. He would jump into a trash can and cover himself with garbage. He later explained he felt that was what he was. Or he would stand in a toilet and try to flush himself. He could not express his emotions in any other way.

It took all the staff in the building working together to teach him coping strategies and how to go to a safe space when he needed to work through his feelings. By the end of the school year he was able to crawl under a table draped with a sheet in my classroom when he felt

the need to escape. We weren't where we wanted to be yet, but we were making progress. At least he was in the academic setting and could hear the learning around him.

After working with Tyson for a while, I realized his foster home was not a good match. His behaviors were escalating, and his foster parent was not equipped to support Tyson in the positive way he most desperately needed. As a licensed foster parent, I knew the impact moving schools would have, so I advocated to have Tyson and Kira join my home and stay in our school. Moving in with us did not provide an immediate and magical change. I remained Mrs. Hartman both at home and in the classroom for the rest of the school year. However, by creating a stable and positive environment, I was able to provide the structure and consistency he so desperately needed.

Tyson continued to struggle. In my new role I wasn't just focusing my time and attention on getting Tyson ready to learn, I was helping the whole child learn to exist in a world where he did not feel safe or valued. I worked on giving him the skills, encouragement, and environment to begin the painstaking task of developing the framework to start this process. I sought out services to help him. I found it very difficult to navigate the system; things were not intuitive and often did not meet the needs of this particular child. I learned to be persistent and resourceful to access services and resources necessary to help Tyson begin to see his true potential. While we are a tight rural community, unfortunately, resources are limited. In the space of

a few years, six counselors have worked with Tyson because the public mental health system that works with our most vulnerable youth struggles to keep consistent counselors. The school is where these children find the most consistency, where they are able to stay in one stable environment and form healthy relationships with caring adults who they can trust.

Working with the foster care system provided its own challenges. Social workers were responsible for ensuring the safety and well-being of the children but we went well over a year before they met Tyson or Kira because they were placed out of their original area. Over a dozen “courtesy” social workers would do monthly check-ins with the kids and never see them again. I gave my reports and voiced my opinions without receiving any feedback or support. Like Tyson and Kira, the place where I found the most help and support was the school setting. My colleagues and coworkers were my rock. They did whatever it took to make sure I had the help I needed to reach Tyson and give him the skills he required to cope. I could not have stepped into my role as a parent with any kind of effectiveness without them. The school became our team and extended family.

In November of 2016, I transitioned from Mrs. Hartman to Mom when my husband and I adopted Tyson and Kira. We made this momentous decision because this complicated boy and his sweet sister became our world, and we wanted to move heaven and earth to make sure they would have an opportunity to reach the potential we saw in both of them. We knew the statistics, roughly

28% of kids in foster care are waiting to be adopted. The older a child gets, the less likely they are to be adopted. Fifty five percent of kids who go through foster care adoptions are adopted by their foster families. We felt our family needed to include Tyson and Kira in order to be complete, and we knew we were statistically their best chance at adoption.

This process has shown me the support a child needs and the importance of stability. Tyson now has adults in his life he can trust. He has an Individual Education Plan to help define the modifications and accommodations he needs to find academic success.

It hasn't been easy since the adoption. We continue to face challenges, especially helping Tyson recognize his own strengths and skills and how to appropriately advocate for his own needs. Tyson continues to practice how to appropriately take breaks while he is working through his feelings.

We find, as his parents, we have to educate others including teachers, coaches, and family members on appropriately addressing Tyson's needs which stem from his life experiences. He is an intelligent and talented young man who is often his own worst enemy, and when he works with people who do not recognize or understand the effects of trauma, they will often unintentionally trigger the behaviors he has worked so hard to overcome.

Tyson is now 13. Kira is 10 and a 4th-grader in my classroom this year. She is a hard worker who is a joy to teach. She



is in a class with kids facing the same difficulties Tyson did. I've been able to apply what I've learned by adopting these children as well as the education I've sought in order to support them.

He may always have struggles, but Tyson now talks of a future. He is saving for college with his own money and exploring possible career paths. His struggles can be both minor and significant, some months are better than others. But we are making progress. He is my inspiration and proof of where a student with a traumatic background can go when given the resources and skills for success. Tyson taught me that all students (but especially those in foster care) need help developing social and emotional skills. He is my hero.

I'm not yet the teacher I strive to become, nor the mother I want to be. However, I've given my all to support not just my two kids, but all kids with traumatic backgrounds. I am making progress and learning—just like my kids—and becoming the best me I can be.



## AUTYMN WILDE

Member, Association of  
Washington Student Leaders  
Student Voice and Advocacy  
Board (Eastern Washington  
State Board of Education  
Representative)

Central Valley High School  
Central Valley School District

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## Diving In

*A student's personal trauma opens up  
a new world of mental health awareness  
and activism*

**S**haring about past trauma is like wading into a lake.  
First, you get to the shore.

Last year I went through a traumatic experience.

Then you test the temperature of the water with your feet.

My lung spontaneously collapsed and I had multiple surgeries.

You wade into the water.

At a leadership conference in October 2018, my left lung spontaneously collapsed, and I was rushed to the emergency room. I was given Tylenol, an anxiety pill, and—still wide awake—I had a small pigtail chest tube

entered in to my chest cavity. My mom drove to the ER in Renton and then drove me home to Spokane where we went to Sacred Heart to have me checked out. After a short evaluation by the attending ER doctor there, they determined my lung was still collapsed, the pigtail had done extreme damage, and I would need immediate surgery to re-inflate my lung. The surgery was the following day, and a half inch wide foot long tube was placed through my ribs under my breast. I was told that my recovery would be around six months to a year, and I was prepared to allow myself the time I needed in order to heal. However, my lung collapsed again at the end of December and I was scheduled for a same day exploratory surgery and chest tube placement.

The surgery revealed that a quarter of my lung tissue was damaged, the surgeon removed it, and placed a one inch wide two-foot-long chest tube in between my ribs in my back. My time for recovery was undefined and I was told that it could take anywhere from a year to the rest of my life to fully heal physically.

*You dive into the lake.*

After the entire experience, I didn't want to open up to anyone. I was suffering from severe PTSD, depression, and anxiety. I felt isolated, and I was—for my physical safety. But I took a chance and reached out others because I hated feeling so alone. It turned out that every single person in my life was dealing with something that made them feel the exact same way—isolated. So, I started having difficult conversations with my best friends, and our relationships grew. I reached out on social media. I

asked if anyone wanted to tell me their story, and I built so many connections through that simple question. I learned how to talk about how I was actually feeling and how to ask for what I need. I was supported by those who loved me, and I slowly learned how to have a healthy mindset and stop thinking toxically.

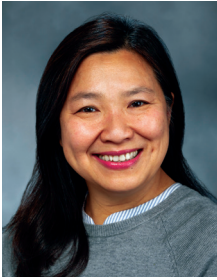
Mental health was a rarely discussed topic in past generations, but lately there has been a paradigm shift. We have seen a rise in teen suicide, depression, and anxiety in the last decade. In response to this, the youth of today are starting to have hard conversations around mental health.

My work as a student leader has primarily consisted of creating and promoting student led initiatives about mental health. From mental health assemblies and day-long events to positive posters and the Resolution on the Mental Health of Students, I have seen and been a recipient of an overwhelming amount of approval for my efforts.

But mental health is so much more than depression and anxiety. Mental health envelops the topics of self-esteem, self-worth, self-love, positive and negative mindsets, addressing toxic relationships and cultivating healthy relationships, and recovering from trauma. Although we have made tremendous progress in the past few years, we still struggle with taking a holistic approach toward mental health.

*You float on the water, blissfully gazing at the sky above you.*

If I was asked at the beginning of 2019 if I wished my lung hadn't collapsed, my answer would have been a blunt "duh." However, if asked that same question now, I would respond with "no, because I'm glad that it happened." The pain was unbearable, the isolation was excruciating, it was an awful experience. But it taught me something invaluable; vulnerability is not a weakness, vulnerability is a strength.



## REPRESENTATIVE MY-LINH THAI

Washington's 41st Legislative  
District

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# How Children Change Us

*A PTA mom connects her own experience as a refugee to the plight of undocumented students and becomes an activist*

**W**e each have stories we chose to tell in different occasions. Mine, at least this one, is the reason why I am actively participating in the conversation around education policies and seeking to improve the very system I am an active member of.

People said that children change you. When we were ready to have children, I asked my husband to promise each other that we wouldn't allow that to happen.

To tell this story completely, I will ask you to travel back in time to meet the younger me—as a junior in Federal Way High School—in my counselor's office. With me was my French teacher, the only person who could understand me verbally. Our family had arrived that April from Vietnam. My English was limited to “Hello” and

“How are you?”

I was asked by my counselor, “What do you want to be when you grow up?”

I proudly answered, “A doctor. I want to be a doctor taking care of kids’ grandparents.”

My counselor paused, then told me with the most serious voice, “You will need to change, because that is not possible.”

Because I was a new immigrant, my counselor had already decided my options were limited. I defied the conclusion she drew by graduating on-time, being inducted into the National Honor Society, and receiving admission to University of Washington with a scholarship from a local library.

Growing up, I often wonder about the people who had have a hand in helping me. Many of whom, like that scholarship committee, I did not have a chance to meet.

I started my volunteering career when we moved back home from our adventure to California, Wyoming, and Montana. I volunteered in my children’s classrooms. Which lead to being a PTA mom and eventually taking on a position as a scholarship chair for the Bellevue PTA Council.

As the scholarship chair, I began looking for a rubric as way to formally evaluate applicants for the scholarships, but I found none. So, our committee set out to do research with the intent to establish one. We were very proud of

ourselves for building this rubric. That year, we received over 50 applications for the four scholarships, and we used our new rubric to select the recipients. As a chair, I gave myself the job of writing regret letters. That was when I met two applicants, who identified themselves as undocumented students through their essays.

That was when I was reminded of the young me—with a dream—trying to fight the system that is not set up to support you. I realized our carefully built rubric had failed to capture the potential of those two undocumented students just like my counselor had failed to see my potential. That was when I recognized how I was upholding the system that excluded those who needed help most. That was when I understood the meaning of “children change you.”

I looked for ways to mend my wrong doing. I ran to serve as school board director. I wanted to learn and to change system, one policy at a time.

And that was the beginning of this Vietnamese refugee actively giving back to her community. My political engagement started from the recognition that this perfectly orchestrated system was created to exclude, not include. I am now asking questions and engaging youth voice in my work. I am changed because of the youth who told me their stories and shared their dreams courageously to a perfect stranger like me.

People said that children change you. I am grateful for that.







## MARK GARDNER

2008 ESD 112 *Regional Teacher of the Year*

Hayes Freedom High School  
Camas School District

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# A Well-Chosen Profanity and My Growth as a Teacher

*What happens when a teacher's practice is rooted in curiosity about his students' lives*

He sits in a desk away from the others. Sometimes at the back of the room, or in the little alcove by the door. Earbuds in, hood halfway up, eyes fixed on his phone. His jaw is clenched, the muscles rolling every so often, in time with some imagined dialogue in his head.

His shoulders droop and his neck bows as he folds himself up, watching but not watching me as I circle the room checking journals and stamping homework for his fellow 11th-graders. It's after lunch and everyone's energy is waning, but little bursts of teenage conversation spark to life and flare out here and there around the room. Meanwhile, he simmers.

I step over to his desk, clipboard in hand, stamp ready. He inhales deeply through his nose and I see his shoulders swell.

Fifteen years ago, I would have crossed my arms and shaken my head and said firmly: “I told you to get your journal out. Where’s your journal, AJ?”

“I don’t have it.” Pointed and bubbling. Poised and ready.

“This is the third journal entry you haven’t done. Your grade is tanking. I wish you’d care a little more about that, AJ.”

His eyes roll. My button gets pushed. Voices get raised. He ends up in the office. He misses the day’s lesson, the journal prompt, and the assignment task. But he comes to school the next day, earbuds in, hood half-way up, journal empty because he wasn’t here when I assigned it. He knows the drill. This is school for AJ.

I feel such shame when I think back to those days.

For way too long in my career I was a yeller. I was a power-struggle-engaging, room-dominating, my-way-or-take-it-somewhere-else teacher. Classroom management was about control, specifically, my singular control over student behavior.

Unfortunately, like too many bad teacher behaviors, my behavior was reinforced by compliant, perhaps fearful students and by a system all too willing to treat kids like AJ as if not completing a journal entry was an existential threat to everything sacred to schools. At the same time,

I was also receiving glowing evaluations, strong reviews from parents, plus shiny plaques and glass apples telling me that what I was doing was justified and correct.

My whole career, the phrase “behavior is communication” has been part of my professional lexicon. We know that when students act out, they are trying to communicate something to us. But behavior is only communication if we are willing to actually listen. This was where I was failing without ever realizing it. When kids like AJ would show up without homework, or venture any other resistance to my directives, I’d only hear “I don’t care.” When tempers flared because I did not have the skills to prevent myself from engaging in the ensuing power struggle, I mentally blamed the escalation on the student and counted it as undeniable proof.

I do better now, and I’d love to point at a single interaction that was a turning point for me. It’d make for a great story if *that one kid* came back to me and taught me a poignant lesson about the damage I was doing, but there wasn’t one specific day in class when I realized that yelling, escalating, engaging in unnecessary power struggles over hats or forgotten pencils or books not yet on desks even though I asked three times already.

In contrast with all the other aspects of my practice—the lesson planning, the assessment, the instructional design, these tangible and measurable elements of my craft which I deliberately studied and refined—I devoted no deliberate reflection to my classroom management and relationships with students. Despite this, my practice evolved accidentally through interactions with students,

collaboration with teachers, and through casual reading and unfocused study. Along the way I absorbed the lessons that a deep part of my professional brain must have known I needed.

It was deep in the second decade of my career when there did come a moment that the gradual change I had unknowingly undergone was snapped into pristine focus.

I was dabbling in teacher leadership and working to build our district's new-teacher induction and mentoring program, so one summer I found myself at a training with a hundred other prospective mentors to learn how to support early career teachers. I remember sitting in a middle school cafeteria a few hundred miles from home and hearing our facilitator invite us to help our new teachers re-frame student misbehavior. She asked us to think about a student who was falling asleep in class. How would we explain that behavior?

The initial reactions from us at the tables were as expected: "He doesn't care," "He is bored." With a little more time, curiosity began to emerge in the room "He might have been up all night taking care of someone," or "Maybe he's working to earn money for his family." With this dialogue, the facilitator asked us to listen to student misbehavior with curiosity, and to wonder What else might it be?

And then she said the line that I will never forget: "I don't see a kid falling asleep in class, I see a kid trying his hardest to stay awake in class."

The simplicity of the shift jolted me like an earthquake.

Immediately, my mind flashed the countless times from early in my career when I had not paused to wonder anything other than my initial assumption, back in those days when I believed unfinished homework could only communicate messages of indifference or defiance.

I realized what had changed: assumption had been replaced by curiosity, patience now took precedence over power. Now I finally had words to make it real, so that I could practice it, refine it, and employ it intentionally rather than accidentally: What else might it be?

So AJ comes in to class and sits on the margin of the room like always. Earbuds are in, hood is halfway up, eyes are fixed on his phone. His jaw is clenched. After circling the room to check homework, check in with students, I get to AJ. His desk is empty, and he has not started the warm-up entry task I have so clearly posted on the screen.

What else might it be? I ask myself, and I listen to all the possible answers. “I don’t care” is no longer what I allow the behavior to mean to me. I listen to his jaw, his shoulders, his empty desk. For whatever reason, English class is not foremost in his mind at this moment.

“How’s today?” I ask.

He replies with a well-chosen profanity, spat forcefully at his desk.

“Want me to give you some space for a little bit?”

Without eye contact, he affirms this.

“Alright, I’ll be back by once I get everyone going.”

No, he doesn’t have his homework out. Yes, he’s got his earbuds in and he’s not paying attention to the warm-up activity. When the rest of the class has gotten to work on the day’s project and I notice his affect has softened just slightly, I meander by. He slides his phone into his pocket as I approach. This time he speaks first: “I didn’t read the chapter.”

“Not the end of the world,” I reply. “We can figure out a way to move forward.” Without me telling him to, he digs into his backpack and pulls out his book and notebook. “Can I just read right now?” he asks, finally giving me his first eye contact of the period.

“Let’s do that, and instead of writing out the homework, how about we talk it out once you’re done.” He nods. Whatever is on his mind, has settled enough for him to at least do something. This is more than would happen if I had let a stupid power struggle culminate with him punching lockers on his way to the principal’s office.

Yes, valuable minutes have passed and instructions were missed, but something of greater value has been gained. AJ’s book is out. He’s still in my room, we’re still working together, we’re still moving forward.



## CAMILLE JONES

2017 Washington State Teacher  
of the Year

Pioneer Elementary School  
Quincy School District

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# His Struggle Is Not Your Fault

*A letter to my friend, a struggling teacher*

This year is hard. Alex is in your class, and I know his story weighs on you. I know that, because I know you, and I have been you. But I also know Alex, and I want you to know that his struggle is not your fault.

I wish someone would have told me that when Jackson was in my 3rd-grade class.

It was my 4th year of teaching, and Jackson needed more from me than I knew how to give. I'm certain he had some undiagnosed mental health issues. He had severe anxiety around other students. He often became violent. Once he pooped on the floor on purpose. Eventually Jackson spent part of each day in kindergarten to help him cope at school.

Every day I felt like a failure. To Jackson, and to the rest of the students in my class. When I packed my last box at the end of the year, I drove away from school laughing. I



was genuinely surprised that I had made it. None of my students had been physically injured. And I didn't give up on them.

I may have made it, but Jackson has haunted me ever since. I knew he didn't struggle like that in 2nd grade. In 4th grade he stabilized quite a bit. Surely, he could have been successful in 3rd grade, too. If only he would have had a different teacher. If only I would have been more compassionate. If only I would have been a better advocate for him.

It must have been my fault that he struggled so much in 3rd grade. I've gone on thinking that until this year. I finally see the bigger picture thanks to Alex, and thanks to you.

You know that I'm deeply connected to Alex. I've been working closely with him for four years now. I've seen him struggle. In kindergarten and 1st grade, to control violent outbursts. In 2nd and 3rd grade, to reason through a problem.

I've also seen Alex grow. In 1st grade, to share his creative ideas. In 2nd grade, to solve problems with peers. By the end of 3rd grade, he was thriving. It appeared that he was on a path to success. He had made it.

This year Alex started 4th grade. His medication has stopped working, and a new medical plan remains elusive. He walks out of your class, my class, sometimes out of the school. He refuses to complete any work at

all. He is not leading, sharing, or collaborating with his peers. It is as if he has started from kindergarten again.

You are his 4th-grade teacher. I hope that you know how much I believe in you. We've taught alongside each other for several years. I see how you invest in each student in your class. You spend late evenings and weekends making sure that your lessons are planned for maximum impact. The relationships you develop with your students endure long after they leave your classroom. I aspire to be like you. And I know that you take Alex's story personally.

I'm here to be the voice that I wish someone had been to me. To tell you, firmly and confidently, that his struggle is not your fault.

Over the years I have tried to reason that same statement to myself. Only this year did I begin to believe it with certainty. Watching you and Alex, I finally accepted impossibility for a teacher, in one short year, to see and understand a student's story over time. I was in that position with Jackson. I couldn't separate his struggles from our relationship. Now, by having walked Alex's journey with him for many years, I can plainly see how you are a part of his story, but his struggle is not your fault.

As I see Alex this year, my constant thought is how grateful I am that he is in your class. That he is in our school. That many of our staff do know his broader story. That we can rely on our memories to see these behaviors for what they are, only one part of the wonderful person that he is. That we can be there to remind you of those things when you question yourself.

His struggle is not your fault.

You are doing a great job.

I am here for you.



## REBECCA ESTOCK

2020 ESD 123 Regional  
Teacher of the Year

Connell Elementary School  
North Franklin School District

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# In Pursuit of a Superior Education

*The growth that happens in the process  
of learning is the greatest reward*

The gift of education is really unlike anything else that we can receive. It is not perishable like a birthday cake, and it will not require winterizing to prevent rusting and wear like a bike. A truly superior education does require careful building and consistent attention, and ultimately, it can be a catalyst whereby the student can build immense power to solve problems and overcome personal obstacles. It is with this view of student achievement and possibility that teachers often feel cognitively laser-focused. However, teachers will inevitably come to a place where a student is not demonstrating the skills which signify they are learning. It is in that space of time, we face a choice as educators. Perhaps the easiest step is to continue doing what has always been done, even if it is not working. A more unconventional approach requires that teachers take a

step away from the traditions of the classroom and look at the needs of an individual student. One of my journeys in teaching took me away from what I knew. It allowed me to take the courageous step down the road into the unknown to learn how to serve and teach a student who seemed unreachable.

When I first began working directly with Jon he was a young 1st-grader; physically he was shorter than the other students and still had the walking gait of a small child. His little feet pointed toward each other, and he would shuffle his feet as he walked, barely lifting them off the floor with each step. While in class, Jon maintained a strong inward focus. His head remained bowed during all activities, looking up only long enough to be sure he knew where everybody in the room was located. When a teacher asked him questions or gave directions, he would give a shoulder shrug, resolutely hold his posture, and mumble, “I don’t know.” Jon did not demonstrate his knowledge in any way. He did not write or speak; he was content to sit in his chair and avoided interaction at all cost.

It was at this point in this young learner’s life that I was introduced to Jon. We began working together on literacy development daily for 60 minutes. The objective for the first month was for Jon to know the letters c, o, a, d, and m. I also needed to teach Jon to respond to directions and interact when spoken to. In a very real way, he felt hopeless regarding reading and writing. He did not know his letters, he did not know how to write, and processing

language was difficult. The very thing that often defines budding 1st-graders was a mountainous task for him.

His common responses to me were, “I can’t,” “I don’t know,” or on occasion, “Mrs. Estock, why do you make me do hard things?”

As much as Jon tried, he could not remember letters, even those in his own name. He was not successful at school and had developed such a feeling of hopelessness that even answering a question was risking failure and terribly frightening for him. It was my responsibility to remove barriers for him and create an environment where he would want to learn and could feel enough trust to put forth the fragile effort he had.

I began instruction by incorporating all of his senses. We used sand to write letters, found common objects that represented sounds, and formed letters with wood blocks. I created giant letters on the floor (like the small letter d) with tape, which he was able to trace or walk along while he spoke, “make a c, helicopter up, up, up... helicopter down.” He would repeat the pattern over and over again. I started by showing him how to communicate with me without talking if necessary before I eventually required that his voice be heard. All activities that were completed involved not only academic skill building, but personal confidence building. Although reluctant at first, Jon began to feel success. Jon began to smile. The words, “I can’t” were used on a limited basis, and he began to interact with other children.

When summer came Jon wanted to keep learning. He and I created our own summer school class. The class occurred at the same time as the general school program but was not a part of it. In this way Jon could see and interact with other students at the school while continuing the academic program we were pursuing. We worked hard, but I showed him how learning can be play also. We wrote on sidewalks with chalk, sorted toys into piles with matching sounds, and formed sand to create letters.

When 2nd grade started, Jon knew all of his letters and could read at a 1st-grade level. Jon continued to put forth extraordinary effort. He requested after school tutoring and came prepared and ready to learn. When 2nd grade was coming close to an end, he asked me, “Mrs. Estock, when are you going to stop giving me things that are so easy?” I was delighted by his question and showed him the remaining books that he needed to read before he was ready for 3rd grade. “I can read those!” With that, he zoomed through each text before school was out.

Jon is an ever-present reminder to me that children are the reason I love to teach. His ability to work hard amidst his fears in himself, inspired me. He reminds me that children feel immense joy when they overcome the mountains they face, and they are worth every effort I have. Jon motivates me to continue my pursuit of excellence as a teacher and reminds me that in doing so, I must continue to support students as they build their own internal power. Jon and I know that internal power comes from working toward a superior education.



## JANA DEAN

2016 Presidential Awardee  
for Excellence in Mathematics  
and Science Teaching &  
Fulbright Distinguished Award  
in Teaching Recipient

Reeves Middle School  
Olympia School District

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# Sometimes My Math Thinking Is Bigger Than Paper

*A new tool leads to new pathways in  
one math classroom*

As the paint dried and the press board curled up in the sun, I wondered if I had wasted valuable end-of-summer hours making homemade white boards. I want students doing math for as much of my class as possible, I want them making the most of their mistakes and I want to see their math thinking. A few months into the school year, my investment seems to have paid off.

These erasable surfaces also seem to facilitate the kind of productive struggle Jo Boaler describes in her new book *Limitless Mind*. She writes about “the role of struggle and error in transforming people from beginners to experts.”



(p. 52) One day I saw Sam proceed from one corner of his board to another, conserving every false start he made at seeing how a pattern changed and stayed the same until he was satisfied he had identified a constant, a coefficient, and a variable. Neuroscience tells us that this kind of mistake-filled deliberate practice is what creates powerful new pathways in the brain.

Students tell me, “whiteboards make math easier when the math isn’t easy.” I have seen students combine the write-on surface with manipulatives as they annotate patterns they find. They use the markers to keep track what they call “little numbers” while deep into problem solving. One day, during a card-matching task, groups used the surface to debate and create categories that they could see and agree on. I have one student who makes rectangles on his whiteboard every day to keep his workspace organized. He tells me it helps him to know where his tools are.

The whiteboards make tracking students’ thinking easier for me too. From across the room, the big surfaces allow me to see the progress students are making when they problem-solve. As I walk around the room, I think on my feet and make decisions about which desks I will showcase so that students can see and investigate each other’s ideas. Instead of having to walk to the front to share their thinking—many of my 8th-graders don’t like to do this—others can travel to them.

The whiteboards have also addressed perennial middle school issues that have nothing to do with math. Instead of spending my energy handing out pencils and providing

paper, everything students need to do math is right there, to share, all day long. As a result, more of my attention is available for listening to, looking for, and teaching the tools students need for math thinking.

It hasn't been all rainbows and ponies, however. Some days way too much of my attention goes to interrupting eraser rags turned waving flags, arresting elaborate doodling, and markers that placed end to end can tap a classmate seated two arm-lengths away. At the beginning of the year, I established that whiteboards and markers would be for math only. In so doing, I created an irresistible rule to break, and I've had a few students spend more time than I'd like "inviting" my attention with rule-breaking.

Today, when I wondered aloud whether the whiteboards were worth it, my students admitted the challenges but most defended the tool as extremely important for their math learning. Among the challenges, they listed the distracting things they do with the markers: tapping, scratching, and drawing Sponge Bob memes.

On the other hand, Angel wrote, "Sometimes my math is bigger than paper. Whiteboards hold more of my ideas."

Robert said, "The whiteboard helps me make mistakes I can feel good about."

Amber wrote, "On the whiteboard, mistakes aren't permanent. Mistakes are for learning."

At times, the whiteboards have had me skirting failure so closely that I have wondered why I took on the challenge

of incorporating a new tool at the same time I am adapting to teaching 8th grade for the first time in many years. On the other hand, having so much math thinking so large has me grateful to have spent those last days of the summer dreaming—once again—about all the ways we can have the beauty of math between us.



## ISAAC YI

Member, Legislative Youth  
Advisory Council

Glacier Peak High School  
Snohomish School District

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# America, a Great, Great, and Benevolent Country

*Living my grandmother's dream through  
the opportunity of education*

I am an American. And as a citizen of the United States of America, I feel privileged to be an integral part of the greatest, most benevolent, and most powerful nation in the world. My story begins decades ago and 6,690 miles away in Korea, because I am a grandson of political refugees.

My grandparents were expelled from their homes with nothing on their backs. They resettled in a city located in the center of the Korean peninsula, and there they endured North Korea's tyrannical rule. My family saved as much money as they could to buy my aunt and my father a ticket on an airplane to Guam, a territory of the United States. My grandmother told them, "that is where you find hope, opportunity, a better education, and a place to

build a better and more prosperous life for yourself and for your family.”

My parents met at Washington State University several years later and settled in the suburbs of Seattle. Back then it was still a working-class town, and my parents were working parents. My father worked at a pharmaceutical company, and my mother worked at a biotechnology company. My parents went through tremendous challenges in those early years in the United States; they barely spoke the language and my father had arrived with thirty dollars in his pocket. They worked very hard and knew that they had the education to build a new life in America that simply wouldn't be available to them back in a country ravaged by war and destitution. My father would always say to me as I was growing up these beautiful and simple words, “America, a great, great, and benevolent country...a land of free education and opportunities.”

We were different, and no one quite knew what to make of us at a time when black and white still dictated much of the social and political life. We weren't white enough to be white, or black enough to be black. However, we worked hard, we studied hard, we got to know our neighbors, and over time my family grew to be, not just accepted, but embraced by America. Our differences didn't go away, but we were able to show the community that education is certainly a key to achieving the “American Dream.”

I am fortunate enough to have parents who gave me necessities like food, clothes, my health, and a place to live. Perhaps the value that my family cherishes most is

education. My parents serve as a daily reminder for me that through education, we can weave ourselves into the American cultural identity and achieve the American Dream. We benefited from the incredible educational opportunities our country offers, and we respected the right of others to succeed on their own terms as well.

Both of my parents came from impoverished families and immigrated from a country in a state of war and virtual penury. Through education, they were able to escape the ruins and build a prosperous life here in America. They are both college graduates from multiple universities in America. My mother, who has a PhD in biochemistry and spent many years educating in her field of study, continued to build on the promise that individuals from all walks of life can find success. My father has a PhD in chemistry from University of Utah, and he educates many students at a prestigious university.

The basic definition of the American Dream is the set of ideals by which equality of opportunity is available to any American, allowing the highest goals to be achieved. That means, regardless of where you were born or what class you were born into, we can all attain our own version of success in society where upward mobility is possible for everyone, just like my parents.

I am very proud to be able to say, “I am the first member of my entire family to be born in the United States of America.” I consider it a badge of honor and a great privilege to live under this flag. I have this great feeling of gratitude when I remember the hardships of my grandparents and pride that despite the difficulties my

parents faced, they were able to make a great living and lead a comfortable, safe, and wonderful life all thanks to education.

I think about the America that so inspired my parents and millions of people around the world to leave behind families, kinships, and close ties to come to this distant and sometimes strange land just to pursue the hope, opportunity, and better education my grandmother spoke of. Education is the key to achieve that American Dream, and it is something that has not only helped me grow as a person, but also endlessly helped and rewarded my family. I will forever appreciate it.



## GABRIEL NAVARRO

*Member, Legislative  
Youth Advisory Council &  
Association of Washington  
Student Leaders Student Voice  
and Advocacy Board*

Ephrata High School  
Ephrata School District

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# Learning Through Leadership

*A journey in youth activism reveals  
education is the truest equalizer*

**M**y whole life, I have faced many forms of adversity, including discrimination and poverty. These have served as barriers to my ability to access education; however, I have continually persevered to access opportunities.

My father came from a family of peasant brickmakers in Mexico and immigrated to Los Angeles to pursue the American dream in the 80s. There, he met my mother at a flea market. She got pregnant, they inadvertently got married, and moved to Washington in the 90s to work in agriculture. Then, they had my two older brothers, who are now in their twenties. They are no role models to me because they never made anything of themselves only



becoming drug addicts with criminal records who never pursued higher education.

Since elementary school, I have always been discriminated against and punished for speaking Spanish with my fellow classmates. I can remember it vividly. I was just a poor, chubby, frizzy-haired, brown kid. I was told I was not to speak my mother tongue because “this is America” and this is “English class.” Even though the class was mainly white, there were still a considerable number of my Chicano peers in class who understood Spanish. Every time I became completely devastated and dumbfounded. Why had I been severely chastised for speaking my native language? Why was I not understood and hated? Growing up in a system like that, I felt like my Chicano peers and I were like a handful of pennies in a jar of dimes, treated and viewed as dirtier and of less value.

Ironically, 10 years later—in high school—all my peers want to learn to speak Spanish. In fact, there’s a state language credit requirement. But for us brown kids, it’s too late. We have already had our native tongues ripped out of our own heritage and culture. Too late. Too bad. Fortunately, I was brave enough to rebel and learn Spanish, which continues to connect me to my culture and heritage.

When I was around the age of 8, my father got into an accident at work, which left him permanently disabled and unemployable. My parents had to declare bankruptcy. Oftentimes, I would have to miss school to help translate for my father at medical appointments. This constrained my progress through school.

Although I have always lived in poverty and hardship, I have always sought to serve and make the lives of others better while still dedicating myself to my studies. Throughout school I have always had a passion for student leadership.

To date, I have been a representative and then President in elementary, middle, and high school. In my years of student leadership, I organized many book, food, and clothing drives for my community, planned entire first ever cultural celebrations, dances, social events, guest speakers, assemblies and many other events for my peers and schools every year.

A high point in my leadership endeavors was in the spring of my 10th-grade year. I had applied and been accepted into the page program which provided an opportunity to serve my state government through becoming a page for the Washington State Senate. This experience enticed me into the world of government, politics, and civics, and allowed me to come back home and educate and excite my peers about the importance of intellectual and civic participation and engagement.

Yet as soon as I came home from serving in the Senate, I found out that my mother had been fired and lost her job therefore making both of my parents unemployed and prompting me to get a job at Walmart. This is when my fluency in Spanish proved its usefulness as I had to use it to speak to the migrant farmworkers who came in often. This enabled me to understand them and treat them as human beings, unlike many of the store's customers and employees.

When I started my junior year both of my parents were unemployed. I was taking the most rigorous classes my school offered, working nights and weekends to support a family that could not support itself much less me, and serving my school as ASB publicity manager. I was also appointed by my city council to be student liaison for the Department of Parks and Recreation, and I was sitting on the school board as a student representative. I had just started my term on the Washington Legislative Youth Advisory Council advocating for the youth of Washington on affecting legislation. My grades dropped.

Despite this setback, I continued to pursue extracurricular leadership opportunities. At the end of my junior year, I applied to three statewide leadership programs and got accepted to all three of them: the Association of Washington Student Leaders Student Voice and Advocacy Board, the Latino Educational Achievement Program, and the Young Executives of Color program by the Foster School of Business at the University of Washington.

While my peers sat in class solving mathematical inequalities and inequities, I was busy solving societal inequalities and inequities. I felt it almost seemed selfish to go to school every day and only focus in my own education and improvement. I wanted to actually educate myself on the circumstances and obstacles currently facing my peers and I and find a way to remedy them. That is why I continued to fight for change and improvement at the risk of the perfection of my academics. I believed that being a good person and a good leader meant being

selfless and having the resolve to make progress for the advancement of our education system and society.

Through my disheartening and trying times I came to find the conviction that education certainly is society's truest equalizer. Nothing is worth the sacrifice of my education because it is what I value the most. Though I may face more discrimination and economic difficulty in the future, I know that through my educational experiences, I have found my voice and become a leader. No one can take that away from me.





## MICHAEL NELSON

2019 Washington State  
Superintendent of the Year  
Enumclaw School District

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# A Painful Gift

## *Processing loss grows powerful leaders*

Eighteen months ago, the No. 1 seeded University of Virginia Cavaliers lost to the No. 16 seeded University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC) in the NCAA basketball tournament. This was the first time the No. 1 seed ever lost to the No. 16 seed.

Last spring (a year and a half later), in a Disney movie format, Virginia won the National Championship.

After hitting an historic and unimaginable bottom as the first No. 1 seed to ever lose to a 16—and by 20 points to boot—Virginia is on a peak it has never seen before. An 85–77 overtime win over Texas Tech and a national championship. It was a mission of atonement accomplished like maybe no other, when you consider the distance from where the Cavaliers were to where they now are.

Can you imagine how long the year must have felt for the players, coaches, and fans?

For an entire year and a half—18 months of inner reflection, but also scrutiny and questions from the outside world—they sought to live by one theme of seeing the loss as a learning opportunity to persevere, building resilience, and becoming better both on and off the court. It was the theme they had almost immediately turned to, trying to make sense of that night in March that had caved in on them.

Kyle Guy (guard for Virginia) put this theme into words the team lived by during these long 18 months: “If you use it the right way, it can buy you a ticket to a place you couldn’t have gone any other way.” Coach Tony Bennett called it, “A painful gift.”

The two quotes used such simple words, yet when put together are so very powerful

If we use it in the right way, it can buy a ticket to a place you couldn’t have gone any other way.

A painful gift.

We all face adversity in our personal lives, and luckily most of us get to process it privately without national attention. It’s unimaginable for me to think of the pressure the players and coaches felt in responding in press conference after press conference about their unfathomable loss. How these athletes and coaches chose to respond to this loss is a model for us as adults, and I believe this story can be used as a guide for our students.

As educators, our work is also public. From yearly state assessments to closing opportunity and achievement

gaps to ensuring equity for all students, our work and progress (both good and bad) is newsworthy. How do we work with our students, parents, and public when events in our school districts don't go as planned? Do we see, feel, and model:

**Hope** when we might not see it.

**Courage** to know what is possible.

**Resiliency** during times of adversity.

**Strength** to wake up each day and put one foot in front of the other.

A cynic may say it's just a basketball game, and in a literal sense that's true. But sporting events, like public education, have a strong human element factor. The example of the Virginia basketball team overcoming a year of disappointment, questions, and criticism is quite remarkable. They rose up and became a premier basketball team and program by positively being their best selves during adversity. This an incredible leadership model and testament to the human spirit. I predict this to be an incredible movie script. I, for one, will be first in line to go see this (overcoming failure) movie when it is released one day.







## MARTHA WISDOM

2019 Washington State  
Classified School Employee  
of the Year

Tonasket School District

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# Who Finds a Friend Finds a Treasure

*Personal relationships with parents  
and students make a big difference in  
school success*

Humans are naturally social creatures; we need each other to grow as people. When someone gives us their attention they send a signal that we are in some way important. Each student is important for the school and by extension their family. Through personal interactions we create strong relationships that help us achieve our goal of success for the whole community.

My job is to support the communication between the school's Anglo-phonic personnel and its Hispanic students and their families. When you listen to someone, you build a stronger relationship. Through that relationship and being invested in that person you can better help them with what they need. We as the school staff hope to inspire those people because they are

important to us. The families I serve talk to me about their problems and feelings. I do my best to put myself in their shoes, and in that moment there is a connection. They no longer feel alone. When someone listens to them they feel accompanied, and they trust in your disposition. The person who feels supported is the person who will go on.

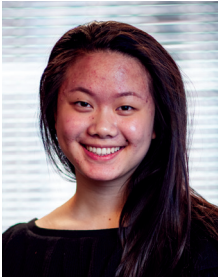
There is an inherent sacrifice to be a good guide, but a good guide is ready to make that sacrifice. We all need a good guide through life, so we are not alone. Those who guide you help and nourish you mentally. It's different when you have a teacher who merely shows up and explains things rather than one who is genuinely invested in their students. That is someone who is aware that their students have learned something, someone who sees when thought and understanding have been conceived and come to light. The good teacher is someone who is invested in every one of their students, but especially the most vulnerable. There needs to be a heart to heart understanding for there to be an education. It's different to ask "hello how are you doing?" than to ask "hello how are you feeling?" When you understand another's feeling, then you can make that connection to be their guide.

Every person is unique, and that's why no same instruction will work for everyone. Very early into my professional career when I was working for National Autonomous University of Mexico I had an experience that helped me understand the importance of helping someone change their lives forever through education. I was secretariat to the faculty of accounting and administration and when I was working there, the head of the School of

Accounting Arturo Diaz Alonso wanted to pay better wages to a particular custodian but couldn't because the custodian had no additional studies or special abilities. I could see that the custodian worked very hard to do his best. He was punctual, honest, respectful, and he loved to answer the phone. So I decided to help him learn to use the computers. These were the old ones, big and heavy, no special tabs, no mouse, and a black screen that only displayed green text. In the evenings I would help him learn to do things on the computer, especially how to use Word and how to type without looking. And from there I would assign him tasks to copy things onto the computer. I left the university when I decided to come to the United States and years after I called the office where I had worked. The person who answered my call, now a secretary, was the same person who I had taught to use the computer all those years ago. He was very grateful that I had been his guide and said that thanks to what I had showed him he was able to get a better job. And at the same time, he was able to inspire his children who saw that, with studies, they could lead better lives. His children studied and graduated at the same university as me. Although I have not met them, I have the joy and pride of knowing that I changed the lives of a family and their future generations forever.

When you share something material, it only shrinks. But when you share knowledge, it grows. I have a long list of lives that I have changed with only a personal relationship built around education. This long list provides me with a great sense of satisfaction, and I am grateful to everyone who has let me guide them and stuck to it. I hope that the

list only grows for many years to come and that we can work to improve the lives of the many people who just need a friend.



## ASHLEY LIN

Member, Association of  
Washington Student Leaders  
Student Voice and Advocacy  
Board

Union High School  
Evergreen School District

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# Blazing My Own Trail

*Letting go of others' expectations and taking charge of your education opens up a world of possibilities*

Ashley, *nǐ liàn qín le méi?*  
I grew up with that phrase frequently in one ear (although it—also frequently—promptly went out the other). Alone, the phrase meant, “did you practice the instrument yet?” In Chinese, the words carried a distinct curtness and an undertone of expectation and obligation that even my Mom’s good-natured voice couldn’t veil.

Needless to say, *nǐ liàn qín le méi* quickly became one of my absolute favorite things to hear. Before I went to school—*nǐ liàn qín le méi?* Before I went to bed—*nǐ liàn qín le méi?* When I got picked up from school—*nǐ liàn qín le méi???* Update: I’ve been at school for the past six hours, Mom. I couldn’t have practiced even if I wanted to.

But I held my tongue, because I knew my parents had only my best interests in mind. They immigrated here from Taiwan when I was five years old, so I could have access to all the educational experiences they never had, including being able to study an instrument, and more importantly, accessing an US university experience. To them, *liàn qín* was but one step in the grand plan of making sure my younger sisters and I achieved what was considered the “American Dream.”

Some say that silence is complicity and complacency. Growing up, I probably didn’t know what either of those two words meant. What I did know was the quiet timidity that dominated the better half of my teenage years allowed words to be put in my mouth and goals to be established for my future.

Consequently, as I progressed in the K-12 public school system, *liàn qín* gradually came to embody every assumption my parents, my peers, and my teachers had about my college and college plan. My family and community meticulously laid out the extracurriculars I should get involved in, the classes I should take, and the exact number of hours I should dedicate to studying for the SAT. It became harder to draw the line between respecting my parents’ sacrifices and pursuing my passions. The educational expectations for me as an East Asian immigrant began to spin out of control.

I had lost my sense of direction. I began to realize this in middle school. In my mind and everyone else’s, I was a uber-prepared hiker—with the trail memorized, binoculars in hand, and a custom formula for my hourly water intake to

boot—here for the long haul. In my heart, I was following the trail signs yet wandering aimlessly in circles.

In 6th grade, my First Lego League team ripped our robot apart at the state competition, and I didn't make it onto the Science Olympiad team.

Nonetheless, I stubbornly, even fervently, tried the same trails and helplessly returned to the same “*liàn qín*” place. It took its toll. I was only in 7th grade when sleep started persistently avoiding me—a culmination of the pressure, stress, and frustration that came with a schedule full of activities I didn't connect with. My mental well-being faltered, flickered, and went out like a candle in the wind. At a time when my parents, in their 40s, complained about their gray hairs, at 12 years old, I found my first.

In 7th grade I barely made the Mathcounts team, plateaued in my competitive swimming times, and wasn't accepted into the Portland Youth Philharmonic. What are you going to do about that, *liàn qín*?

I felt trapped in the single pathway my community defined as “success.” The path that was charted for me allowed for no personalization and no opportunity for deeper learning. My love for words, for innovation, and for helping others did not seem to matter. Like every other student, I have educational and developmental needs outside of a pre-set list of activities and classes. However, I didn't know I had a right to those needs. For many immigrant students, stepping into those rights is difficult because society, family, and the immigrant community already have preconceived notions of success



and the American Dream. Notions that do not account for individual student perspectives.

Growing up, I was a pawn in a system that values and celebrates numbers and scores and picket-fence resumes. I struggled to reconcile my interests and passions with the expectations around me. I was discouraged from speaking of personal struggles that rose from this conflict. Those struggles were raw and vulnerable and acknowledging them would be the equivalent of turning my back on a community that has raised me and nurtured me.

It's scary to say "I learn better another way." It's even scarier to say, "I want something different out of school."

In 8th grade, I tried quitting the cello three times before I finally did, managing to convince myself and reassure the *liàn qín* crusaders around me that I didn't mean it each and every time. When I finally put the instrument away, I cried.

Choosing to stop *liàn qín* finally showed me how my fear of being misunderstood and ridiculed had dictated my learning choices. I realized that while going off-plan would require a lot of explaining and cajoling, maybe it was possible, and I'd just been too scared to try—so I decided to try.

Since then, I'm lucky to have found life-changing career and technical education experiences and identified spaces I enjoy working in and giving back to. I've discovered a love for global education for its ability to bring clarity onto my own perspective. In 2018, I started Project Exchange ([www.myprojectexchange.com](http://www.myprojectexchange.com)),

an organization increasing access to cross-cultural learning for middle and high school students through digital programs.

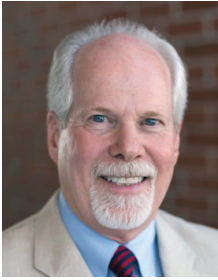
Throughout it all, my parents, school counselors, teachers, and peers have been my biggest supporters.

If there's one thing I've learned on my journey, it's to advocate for yourself. If a type of learning isn't working for you, change it. Don't assume what your community will think, go ask them. Lean into the fact that, as a student, you're the expert on what you need. Deeper and alternative learning isn't better or worse. It's different, just like I am different from every other Taiwanese-American, any other immigrant, and any other student that learns in Washington's K-12 public school system.

Be strong enough to redefine success and the toxic narratives often associated with it first for yourself, then outwards for your family, school, and community. Be smart enough to explore *liàn qín* and the opportunities that will come your way and know your success in one does not define your value. Finally, be bold enough to be different, and ask for the support you need to chart your own learning journey.

Through this, I've found my way. You can, too.





## FRANK HEWINS

2018 Washington State  
Superintendent of the Year

Franklin-Pierce School District  
(retired)

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# A Love Letter to My Community

*Reflections on three decades of  
transformation in one community*

After serving our country as an Army paratrooper, then teaching and coaching for a number of years in other states and districts, I felt the need to expand my horizons and began my graduate work and principal certification right here in our backyard at Pacific Lutheran University in 1984. Not realizing, at that moment, that my time spent on the PLU campus for the next couple of years was introducing me to a community I would be totally invested in for the next 30+ years.

I began my career here as an assistant principal at Franklin Pierce High School in 1988 at the age of 35. My own children were five and seven-years-old. My parents, my wife's parents, and her grandparents were all still living at that time. Over decades, as we all know, life happens. Our last remaining parent has now passed. I have attended the weddings and funerals of scores of

students and staff. I now regularly see the second and even third generations of students in our classrooms. It is not uncommon for me to observe new teachers who are the children of teachers I observed many years before or to supervise principals and administrators who were previously my students. I now have four granddaughters. Two of them are older than my daughters were when I arrived here.

Our district and community were much different 30 years ago, but not necessarily better. In fact, our schools are unquestionably much better than they were back then. The rich tapestry of diversity that covers our community today gives us character, complexity, opportunity, and tremendous hope for the future. I have watched and been able to experience the generosity of families and students who had very little give to those who had even less. I have witnessed the pride of parents watching their children perform musically, athletically, and dramatically or being the first in their family to graduate from high school walking across the stage receiving their diploma. I have observed the tears of joy and amazement of parents of kindergartners conducting student-led conferences and the loud cheers for their children receiving a senior academic award or college scholarship. Over 13,000 students have graduated from our high schools during my time at Franklin Pierce. They carry their skills and our community pride into households, workplaces, cities, and towns throughout the world.

I have made my share of mistakes over the years but, with your feedback and assistance, have been able to

rectify them, not only improving the quality of education for our students, but making me a better leader. Your partnership has allowed me to leave knowing our schools are in better shape than when I arrived. In a community where many families struggle day to day making ends meet, it is nothing short of amazing that year after year our public makes a conscious choice to support our schools and their children at the ballot box. If that isn't love, I don't know what is.

Our district sits in an unincorporated area with no real industry, low property values, and social service challenges without the social service infrastructure of many urban areas. And we still thrive. In fact, we are known as an innovative, forward thinking, future-focused learning organization that stays on the leading edge of providing the highest quality education available for all our children. When our name is mentioned, while many may not know our exact geographic location, they do know our district and that it is synonymous with strong leaders, a high-functioning Board of Directors, well-trained staff, innovative programs, exceptional students, and a supportive community.

I have been sustained over my 40 years in education by a conviction that public education is the backbone of our democracy. My work has allowed me an opportunity to make a difference on a human level. I have had the chance over the last four decades to change the world, one student at a time. Navigating the twists and turns of various events over the years has allowed me to create a legacy of leadership for those who will follow me. But,

I will never stop advocating for our country to better support public education.

The challenges of a community that has significantly changed in so many ways over the past three decades could have easily divided us and diminished the quality of education our schools provided. On the contrary, our diversity was embraced as equity and social justice became the vehicle for our schools to build a system of supports for all students and their families. The understanding that supporting schools is an investment in the future as opposed to another expense seems to be a hard sell these days. But in a community like ours where the collective mindset is to help others as they help you, the future looks bright.

All my love,  
Frank



## AMY CAMPBELL

2020 Washington State  
Teacher of the Year

Helen Baller Elementary School  
Camas School District

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# What Tom Can Do

*How an asset-based approach to special education can transform a community*

Twelve years ago, I stepped into my first classroom. I had an undergraduate degree in psychology, a Master in Teaching, and an endorsement in special education. I knew about learning and I knew about teaching and I knew about disabilities. I had a lot of tools at my disposal, and I was ready to buckle down and start to fix problems. My focus was on addressing deficits, setbacks, and learning gaps, and my students—students with moderate to profound disabilities—had many of those. I used to walk away from each day exhausted and emotional and feeling alone and disconnected. I am sure my students did too.

I remember at an early IEP meeting feeling frustrated sharing Mark's IQ and adaptive scores with his family and then based on those scores guiding the team to craft an IEP that aligned to my perception of Mark's capabilities. In assuming I knew the implications of the information I



was sharing with his parents, I was limiting Mark. It wasn't a bad meeting and I wasn't a bad teacher, but my limited experiences and perspective affected Mark's services.

Things might not have changed except for two powerful conversations I had early in my career.

First, after a day of difficult teaching, and students struggling with the same concepts despite my careful instruction, an administrator advised me, "Mrs. Campbell, it is important to always have a positive presupposition." He reminded me how my amazing relationships with my students provide me the unique ability to personalize what I teach and how I teach.

With a positive presupposition, I started looking past deficit and disability and started seeing ways to access and build on the potential in my students. Despite what I thought I knew about disabilities and education, all my students had amazing skills, true interests, and the ability to participate in rich academic experiences when I took the time to truly individualize instruction.

Tom, one of my students who has a big bright smile and beaming eyes, also has Down syndrome and autism. Tom has a loving family who worried about his future and wanted to advocate for the best education they could get to ensure positive outcomes for their son. At Tom's IEP meeting, I waited to share that an IQ test had indicated a score 3 standard deviations below the mean. First I shared that he was starting to read now that I had focused my instruction on books that were of interest to him, books about dogs, and how he was starting to type

with laser prompting to find the keys, and how he was solving simple math problems using a talking calculator and number stamps to mark his answers. Tom's love of technology meant that previous pencil and paper barriers were overcome with a presupposition that he could write if I could find the right method or tool for him.

The other conversation that had an impact on me was with a parent. I was told, in no uncertain terms, that I was "segregating her child." My focus on maximizing time delivering direct instruction in my classroom meant that I was inadvertently minimizing the opportunities my students had to participate in social and academic learning with their peers in general education settings. I remember wanting to argue, but I realized that I didn't have an adequate answer for her. This conversation led to years of reflection on how inclusion and access to the community are a right for all students and a responsibility of our educational system. Developing inclusive opportunities for students has been a work in progress as I learn ways to enlist the support of staff and other students. But it has been the most rewarding work of my life, and the benefits for the entire community are too many to count.

For Tom, access to inclusive experiences was centered on finding meaningful opportunities that matched his interests and also built his skills and sense of self. When the general education teacher heard about what he could do academically, rather than what he couldn't do, she could picture my suggestions for academic opportunity and build on them, including hands on science and social

studies times and morning work with his calculator. We found opportunities for inclusion in my classroom too, where students from his general education class could come participate in Tom's social skills group. Everyone would finally be able to learn how to use his new communication device together. Probably most exciting was the addition of daily "Book Buddy" reading time during the general education classroom silent reading time. During Book Buddies, Tom would be able to read any books he liked or have his peers read to him. He would be actively learning alongside his peers.

Only a short time after the implementation of Book Buddies, Tom's peers noticed the types of books and the topics that excited him, immediately recognizing his love of animal books. I would often hear a buddy offering, "do you want to read this dog book?" Students who didn't usually want to read out loud, or read at all, would often read to Tom, and his willing smile kept them motivated even as they worked to sound out words. The teacher reported fewer discipline problems and overall participation in reading increased as all students enjoyed reading together. When Tom wasn't there, someone always came searching for their peer who loved reading. As I watched Tom charge into his 4th-grade classroom and pick up books to read to his friends (pointing out pictures of familiar words or characters), it was clear to me that Tom knew he was a reader and that he belonged in this class. The disability and the IQ score did not matter.

Tom's situation is not unique. Though I imagine my job will always be hard work, now it is the work of innovation

and inspiration. I can see the results of my labor as students with disabilities make real academic gains and see their own worth and place in this world, and the world is able to see my students for their inherent value and their contributions. By creating both social and academically inclusive experiences, I am building community for my students and for myself, and we, all of us together, are winning.

I got a text message from Tom's mom on the first day of school this year. He had moved up to the middle school. It's a very nerve-wracking transition for most parents, and Tom's parents were no exception. In the text was a picture of Tom in an assembly with 800 other students. He was surrounded by peers and they were all smiling. The message read, "Thank you for giving him community."

The truth is, by investigating Tom's unique skills and interests and then leveraging those to create meaningful opportunities for him to participate with his peers, I had actually given Tom to the community. And he is an amazing gift!



# About Teacher of the Year

Since 1963, the Washington State Teacher of the Year program has selected one outstanding educator annually to serve as the Washington State Teacher of the Year. The Teacher of the Year is selected from a slate of up to 9 regional candidates representing Washington's nine Educational Service Districts (ESDs) and including Tribal Schools. In 1963, 1970, 2007, 2013, and 2018, the state program garnered national attention when Elmon Ousley of Bellevue School District, Johnnie T. Dennis of Walla Walla School District, Andrea Peterson of Granite Falls School District, Jeff Charbonneau of Zillah School District, and Mandy Manning of Spokane School District, respectively, were each selected as the National Teacher of the Year.

Anyone can nominate someone for Teacher of the Year. Nominated teachers complete a written application and enter the regional selection process through their ESDs. Each ESD recommends a Regional Teacher of the Year to the state program. Regional Teachers of the Year undergo a rigorous state selection that includes a written application, presentation, and panel interview. The State Teacher of the Year is selected by a committee made up of diverse educators, families, students, and education stakeholders.

## Teachers of the Year:

- Have the respect of their community.
- Are knowledgeable in their fields and guide students of all backgrounds and abilities to achieve excellence.
- Collaborate with colleagues, students, and families to create school cultures of respect and success.
- Deliberately connect the classroom and key stakeholders to foster strong communities at large.
- Demonstrate leadership and innovation in and outside of the classroom walls that embodies lifelong learning.
- Express themselves in engaging and effective ways.





*"We are better teachers when we listen to and support our students. And we are a better community when we listen to and support our teachers and schools. We are all in this together."*

*— 2019 Washington State Teacher of the Year*

