

Reimagining School-Community Relations

Ensuring Necessary Conditions for Student Success

A Community Learning Exchange Case Study

By increasing the capacity of school leaders to collaborate, both with the people on their campuses and those in the communities they serve, the Community Learning Exchange supports educators in charting new paths to success for schools and communities as they reclaim their roles as partners in the education process.

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OVERVIEW

*For nearly a decade, the **Community Learning Exchange** has focused on reimagining the way schools and communities collaborate to foster the necessary conditions for student success. The leaders and activist scholars in the CLE network have broken convention by investing in a different type of university-school-community partnership, one that marshals the local assets of urban and rural communities in the push toward equity and excellence. Together, these change agents are redesigning education leadership, revitalizing local allies as partners, and restoring confidence in the collective mission of educating our children and youth.*

The following case study explains the CLE approach to school-community relations and offers a set of stories illustrating how practitioners in the growing network are applying this approach in their communities.

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THE SITUATION

The face of America is undergoing rapid and dramatic change. Demographers predict a minority white population by mid-century.¹ Unfortunately, our education system is not prepared to fully capitalize on this opportunity because it still struggles to serve all students equitably. Segments of the population that are growing the fastest—Latinos, immigrants and students with disabilities—are among those most poorly served by our schools.

Recognizing the urgent need to address these disparities, education reformers have focused on transforming what goes on in our nation’s classrooms. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (and its latest iteration: No Child Left Behind), the charter school movement, and teacher evaluation efforts are examples of efforts to close the opportunity and achievement gaps.

While these initiatives address critical problems in our education system, there are other equally important avenues to improving student outcomes. Changing student outcomes requires changing the ways we envision the education of America’s children and youth as well as who we enlist in the re-visioning process.

The **Community Learning Exchange** offers a vital pathway to improving the efficacy and equity of our nation’s schools: catapulting the capacity of school and community leaders to collectively create conditions that yield more robust outcomes for our children and youth. The CLE promotes what John Dewey said more than a century ago:

What the best and wisest parent wants for his own child, that must be what the community wants for all of its children. Any other ideal for our schools is narrow and unlovely; acted upon, it destroys our democracy.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT: A GROWING PRIORITY FOR SCHOOL LEADERS

The National Association of Elementary School Principals lists leading “parent, family and community engagement” as one of its six standard performance practices for

¹ William H. Frey, *Diversity Explosion: How New Racial Demographics Are Remaking America*, (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2015).

school principals.² Similarly, the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium lists collaborating with “faculty and community members” as one of the six common standards of practice for school leaders. It’s worth noting that 40 states have adopted ISLLC standards.³

Strong school-community relationships generate an environment in which students and educators flourish. In their 2011 book, *Getting it Done: Leading Academic Success in Unexpected Schools*, authors Karin Chenoweth and Christina Theokas examined the best practices of school leaders across the country, many of whom are featured in Chenoweth’s earlier books, *It’s Being Done* and *How It’s Being Done*.⁴ Many of the school principals highlighted in these books mention the engagement of families and the community as fundamental to their efforts to create conditions for student success.

Similar findings were presented in Anne Henderson and Karen Mapp’s report, “A New Wave of Evidence: The impact of school, family and community connections on student achievement,” and book, *Beyond the Bake Sale*, the latter of which provided a roadmap to building family-school partnerships.⁵

“When schools, families, and community groups work together to support learning, children tend to do better in school, stay in school longer, and like school more.”⁶

² National Association of Elementary School Principals, “Leading Learning Communities: Standards for What Principals Should Know and Be Able To Do,” Second Edition, (Washington, D.C.: NAESP, 2008), 10.

³ Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium, Council of Chief State School Officers, “Educational Leadership Policy Standards,” (Washington, D.C.: ISLLC, CCSO, 2008), 6.

⁴ Karin Chenoweth and Christina Theokas, *Getting it Done: Leading Academic Success in Unexpected Schools* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2011).

⁵ Anne T. Henderson, Karen L. Mapp, Vivian R. Johnson, and Don Davies, *Beyond the Bake Sale: The Essential Guide to Family-School Partnerships*, (New York, NY: The New Press, 2007).

⁶ Anne T. Henderson and Karen Mapp, “A New Wave of Evidence: The Impact of school, family and community connections on student Achievement” (Austin, Texas: Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, 2002), 7.

Research has consistently demonstrated that the actions taken by educators and other school staff to invite, encourage, and support parental and community involvement in schools are the strongest predictors of parental involvement.⁷

School-community relationships are the bedrock opportunity for increasing the capacity of those who serve as teachers and leaders in low-income districts because they rely on the very resource that does not cost more money: the abstract resource of family care and concern for their children.⁸ Since many school personnel neither live in nor come from the communities they serve, the experiences they bring to schools often misalign with the everyday context in which their students live. That dissonance can affect all aspects of school climate and culture, including:

- How teachers set expectations for their students,
- How students interact with educators,
- Which pedagogies teachers use in the classroom,
- How administrators set expectations and goals for teachers,
- How disciplinary policies are shaped and enforced,
- How school personnel communicate with families,
- What extra-curricular in-school and after-school activities are offered, and
- Which food items are included on the cafeteria menu.

Evidence suggests that school leaders who overlook, ignore, misunderstand, or devalue the cultural assets of the local community tend to set up situations in which teachers and other adults in the school have a difficult time engaging and retaining students.⁹

In contrast, educators who successfully cross the boundaries separating their schools from the community are better positioned to enhance the cultural competency of faculty and staff, while concurrently involving families and the community in setting up students for success. When school-community relationships

⁷ Susan Dauber and Joyce L. Epstein, "Parents' Attitudes and Practices of Involvement in Inner-City Elementary and Secondary Schools," in Nancy Chavkin, ed. *Families and Schools in a Pluralistic Society* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1993), 53-71.

⁸ Norton Grubb, *The Money Myth: School Resources, Outcomes, and Equity* (New York, N.Y.: Russell Sage Foundation, 2009).

⁹ Atelia Melaville, Reuben Jacobson, and Martin Blank. "[Scaling Up School and Community Partnerships](#)" (Washington, D.C.: Institute for Educational Leadership, 2011).

are strong, problem solving and educational innovation can emerge as a team effort, enhancing the chances for student success.¹⁰

The CLE processes emphasize opportunities for educators to broaden their perspective about where learning happens. As scholars and CLE co-founders Miguel and Francisco Guajardo note:

Introducing global concepts and viewing them through local lenses centers teaching and learning in a more meaningful and concrete manner, and it gives students and teachers the power to see themselves not as consumers of information and data but, rather, as researchers and creators of knowledge. The community becomes the classroom.¹¹

When children are encouraged to think and learn about the issues concerning their local communities; when they explore history by talking with local elders; when they have an opportunity to apply the skills they learn in class to local action projects that improve the lives of their family members and neighbors, education becomes a dynamic, life-enriching experience and a tool for change.

The CLE introduces school and community stakeholders to practices and pedagogies that can facilitate this process. It also provides a space of affirmation for educators who may come from cultures and communities where these practices and pedagogies are the norm, but who have previously encountered limited receptivity to these skills in the context of their careers as educators.

The CLE approach to cultivating school-community relations, discussed in the next section, is rooted in a theory of change and an approach to documentation that emphasize collective leadership and collaboration.

¹⁰ Dacia Chrzanowski, Susan Rans and Raymond Thompson “[Building Mutually Beneficial Relationships Between Schools and Communities](#): the role of a connector” (Evanston, Ill.: Asset Based Community Development Institute, Northwestern University, 2010), 6.

¹¹ Miguel Guajardo, Francisco Guajardo, and Edyael Del Carmen Casaperalta, “Transformative Education: Chronicling a Pedagogy for Social Change,” *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, Vol. 39 (April 2008): 17.



THE CLE APPROACH

The CLE approach to school-community relations is built on the premise that today’s educators and community leaders must work in collaboration with others to develop a shared vision for successful schools and then work together toward realizing that vision. Invariably, this style of leadership requires crossing traditional social boundaries (e.g., class, race, age, social status, etc.) and sharing power.

Henderson and Mapp find that higher performing schools share three characteristics when it comes to engaging with families and communities: they focus on building trusting, collaborative relationships among teachers, families and community members; they recognize respect and address families’ needs as well as class and cultural difference; and they embrace a philosophy of partnership where power and responsibility are shared.¹²

The theory of change and action supporting the CLE approach accepts that, in most instances, communities already possess the wisdom required to make the changes they need. However they are not, in general, as practiced at crossing social boundaries to marshal the mix of local talent they need to engage in local problem-solving.

¹² Henderson and Mapp. “A New Wave of Evidence,” 7

When schools and communities interact with each other using the CLE goals listed below, they find they are more successful in creating the conditions that can ensure these equitable and rigorous outcomes:

- Strengthen relational trust through collective leadership strategies and pedagogies.
- Use local storytelling to provide “just in time” empirical evidence of successes and necessary areas of improvement.
- Foster the reciprocal benefits of collective advocacy for all participants, organizations, schools, and communities.
- Build on intergenerational community leadership that relies on cultural competency of school personnel.
- Ensure that every participant is a teacher and a learner.

The pursuit of these core goals, which are cornerstones of the CLE, creates leadership development opportunities for all who participate: teachers, parents, school leaders, university professors, community organizers, youth, and elders.

Being engaged in activities that model these concepts allows educators to uncover personal and community competencies they might otherwise never have enlisted to advance the overarching goal of excellence and equity.

Secondly, unlike many leadership development initiatives that focus on building the competencies of individual educators, the CLE relies on a team approach to planning and problem solving. Participants are invited to attend learning exchanges with intergenerational teams of stakeholders from their school communities. These groups practice working as a team in a learning environment that nurtures collective learning, planning, and action, and the result is they are better equipped to put those lessons in use back home.

Collective leadership activities serve two additional purposes: (1) validating the role of community stakeholders as partners in the education process, and (2) asserting the importance of distributed leadership as an operating principle, thus freeing principals from the burden of acting as hero/heroine.¹³

Finally, transferring CLE experiences to regular use in home communities requires, as with all learning, multiple CLE experiences where participants practice and receive

¹³ James P. Spillane and John B. Diamond, *Distributed Leadership in Practice*, (New York, N.Y.: Teachers College Press, 2007).

guidance from a network of support.¹⁴ Certainly, all teams can benefit from participating in a single CLE, but participants maximize the potential benefit of these learning exchanges by attending more than one.

Over the years, the number of teams returning to CLEs has increased steadily. Some of these teams send the same people each time, while others send a mix of previous and new participants. Teams falling into the latter category are usually striving to broaden the number of local people exposed to the CLE so as to strengthen the practice of CLE principles and pedagogies back home. This unique form of professional development and team building has led several teams to host local CLEs in their home communities, usually with support from the national team.

Repeat participation in national CLEs affords participants a chance to build their collective leadership competencies over time. Further, it offers a networked improvement community of practitioners from around the country, opening the door for more peer-to-peer learning and collaboration.¹⁵

Participating in national CLEs also gives teams a chance to see how other communities are addressing issues they, too, may encounter. These interactions help diminish the sense of isolation and hopelessness felt by many people in school communities that are experiencing significant barriers to improvement, emboldening them to rediscover local assets and reclaim their capacity to make meaningful and sustainable change.

The stories featured in this case study highlight the experiences of six education leaders who've found the Community Learning Exchange to be a valuable contributor to their professional growth and practice. These educators affirm CLEs as a necessary resource in their efforts to create schools that are grounded in community and better poised to prepare students for educational success. Individually and collectively, their narratives proclaim the power of story as a moving force for change. They also illustrate how the CLE approach to school-community engagement works to create the necessary conditions for student success.

¹⁴ John D. Bransford, Ann L. Brown and Rodney R. Cocking, *How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience, and School* (Washington, D.C.: National Academies Press, 2000).

¹⁵ Anthony S. Bryk et al, *Organizing Schools for Improvement: Lessons from Chicago* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

The stories are organized to highlight seven themes:

- Theme 1** **Personal transformation precedes and supports collective work.**
(This theme is common to all six stories.)

- Theme 2** **Leveling the playing field across generations, race, class, positions, and experience produces a transformation that only fully engaging difference can make.¹⁶** ([See Story 1](#))

- Theme 3** **Intergenerational leadership is fundamental to school and community reform efforts.** ([See Story 2](#))

- Theme 4** ***Praxis*—the power of dialogue and reflection to decide on action — is fundamental to individual and collective learning.¹⁷**
([See Story 3](#))

- Theme 5** **Translating and embedding the CLE pedagogies in local work requires thoughtful experimentation and adaptation.**
([See Story 4](#))

- Theme 6** **Mentoring relationships with the CLE national team and other CLE teams support the transfer of CLE practices and pedagogies to local contexts.** ([See Story 5](#))

- Theme 7** **Embedding documentation, evaluation, and scholarship in the CLE experience as an accessible tool for all participants authorizes everyone as a co-researcher.** ([See Story 6](#))

¹⁶ Scott E. Page, *The Difference: How the Power of Diversity Creates Better Groups, Firms, Schools and Societies* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007).

¹⁷ Paulo Freire, *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (London, U.K.: Continuum International Publishing Group, 1970).





Teaching, Learning, and Leading in Community

Community Learning Exchange: Stories in Action

STORY 1

Engaging Local Power by Valuing Local Narratives and Looking Beyond the Obvious

STORY 2

Nurturing Intergenerational Partnerships and Learning to Let Youth Lead

STORY 3

Listening Respectfully to Rebuild Community Trust

STORY 4

Merging the Wisdom of Community and Educators to Create Better Schools

STORY 5

Inclusion Begins with Dialogue across Boundaries, Pre-K—College

STORY 6

Urging Education Leaders to Teach and Learn in Partnership with Community

Engaging Local Power by Valuing Local Narratives and Looking Beyond the Obvious



“In rural communities, the people who have the real power and influence aren’t necessarily the elected officials and business folks.”

Larry Hodgkins,
Educator and Ed.D. Candidate
East Carolina University
Greenville, North Carolina

Larry Hodgkins didn’t initially plan to build a career in education. Born in Maine, he grew up not far from New York City. After college, he spent a few years working as an engineer, but it was his volunteer work as a middle school coach that prompted him to change paths.

“I started out teaching at a private Montessori school, but the cost of living in the northeast was higher than I could handle on a teacher’s salary,” he says. “I had a few friends who’d moved to North Carolina, so I decided to move down, too.”

Hodgkins’ first job in North Carolina was at a charter school, but he ended up teaching math in the Martin County Public Schools, where he’s taught and now serves as an assistant principal for nearly a decade.

The Martin County School District is a small, rural system that has endured rapid contraction in recent years, as economic pressures and statewide expansion of the charter school movement have siphoned dozens of students out of the traditional public schools and effectively resegregating them. Just a few years ago, South Creek Middle School, where Hodgkins is the assistant principal, had roughly 400 students. By the time of this writing, enrollment had shrunk to around 225.

“We had two major changes: A charter school opened and many of the white students enrolled there. Then the economic scenario here is really limited,” Hodgkins says. “At one time there were textiles mills and agriculture. Now all the textiles jobs are overseas and many of the agriculture jobs are consolidating or becoming mechanized. There aren’t a lot of jobs here. So, we lose students throughout the year.”

Indeed, Martin County School District has been losing students for years (see [*“Changing Dynamics as Enrollment Declines”*](#)). Plunging enrollment has led to district-wide feuding over school consolidations, closures and the rise of charter schools.

Hodgkins arrived to the district in the midst of school consolidation. He recalls the process as highly contentious, mostly among the adults because the students didn’t seem to mind much.

“Some consolidation was necessary, but how do you do that and retain the identity of your local schools?”

In 2014, the district closed yet another middle

Changing Dynamics as Enrollment Declines

In 2002-03, North Carolina’s Martin County School District had 12 schools: 4 high schools, 2 middle schools and 6 elementary schools. Together these schools enrolled 4,518 students. By 2012-13, enrollment had sunk to 3,789. Today, the district has 10 schools: 2 new high schools, 2 new middle schools, and 6 elementary schools. As enrollment has declined, white students have become a minority.

Source: [*NC School Report Cards, 2002-03 and 2012-13*](#)

school, distributing the remaining pupils between Riverside Middle School and Jamesville Elementary.

Race was huge factor in the “identities” of Martin County Schools. Consolidating the schools meant merging institutions with different racial personas. South Creek High was created by merging two older high schools: predominantly black Roanoke High and mostly white Bear Grass High. Many parents were outraged to see their local schools close.

The hemorrhaging of white students from the district, was perhaps most evident at South Creek high and middle schools, which now serve mostly black students. Many white families in the area of the district formerly served by Bear Grass High now send their children to Bear Grass Charter School, which opened its doors in fall 2012 to serve grades 7-12 after much legal wrangling with the school district.

Hodgkins says the social setting remains relatively segregated. For him, the CLE has become a valuable resource for community engagement strategies, tools he’s using to ease tensions in a polarized environment.

Although most of South Creek’s students are African American, the teaching staff is predominantly white and many of the teachers—including Hodgkins—hail from or live outside the community.

“I drive 45 minutes to get here,” Hodgkins says. I’m not always immersed in the local happenings and culture and that can make it more challenging to build community. The churches are the strongest local organizations. I’ve gotten to know some people and the CLE has helped me.”

Hodgkins’ initial exposure to the CLE came through his involvement with the Northeast Leadership Academy (NELA) at the North Carolina State University. The community engagement work he experienced through NELA was the most profound aspect of that experience, so when he found out about the CLE he was eager to go deeper. He is now enrolled in the Ed.D. program at East Carolina University, where Dr. Matt Militello, a founding member of the CLE national team and former faculty member at NC State, is an endowed professor in the department of educational leadership.

“I expected [the CLE] to be more like a traditional conference where the side experiences are equally as memorable as what you’re there for. But with the CLE, it was 100 percent the opposite.”

“The intensity of [a CLE] is something that I was struck by,” Hodgkins says, recalling his first learning exchange. “I expected it to be more like a traditional conference where the side experiences are equally as memorable as what you’re there for. But with the CLE, it was 100 percent the opposite. You forget to eat and you forget all the rest. The conversations with other people are what stand out. ... I find at 9 or 10 at night, having gone the whole day, I’m still energized.”

After attending a couple of learning exchanges, Hodgkins persuaded his principal to let him host one locally. He hoped it would begin to heal some of the resentment many in the community feel toward the school district and the new school.

“I couldn’t ask for a better principal. We make a great administrative team. When I said I want to do the CLE here, she was very supportive and helped lead the event.” A good cross-section of the community— including students, teachers, a school custodian, district staff and parents— participated in that first CLE.

“If you’re not in the schools, it is easy to focus on the negative things ... At the first CLE, my opening question was, ‘Why are you here?’ ‘Why is education of students in Martin County important to you?’ People went on for several minutes.

“One of the biggest lessons for me, from my work in NELA and the CLE, is that in rural communities, the people who have the real power and influence aren’t necessarily the elected officials and business folks. It is the people in the churches, etc. It takes digging to identify who those people are, but once you establish yourself as genuine, they’re willing to help.

“I’ve gone to a couple of community events recently, run by some of the less known community leaders. These are the types of meetings that the school leaders need to attend. There is a lot more power in this community than is acknowledged. ... Some of our strongest people are our bus drivers and our substitute teachers. Those are the people who usually are really well respected. A lot of the [substitutes] are retired teachers from the area. It was talking to those people who helped me get the right people for our CLE.”

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A CLE practice Hodgkins has found particularly useful is the emphasis on local storytelling. He now uses a variety of storytelling techniques (high- and low-tech) to help students and the adults in his school’s polarized community reconnect to their roots and shared values. If they can do that, he’s confident they will build new connections and a new sense of community.

“For our CLE, I went back to right before integration and

made a timeline family tree of the schools that made up South Creek [middle school] ... I included all the old names and mascots of the other schools. We’ve identified 10 or a dozen that made up this one. I made a banner that had some of those old photos there and had participants sign it.

“No one had asked them about that history and those memories in a long time. A lot of the people who were from here couldn’t even remember the names of these schools.

“I want to keep the spirit of those schools alive here. We’ve lost some of that community feel in our schools now. We hold people at an arms’ length. Rebuilding that is a bit of a challenge.”

Time will tell whether the unified community Hodgkins envisions for his school fully emerges. But so far, the feedback he's receiving is encouraging. Not long ago, one of South Creek's school bus drivers recounted a story to him about how attending a local CLE inspired her to try a new approach to resolving a long-running dispute between a group of students who recently got into a fight on her bus.

The driver took it upon herself to invite all of the students involved, and their respective families, to a meeting. She arranged for the gathering to be held at a local church where the pastor is well known and respected.

"They sat down for over an hour, and after an outpouring of emotions and listening to each other's perspectives, some common ground was reached," Hodgkins says.

Episodes like this inspire him and his colleagues to continue using CLE practices to move their school and their school community forward.

"I think the struggles and challenges we have to deal with here, we have the knowledge to solve them, but we need to bring everyone to the table and have everyone take a role." ■

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Nurturing Intergenerational Partnerships and Learning to Let Youth Lead

“I have found that youth are willing and able to fulfill leadership roles within organizations, schools and community. They are often just waiting for the invitation.”



John Oliver, Ph.D.
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Gracious Space is a core pedagogy in the Community Learning Exchange. It helps support one of the primary pillars of the collective leadership framework, which is building relational trust. Without trust, educator’s efforts to engage community are not likely to succeed. It is possible for episodic success to occur in the absence of trust, but seldom is this type of success sustainable. Once established, Gracious Space provides a foundation upon which the other three stages of collective leadership can unfold:

- Co-constructing purpose and strategic planning
- Acting together
- Deepening, sustaining and establishing collective leadership as way of life.

Professor John Oliver was introduced to the concept of Gracious Space as a doctoral candidate at Michigan State University, where he studied under Dr. Maenette Benham (now the dean of Hawai’i inueakea School of Hawaiian Knowledge at the University of Hawaii). Benham led the national evaluation team for the Kellogg

Foundation's Leadership for Community Change initiative and, a few years into it, invited Oliver to help out.

"Gracious Space is my favorite CLE social technology or practice," Oliver says. "I like it because it suspends the traditional and expected way people gather. It opens the space and invites all participants to feel comfortable to participate and contribute without concern of judgment or ridicule. "

Gracious Space is a term and practice developed by the Center for Ethical Leadership, another partner in the KLCC initiative. Defined as a "spirit and setting where we invite the 'stranger' and embrace learning in public," it was originally developed as a tool for working with conflict. It has since been used for many other purposes including guiding people from a state of conflict to one of transformation. Members of the CLE network use Gracious Space as a foundation upon which to build new collaborations.

Oliver began his doctoral studies after spending eight years as a teacher and assistant principal in Michigan public schools. Those K-12 experiences gave him an opportunity to witness, firsthand, the consequences that result for students and educators when there is neither trust nor connection between schools and the people they serve. His introduction to collective leadership and Gracious Space gave him a fresh perspective on how these relationships might be reengineered.

"I remember thinking, 'This is the type of work I want to do for my dissertation and as a professor,'" he says. "It was refreshing to learn that individuals were working to bridge gaps in communication between community and schools."

Oliver was excited to discover community stakeholders who were

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concerned about schools beyond testing. It also encouraged him to see communities expanding leadership development to include non-traditional leaders.

African-American students often feel that they are not heard. The CLE creates the stage and platform for their voice to be heard and, more importantly, valued.

Though his initial role in the CLE was as part of the evaluation team, his involvement has deepened over time. In recent years, he's helped plan several learning exchanges, including a 2013 CLE in San Marcos that focused on enhancing youth voice and youth-adult partnerships in education.

"I have found that youth are willing and able to fulfill leadership roles within organizations, schools and community. They are often just waiting for the invitation."

Not only are youth energized and concerned, Oliver says they have great ideas, insight and expertise that can lead to meaningful outcomes.

"They consistently contribute to the leadership development of adults by demonstrating that they share similar aspirations, values and concerns."

Oliver has helped the CLE create opportunities for youth to demonstrate the leadership competencies they bring to educational settings. He urges young CLE participants to pursue collaborations with adults not just as followers, but as equal partners and, where appropriate, as lead partners.

Similarly, he prompts educators who attend CLEs to consider new ways of engaging young people, not just to help shape the students' own educational experiences, but those of their classmates as well.

At a 2014 national CLE in Washington, D.C., Oliver helped mentor a group of young African-Americans from the Pittsburgh public schools. These young educators and youth leaders—many of whom had been troubled youth themselves at one time—

welcomed the opportunity to talk with him. They remarked appreciatively about how affirming he and the CLE network were of them and the change they were striving to bring about in Pittsburgh. As in many areas of the country, an alarming percentage of black youth in Pittsburgh fall through the education system, in part, because no one believes in them, listens to them, or expects them to succeed. Strong youth-adult partnerships can transform these environments.

“The CLE helps to magnify the individual voice and develop a collective voice,” Oliver says. “African-American students often feel that they are not heard. The CLE creates the stage and platform for their voices to be heard and, more importantly, valued.”

By positioning youth in partnership with older individuals—both from similar and diverse backgrounds—who share in their passions and concerns, the CLE creates a peer support and peer review process for ideas. Olivier describes it as an incubator for success.

“I try to pass along the idea that any partnership requires time and attention. Youth-adult partnerships are no different. Both youth and adults do well when they remember and acknowledge that even when things are out of sync, it does not mean that they are lacking in development or progressions. It is, instead, part of the process.”

The CLE, he adds, reassures folks that partnerships need not crumble at the first sign of difficulty. “There is no progress without struggle. Anything worth having is worth the struggle to attain it.”

These days, CLE principles and practices, such as Gracious Space, are integral to how Oliver functions as a professor.

“Each semester, at the start of my class, I open with Gracious Space activities. It models for my students one way they can create a collaborative learning environment in their schools.”

“Each semester, at the start of my class, I open with Gracious Space activities. It models for my students one way they can create a collaborative learning environment in their schools. I have also utilized Gracious Space in my work with community based organizations.”

Oliver sought a faculty position at Texas State, in part, because of his connections with members of the CLE national planning team. These days, he and Dr. Miguel Guajardo, a longtime collective leadership practitioner and founding member of the Community Learning Exchange, are acclimating their Texas State colleagues and students to the CLE approach.

“Miguel and I have developed a core group of colleagues that have utilized and continue to utilize CLE pedagogies. These individuals are Ph.Ds. that have completed our program and who’ve participated in CLEs. Some have even utilized CLE as part of their dissertations.”

Oliver adds that many of these Texas State graduates are now working at varying levels in the San Marcos Consolidated Independent School District, where they are training school staffs on CLE pedagogies and hosting CLEs with teachers and parents.

“We have a cohort of teacher leaders preparing for principal certifications that utilize CLE pedagogies as part of the course work,” he says. “They have attended several CLEs and return with insight of how to share and expand what they learned with their colleagues back in their districts.”

“The CLE created a community for me in an environment that usually speaks to/at communities and families but rarely speaks with them.”

Oliver and Guajardo are now observing the germination of CLE seeds they’ve planted among undergraduate and high school students.

Many of the educators they are training are people of color eager to break free of status quo education practices and pedagogies that have done a disservice to so many of their former students and classmates.

Oliver says the CLE aligns well with core values he’s held throughout his career. Looking back, he can only imagine how much more impactful his work might have been had he had access to a CLE type resource for community-school engagement.

“I could see the benefit of utilizing gracious space, [talking] circles and digital storytelling, specifically, to enhance how we, as a school community, invited those outside of the school to better understand who we were and the importance of the school and the approach we took in our work.”

Oliver appreciates that the CLE offers a tested approach and a reliable set of tools to help educators engage community. Overall, he says the CLE has made a tremendous contribution to his career development.

“It created a community for me in an environment that normally speaks to/at schools, communities, and families but rarely speaks *with* them. This work has created a network of scholars, educators, leaders—traditional and non-traditional—who understand and support each other and the work in which they are interested. It has created a network of mentors that are capable and actively engaged with CLE participants at all levels—student, teacher, professors, nonprofits, business, civic, etc.

“Within the CLE, there are specific individuals that I know I can reach out to who would be willing to assist me or make introductions to individuals who could assist. It is really refreshing to know that is the case.” ■

Listening Respectfully to Rebuild Community Trust

“There is a huge disconnect between the schools and the parents. As educators, we’ve got to be willing to go the extra mile to bridge the gap.”

Karyn Pleasant
Fellow, Northeast Leadership
Academy and
Administrative Intern, Halifax
County Public Schools
North Carolina



Karyn Pleasant moved to Northeast North Carolina from Brooklyn, N.Y., in 2010 to attend graduate school at North Carolina State University. The former science teacher completed the program in 2014, earning a master’s degree in school administration. At the time of this interview, she was still in school and worked as an administrative intern at Southeast Halifax High School in Halifax County, NC. Pleasant is part of NC State’s Northeast Leadership Academy (NELA). She also holds a second master’s in adolescent education.

Southeast Halifax High is one of two high schools in Halifax County, N.C. The Title I school serves roughly 400 students in grades 9-12, the majority of whom are African American (97 percent), and more than two-thirds of the students (68 percent) receive free or reduced-price lunch.

Many educators working in Halifax County came there either from another part of the state or—like Pleasant—from elsewhere in the country, often through Teach for America. Most TFA educators are white. In a part of the country where racial tension is often just beneath the surface, these teachers’ “otherness” sometimes puts them at a disadvantage when it comes to connecting with the predominantly black students and families they serve.

Family member participation in Southeast’s Parent Teacher Association is low. Pleasant recounted the story of a “well-attended” PTA meeting that attracted only eight parents. Even worse, a welcome breakfast the school hosted for parents of incoming freshman drew not a single parent or family member.

“There is a huge disconnect between the schools and the parents,” Pleasant says. “As educators, we’ve got to be willing to go the extra mile to bridge the gap.”

As someone, who hopes to get a principal assignment in the near future, she believes the schools in her district need to expend more effort reaching out to residents who may not immediately see that they have a stake in helping to improve the schools. “Getting different people involved in the conversation is going to be crucial to the success the continuation of our school.”

Achieving this task, however, will be difficult. In Halifax County, tension and mistrust exist at many levels. Voters have

Northeast Leadership Academy

North Carolina State University’s Northeast Leadership Academy is an innovative school leader preparation model designed to develop 21st Century school leaders for rural, high-need schools in the northeastern part of the state. NELA aims to rigorously recruit, select, prepare and support more than 60 future school leaders over the next four years, creating a critical mass of school turnaround specialists.



Tools for Building Relationships in and Out of Schools

Talking Circles and Gracious Space are foundational practices within the CLE. They require non-hierarchical conversations and help leaders create settings where everyone's contributions—regardless of social or positional status—are valued. Gracious Space and talking circles also urge participants to focus on developing solutions.

repeatedly rejected ballot measures aimed at putting more money into the schools, partly because the schools have such a poor track record, and partly because most of the students enrolled in the public schools are black and low-income. The population in Halifax County is 41 percent white but many of the white residents either no longer have children of school age or have enrolled their children in charter schools. “The community doesn’t trust the [traditional public] schools,” Pleasant says.

Relationships between the school leaders, the superintendent, the school board and the state department of instruction also are strained. A look at the district’s past performance helps explain.

Not long ago, Southeast Halifax High School ranked among the worst in the state. In May 2009, a Superior Court judge approved a consent order between the Halifax County Board of Education, the N.C. Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) and the State Board of Education to implement an intervention plan to raise academic achievement.

While families were eager for student outcomes to improve, many local officials resented the state’s intervention. The predominantly black school board—which includes several long-serving members with deep ties to the community, but few if any of their own children enrolled in the school system—was no exception. School principals, meanwhile, became frustrated as many of their decision-making powers, including the hiring teachers, were taken over by outsiders.

By 2012, the district’s high school graduation rate showed improvement, but relationships between the stakeholders remained deeply strained.

Pleasant was introduced to the CLE during her graduate work at North Carolina State University. At the time NC State’s principal preparation program was led by Dr. Matthew

Militello, a long-standing member of the CLE’s national planning team (he has since moved to East Carolina University). Militello embeds many of the CLE practices and pedagogies into his curriculum. Pleasant was impressed by how effectively the learning exchanges create opportunities for educators to learn from the community.

“Parents wanted to be heard and have their concerns addressed,” she says adding that school officials sometimes use their titles and authority to monopolize conversations about important school issues. Listening, particularly to family members and students, is a skill she believes the CLE can help educators in her district develop.

Exposure to the CLE has prompted Pleasant and her NELA colleagues in the Halifax School District to pursue opportunities to meet with family members outside of the typical PTA and school board meeting settings.

“We’ve talked about getting together with the ones who are attending athletic events and maybe even holding small events at people’s houses. We need to have conversations with people who don’t normally come to PTA meetings.”

During one such gathering, students and families were

invited to sit in a “talking circle” (see [Tools for Building Relationships in and out of Schools](#)) and discuss what they wanted the schools to look like.

“The conversation was so rich,” Pleasant says. “The information this is allowing us to collect will allow our superintendent to have access to information she doesn’t have. I am not sure she realizes how miserable children are. And how angry parents are. Parents don’t want to be talked *at* any more. They’ve stopped talking to the central office. [The CLE] allows her to hear.”

“The information [these CLEs are] allowing us to collect will allow our superintendent to have access to information she doesn’t have. I am not sure she realizes how miserable children are, and how angry parents are.”

Local storytelling is another pillar of Community Learning Exchanges. At a recent national CLE held in Northeast North Carolina, Pleasant and her NELA colleagues

“ ... If each of us, as leaders, could create environments in our schools where our families and communities have a stronger voice, everyone would be better off.”

witnessed, firsthand, the benefits of sharing local stories in an environment where everyone is encouraged to listen attentively.

One young teacher, a transplant who is white and works at a local high school where most of her students are black, experienced an epiphany while leading a CLE tour

through her town’s center. A majority of the tour participants were from out of state and several were either African American or Latino. On the way to the town library, the teacher recounted the story of how a large statue of a Confederate soldier came to reside in front of the library entrance. The visitors were deeply disturbed by the story and the statue. Their strong reactions prompted the teacher to reflect later on how her African-American students and colleagues must feel about the statue, something she’d never considered before the CLE. She described the experience as transformative, stating publicly that she would not be able to teach the same way when she returned to the classroom.

The exchange of local narratives in a safe environment helps educators, even those who have lived in a community their whole lives, gain deeper connection to and understanding of the communities in which they teach. Yet conversations such as these aren’t always possible during a normal school day. CLEs give educators an opportunity to be both teachers and learners. It also inspires them to invite community stakeholders to become partners in the education process.

“Ideally, if each of us, as leaders, could create environments in our schools where our families and communities have a stronger voice, everyone would be better off,” Pleasant says. ■

Merging the Wisdom of Community and Educators to Create Better Schools



“The CLE is a training methodology for aligning theory and practice with community.”

Lee Francis IV, Ph.D.
Fellow
NACA-Inspired Schools
Network
Laguna Pueblo, New Mexico

New Mexico is home to the oldest continuously inhabited settlement in North America. Many of the earliest residents lived in pueblo villages, often atop high desert mesas, where they amassed expertise in numerous disciplines including architecture; engineering and construction; hunting and agriculture; military defense; spirituality, diplomacy; and meteorology among others. The region’s performing and visual arts achievements continue to be admired around the globe. This is especially true in the field of pottery. Families have passed down traditional ways of mining and working with clay for generations, producing spectacular works of art.

This proud legacy of intellectual, engineering, and artistic achievement stands in stark contrast to the way contemporary school data depict New Mexico's students of Native American descent.

Lee Francis IV, Ph.D., grew up in Laguna Pueblo, where he has long family roots. His career in education has included stints as a K-12 teacher, a writer/storyteller/poet, a new media innovator, and a leader in a variety of nonprofit organizations.

Francis—whose father was an internationally acclaimed poet and educator—has observed firsthand how poorly served Native American students are by traditional public schools. Which is one reason he is developing a new charter school with a team of educators and community members who share his belief that Native American students achieve best in environments that validate and embrace their culture, encourage them to set high expectations for themselves, provide the educational supports they need to fulfill those goals, and include families and community in the education process.

Sadly, too many students attend schools where this vision is not in practice. All across New Mexico, school districts that enroll high numbers of Native American students are among the state's lowest performing.

Francis comes from Cibola County, N.M., home of the Laguna and Acoma pueblos, which are situated just a few dozen miles west of Albuquerque. The pueblos, are Keresan Tribal communities that have inhabited the region for at least five centuries. In recent years, the area has become as a bright light of academic hope for Native Americans in New Mexico, as innovative educators like Francis are pursuing strategies that are yielding improvement in student outcomes.

K-8 education in Laguna Pueblo is administered by the Laguna Department of Education, which serves 550 students. Laguna-Acoma High School, which serves students in grades 9-12, is managed in cooperation with Cibola County and Acoma Pueblo. The Laguna Department of Education was among the first grantees of the Kellogg Foundation's Leadership for Community Change (KLCC) initiative and subsequently became one of the first communities to participate in the Community Learning Exchange.

Francis was initially introduced to members of the CLE national planning team through KLCC in 2003. At the time, he worked with the Laguna Department of Education. He credits his involvement with the CLE and the relationships he's cultivated through the network over the years with helping to persuade him to pursue a terminal degree in education leadership.

“It’s hard to extricate my doctoral experience from the CLE because the two complemented each other.”

“I was trying to figure out what to do with my life,” Francis recalls. “I had kind of reached my limit at the Laguna Education Foundation. I couldn’t really go anywhere with my degree [in community education] because it wasn’t a teaching degree.”

Francis considered pursuing another nonprofit job, but recoiled at the idea of working under administrators who, though highly credentialed, were out of touch with the people they were supposed to serve. Conversations with a few of his CLE colleagues persuaded him to seek a doctoral program in education leadership that aligned with his commitment to community engagement.

He found such a program at Texas State University, where he was mentored by Dr. Miguel Guajardo, a co-founder of the Community Learning Exchange. One of Francis’ first assignments as a doctoral candidate was helping to plan a CLE.

“It was one of the best work experiences, with a group, I’ve ever had,” he recalls. “In many ways, I got three years of CLE training because I worked with Miguel. It’s kind of hard to extricate my doctoral experience from the CLE because the two complemented each other.”

Years earlier, Francis had co-planned one of the CLE’s first national learning exchanges back in New Mexico. He’d also attended several learning exchanges around the country. While those experiences had been positive, he says working closely with his Texas State colleagues and the national CLE team to plan the San Marcos learning exchange solidified his conviction that the CLE model of collective leadership was perfect for the sort of educational transformation he hoped to pursue in New Mexico.

“A lot of the work of the CLE—and what I find to be very dynamic—is the relationship building,” he says, noting that his Texas State-CLE experiences gave him the opportunity to witness up close the importance of relationship building when attempting to initiate community change.

CLEs where the leadership teams did not have strong community relationships were noticeably different from those that did. Tension and conflict might occur in either, but in settings where the teams had developed strong relationships, that tension did not block their ability to work through conflict and cooperatively push toward a shared goal. Strong relationships enhanced the likelihood that the changes begun at the CLE would be more resilient.

Working with Guajardo at Texas State also gave Francis the opportunity to see CLE methodology applied in a traditional university setting. For him, this was, perhaps the most powerful lesson of all.

“The way Miguel teaches is *in community*,” Francis says. “It includes all of the principals that we have in the CLE and it aligns with a particular style of indigenous methodology around a particular set of domains of knowledge.”

He explains that these domains: traditional teachings, empirical observation, and revelation—as defined by aboriginal scholar Marlene Brant Castellano—are the central knowledge domains of indigenous people.¹⁸

“My work is: How do I foster these domains? And I think it comes from the CLE methodology.”

“How do we get teachers, who are often trained in Western institutions, to understand that there’s a different way of doing things?”

¹⁸ Marlene Brant Castellano, “Updating Aboriginal Traditions of Knowledge,” in *Indigenous Knowledges in Global Contexts: Multiple Readings of Our World*, edited by George Dei, Budd Hall and Dorothy G. Rosenberg (Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press, 2000) 23-24.

The “traditional,” he continues, is about the stories of the people. The “empirical” is about the observational: being able to make sense of the environment through observation. And the “revealed” is the intuitive feeling, which is sometimes referred to as prophecy knowledge or Dreamtime.

“All of those are what we cultivate in the CLE. We cultivate a sense of emotion and intuition. And how do we draw those out? Through poetry, through spoken word, through art. Through experience, through eating meals together, taking a walk somewhere These [pedagogies and practices] run through all of the CLEs.”

Few of these pedagogies are regularly used to excite children about learning in the K-12 classrooms of Francis’ home state. But he envisions schools where this type of teaching and learning become the norm.

“These are all really great ways of engaging students and of conducting professional development,” Francis says. “How do we get teachers, who are often trained in Western institutions, to understand that there’s a different way of doing things?”

He and the superintendent of the Zuni Public School District will soon find out. They plan to collaborate on a professional development opportunity for teachers in that district. The superintendent wants his teachers to be able to engage in dialogue and discourse in ways that better reflect the communities they serve.

“The CLE is a training methodology for aligning theory and practice with community,” Francis says.

Of course, he isn’t just trying to remake existing schools. He and his charter school development colleagues in Laguna are reimagining the curriculum and education delivery from the ground up. And they’re going to great lengths to include community in the design process.

“The work we’re doing in Laguna is trying to bring the community in and for me it is about the authenticity of the process. ...” Francis says though he’s working with a great team of educators, he knows it’s not enough for them to design the new school in isolation from community input.

“We’ve established a framework, but the most important part is to sit down with the community and have a process that says ‘Okay, so what do you all want to see? How can we bring all of this together?’

“We want to bring the community together and ask them, ‘What should our students and our graduates look like?’ And we need to bring the kids in and ask them, ‘What do you want to learn?’”

Another CLE core practice Francis now incorporates into his work is the importance of evaluating and modifying programs as situations change. Of course, as curriculum and education delivery systems are transformed, so must the metrics by which these systems are assessed. Francis sees a role for the community in this process as well.

“If the metrics are not in rhythm with the community or what students are actually learning in school, then you’re not getting the right data or the right analysis of what actually is taking place.”

Francis’ educational vision is extremely ambitious, but he’s not fazed.

“The CLE has afforded me the ability to do this and the confidence that there are people who have my back as well as the theory and the practice. I’ve experienced this, I already know it works!” ■

“The CLE has afforded me the ability to do this and the confidence that there are people who have my back as well as the theory and the practice. I’ve experienced this, I already know it works!”

Inclusion Begins with Dialogue across Boundaries, Pre-K—College

“Having grown up in a school environment that was not inclusive, I soon came to recognize and acknowledge that the bilingual students whom I taught were also experiencing similar exclusionary circumstances I knew there had to be another way ...”

Monica Valadez, Ph.D.,
Assistant Principal
De Zavala Elementary
San Marcos, Texas



De Zavala Elementary is one of six primary schools in the San Marcos Consolidated Independent School District, a central Texas school system located about 40 miles southwest of Austin. Monica Valadez, Ph.D., is the school’s assistant principal. She came to De Zavala in 2013, shortly after earning her doctorate in school improvement at Texas State University-San Marcos.

Valadez was introduced to the CLE back in 2009 by one of her graduate professors, Dr. Miguel Guajardo, a co-founder of the Community Learning Exchange. She has been an active member of the CLE network ever since and looking back, says it’s difficult to differentiate her graduate studies experience from her CLE experiences.

“CLE pedagogies were utilized to engage us in the learning space. Dr. Guajardo opened and closed class with circle; the community became our classroom.”

Valadez was a teacher before coming to Texas State. She spent 10 years as a bilingual educator in the Austin Independent School District. Though she enjoyed teaching and had developed strong relationships with her students and their families, after a while, she questioned whether she was becoming just another part of maintaining the status quo. Her teaching experiences, combined with her personal encounters attending public schools in Texas as a youngster, convinced her that the status quo wasn't enough.

“Growing up, we were excluded a lot,” she says reflecting on her childhood in Moulton, Texas. Her parents had immigrated to the United States from Mexico and, initially, had limited English proficiency. The family lived in a largely white community with English immersion as the only option within the public school. Valadez remembers what it was like to be a student who didn't exactly fit in with the local culture. Even as a youngster, she felt something was amiss.

“We were very sheltered back in Moulton. My mother felt the need to protect and defend us. Indeed, there were often times where it was warranted.”

Fortunately, her close-knit family held education in high esteem. Her parents encouraged their children to do well in school, but she recalls her mother also urging them to recognize that there were opportunities to learn everywhere, not just at school. This understanding helped Valadez develop a more profound awareness.

“Having grown up in a school environment that was not inclusive, I soon came to recognize and acknowledge that the bilingual students whom I taught were also experiencing similar exclusionary circumstances within the education system. I knew there had to be another way because the way we were going about it, in my experience, wasn't working.”

Valadez could certainly have pursued a position within higher education after completing her doctorate, and she still might at some point in the future. But for now, she's eager to apply what she's learned at Texas State and the CLE in a K-12 setting where there is a receptivity to the type of systemic transformation she believes is needed.

As in many elementary schools across the country, the role of assistant principal at De Zavala is largely managerial. Valadez could easily excel solely in this area and be considered an accomplished administrator. But she has other plans.

“The leadership component isn’t necessarily embedded in the position,” she says. “So now my challenge is: How do I identify all of the leadership possibilities within that position and then explore them?”

The way Valadez facilitates teacher conferences offers a glimpse of how she’s applying her collective leadership training in a job that doesn’t ordinarily require it. Small, deliberate gestures, she explains, when informed by CLE pedagogy, can make a world of difference when you begin to explore how change happens gradually within an institution.

“Making sure coffee is prepared and that a snack is provided is important. It is an invitation to the teacher to come and collaborate, acknowledging that what the teacher contributes to the growth of the student is critical.”

Of course, Valadez never loses sight of her managerial responsibilities, but she uses her position to pose new questions, which prompt her colleagues to explore new solutions.

“With Responsive Intervention [for instance], the quality of the conversations that are had with and among the interventionists is much deeper,” she says.

De Zavala is a Title I school serving nearly 500 students, roughly 20 percent of whom come from homes where English is not the primary language.

San Marcos Consolidated Independent School District

San Marcos CISD serves more than 7,500 students and employs roughly 1,000 staff, about half of whom are teachers. In addition to its six elementary schools, the district includes two middle schools, a high school, a Pre-K program, an alternative school, and a school for returning students seeking to complete their high school diploma.

The majority of the district’s students are Hispanic and roughly 1 in 10 students are English Language Learners. Two thirds of the district’s teachers are white and another third is Hispanic.

Valadez has been told that one of the reasons she was selected for the assistant principal position is because the school was looking for someone to help them build community, both among the staff and with the families surrounding the school. She and her colleagues have barely scratched the surface, in terms of remaking the school-community relationships. But they've invested quite a bit of energy in transforming relationships within the school. Valadez' CLE training has taught her that a strong internal team that knows how to collaborate and has an understanding of the community it serves is better prepared to engage and collaborate with local families.

"There is still much work to do. We say we need parental engagement, but what would we do if families all of a sudden showed up? We haven't had those conversations yet, but have recently scheduled parent dialogues. We need their insight to be able to move the work forward."

Moreover, Valadez has had conversations with her colleagues about what collective leadership looks like and what it requires.

"I speak a lot about the CLE, what it means and how I'm involved," she says. "I've been to two CLEs since I came here, and this year the district sponsored teachers to attend as well. It opens up the possibilities of discussing professional development beyond what is typically seen as professional development within the public school system."

"Teachers are beginning to explore new ways of doing things and that's a powerful thing."

With a collective vision, the staff at De Zavala has begun moving away from the traditional model of instructional planning, where individual faculty are expected to plan and instruct their classes in isolation.

"Just recently the Title unit leader proposed going to more of a

collaborative planning model, where we're inviting all grade-level teams to come together as a collective," Valadez says. "Teachers are beginning to explore new ways of doing things and that's a powerful thing."

During these planning sessions, the school provides many of the resources teachers might need. This includes a diversity of support staff, e.g., special area teachers, instructional coaches, special education experts, and others.

“And of course the principal is there and I’m there,” Valadez says. “We help facilitate collaborative conversations the teams have and strive to deepen the discourse with regards to instructional planning, and we hold ourselves accountable.”

Beyond the changes emerging on the De Zavala campus, Valadez sees ripples of the CLE turning up in other parts of her district as well. The growing relationship between the university and the school district has already begun to have a positive impact. A cohort of district teachers is

currently enrolled in the master’s of educational leadership program at Texas State, and a second cohort is slated to begin courses this summer.

“Those types of ties inspire others,” Valadez says, noting that a math professor at the university has begun meeting her students at De Zavala’s library and another professor is hosting a literacy project at the school for local mothers of pre-school-age children. The lines between the community, the K-12 schools and the university are beginning to blur, and education is the glue binding them all together.

Valadez is excited about the potential impact these activities are having in her district and looks forward to a day when the kind of discourse and collaboration that is developing on her campus occurs at every school.

“It shouldn’t be a matter of luck that people find themselves in these types of settings. I would like to get to the point where we are all having more profound conversations about learning; a time when we have the kind of impact that you can taste and see in the classrooms and in the hallways of our campuses, just a different quality of engagement.”

“We have to have diversity of thinking in our schools. If we always have the same thoughts, we will never discover new approaches.”

“We have to have diversity of thinking in our schools. If we always have the same thoughts, we will never discover new approaches. We need to be asking different questions, better questions. The more we can foster this understanding, the more we will be able to facilitate change and imagine something new.” ■

Urging Education Leaders to Teach and Learn in Partnership with Communities



“We’re true to the philosophy of community learning. So I can plan my agenda, I can plan my lessons, but to a great extent, what [my students] bring is going to shape the learning experience.”

Sophie Maxis, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor, Leadership, School Counseling and Sports Management
University of North Florida,
Jacksonville, Florida

Today’s school counselors wear many hats. In addition to helping students get the most out of their K-12 education and preparing them for life after high school, counselors serve as part of the bridge connecting families and communities to our schools. Ideally, school counselors provide a vital leadership role, partnering with principals to: shape school culture; develop, deliver and interpret student and school assessment data; co-design school activities and programs that involve families and the community; and determine the types of professional development the teachers, staff and families need to provide an optimal educational experience for students.

Preparing Tomorrow's School Counselors

The University of North Florida's department of Leadership, School Counseling and Sports Management prepares graduate students to pursue a variety of career paths in the field of education. In addition to offering six master's degree programs, it also offers three separate professional certification programs and a doctoral degree in educational leadership.

Sophie Maxis, Ph.D., came to the University of North Florida in 2011 having completed her doctorate at the University of Florida and having previously spent several years working as a secondary school mathematics teacher and a guidance counselor. Her doctoral research examined school counselor's beliefs about the efficacy of their practice at urban, underperforming high schools in relation to the completion rate of African-American male students at the high schools where these counselors worked.

In her current role as assistant professor of Leadership, School Counseling and Sports Management at UNF, her primary focus is on training school counselors.

"Many of my students are teachers who are transitioning," Maxis says. Some are early childhood educators who've come to UNF looking to learn new ways to establish relationships with people in the communities their schools serve, she explains.

Maxis attended her first CLE in 2011 at the invitation of her faculty colleague Dr. Chris Janson, who is part of the CLE national evaluation team.

Though several of the community-school engagement practices used within the CLE were not unfamiliar to Maxis, seeing those practices applied in a higher education setting—as Janson does with his students—was new. So she decided to try it.

"That's where I've seen the most transformation within my own personal growth as an educator," Maxis says. "And also in my students. A lot of them haven't been teachers themselves, but they've been taught with a traditional paradigm."

The CLE approach to teaching and learning requires most students to take more responsibility for learning than they're used to.

“We tell them ‘We’re true to the philosophy of community learning. So I can plan my agenda, I can plan my lessons, but to a great extent, what you bring is going to shape the learning experience.’ Initially, there’s some uncertainty with that because the traditional structure is not there, but at the end of the experience they say, ‘Wow! Now I feel the difference.’”

That revelation becomes even starker, she says, once students move on to other courses where more traditional styles of teaching are practiced. Maxis likens their reactions to those of people who attend their first CLE.

“It’s really hard to explain what a CLE is. You can talk about elements of it, but until you’ve gone through it and you see the type of engagement we have and how the expectation is to be present, it’s hard to understand. It’s the same with our students. Once they’ve had the experience they say, ‘Ok, I see there’s a respect for my understanding, my wisdom that I bring into the process.’ You don’t have that in a traditional classroom setting in higher ed.”

Maxis and Janson have invited many of their students to participate in national CLEs. They’ve also coordinated several CLEs locally. Once their students graduate, Maxis is confident they’re ready to take what they’ve learned about place-based, collective leadership back into the schools, which is exactly what she says is needed, given the changing expectations being placed on today’s school counselors.

“Nationally, there’s this new emphasis on school counsels supporting college and career readiness. As our students go out, they need to establish what their identity and their role is going to be in the schools. They can’t just be passive educators,” she

“You can talk about elements of a CLE but until you’ve gone through it and you see the type of engagement we have and how the expectation is to be present, it’s hard to understand.”

Today, I'm using community members and community-driven resources to help shape and evolve my work as a professor. I was never taught how to do that in my graduate program. That's come from the CLE.

says. "They need to be prepared to take a leadership role, assert more initiative and start building better relationships with the school community and administrators in order to become part of the school's mission."

Maxis views the CLE as the perfect companion to what she teaches at

the university because it is a real-world incubator where she and her students can practice, learn from and form partnerships with other collective leadership practitioners, many of whom are neither students nor educators.

"By hosting local CLEs, we've discovered people who we didn't even know were here. Regular folk who are doing this work every day—work that is meaningful and that's affecting the community. ... These are people that we can actually rely on as a source of community wisdom, we don't have to go outside of Jacksonville. It's just a matter of building relationships with them and encouraging them to come in and be a part of a bigger movement."

As an example, she recounts the story of a couple of the young African-American men who attended a recent national CLE hosted in Jacksonville. The two have since sought to partner with the university on some ideas they have for addressing local problems. That type of initiative and leadership coming from young people, one of whom isn't even enrolled at the university, is unique in Maxis' experience. Encounters such as these deepen her appreciation for the CLE and for the community in Jacksonville.

"I've been here for the last few years thinking there was not much going on to address the community's problems because I didn't know these powerhouses were sitting there doing their work. No one is really tapping their assets. They don't get a lot of media attention, but they're doing their work faithfully. That actually humbled me."

It's humbling, she adds, because it makes what she and her university colleagues are doing pale in comparison. Maxis credits her involvement in the CLE with inspiring her to make connections in her local community.

"I came to Jacksonville by myself. I didn't have my folks here, I didn't know the community. I'm naturally introverted, so the CLE has encouraged me to reach out and actually build my community. It's also reminded me how important and necessary it is to be in community and if we don't have it, we have to make an effort to build it around ourselves."

These days, Maxis says she can't imagine going back to teaching the way she did before coming to UNF and becoming steeped in the CLE approach to school-community relations.

"When I look back on some of my readings and some of my work before the CLE, I see that I was actually writing about this type of community engagement and I was talking about it, but I didn't know there was a place or language for it. ... Today, I'm using community members and community-driven resources to help shape and evolve my work as a professor. I was never taught how to do that in my graduate program. That's come from the CLE. It's impacted my teaching in a very profound way."

It's too soon to tell, empirically, whether the work Drs. Maxis and Janson are doing at UNF is significantly improving outcomes of the students and schools being served by their graduates. But she has observed and experience firsthand the benefits that

can accrue from strong connections between communities, families and schools.

She's seen and heard stories of high school students that have moved from being totally disinterested in furthering their studies after graduation to becoming serious college students. She's seen the benefit of using community leaders in her work. And she's found a national community of practitioners that affirms and validates core competencies that she's held all along, but didn't always feel there was a place for in her higher ed career.

"In some ways, this type of work takes me back to my roots I can't go back and teach any other way."

"I'm Haitian-American and we tend to be very much more community-centric anyway," she says. "In some ways, this type of work takes me back to my roots I can't go back and teach any other way." ■

CONCLUSION

America's changing demographics offer fresh opportunities to engage families and communities in the revitalization of our schools. Yet, many policymakers and schools serving our most vulnerable students and families are attempting to reimagine education in isolation from community and using stale approaches that have outlived their usefulness. Even school leaders who expend the effort to engage families and local leaders sometimes misread the tepid response to their invitations as a lack of interest rather than question the efficacy of their approach.

Cultivating the types of relationships needed to form effective school-community relationships isn't easy, but the CLE's pedagogies and practices can facilitate this process. By encouraging community leaders and educators to uncover their collective capacity to problem solve and innovate, the CLE puts them in a better position to co-create conditions that support student learning.

The CLE approach to community change is especially compatible with education settings, where people already value teaching and learning. Once people in these settings build relational trust and feel their input is welcomed and appreciated, they become more receptive to change, more resilient to episodic disputes, and more creative in the face of funding or other challenges.

The stories in this case study illustrate how the CLE approach supports school-community relations. We hope they will inspire readers to become fellow practitioners. Of course, the best way to understand the CLE is to experience it firsthand. For more information about upcoming learning exchanges and to learn more about our network, visit us at www.communitylearningexchange.org.

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