



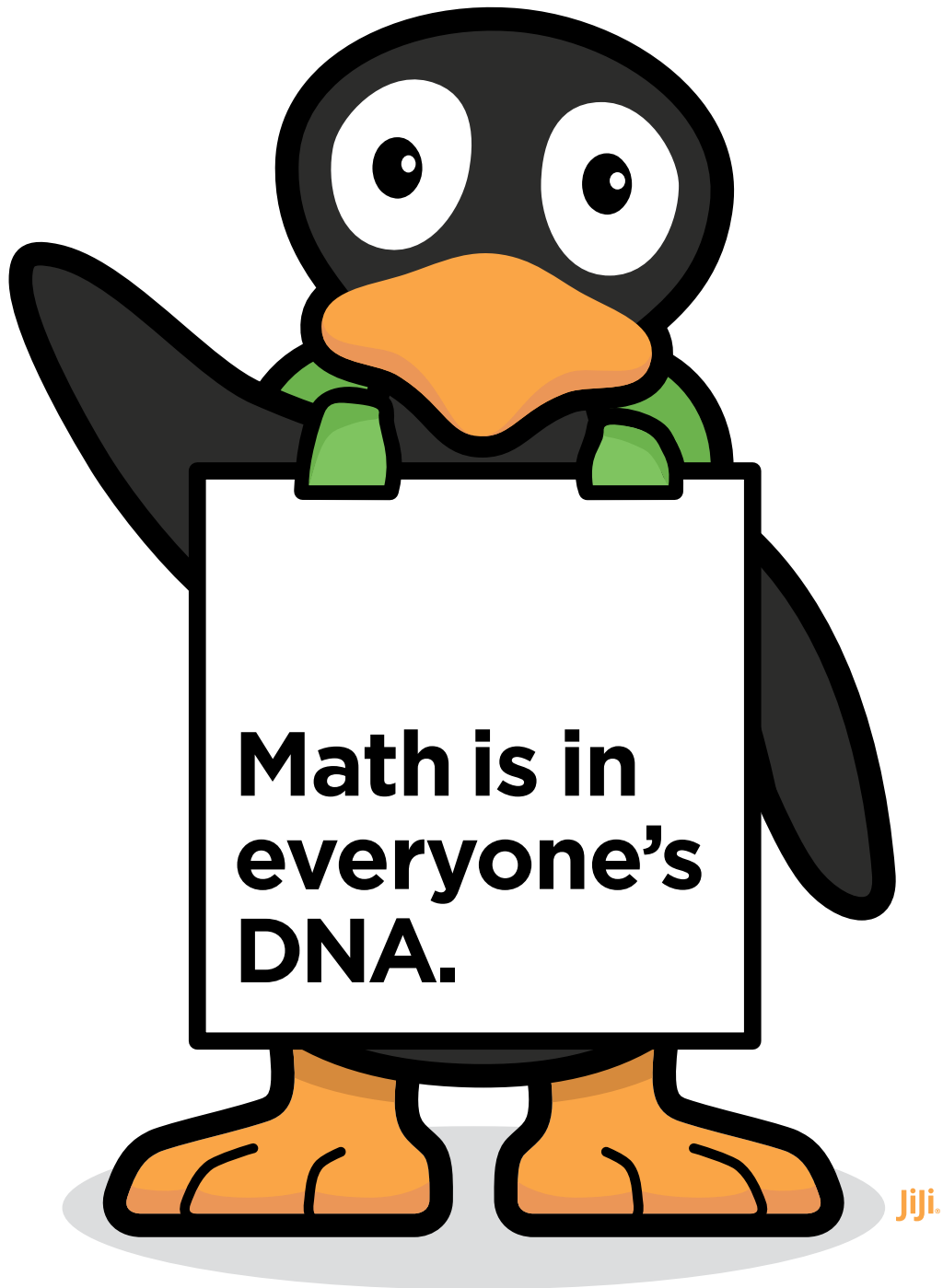
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March/April 2024

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Publisher Tim Hart

EDITORIAL

Executive Editor Lori Capullo

Senior Writer Matt Zalaznick

Education Staff Writers

Alcino Donadel, Micah Ward

ART

Art Direction Xavier Marañón

ADVERTISING, EVENTS AND CUSTOM MEDIA

Vice President, Education Media and District Administration Leadership Institute

Amy Dujon, amy.dujon@etcnetwork.com
(561)389-1100

Sales Manager (East), Rachel Davis

rachel.davis@etcnetwork.com
(678) 521-7584

Sales Manager (West), Paul Milnamow

paul.milnamow@etcnetwork.com
(847) 648-0416

Content Marketing Editor

Kurt Eisele-Dyrlí

CIRCULATION AND OPERATIONS

Vice President,

Marketing/Audience Development

Rennette Fortune

REPRINTS/PERMISSIONS

For more information,
districtadministration.com/contact-us

SUBSCRIPTIONS

Send email address changes to:
Rennette Fortune
rennette.fortune@etcnetwork.com

HOW TO REACH US

222 Lakeview Avenue, Suite 800
West Palm Beach, FL 33410
Website: DistrictAdministration.com

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FIRST TAKE



Living in interesting times

All the old clichés about time flying by so quickly—well, they’re clichés for a reason: because they’re true. The idea that we are a quarter of the way into 2024 may be difficult to process, but here we are. Another class is closer to moving forward, whether it be kindergartners excitedly graduating to first grade or another group of seniors being launched into the world to discover the glories of adulthood.

District leaders—counselors, principals, superintendents—not only have a profound impact on the growth of students while they’re in school but the effect lingers once they’re out. While students are in school, leaders are responsible for creating a positive learning environment that fosters growth, creativity and critical thinking. You set the tone for the school culture, establish expectations, and provide support and guidance (to both students and teachers). Almost as critically as the environment these students grow up in, the environment in which these kids learn every day helps set them up for success in the future.

Sometimes this influence lingers for a little while, but often it lingers for years—and even decades.

Through mentoring, internships, teaching programs and other methods of staying connected to graduates, school leaders can continue to provide ongoing support, even after the final bell rings. By staying connected with graduates, school leaders can continue to influence their lives and offer valuable resources that help them achieve their goals.

All this is to say, the lasting impact of principals, superintendents and other school leaders on students cannot be understated. Know that we recognize that. We love bringing your success stories, your strategies, your problems and your issues to the forefront and addressing them every day. We also not only welcome but truly want to hear your feedback and input on all of those things. Our team will continue to meet with you—on calls, at DALI summits, at your schools, and wherever else possible—to learn firsthand what you need and want to hear from DA. And we’ll continue to strive to deliver that.

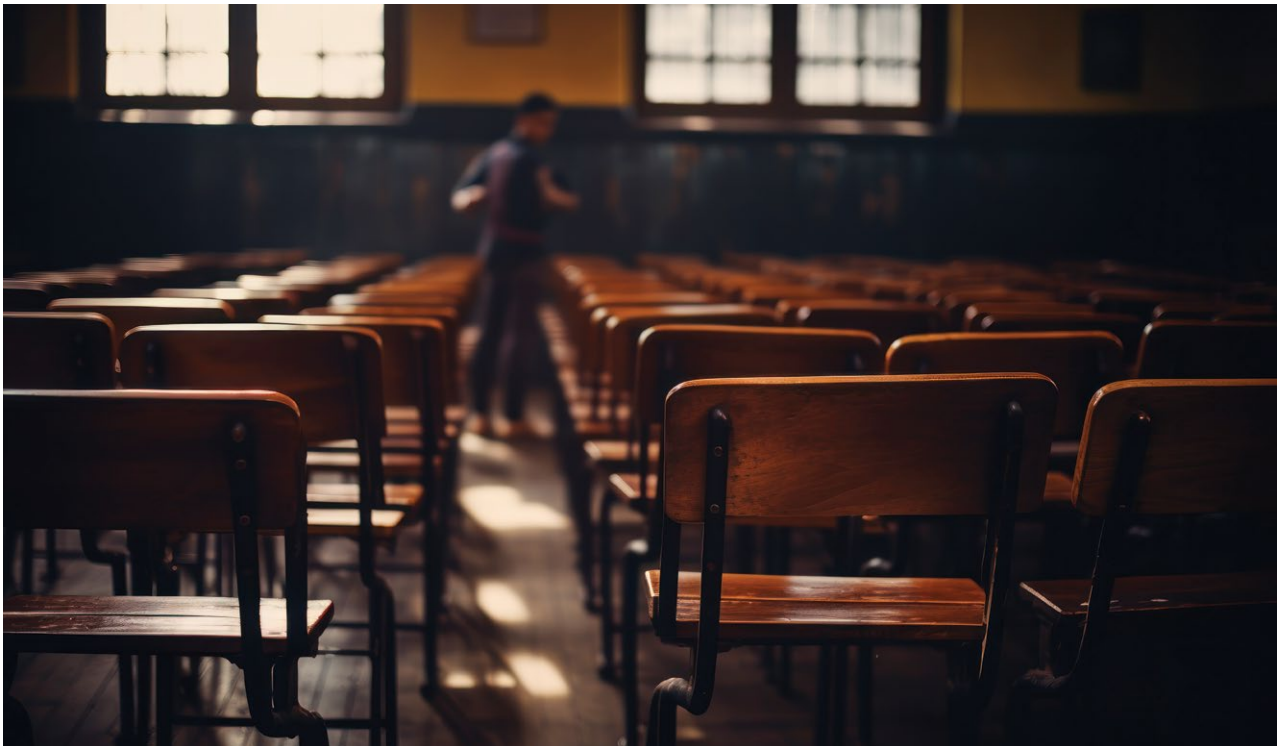
“When I started, I wanted to reform teaching and learning, to help make it a more engaging, relevant and just enterprise. And today, I feel like we’re fighting for the survival of public education.”

—SUPERINTENDENT ROGER FREEMAN,
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Lori Capullo
EXECUTIVE EDITOR

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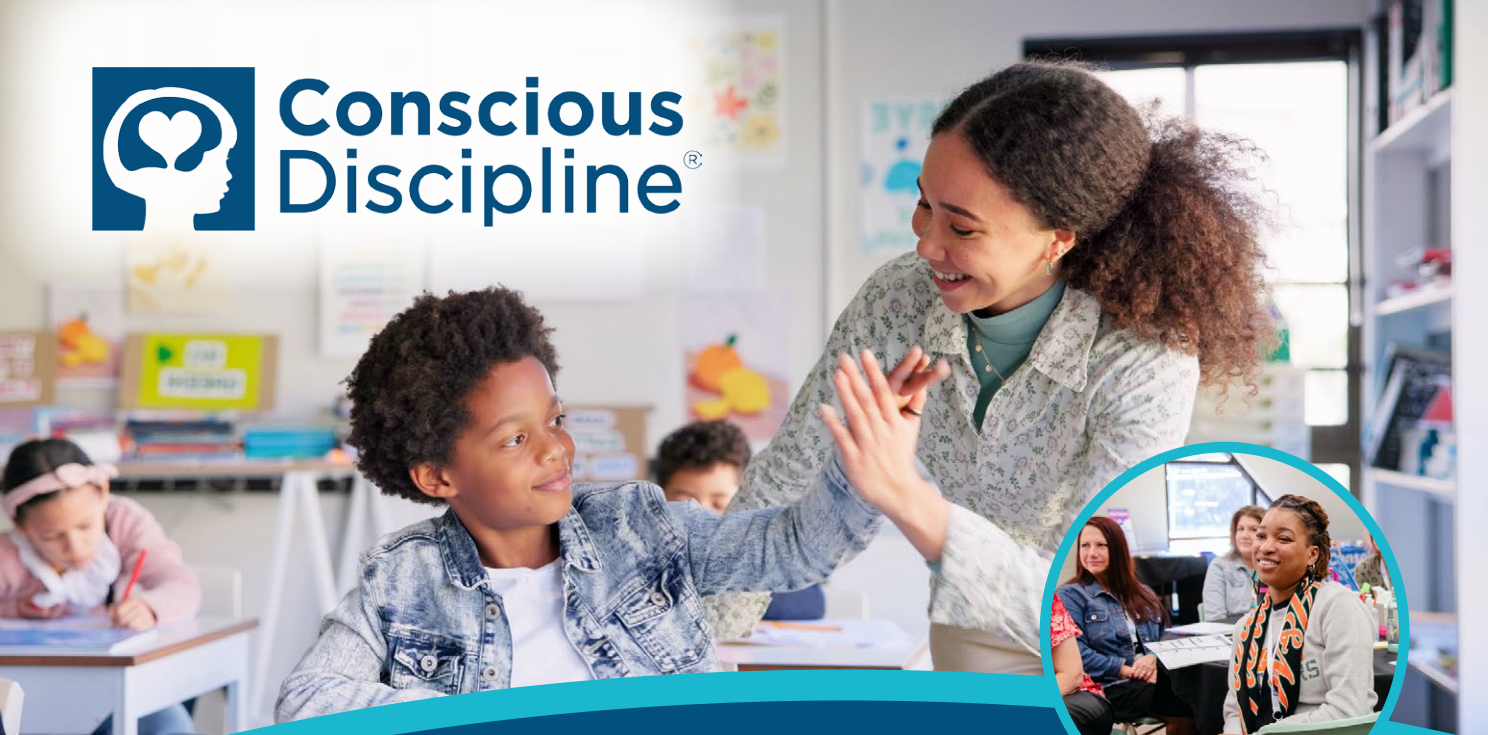
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The most effective way to improve teacher and administrator retention is too often overlooked

Q&A with **Jill Molli**, Director of Development, Conscious Discipline

In your work with districts across the country, what has surprised you about the issue of teacher retention?

Teacher retention has been a serious issue for years, but what's surprising is that since the pandemic, it's not just the teachers. School and district administrators are retiring and resigning at an even higher rate than teachers.

Administrators and teachers share many of the same challenges that drive them to leave the profession— feeling overwhelmed and exhausted, and struggling to find solutions to so many significant challenges. Helping adults establish healthy practices like self-regulation is no longer optional; it's 100% essential if we want any of our other educational initiatives to be successful.

Why do many traditional approaches to improving teacher morale and retention fall short? What is a more effective approach?

Typically, these types of strategies involve external rewards, like having a "jeans day" or another incentive. The problem is that it's fleeting. By the next day, the good feelings have worn off, everyone is still feeling disappointed or frustrated, and we're back to where we started.

A typical professional development plan focuses on academics. But we work with schools to create PD plans that include a focus on the teacher's self-regulation skillset and overall wellness. Self-regulatory skills help adults manage the stressors they face—both the immediate ones like when students or staff have an

emotional outburst, and the long-term, grinding ones that tend to lead to burnout.

The wellness component to Conscious Discipline is more nuanced and authentic than saying, "Remember to practice self-care!" A PD plan with us might include asking how they're going to prioritize their own health. The administration leads with their commitment and asks teachers to make a commitment too. Then, when admin checks in on academics, they also check on how the teachers are doing emotionally, mentally, or physically. With small but meaningful shifts like this, teachers start feeling safe, connected, valued, and appreciated. And that feeling travels down to students and up to administration, touching every member in the educational community.

Conscious Discipline is structured around practices like these that improve morale and culture in ways that last far beyond a momentary reward.

What other impacts does this adult-first approach have?

When teachers feel more positive, they show up differently in the classroom and are more willing to put new strategies into practice. Conscious Discipline supplies strategies that help teachers create a culture of belonging in their classrooms and respond to student behaviors in healthier ways. We equip teachers to teach self-regulation for long-term improvement and to manage tough behaviors in the moment of upset instead of just sending a student to the office. That means the student stays in the classroom



Jill Molli,
Director of Development,
Conscious Discipline

instead of losing instructional time and disrupting others' instructional time. Academic achievement improves for all, and all learn ways to self-regulate and manage conflict because they've seen the teacher do it in the classroom, in the moment.

By focusing on adults first, everyone benefits. It's about prioritizing a healthy school culture for everyone— administrators, teachers, staff, and students. A school like that gains a reputation for being a great place to learn, work and teach. Teachers and principals want to work there, and retention improves.

What can leadership do now to positively impact culture and retention?

It's important to understand that it's not going to be a quick fix or a prescriptive, linear process. Changing school culture takes time, intention and responsiveness. School and district leaders must prioritize their own learning and take ownership of school culture. Don't delegate this responsibility to a committee to handle. It can be hard work that takes years, but we have seen repeatedly that it's worth the effort.



ATTEND





ATTENDANCE:

Is chronic absenteeism the new normal?

THIS PAST FALL, AVERAGE ATTENDANCE RATES LEVELED OUT AT 90%, NEW FEDERAL DATA REVEALS. HERE ARE 6 WAYS TO TACKLE THE PROBLEM.

BY MICAH WARD

Across the country, attendance rates in K12 schools have witnessed a dramatic shift—for the worse. It's one of the many lingering effects caused by the pandemic, and federal agencies are calling upon education leaders to make improvements.

Recently, the National Center for Education Statistics published attendance data from November 2023, which revealed a 90% attendance rate for K12 public schools. Furthermore, just 37% of public schools saw average attendance rates of 95% or higher.

School leaders were also asked to rate their concerns as they relate to student and teacher absences. Some 15% of public schools reported being “extremely worried” about student absences. Similarly, finding substitute teachers topped leaders’ concerns for teacher-related absences, with 35% reporting they are “extremely concerned.”

“This new, timely data on attendance help us understand the extent of absenteeism at public schools, as well as the extent to which absences by students, teachers, and staff are a concern to public school leaders,” NCES Commissioner Peggy G. Carr

said in a statement. “The data also show challenges our schools face when it comes to the supply chain for adequate goods and services needed to successfully operate, such as food services, laptops and other electronic devices, and office equipment.”

In light of this research, Attendance Works, an organization that works with schools to address and reduce chronic absenteeism, is calling upon states to adopt a “tiered approach” to tackling this issue in their K12 schools.

At the bottom of the pyramid is “state support for all schools and districts.” Here, states should offer guidance on effective practices or state messaging campaigns. Next are “districts with high levels of chronic absence,” the middle of the pyramid. Initiatives include “community of practice or targeted investment in a key program.” Lastly, at the top of the pyramid are your most impacted districts. Here, states should be offering intensive technical assistance and coaching.

“Chronic absence is now more widespread and more concentrated than ever before,” an Attendance Works blog reads. “It is elevated and more intense in the places where chronic absence was a challenge before the pandemic, and now is a significant challenge in many schools that have never experienced such large numbers of chronically absent students.”

So, what can states do to support district leaders in their efforts to mitigate this issue? Here are six recommendations school leaders can call upon their state decision-makers to act on:

- 1. Publish timely, accurate and comparable data:** This will help educators and district leaders understand where action is needed.
- 2. Create and promote messaging about the importance of attendance:** This is critical post-pandemic as many families have gotten used to their students missing prolonged periods of school.
- 3. Build capacity:** Create training

and professional development materials that schools can use to implement evidence-based approaches to tackling absenteeism.

- 4. Embed attendance into pre-existing initiatives:** Family engagement, expanded learning and intensive tutoring programs are perfect opportunities for leaders to incorporate strategies designed to target engagement and attendance.
- 5. Reduce ineffective punitive responses:** Most of the time, punitive approaches do very little to address the underlying cause behind chronic absenteeism. Consider punishment as a last resort.
- 6. Enact a tailored action plan based on current data:** To determine where action is needed, states can combine data from their state’s stock of existing resources to understand where gaps exist and what priorities must be established to support engagement and attendance. **DA**

The bright spots in enrollment’s rocky recovery

PUBLIC SCHOOL ENROLLMENT HAS REBOUNDED IN HIGHER GRADES BUT CONTINUES TO LAG AMONG YOUNGER STUDENTS SINCE THE PANDEMIC AND REMAINS BEHIND 2019 LEVELS.

Pre-K-through-12 enrollment increased slightly—by just 0.4%—from fall 2021 to fall 2022 to 49.6 million, according to data released Tuesday by the National Center for Education Statistics. And that number is 1% below fall 2019, the year before COVID shut schools for up to a year or more in some districts. Here are more key numbers:

Pre-K-through-8 enrollment was about 34.1 million students at the beginning of the 2022 school year, or 4% below fall 2019.

For grades 9 through 12, enrollment increased by about 2%, from 15.2 million to 15.5 million.

Fall 2022 is the most recent data for which national data is available.

“Total public school enrollment is still down, by about 1.2 million students, when compared with data collected just before the pandemic, but it was stable from 2021 to 2022,” NCES commissioner Peggy G. Carr said in a news release. “This points to a continuously changing school enrollment landscape.”

A PUBLIC SCHOOL ENROLLMENT ROLLER COASTER

Not all states are experiencing the same shifts in enrollment, which fell by more than 4% in 14 states from fall 2019 to fall 2022. The largest drops—over 5%—occurred in California, Hawaii, Mississippi, New York, and Oregon. In Idaho

and North Dakota, however, public school enrollment grew by about 2% while the biggest jump occurred in Louisiana, at 5%.

The Center noted that the national student-to-teacher ratio in fall 2022 was 15.4 to 1, and also recorded the following enrollment levels for racial and ethnic groups in public schools:

- American Indian/Alaska Native - 0.9%
- Asian - 5.5%
- Black - 14.9%
- Hispanic - 28.9%
- Pacific Islander - 0.4%
- White - 44.5%
- Two or more races - 4.9%

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Breaking Through

WHY THE “WARM DEMANDER”
CONCEPT IS BECOMING
POPULAR IN K12 LEADERSHIP

BY MATTHEW X. JOSEPH





The concept of the warm demander has gained significant traction in the educational space, particularly within the framework of culturally responsive teaching. A warm demander embodies a pedagogical approach that combines empathy, high expectations and a nurturing environment to facilitate optimal learning outcomes for students from diverse backgrounds.

The term “warm demander” has emerged as a powerful educational paradigm, reflecting a pedagogical philosophy that transcends traditional teaching methods. Coined by educational scholar Lisa Delpit in her seminal work “Other People’s Children,” the concept of the warm demander embodies a nuanced approach to instruction that blends warmth, high expectations, and cultural responsiveness.

At its core, the warm demander ethos recognizes the importance of establishing authentic connections with students while challenging them to excel academically and personally. I am so proud to work in a district, New Bedford, Massachusetts, led by Superintendent Andrew O’Leary, who is driven to raise student accountability, and Deputy Superintendent Darcie Aungst, who models being a warm demander and empowers and emplores our leaders to do the same.

Understanding what it means to be a warm demander necessitates a holistic exploration of the qualities, practices and beliefs that characterize this pedagogical archetype. By delving into the intersection of empathy, authority, and cultural competence, educators can unlock the transformative potential of the warm demander approach in addressing the diverse needs of students.

This article embarks on a comprehensive journey to unravel the dynamics of warm demanders, shedding light on their roles as advocates for social justice, champions of equity, and architects of inclusive learning environments.

WARM DEMANDERS SET AMBITIOUS GOALS

Warm demanders approach their interactions with students with openness, humility, and a willingness to learn from their experiences. By demonstrating genuine care and concern for their students' well-being, warm demanders create a supportive environment where students feel valued, respected and motivated to engage in learning.

Simultaneously, warm demanders uphold high expectations for student achievement, recognizing and nurturing the potential within each learner. This aspect of the warm demander ethos aligns with the concept of "demandingness"—the belief that all students are capable of success and deserve rigorous, intellectually stimulating instruction. Warm demanders set ambitious goals for their students, challenging them to stretch beyond their comfort zones and persevere in facing challenges. However, these expectations are accompanied by the necessary supports and scaffolds to ensure students have the resources and guidance they need to succeed.

Another critical dimension of the warm demander framework is its emphasis on cultural responsiveness and equity. Warm demanders recognize students' cultural assets and strengths to the learning environment, leveraging these resources to enhance instruction and promote meaningful learning experiences. They actively seek to understand and honor students' diverse backgrounds, experiences and perspectives, incorporating culturally relevant content, pedagogies and assessments into their teaching practice. Moreover, warm demanders advocate for equity and social justice, challenging systemic inequities and creating inclusive educational spaces where all students can thrive.

A PROMISING PATH FORWARD

Key strategies for implementing the warm demander approach in practice:

- **Build authentic relationships:** Cultivate genuine connections with students based on trust, empathy and mutual respect. Take the time to learn about students' interests, backgrounds, and aspirations, and demonstrate a genuine interest in their well-being.
- **Set high expectations:** Communicate clear, ambitious goals for student learning and hold students accountable for meeting these expectations. Provide support and scaffolding to help students reach their full potential and celebrate their successes.

The term "warm demander" has emerged as a powerful educational paradigm, reflecting a pedagogical philosophy that transcends traditional teaching methods.

- **Integrate cultural relevance:** Infuse instruction with culturally relevant content, pedagogies and assessments reflecting students' experiences and cultural backgrounds. Incorporate diverse perspectives into the curriculum and create opportunities for students to see themselves reflected in their learning.
- **Foster inclusive environments:** Create a safe, inclusive learning environment where all students feel valued, respected and supported. Address issues of bias, discrimination and inequity proactively, and promote a culture of belonging for students from all backgrounds.
- **Advocate for equity:** Challenge systemic barriers to educational equity and advocate for policies and practices that promote fairness, justice and opportunity for all students. Work collaboratively with colleagues, families and community members to create a more just

and equitable education system.

- **Provide support and guidance:** Offer individualized support to students struggling academically or emotionally, providing extra help, resources or accommodations as needed. Create peer collaboration and support opportunities, fostering a sense of community and belonging among students.
- **Model empathy and respect:** Demonstrate empathy and understanding towards students' perspectives, experiences and challenges. Model respectful behavior and positive communication in your interactions with students, colleagues and others in the school community. Create a mutual respect and trust culture where students feel valued, heard, and respected for who they are.
- **Continuously reflect and grow:** Engage in ongoing reflection and self-assessment to evaluate your teaching practices and their impact on students. Seek feedback from students, colleagues, and mentors to gain insights into your strengths and areas for improvement. Stay open to learning and adapting your approach based on the needs and feedback of your students and the changing dynamics of the learning environment.

A warm demander approach represents a robust drive for fostering inclusive, empowering learning environments that meet the diverse needs of students. By embodying warmth, high expectations and cultural responsiveness, educators can create transformative educational experiences that enable all students to succeed.

As we strive for educational equity and excellence, the warm demander approach offers a promising path forward that honors students' identities, cultivates their talents and empowers them to realize their fullest potential. Through ongoing reflection, collaboration and action, educators can embrace the role of warm demanders and create positive change in the lives of their students and communities. **DA**

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What's in store for edtech in 2024? One expert weighs in

What should educators be excited about, and what challenges persist? Imagine Learning's Sari Factor says AI is the answer to both of these questions.

BY MICAH WARD

2024 has some exciting things in store for K12 education, especially when it comes to technology. In January, for instance, thousands of educators, district leaders and technology professionals attended the Future of Education Technology Conference to immerse themselves in the latest innovations and trends impacting edtech. From artificial intelligence to virtual learning, there's no doubt that technology will continue to impact student achievement in a meaningful way. But what exactly should educators be on the lookout for?

District Administration had the opportunity to connect with Sari Factor, vice chairman and chief strategy officer at Imagine Learning, to hear her predictions for edtech in 2024.

2023 RECAP

Factor notes that 2023 was a big year for education technology, especially as it pertained to personalized learning. Closing learning gaps has been a top priority among district leaders since the pandemic and technology has been

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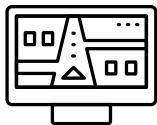
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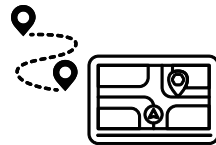
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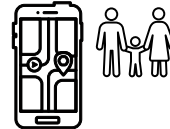
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“For AI to be developed effectively, it must leverage a foundation of high-quality digital curricula to build trust with educators and school leaders.”

a supportive tool in this effort. However, leaders have placed less of a focus on the technology itself and more on how it benefits the student.

“In 2023, we saw a greater a greater focus on the ‘ed’—that is, education to propel student outcomes—and less on the ‘tech,’” she says. “The term ‘edtech’ is an anachronism, with teachers now employing technology-based programs regularly as a vital classroom tool.”

Chronic absenteeism is another issue that arose—or was exacerbated—during the pandemic. The rapid expansion of technology that resulted from COVID offers leaders more options for students to continue learning no matter where they are whether it’s a virtual, blended or competency-based learning model. Factor says she saw these successful practices play out in 2023, including more ways to keep students engaged with the curriculum.

“We’ve seen districts explore gamification and immersive learning projects to keep students engaged and more excited to learn and participate,” she says.

Amid an ongoing teacher shortage, the growth of virtual learning has opened opportunity and access, allowing

districts to fill teaching vacancies in upper-level math and sciences, world languages, career and technical education and special education—all of which have seen heightened demand in recent years.

Generative AI, too, became a major disruptor to K12, specifically in regard to how it might impact academic integrity. Factor says the initial concern surrounding this technology is starting to wear off.

“The advent of generative AI initially generated concerns about plagiarism, though, by Sept. 2023, we found that 33% of teachers reported using generative AI in their classrooms for tasks, such as crafting assessments, developing lesson plans, creating instructional content and grading,” she explains.

THE 2024 ROADMAP

What’s in store for edtech this year? What should educators be excited about, and what challenges persist? According to Factor, AI is the answer to each of these questions.

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“The advent of generative AI initially generated concerns about plagiarism, though, by Sept. 2023, we found that 33% of teachers reported using generative AI in their classrooms for tasks.”

learn,” she says. “Educators should be excited to use the technology to alleviate the burden of repetitive tasks and to identify trends in student data, enabling them to focus their efforts and giving teachers more time to interact with their students. I’m hopeful that teachers’ job satisfaction will increase and more will stay in the profession longer.”

It’ll also have a profound impact on supporting student achievement. She says over time, AI—paired with digital curricula and human interaction—will allow students to tap into their potential with personalized lesson plans that cater to their needs and interests, thus, producing better results.

“For AI to be developed effectively, however, it must leverage a foundation of high-quality digital curricula to build trust with educators and school leaders, who must first believe in this technology for it to have a meaningful impact,” she argues.

Furthermore, students must be taught why it’s more important to ask the right question than it is to get the right answer. When it comes to AI, 21st-century skills like the four C’s—communication, collabora-

tion, creativity and critical thinking—will “become more prominent and important in the age of artificial intelligence,” she says.

“With ever more schools equipping every student with a device, new digital-first solutions are becoming available. As technology-enabled solutions become more deeply ingrained in the K12 landscape, we must break down the barriers to access in rural and underfunded school districts, ensuring digital equity.”

In the meantime, she believes district leaders and educators need support from federal and state decision-makers who are in charge of enacting policies to govern AI use. Without it, educators will lack the comfort to invite such technology into their classrooms.

“Districts are willing to integrate AI into their classrooms, but lack the proper resources and training needed to do so successfully,” she says. “Collaboration among policymakers, district leaders and education solution providers will play a critical role in addressing concerns with AI use in classrooms.” DA

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Comfort counts: Superior school design can boost attendance

Even simple adjustments made to create an appealing and immersive school environment have demonstrated a positive impact.

BY MATT ZALAZNICK

Two concepts are driving school designers these days: physical safety and emotional well-being. The climate created by new designs can help superintendents and their teams strengthen school climate and tackle some of their biggest challenges, including chronic absenteeism.

To help K12 leaders envision new learning environments, *District Administration* chatted with Melissa Turnbaugh, a partner and national education and innovation leader at the architectural firm PBK, which specializes in school design.

What aspects of school design should be prioritized to make students comfortable?

Turnbaugh: Creating a conducive and comfortable atmosphere for students at school requires a dual focus

on physical and emotional well-being. Physical safety measures, such as established security protocols, limited access, security film, cameras and unobstructed visibility, are essential to provide a secure environment. Equally important is fostering emotional safety, achieved through learning spaces that cater to diverse needs—offering various sizes and scales to accommodate different learning styles.

These environments should be warm and inviting, characterized by abundant natural light, clean air, and adaptable furniture, promoting a sense of ease and security. Additionally, ensuring access to outdoor spaces is crucial, as studies show that spending time outside contributes positively to students' physical and emotional well-being, enhancing attention spans and test scores and addressing behavioral issues.

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Given the substantial time students invest in the school environment, it is imperative that the surroundings actively contribute to their overall support and comfort, addressing both their physical and emotional needs.

How do lighting, furniture and other design components help increase attendance?

Boosting attendance is directly linked to creating an appealing and immersive school environment. Even simple adjustments, such as introducing natural light into classrooms, have demonstrated a positive impact on both student and teacher attendance as well as academic performance. A recent article in *The New York Times* highlighted a concerning nationwide increase in school absenteeism, emphasizing that ‘research consistently indicates that student attendance is a powerful predictor of virtually every other outcome.’

The solution to this issue is multifaceted. According to the EPA, maintaining indoor air quality is another crucial factor that can contribute to increased daily attendance and decreased dropout rates. Furthermore, fostering a positive perception of school and promoting engagement can be pivotal. A study involving first graders who had the opportunity to manipulate and control their furniture revealed higher levels of engagement and attendance.

When these solutions are integrated, addressing

factors such as lighting, air quality and student engagement, they collectively serve to improve both student and teacher attendance rates, ultimately contributing to enhanced retention within the educational system.

Describe some innovative designs schools have adopted for classrooms and other spaces, and how they are conducive to learning.

Educational institutions are adopting innovative approaches to space utilization, promoting flexibility and extension for both students and teachers. One strategic design involves integrating collaboration spaces directly adjacent to classrooms, allowing educators to securely send students outside the traditional setting for activities like small group instruction, personalized learning, coaching or simply a peaceful break.

Moreover, various areas across the campus are repurposed for learning purposes, utilizing outdoor spaces for classroom activities and providing designated areas for students requiring moments of de-escalation and reset.

This comprehensive use of every inch of the school campus for learning and instruction not only facilitates a diverse range of choices and spaces but also aligns with the principle of responsible resource stewardship. Such intentional design encourages adaptability, promotes

Educational institutions are adopting innovative approaches to space utilization, promoting flexibility and extension for both students and teachers.

a variety of learning environments and maximizes the educational potential of the entire school infrastructure.

What new types of furniture are schools installing to increase student comfort and achievement?

Recognizing the significance of accommodating diverse learning needs, schools are increasingly valuing the use of flexible and adaptable furniture. Both students and teachers appreciate the versatility provided by furniture that can be easily rearranged to suit specific programs or projects.

Furthermore, in catering to students with distinct learning requirements, adaptable furniture allows for rocking or wiggling, contributing to the maintenance of attention spans and focus. The furniture in educational settings must align with the specific type of learning taking place, thereby enhancing the overall effectiveness of the learning environment.“

How does design improve teacher retention, confidence and well-being?

A concerning trend is the high rate at which teachers are leaving the profession. As previously noted, teachers must experience a sense of support within the school environment. This encompasses not only physical safety, ensured through the implementation of safety measures and improved air quality post-pandemic, but also support in the realm of teaching. This involves providing tools such as voice amplification and creating teaching environments that align with their individual styles, including the incorporation of flexible furniture.

Additionally, teachers require intentional spaces where they can collaborate with peers, fostering their well-being, promoting connections and facilitating ongoing professional development. Recognizing and addressing these multifaceted needs is essential to retaining educators within the teaching profession. DA

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A new proposal offers federal funding for AI literacy in schools

The Artificial Intelligence Literacy Act aims to help schools teach students to use the rapidly advancing technology safely and ethically.

Improving the nation's overall AI literacy starts with expanded teacher professional development in artificial intelligence and helping schools develop new computer science courses. Funding for these and other K12 AI literacy initiatives is included in the bipartisan "Artificial Intelligence Literacy Act of 2023" recently drafted in Congress.

"By ensuring that AI literacy is at the heart of our digital literacy program, we're ensuring that we can not only mitigate the risk of AI, but seize the opportunity it creates to help improve the way we learn and the way we work," says Rep. Lisa Blunt Rochester, a Democrat from Delaware, who co-sponsored the bill with Rep. Larry Bueshon, M.D.,

an Indiana Republican.

The bill, which would amend the Digital Equity Act, defines AI literacy "as the skills associated with the ability to comprehend the basic principles, concept and applications of artificial intelligence, as well as the implications, limitations and ethical considerations associated with artificial intelligence."

The main goal of the bill is to help schools teach students to use the rapidly advancing technology safely and ethically. Grants created by the proposal would help district leaders and other education organizations:

- Provide teachers with training and certification to drive AI literacy efforts in schools.

- Send teachers to courses, workshops and conferences related to artificial intelligence instruction and course design.
- Schools without resources for computer science education would get assistance in using best practices to develop and design AI course materials for computer science classes.
- Create partnerships with the private sector to expand AI education.
- Build school labs that provide students with hands-on AI learning experiences.
- Develop virtual learning platforms for remote and individualized AI instruction.

"Every administrator, teacher and student should know how to use AI and how AI works because when you understand the underlying fundamentals, you will be better able to use AI safely, effectively and responsibly," Pat Yongpradit, chief academic officer of Code.org, said in a statement.

—Matt Zalaznick

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Digital payments: Can districts actually go “cash-free”?

“While districts and parents want to move to cashless systems, it is clear districts need additional resources to make it happen,” Bryan Jones, CEO of LINQ, said in a statement.

“The right digital payment solution reduces burdens on school district staff and creates a more efficient work environment with a goal to reduce overall expense and risk to the school district. When districts are responsive to parents’ preferences, they can foster an environment that benefits all.”

That’s according to Keith Womack, general manager of payments at LINQ, a provider of K12 business platform solutions, about their new survey of school districts and parents that sheds light on the ongoing complexities surrounding school payments and communications.

Despite a recent technological boom in the education industry—primarily in the edtech sector as a result of the pandemic—many parents continue to voice frustration over the headache that is their school’s mix of

payment options for a variety of fees.

While 91% of districts “desire” to move to what they envision as a cashless future, many districts are hesitant to do so because:

- **It’s too complicated**

- 48% of urban districts
- 34% of suburban districts
- 28% of rural districts

- **It’s too expensive**

- 42% of urban districts
- 32% of suburban districts
- 30% of rural districts

- **Not enough personnel**

- 40% of urban districts
- 24% of suburban districts
- 42% of rural districts

- **Fraud risk**

- 29% of urban districts
- 26% of suburban districts
- 17% of rural districts

- **Too many people involved**

- 52% of urban districts
- 30% of suburban districts
- 26% of rural districts

“While districts and parents want to move to cashless systems, it is clear districts need additional resources to make it happen,” Bryan Jones, CEO of LINQ, said in a statement. “K12 leaders can improve security, transparency and accountability by digitizing and modernizing their payments approach.”

Districts were also asked to consider which features they believe to be most important when considering digital payment providers. Above all, leaders value “security and access control” the most (45%), in addition to:

- Easy implementation: 40%
- Affordable product line: 40%
- Parent and staff portals: 39%
- User support and training: 38%

However, as the survey concludes, parents would like to see districts transition away from requiring cash payments for certain fees while consolidating the number of digital applications used for such processes. At the moment, parents are most commonly asked to provide cash payments for things like sporting events and plays (41%), field trips (39%) and other sports-related activities (35%).

If you’re one of the many administrators hoping to transition to a more digitized form of payment opportunities for parents, know that families value products and apps that are:

- Easy to use (87%)
- Require low or no fees (86%)
- Have security controls (85%)
- Have mobile accessibility (83%)

“By addressing the concerns of both districts and parents, payment applications in K12 education can create an environment where financial transactions are not only seamless, but also tailored to meet the needs of all stakeholders,” the report declares.

—By Micah Ward

Upstate New York district increases safety, saves \$400,000 a year with bus routing software

Transfinder's Routefinder PLUS helps Ravena-Coeymans-Selkirk Central School District deal with its driver shortage

Two years after upgrading its transportation platform, a rural K-12 district in upstate New York has been saving more than \$400,000 a year by eliminating two routes and servicing previously outsourced ones. Here are some key tasks to consider:

"We took on nine new schools with six fewer drivers based on the new information we had," says Craig Lipps, director of transportation at Ravena-Coeymans-Selkirk Central School District (RCS), about the upgrade to Routefinder PLUS from Transfinder.

"That's the value of this platform. It helps you make informed financial decisions that allow you to keep your own people employed and your students safe. We were able to realize huge savings."

Transfinder provides a variety of intelligent routing, scheduling and fleet maintenance solutions that optimize school transportation logistics, and districts can select which solutions they use based on their needs.

"Since we've been using Routefinder PLUS, we have seen exponential service and safety improvements, and we've been able to meet the current demand within our own operation."

Addressing a driver shortage

At RCS, 1,600 of the K-12 district's 1,900 students rely on school transportation. But a lingering bus driver shortage created a big problem for the transportation department, and the shortage worsened after the pandemic. Upgrading to Routefinder PLUS—an update to the initial Transfinder solution the district purchased in 2009 to replace its paper-based bus routing process—did far more than address the driver shortage.

"Since we've been using Routefinder PLUS, we have seen exponential service and safety improvements, and we've been able to meet the current demand within our own operation," Lipps says.

By changing configurations on the cloud-based system, Lipps' department eliminated two in-district routes by improving efficiency, and picked up routes for private and parochial schools and out-of-district placements, which were previously served by contractors.

Push notifications to parents

RCS is also using the Stopfinder app, which allows parents to have access to their children's bus information and enables transportation staff members to send push notifications announcing delays or updated bus stop times. Once the GPS system is added, parents will get automatic updates that include bus arrival times, and notifications if their student is on board or missed the bus.

The next Transfinder component scheduled for implementation is Transfinder's driver app Wayfinder, which features turn-by-turn directions and student photos to easily identify who should be getting on and off at each stop.

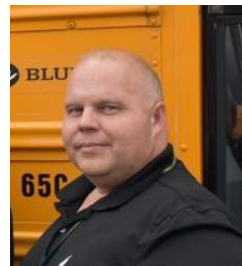
"We will be able to capture ridership data and use it to find additional efficiencies," Lipps says. "With the frequent changes in communities, we are continually looking for opportunities to improve efficiency. This will make things easier by enabling us to look at what we are actually doing versus what was planned."

This is particularly important in his district, Lipps says, because of how often students' living situations—and therefore, their transportation needs—change. "Often we have students that end up residing outside of the boundaries of the district," he says. "Routefinder PLUS allows us to see which drivers and vehicles are available, and we're able to make informed decisions, minimizing the cost impact of any special transportation needs we have."

Peace of mind

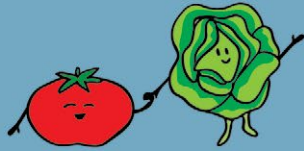
The upgraded software also prioritizes safety by ensuring bus routes include safe zones to minimize student crossings of busy roads or intersections, and automatically avoiding dangerous or impassable roadways.

"I am very pro-Transfinder because of how it improves safety," Lipps says. "I sleep better knowing our kids are safe. Once Wayfinder is in place, our transportation service will be even safer than it is today."



Craig Lipps,
Director of Transportation,
Ravena-Coeymans-Selkirk Central
School District

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Is school nutrition at a “perilous juncture”?

The School Nutrition Association is urging Congress to increase school meal funding and preserve current nutrition standards.

A range of financial and logistical challenges have the potential to disrupt school nutrition programs as pandemic relief funding expires, advocates say.

Nearly all of the 1,300-plus school meal program directors who responded to a School Nutrition Association survey report said they were grappling with increasing costs, with a large majority calling it “a significant challenge.” Many of these directors said they were worried they would not be able to procure foods that would meet stricter school nutrition guidelines expected to be released by the U.S. Department of Agriculture in April.

“Inadequate funds and overly restrictive rules will soon cripple school meal programs,” said Chris Derico, president of the School Nutrition Association. “We believe

all students deserve equal access to nutritious meals at school, and in schools that must charge for meals, we see inequities for children as well as unpaid meal debt increasing financial losses.”

The association is now urging Congress to increase school meal funding and preserve current nutrition standards.

SCHOOL NUTRITION SUPPLY CHAIN SNAGS

Fewer than one in five of the nutrition directors surveyed said current reimbursement rates cover the costs of producing a school lunch. This funding gap also makes it harder for district nutrition programs to pay competitive wages in today’s tight labor market, which in turn

CONTINUED ON PAGE 30

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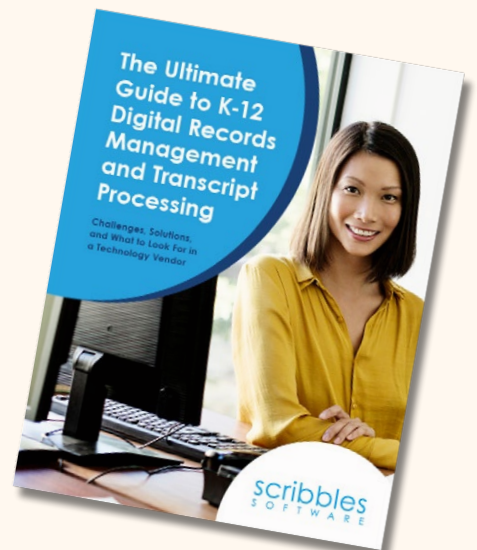


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hinders efforts to provide healthier meals by cooking dishes from scratch.

Another top challenge identified by a large majority of school nutrition leaders was a shortage of menu items that will likely get worse if new nutritional standards are implemented. Districts with the highest numbers of students eligible for free-and-reduced eligibility are also the most likely to report severe procurement difficulties.

“With a lack of any nutrition mandates for dining or retail foods, limited demand for low-sodium and whole-grain products in the retail market leaves many manufacturers and distributors hesitant to prepare and stock specialty items for K12 customers,” the report asserts.

Unpaid meal debt continues to be a financial hurdle in districts



that can no longer serve universal free meals. The shift back to paid meals since the pandemic has led to consistent drops in student participation, in part because some families fail to submit applications.

On the other hand, schools that

provide free meals to all students also report a more positive social-emotional cafeteria environment, reduced stigma for low-income students and increased operational efficiencies, the report contends.

—By Matt Zalaznick

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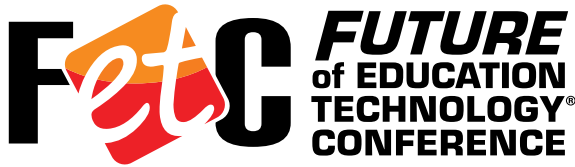




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As teacher shortages persist, districts look for creative solutions

Nearly nine in 10 public schools struggled to hire educators ahead of the 2023-24 school year, according to survey data from the National Center for Education Statistics. How are districts responding?

Nearly nine in 10 public schools struggled to hire educators ahead of the 2023-24 school year, according to recent survey data from the National Center for Education Statistics. The vacancies were most commonly found in some of your traditionally understaffed areas, including special education, science and foreign languages. Now that we're halfway into the school year, we're still seeing these shortages impact school districts across the country.

Like most school systems in the

U.S., the Aldine Independent School District in Texas has started looking for alternative solutions to bolster its teaching workforce. For instance, they've started working with Teach USA, a program that connects international teachers with U.S. schools.

According to *San Antonio Express-News*, Aldine ISD has hired 76 teachers from more than a dozen countries through this program. Scott Duberke, the district's human resources director, said it's helped them to fill positions for special education and

bilingual elementary school classes with an even greater effect.

It's "not just filling vacancies, but it also supports our kids," he told *San Antonio Express-News*. "Our kids are not only learning but they're learning from the culture of where these people are coming from."

In North Dakota, the state's Department of Public Instruction has awarded \$3 million for a program that helps paraprofessionals become teachers. There are some 230 participants in the program across 60 school districts, *The Dickinson Press* reports.

The program provides participants with up to \$20,000 that they can use to put toward earning a teaching degree through one of 10 online programs available through universities across North Dakota.

Gov. Doug Burgum also created a

CONTINUED ON PAGE 34

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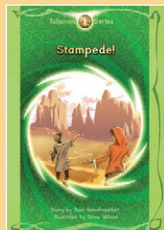
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Teacher Retention and Recruitment Task Force, which met for the first time last month and aims to identify and address areas of improvement regarding teacher vacancies across the state.

“We’re deeply grateful to these members and all the candidates for their passion and willingness to dedicate their time to this critically important effort to address our state’s teacher shortage,” Burgum said in a statement. “Working together, we can identify best practices and policies for retaining and recruiting teachers and ensure they have the resources and support they need to deliver a world-class education to students across North Dakota.”

In Montana, schools have been quick to adopt four-day work weeks in the hopes of recruiting and retaining teachers, a strategy that’s been growing

in momentum in districts nationwide.

As the *Montana Free Press* reports, at least 222 schools had already adopted this model by the end of the 2022-23 school year. Montana ranks last in the country when it comes to average starting salaries for teachers, according to an annual report released last year by the National Education Association. A four-day school week is just one of the ways Montana education leaders aim to keep teachers in the profession despite the unattractiveness of teaching salaries.

Montana’s Roberts Public School has been operating using this model since 2015, soon after the arrival of its Superintendent Alex Ator. He told the *Montana Free Press* he believes it’s helped them stay afloat amid this persistent shortage of qualified teachers.

“When I first got to Roberts, I received a handful [of applicants] for a typical position, and my colleagues

received a few dozen,” he told the *Montana Free Press*. “Now, I still receive a couple and some of my colleagues don’t receive any.”

However, some areas have yet to see major improvements concerning their teacher vacancies. Nebraska, for one, had more than 900 teaching positions go vacant or unfilled with a qualified educator for the 2023-24 school year, a new survey from the Nebraska Department of Education suggests. These numbers surpass the previous year’s 760 vacancies.

“There’s a coordinated effort going on between school districts, the Department of Education, higher education, even others in the workforce development area like our state chamber, who are certainly concerned about this particular topic,” NDE Commissioner Brian Maher said during a recent press conference.

—By Micah Ward

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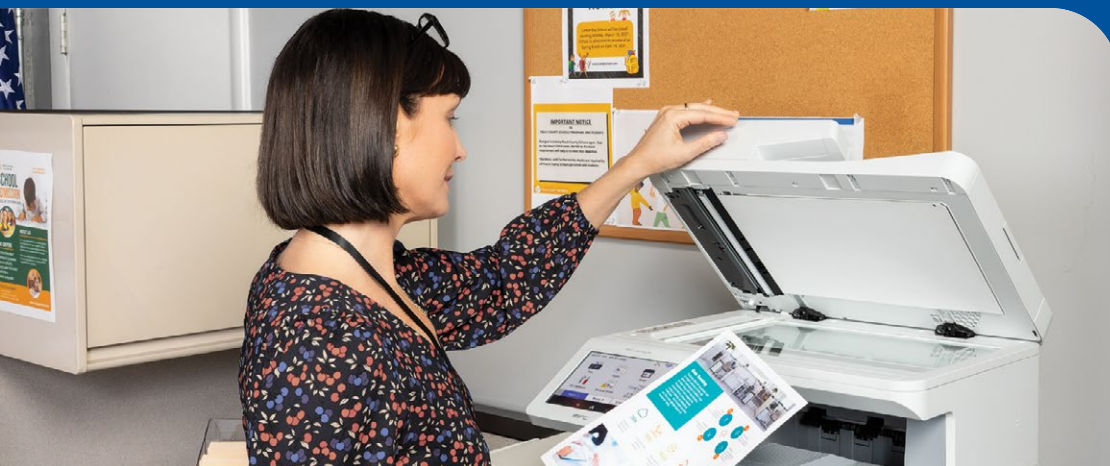
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Don't forget the reading in the "science of reading"

Teaching phonics is an important step toward improving literacy instruction, but students still need time to read authentic texts.

BY JOE BURNS

Adopted by many states, the science of reading has become a major focus for educators across the country. Defining the science of reading is the easy part: it's a collection of peer-reviewed scientific research from a variety of disciplines examining how humans learn to read.

How to put the findings of all that research into practice is a more complicated question, but one thing the science of reading makes clear is that learning to read is not something people do naturally. It's a skill we need to work to master, and doing so requires explicit instruction.

That means that while working on phonics is important, students also need plenty of time for reading.

PRACTICING WITH "REAL LITERATURE"

Students need practice with real literature because the kinds of didactic texts that are made with the express purpose of practicing specific phonics or comprehension skills are highly patterned. If students have been conditioned to find the main idea in the first sentence of the first paragraph, they are likely to struggle when they find an actual piece of writing that doesn't conform to that pattern.

Students need those decodable texts for explicit instruction, but they also need authentic texts with a variety of formats, genres and purposes to build their ability to understand

real-world writing.

It's also important to note that all students need grade-level texts, even if they are struggling with decoding skills. If they don't get opportunities with rigorous, complex texts that build their comprehension skills, they will fall behind there as well. Scaffolds embedded in authentic texts should help students improve skills like phonics while still challenging them to grow their vocabulary, background knowledge, and other comprehension skills.

One of the things I love about "Scarborough's Reading Rope" is that at the beginning, all these strands are separate, but over time they get woven together. Decodables are necessary at the beginning of a student's literacy journey, but the science of reading tells us that explicit instruction must extend to every component of reading instruction. They need opportunities to expand their background knowledge and enrich their vocabularies through reading authentic texts.

Practice with real literature allows students to apply comprehension skills in real life. If literacy instruction is focused solely on phonics and fluency, students will learn to easily pick words off the page, but they will struggle to comprehend what they've read.

BUILDING VOCABULARY, BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE AND COMPREHENSION

If we want students to learn new

words while they read, they need to be able to focus on those words. They won't learn if those vocabulary words appear with a lot of other unfamiliar words or within a passage about a topic they don't know anything about. Just as we don't expect students to make and confirm predictions about texts that are too challenging for them to read, we can't expect them to make predictions about texts on subjects they don't have any knowledge of.

A student who is just learning comprehension skills, for example, needs examples of easily identifiable foreshadowing—until they can recognize more subtle examples. They may have to practice the same thing over and over, just as a baseball player who wants to get good at hitting curveballs will hit thousands of them in the batting cage, even though the point is to be able to automatically recognize the curveball in a game, among lots of other pitches, and adjust appropriately.

The idea is that with a solid blend of skills, students will eventually be capable of the kind of implicit learning those other philosophies champion. The science of reading suggests that we can't start with that. Students need to learn how to sound out new words first, and they also need an opportunity to stretch and grow by reading authentic texts on subjects that interest them, whether that be dinosaurs or famous historical landmarks. **DA**



Joe Burns has a decade of teaching experience spanning kindergarten, 3rd

grade, 4th grade, and intervention. Joe is currently a product marketing expert at Capstone Publishing. He can be reached at jburns@capstonepub.com.

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