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As I write this column, my brother, Mike, is dying. By the time you read it, barring a miracle, I will be learning to live without him.

I do not expect this new “semester” of learning to be easy. It is not a life-lesson I welcome. He is my youngest brother, after all, and his passing defies the natural order of events which should dictate that he learn to live without me.

Only one good thing has come from this lesson so far: it’s given my far-flung family a chance to get together. And one of the most powerful experiences we’ve had is telling stories. We’ve laughed, we’ve cried, we’ve learned more about ourselves along the way. Best of all, telling stories has prepared all of us—Mike included—for the difficult task that lay just ahead.

As I contemplate the theme for this issue, Lifelong Learning, I couldn’t help reflect on the potential power of story in our work to transform the path to higher student achievement.

So today, I’m wondering: What if we spend more time telling stories? What could we accomplish if we start engaging people’s hearts before we fill their heads? What difference could it make in Lansing? What difference could it make in your schools?

Our friend Joseph Grenny from the Vital Smarts organization wrote about this in a recent newsletter. He believes stories are better for influencing behaviors than are facts, logic and data. That’s because stories create a vicarious experience for the listener.

So when educators tell stories, rather than relying on abstract ideas or logical argument, they take listeners into their schools to help them feel the human impact of the work they are trying to do. The right stories told in the right way can profoundly affect others’ motivation to change. But stories can do more. They can also influence ability.

How does that work? Let me invite you to grab a cup of coffee and take a moment to watch a short video that MASA staff put together during the Fall Conference. You can find it at http://gomasa.org/media-library/student-achievement.

We asked MASA members a simple question: How serious are you about student achievement? The answers came back as stories—stories about real people engaged in life-changing activities that are building skills and raising hope for kids.

Their responses didn’t center on programs. They didn’t rely on logic. They didn’t pile on data. Now, imagine the motivational power of those stories on fellow educators and students. Imagine their ability to envision how they could improve learning within their circle of influence.

There’s no denying it: Times are tough for school employees. Your job as their leader is to keep everyone learning, and part of that task means improving people’s motivation and ability to pursue solutions. By communicating with stories, you can build others’ motivation and ability to be better learners...for life!
When I hear people outside the education community talk about early childhood, the conversation typically covers classrooms and playgroups and teachers. But to me learning begins the first time you look into your children’s eyes. There is a sense of the potential and the importance of what is to come in the days, months and years ahead.

Parents are a child’s first teachers and must know the importance of their impact on their children’s future. Parents provide the unplanned, everyday learning of skills that will last a lifetime. The first feeling I wanted my children to have was that of belonging and safety—that they could trust me. With this trust I could lead, push, cajole and provide opportunities for growth.

At the COP ESD, most of the direct services we provide to children are through special education. We are often the first people in the door to work with and support parents and their children. Traditionally, most of our early childhood services were provided in the child’s home. Our goal was to answer parents’ questions and provide support through demonstration and knowledge building. As time goes on, more and more parents are working outside the home, so now we go into child care facilities, preschools, Head Start programs and other types of settings to work with not only the children but also the adults involved with these programs.

Beyond special education services

For about 15 years, we have prepared parent educators to work with and provide information for any parent who has a concern or question on their child’s development. The grant that launched this program was cut after the first year, but we have maintained this service through our general fund as we found this parent interaction was needed.

The COP ESD Board and educators strongly support early intervention, and they continue to provide as much service as possible with the resources we have. Now that we are involved with the Great Start Readiness Programs, we hope to continue to grow and fulfill those early childhood needs by working with our local school districts to help children reach their potential and be ready for continued learning.

The COP ESD staff studied the book *Annual Growth—Catch-up Growth*, by Fielding, Kerr and Rosier, as a guide to help us understand how to assist children to be ready to learn and, in the event that they are not, the importance of closing any achievement gaps early on.

Approximately 40 percent of our entering kindergarteners have fallen behind academically, even before they come to our K-12 schools. The earlier we recognize and close achievement gaps, the more success our youngest children will experience—success that will grow throughout their lifetime.

Early childhood programs and services are the smart vehicle to build success for our children at a young age. Early childhood is also the perfect time to build and foster strong school/parental relationships that will help students achieve throughout their educational experience and serve as the foundation for their bright future.

Tell me and I forget. Show me and I remember. Involve me and I understand.

~ Chinese Proverb

A person’s a person, no matter how small.

~ Dr. Seuss
How soon can we connect again?” That is the question heard from many middle school students in Jackson County after participating in the Mystery Skype project.

In October, the Jackson County Intermediate School District Ed Tech Team teamed up with Iowa Area Education Agencies to present a collaboration challenge to middle school teachers in their coordinating districts. Classrooms were asked to participate in a Mystery Skype as a way to promote inquiry in research in the classroom.

The purpose of this challenge was to make connections to classrooms outside their local area; explore curricular concepts in a collaborative, inquiry-based setting; and use technology with students to complete the research. Teachers from nine districts in Jackson County accepted the challenge.

Students prepared for the challenge by using their informational literacy skills to come up with ten clues about their location. They researched information about landforms, climate, bodies of water, famous landmarks, and famous people, as well as important historic events that took place in their state. The students from each class generated ten clues to share with the mystery location via Skype, a video conferencing tool. Classrooms took turns sharing clues to try and solve each participant’s mystery location.

During the Skype, all students are actively engaged in the process. Teachers are impressed with how engaged the students are during the Mystery Skype. Students are building connections to their own state, as well as extending their responses to learn more about their collaborative school, and the curriculum.

Other roles include geographic locators, who use maps, an atlas, or Google Earth to help locate the mystery location of the other class. Photographers and videographers are assigned to capture the classroom collaboration that is taking place. Everyone participates to maximize the success of the Skype!

Teachers are impressed with how engaged the students are during the Skype. Students are building connections to their own state, as well as extending their responses to learn more about their collaborative school, and the curriculum. Ted Densmore, a teacher at Western Middle School in Parma, Michigan is already thinking about future Skype opportunities.

“I would like students to start sharing the projects they are creating in class and teaching other students about them via Skype,” Densmore said.

Students are also excited about the opportunity to connect and collaborate with other students throughout the United States.
Jill, a seventh grade student shares, “It is great to be learning things from other students. It is fun to see how we are the same and different. It is also nice to see what other classrooms look like.”

Seventh-grader Cory said, “It is great to ask questions and learn from other students in another state.”

This project is the first of many challenges the Jackson County Intermediate School District’s Ed Tech team will be presenting to schools this year. Each challenge will provide the opportunity for teachers and students to build on their curriculum and technology skills. The projects will also provide opportunities to interact and collaborate with other classrooms throughout the United States.

The middle school Mystery Skype project was such a success that it was extended to elementary teachers. The elementary project includes collaboration and connections via Skype with teachers from Michigan, Iowa, Ohio, Minnesota, Illinois, New Jersey, Oklahoma, Maryland, Texas, Nebraska, and Pennsylvania.

This project encourages many skills that are presented in the 21 Things for Students.net project. Topics shared include searching strategies, digital citizenship, social networks, and the use of graphic organizing tools. Educational technology consultants Kim Powell, Dan Spencer, and Brad Wilson from the JCISD will continue to encourage and promote the 21 Things for Students project throughout their monthly challenges so that students will learn to incorporate these valuable skills and strategies into their classrooms.

Kim Powell is an educational technology consultant with the Jackson County Intermediate School District. She has been featured in the REMC Connected Educator Series, Teachercast Podcast Series, and the Flat Classroom Project. To find out more information or to contact Kim, please visit http://kimberlypowell.org
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- **Preconference sessions** are open to all MASA members. Sessions start at 8:30 a.m. and include lunch.

**Bargaining Basics: Negotiations for Newer Superintendents (1/23)**
- [ ] $75

**Preparing the Path to Retirement (1/23)**
- [ ] $75

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**Conference Registration (1/23-1/25)**
- [ ] $275

- I will attend the Awards Luncheon (1/24) + $0
- My spouse will attend the Awards Luncheon + $30
- I will attend the MASA Fellowship Breakfast (1/24) + $30
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**Courageous Journey Participation**
- [ ] Wednesday Evening Event*
- [ ] CJ Guild (Alumni) Breakfast*

*must be a registered Courageous Journey participant to attend

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- Retiree/Spouse [ ] FREE

- [ ] I will attend the MASA Fellowship Breakfast (1/24) + $30
- [ ] I will attend the Awards Luncheon (1/24) + $0

**NOTE:** Meals/registration are not refundable after January 23, 2013. A $25 billing fee will be charged if not paid in full by January 23, 2013. A $25 fee will be charged for cancellations.

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I live in an urban area of Phoenix, right downtown in fact. One consequence to growing up in a place like New York City is that you’re never comfortable unless you see lots of cars, hear police sirens all night, or have your street lit up by police helicopters on the weekends.

Because we live in the city, and while my kids were young, I decided to teach them to cross the street. I knew I wasn’t going to be able to ban the cars. The other option was to pretend the cars weren’t there and never ever let my kids cross the street. I didn’t think that was reasonable. Eventually they had to deal with cars so it made sense to teach them early and often.

When it comes to the World Wide Web and our children, that’s exactly what many of us are doing. We are pretending the Web is not there.

The Web isn’t going anywhere, so ignoring it isn’t going to work. We certainly aren’t teaching our kids how to navigate the Web (teaching them to cross the street). We’re left with the only option we have left, we simple ban it. I don’t know if that’s the smartest idea in the world. Like cars, eventually they are going to have to deal with the Web. Wouldn’t it make sense to teach them, early and often?
I have the opportunity to speak to lots of principals, superintendents, school board members, and parents. Whenever I bring up this subject, they all start blaming each other. The superintendent says, “The school board will never let me.” The school board member says, “The parents wouldn’t let us.” The parents say, “the school is too rigid and would never allow it.” One of my favorite arguments I hear all the time is that the kids are picking up the skills at home. The general argument goes something like this:

“Listen, the parents here are very traditional. They don’t want their students surfing the Web. What if they end up complaining to the board? Also, the feds would take away our eRate funding if we unblocked YouTube® and we can’t lose that.” (I even had one senior administrator of a large district tell me that they would lose ALL federal funding, including Title 9!) They say, “The kids are developing these digital skills on their own, in their own home. They were born digital citizens so there is no need to teach them. Yes, I know a lot of them already have access to the Web in their pockets but they aren’t doing it on school property so we aren’t accountable.”

I push back: “Have you talked to the parents? Have you showed them the benefits of the Web? Are you demonstrating how your school is developing student skills as you prepare them for their future? Have you showed them how the Web opens up new opportunities to learn? Have you offered them ‘parent Internet classes’ to teach them what their kids will learn? In terms of CIPA and eRate, can you give me the name of just one school that lost their funding for violating CIPA? How much did they lose? Can you show me where it says YouTube® violates CIPA? Finally, in terms of students developing the skills on their own at home, are you sure that’s what’s happening? How do you know?”

The assumption that kids are learning these skills at home is insane. Most college educated folks lack basic search skills. Even if it were true, not all our kids would be learning these critical skills. If the kid comes from a family that makes more than $75,000 a year, they have a 90 percent chance of having computer and Internet access at home. If they come from a family that makes less than $30,000 a year, then they have less than a 50 percent chance to have this access at home.
This applies to new technologies as well. For high income families, 55 percent of kids have used a smart phone or a tablet. For low income families, that number drops to 22 percent. In fact, 38 percent of low income parents say they don’t even know what an app is. In case you were wondering, it’s only 3 percent for high income parents.

So even if they were learning how to be good digital citizens at home, and we all know that most of them are not, then we are failing a good portion of our students, the ones who probably need the skills the most. We need a different approach. We need to teach our kids how to cross the digital street and turn their Web experience into something positive. We need to get parents involved. We need to look at the Web as the new platform which will require a set of skills critical to success.

We should also be asking ourselves, what do we need to teach our kids so they are safe online? How do we teach them to stay secure? How do we teach them to protect themselves and their information? How do we teach them about privacy, and what is the right and wrong way to interact with each other?

Things are certainly getting better, like in the case of Chicago Public Schools lifting its ban on YouTube® to help expand digital learning.

Filtering bad content and sites is essential but not in the way many school systems do it. Broad filters that catch everything, including sites like National Geographic, aren’t very useful.

We need to teach our kids to be good digital citizens. Even more importantly, we need to teach our kids to be great digital leaders! The world’s information is at our fingertips, we must take advantage of it. As my teacher friend says, “What students post and share online should be the reason why they get into college, not the reason they don’t.”

Let’s teach our kids how to cross the street.

Jaime Casap is the Senior Education Evangelist at Google, Inc. Jaime evangelizes the power and potential of technology and Google tools in education. He helps educational organizations across the world find ways to utilize these tools in support of new learning models.
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We’ve all seen the medical rounds process portrayed on television or experienced it personally while in the hospital. While the “real life” version is less dramatic than the televised version, the premise is the same: a group of highly trained medical experts gather around a patient, review the facts, discuss their observations, and prescribe a medical “course of action.”

Applying that practice to education was the brainchild of Dr. Richard Elmore and his team of researchers at Harvard University. Their book Instructional Rounds in Education offers a “network approach to improving teaching and learning.” More than “walkthroughs,” Instructional Rounds allow educators to focus on specific “problems of practice,” make observations in classrooms, debrief those observations, and make recommendations that lead to instructional improvement at the classroom level.

Intrigued by the concept, school leaders in the Ottawa Area Intermediate School District (OAISD), including eleven superintendents from traditional K-12 systems, the superintendent from a non-public K-12 system, the Head of School for a K-12 charter school, and ISD staff decided to become an Instructional Rounds network for each other.

Funded through an OAISD Research and Development grant, the 17 leaders agreed to travel to Harvard for training, commit one day per month for two years to the Instructional Rounds process, and host a visit within their schools.

At a time when many educational leaders are hesitant to share their successes or challenges, these leaders are willingly opening up their classrooms to their colleagues (and competitors) in an effort to improve instruction for all students.

Overly simplified, each district identifies a theory of action (for instance: the introduction of iPads will allow teachers to differentiate instruction or a differentiated 90-minute reading block will result in improved proficiency scores), and then allows the network to visit classrooms to observe a specific challenge or “problem of practice” concerning that theory.

The focus is intentionally directed to what students are doing, not what teachers are doing. Remember the patient in medical rounds? Armed with an understanding of the district’s theory of action and the specific challenge, the OAISD educational leaders spend a morning visiting classrooms and recording their observations. The afternoon is spent debriefing their observations, making predictions about student outcomes, and formulating recommendations for next steps.
The process has been eye-opening, affirming, challenging, and pivotal in how OAISD leaders are building their instructional knowledge and capacity in their own districts.

According to Spring Lake Public Schools Superintendent Dennis Furton, “The regional approach of Instructional Rounds provides a powerful antidote to the ‘win-lose’ approach of ranking and comparing school districts. We’ve come to the realization that working collaboratively to leverage our experience and know-how can improve the learning environment across district lines, promoting ‘win-win’ scenarios.”

The process requires trust, staff preparation, and a relentless desire to set aside the things that divide us and concentrate on the collective needs of our students.

“We trust each other enough to open our doors to show what we are trying to accomplish with our instruction as well as take feedback on our work,” said Black River Head of School Shannon Brunink. “There is vulnerability in doing...”

continued on page 18
According to Holland Public School Superintendent Brian Davis, compared to hefty school improvement plans and long lists of new initiatives, Instructional Rounds focuses the work “all the way down to the classroom level, where things matter the most.” While making rounds, the superintendents never interrupt direct instruction; however, participants can talk directly with students when the students are working independently or in small groups. Talking with students, like asking a medical patient, “What hurts?”—can provide profound insight into learning.

The recommendations generated by the process provide important feedback for the district. “We have used the feedback to refine our work around learning targets,” said Hamilton Community Schools Superintendent Dave Tebo. “Specifically, we have been working with grade level and content area teams to ensure that what the students are doing matches the learning target…feedback generated through our Instructional Rounds visit.”

So what’s next? Several of the OAISD leaders have now begun Instructional Rounds networks within their own districts. In the Allendale Public Schools, for instance, the district’s instructional team has developed theories of action for all buildings and departments. Teacher leaders are being trained in the process and will conduct Instructional Rounds in each building next spring.

Holland Christian Schools Superintendent Glenn Vos summarizes the impact: “Instructional Rounds connects us in positive ways that encourage collaboration. In today’s educational landscape, those that try to stand alone will only fade, and those that stand together will continually grow stronger.”

Karen McPhee has worked at the Ottawa Area Intermediate School District for 28 years, the last eight as its superintendent. She had an atypical path into education, joining the OAISD as its Director of Communications after working in the television news industry for seven years. Karen has served as president of the Michigan Association of Intermediate School Districts and the Michigan School Public Relations Association. She is a life-long resident of West Michigan. Contact Karen at (616) 738-8940 Ext. 4001 or kmcphee@oaisd.org.
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Over the last year, I have had many conversations with newer superintendents about how to work with the business side of their school district to open new conversations on budget. In many of my districts I find that the budget process has been absent from discussions concerning the school improvement process. My observation is that school budget work is often an afterthought consisting of a rushed process at the end of a busy school year to meet the July 1 deadline of presenting a balanced budget.

The science of budgeting
There is a science to budgeting. Unfortunately the college accounting curricula in universities devotes very little time, if any, to budget theory and procedures. With the high turnover rate of Michigan superintendents, it is important that new leaders ask important questions on one of their most important roles. One question should be: How should our district best allocate scarce resources?

Retooling your budget process will require a new vision and related goals. Your district’s strategic plan will need to be a driver in the process. If a district lacks a strategic plan, it is important for you to secure an independent organization that can help in the development of a visionary plan that includes instruction, finance, and district operations as components.

Establish budget parameters
With your strategic plan in place, budget planning will increase your budget effectiveness. With agreement on the expected end result, you can set budget and spending parameters with your administrative and board leadership. The budget parameters, including those for contract negotiations, can drive the budget discussion with your organization during the budget process.

Identifying leadership roles for central office, principals, and supervisors is critical in the budget development phase to garner ownership. Breaking your large budget down into manageable cost centers with stated expectations and various options for future levels of service will help the superintendent and board oversee your large budget, usually one of the most significant financial operations in your community.

Abandon incremental budgeting
If across-the-board cuts are not meeting your classroom needs, it may be time to look at a zero-base budgeting approach by identifying the service levels you wish to preserve in our declining revenue environment. By embracing zero-base budgeting you will begin to agree that past spending patterns will no longer be taken as a given. Once this conclusion is reached, you can begin to move away from incremental budgeting habits used in the past to a more collaborative method of intentional allocations based on a level of desired service.

Flattening the decision-making process
It is important that top leadership—including the superintendent and board—agree to this process from the onset, because zero-base budgeting takes more organizational time and effort to execute. Your building and operational administrators also need to buy into this process. The process will require that current data be used as a basis for decision making and allocation of funding.
I have used a zero-base process for over 30 years, and my building principals would never want to turn back to outdated incremental budgeting since all budget data is now transparent and the entire leadership team helps to make budget decisions. As a result, there is less blame for budget disappointment directed at the superintendent and CFO. The decision-making process becomes flattened and less top-down with this method.

For more on zero-base budgeting, a research report recently released by GFOA may be accessed, free of charge, at www.gfoaconsulting.org under the research reports section of the resources tab.

**Relearn your business approach for schools**

One of the most effective and affordable methods of improving your school business approach, including budget, is to support and require certification of your support areas through the MSBO certification tracks. The areas of certification include, Business Office Manager, Business Office Specialist, Chief Financial Officer, Facilities Director, Child Nutrition Director, Human Resource Specialist, Operations Director, Pupil Accounting Director, Pupil Accounting Specialist, School Payroll Specialist, School Technology Management, and Transportation Director. The educational and networking opportunities that your key employees will be exposed to will be invaluable to your district.

**Chief financial officer and superintendent partnership required**

In order to retool or establish an effective budget approach, the superintendent will need to partner with your chief financial officer. Neither administrator can make these systemic changes independently of the other. Start with a conversation on your district aim and involve the business side of the operation early in the discussion.

Donald Sovey, CPA, is President and CFO of School and Municipal Advisory Services, P.C. He has served in public accounting and as a school business official for 34 years. His organization provides services to school districts in the areas of audit RFP preparation, budget systems, CFO search services, campaigns for bonds and millage, deficit elimination plans, district marketing, financial mentoring, long-range financial projections and office systems review. Contact him at donsovey@gmail.com.

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Despite the challenges, Michigan schools have navigated tough times effectively compared to national peers. According to a recent study by the non-profit research coalition Cobalt Community Research, Michigan schools have improved national ranking in community satisfaction (figure 1).

In its annual national community engagement and priority assessment, Cobalt found that Michigan districts’ relative ranking improved from number 23 in 2010 to number 17 in 2012. Michigan’s absolute score improved from a 57 to a 63. The score is based on a scale of 0-100, with 100 as the highest possible score. Summary statewide component scores are listed below in figure 2.

The research began in 2009, when MASA began working with Cobalt Community Research to develop a high-quality, low cost survey program designed to help data-minded school leaders identify the drivers of family engagement and community satisfaction.

The survey program, called the Cobalt School Engagement and Priority Assessment, helps districts benchmark about 80 measures of perception with similarly sized schools across the state based on a current-year baseline index. In addition, districts can customize the assessment to gather data on budget options, future programs, communication preferences and bond/millage questions.

The program was developed with the active involvement of MASA along with superintendents, board members, teachers and parents across the state. The program uses the science behind the well-respected University of Michigan American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI), so the quality of the data is very solid.

The program’s research model measures the performance and impact of individual components of school services (experiences) with the value the community places on the district (satisfaction), which in turn drives behaviors and perceptions (outcomes).

Many think of surveys as a way to measure “satisfaction.” Few think about the rich ways community feedback can identify which district services are most important and which drive behaviors such as keeping children in the district and recommending it to others. Thoughtful use of a quality tool helps ensure that parent and community feedback is actionable when making tough budget decisions, crafting strategic plans, strengthening improvement efforts and developing community outreach.
In tough times, actively seeking community feedback is a powerful way to a budget that delivers the most value for the least cost. Residents are much more likely to support schools when they have a credible voice in assessing performance and decision-making. And the non-profit coalition approach means that keeping or attracting just one child pays for the effort.

Knowing how citizens feel about their local school district gives school leaders a basis for making informed decisions. Local schools that engage families and the community overall have a more sophisticated understanding of community needs, priorities and expectations. Understanding these drivers of satisfaction helps to create goodwill, understanding, political cover and a map to help navigate difficult decisions.

William SaintAmour is Executive Director of the Cobalt Community Research nonprofit research coalition. You can learn more about Cobalt’s programs at www.CobaltCommunityResearch.org or by calling 877.888.0209.
Going the Distance

Reflections on how sacrifice and lifelong learning can change life for the better

By Carlos Lopez, Ed.D.

Editor’s Note: The following essay answers a question we posed to MASA’s Courageous Journey graduates: As you reflect on opportunities you have experienced that have supported you as a lifelong learner, what highlights come to mind?

Life is a “lifelong learning expedition” for me. As a human being I cannot imagine life without learning something every day. What a sad world this would be if we as educators did not take the opportunity to model the best of the teaching profession – active lifelong-learning.

I can remember as a child my mother reading to me stories in a balcony in Havana, Cuba. She would captivate my imagination and engagement by using intentional techniques that required me to ask inquisitive questions such as “I Wonder?” or “What If?” I loved my childhood, because my mother never saw poverty as a reason or excuse not to advance in life.

One day, she packed us up and we migrated to the United States. It took me years to understand why anyone would leave their family, their country, their language, their job to come to a foreign country where nothing was there to greet them. It has taken me years to understand how she could just pack her family and move to another country not knowing what would happen.

I remember the day I turned 50, I wanted to confront my mother and ask her why she did it?

She whispered in my ear, “Because it was the right move for you and your sisters. I had told each of you stories of opportunities, imagination, freedom, creativity and hope. I had to model for you and your sisters that fear and poverty was only a situational circumstance, not a permanent one. Life is a journey; you must take risks. You are the driver of your life and only fear keeps us from reaching excellence. I knew the fear, but the opportunities ahead had a louder voice. Your future and that of your sisters was more important to me than my own comforts. Where you feel that I have sacrificed my life for you, I see it differently. I know that the world is a better place because of my unselfishness. You—contributing to the betterment of others and doing the right thing – matter to society.”

Five things have supported me as a lifelong learner in my journey as a transformational leader. I operate under these five guiding principles that have allowed me to influence others to become lifelong learners.

1. Asking inquisitive questions – As a lifelong learner, I must always ask inquisitive questions that challenge the status quo. We have a responsibility to engage others in rich conversations on
“What if?” and “I wonder if?” What other questions should we be asking to better understand the challenge ahead?

2. Using systems thinking when solving challenges – As a lifelong learner, I need to take the time necessary to plan, examine data and conduct an organization tune-up to ensure efficiency and effectiveness.

3. Using 8 thinking maps to think about our thinking – As lifelong learners, leaders should consider modeling the use of thinking maps in helping other professional staff think about their thinking. This process has made a significant difference in my life.

4. Reflecting on our practice – As a lifelong learner, I need time to debrief and reflect on my practices, performance and how I lead. I need to be open to constructive criticism and flexible enough to make the necessary changes to obtain positive, unprecedented results.

5. Tell your story – As leaders, we must lead our organizations through stories of success, stories of us learning, stories of us collaborating and creating a better future for our children.

In conclusion, I now understand why my mother made such an unselfish sacrifice for me and my sisters. I figured it out while writing and reflecting on this piece. She had the courage to embrace and welcome an unknown future because she knew in her heart that together as lifelong learners we have the great opportunity to make great things happen on behalf of our children.

My message to all leaders: follow your heart and don’t miss the opportunity to model for others how “lifelong learning changes life for the better.” It might be the only thing that does.

Carlos Lopez, Ed.D., is Academic Leader for the Experiencia Preparatory Academy, and a graduate of MASA’s Courageous Journey. Contact Carlos at embracegreatness@yahoo.com.
Upon arriving to the Beecher Community School District in August 2010, I quickly noticed that the district leadership team I inherited primarily focused on addressing day-to-day issues in order to ensure that the district operated at an optimal level. In order for the school district to reach new zeniths, the concept of leadership had to be approached with a new lens. A visionary approach to leadership would need to be embedded into the culture of the district to ensure continuous improvement. To begin this process of transformation, the leadership team would need to become immersed in current/relevant best practice organizational leadership models.

Knowing that individuals need additional training to increase their leadership acumen and providing them with beneficial professional development experiences are two completely different things. If the dollars were plentiful, I would have loved to send my leadership team to various workshops or seminars around the state or country to learn about the concept of visionary/transformational leadership. Since this was not the case, I decided to conduct professional development sessions with my leadership team to ensure they were exposed to effective leadership models. I chose to conduct book study activities at our twice-a-month administrative staff meetings.

In this era of high-stakes testing and unrelenting accountability, one might wonder, “Who has time to read a book?” Many of my administrators, quietly of course, probably had the same thought.

In this era of high-stakes testing and unrelenting accountability, one might wonder, “Who has time to read a book?” Many of my administrators, quietly of course, probably had the same thought.

Next, the team read John Maxwell’s The 21 Indispensable Qualities of a Leader (2007). After finishing this work, we went on to read several other books throughout the year. We continue this practice to this day. The leadership team has approached these book studies as a professional growth opportunity and has begun to use the information discussed in the studies to improve the overall operation of the district.

As a result of the professional development book sessions, several district initiatives have taken place:

- A total overhaul of the district’s curricular framework has occurred with the implementation of the Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (S.T.E.M.) curriculum being used in grades K–5 and the College Board Springboard math and language arts curriculum being taught in grades 6–12.
- A 9th Grade Academy for incoming high school students has been created that focuses on “anytime,
anywhere” learning through the use of the Apple® MacBook One-to-One computer initiative.

- A district-wide grading scale with the elimination of the “zero” grade has been implemented.
- A district-wide assessment and intervention model has been implemented to challenge and remediate student learning.
- The conversation has begun about creating a balanced calendar for elementary students to address summer learning loss.

These are just a few of the initiatives that have come to fruition as a result of professional conversations that have taken place via the book studies. It is also important to note that there has been little administrative turnover since my arrival at Beecher. Thus, the same individuals who were focusing on day-to-day sustainability have now adopted and implemented a visionary approach to leadership. This change in approach has led to improved student achievement district wide.

In closing, since August 2010 the Beecher Community School District leadership team has read, synthesized and implemented the tenants of several books that deal with the various aspects of school leadership (see bibliography at right).

By modeling and providing professional development opportunities to the leadership team, we have transformed our district leaders into systemic thinkers who look for continuous opportunities to improve our system. This change in thinking will ultimately lead to the total transformation of the Beecher Community School District.

Josha L. Talison, Ed.D., is superintendent of the Beecher Community School District in Flint, Michigan and a member of Cohort 7 (Tier 2) of the Courageous Journey. His educational focus is on best practice instructional practices and providing dynamic learning opportunity for students.

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“Lifelong learners” are what educators crave. School mission statements highlight these words as schools purport to develop inquiring minds capable of sifting through myriad conflicting messages in search of the truth. Election seasons serve as Exhibit A as to why society needs lifelong, independent learners.

In order to lead, superintendents must also become lifelong learners to advance their students in a competitive world. In today’s economy “learning for all” must be more than a slogan—it is a moral imperative that forces district leaders to conquer previously undefeated learning obstacles. This requires new knowledge and new practice. Unfortunately, pressured educators sometimes avoid new initiatives, preferring to surrender to quotes like the following:

“If a child’s MEAP score impacted a parent’s ability to claim them as a dependent on their taxes then I believe we’d see a lot more effort on the parent’s and child’s end to ensure their success.”
– A frustrated teacher’s Facebook post

Schools cannot move forward if “learning for all” is countered in this manner by more than 10 percent of the staff. Since most school superintendents graduated in a past century—a time when society could afford to lose students to middle class factory jobs that have since dissipated—new learning is required to develop 21st century learners.

Fortunately, there is no problem developing superintendents who are lifelong learners. Superintendents learn everyday from the parade of unique situations they face and solve answering to the board, staff, and constituents. But these learning experiences, as challenging as they are, lie only at the expected managerial competency level of the job. Today’s superintendents must be more than managers of their districts. They must be educational leaders, and that requires a constant commitment to new learning and implementation.

Now, it must be stated that the demands on district leaders are enormous. Creating the right multi-million dollar budget formula has never been more difficult, and the onslaught of state initiatives has never been more pressing. Top these off with negotiations, relationships, discipline, bonds, etc., and it’s clear how arduous finding time to learn and lead a district in an educational direction can be.

The secret to becoming a lifelong learner under these trying conditions is PURPOSE. Unless a superintendent recognizes and answers the call to lead in a direction that awakens a sense of purposeful passion, he or she will never find the time to focus on learning and leading of consequence.

It’s been said that parenting is an example of purpose trumping time. What non-parents could ever see themselves finding the time to do and pay for all that is required during the first 20+ years of children’s lives? Purpose is what drives parents. Purpose is required to drive the application of lifelong learning from educational leaders.

Each superintendent must find a niche that makes sense in terms of driving students to perform at a higher level. The niche can lead in such directions as technology, literacy, service, arts, civility, leadership—anything that advances student learning.

Void of educational purpose, routine pressures tend to squelch superintendents into managers, not educational leaders. While acceptable in the past, today’s superintendents must find a niche that puts their district and students a cut above. Effective leaders find their purpose, study it, and make it happen.

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