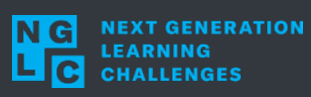


Supporting Learners to Achieve Greatness
North Dakota's Northern Cass School District

Spring 2023





North Dakota's Northern Cass School District

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One of eight finalists for the Yass Prize who were motivated by personal situations or the lack of education opportunities that exist for underserved students.

Northern Cass School District, an innovative public school district in North Dakota, for reimagining rural education and seeking to serve as a model for other districts seeking to implement a transformational, personalized, community-wide education model where other options for students are not available.



Northern Cass School District



Our Why

We believe every child can change the world; therefore, we will provide a **world class education.**

Our Values

We will commit to purposefully **build trust, develop authentic relationships, and engage in innovative practices** which will empower learners to be choice ready.

Our Collective Commitments

We are dedicated and passionate about **relationships, learning and teaching, self reflection, acknowledging greatness, and support of the Northern Cass community.** We are driven towards continuous improvement.



Fast Facts

- 688** total learners
- 332** PK-5 students
- 356** 6-12 students
- 33%** learners open enrolled
- 96%** daily attendance
- 54%** certified staff hold master's degree or higher
- 29** co-curricular activities
- 90%** 7-12 learners involved in at least one activity

Personalized Competency-Based Learning embedded at all grade levels.

One-to-One Technology at every level.



NC Graduates

Higher Ed



Military



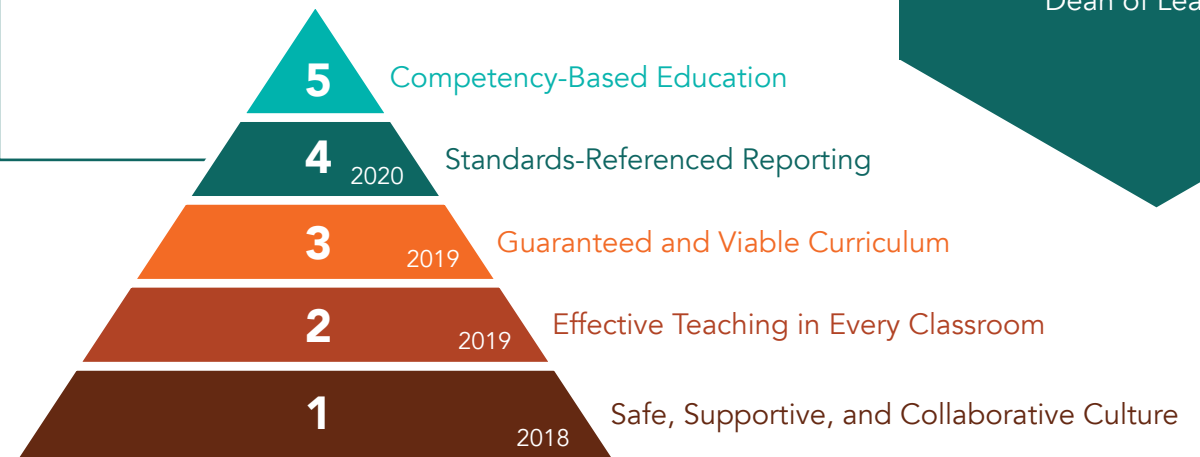
Workforce

Year	Higher Ed	Military	Workforce
2021	79%	5%	16%
2020	83%	7%	10%
2019	72%	5%	23%
2018	78%	2%	20%
2017	96%	-	4%
2016	92%	7.5%	0.5%



Marzano High Reliability School (HRS) Certified.

Northern Cass is currently certified in levels 1-4. This framework is based on 40 years of educational research, where best practices work together and provide indicators to empower districts and schools to measure their progress on attaining five increasing levels of reliability—where all students learn the content and skills they need to be choice ready.



We Provide a Community of Care.

Northern Cass has on-site therapy offered for learners through a partnership with The Village Family Service Center, United Way, and Burgum Foundation.



We Use a Team Approach.

- School Resource Deputy
- School Nurse
- Director of College, Care, and Life Readiness
- Director of Technology
- Director of Personalized Learning
- Personalized Learning Coach
- Social Worker
- Site Coordinator
- Dean of Learners



“ Before we started personalized learning and our journey with it, I was really skeptical about how it was going to work and if it was actually going to benefit us or not. And we definitely had a few years of a lot of changes and challenges, like our schedule and our structure. But looking back, I’m so grateful because [Northern Cass educators] cater to what is best for us and our future. It’s not just, ‘These are the requirements every student needs to graduate.’ We still do those, but we also have all the opportunities to go and explore specific areas of our own interest and not just waste our time in the building. Getting to choose makes me actually want to come to school.”

— Jaenna Wolff, Northern Cass High School, Class of 2022.

Northern Cass School District 97, “home of the Jaguars,” is located 30 miles northwest of Fargo, ND. All 688 learners from grades PK to 12 attend school on one campus in the small town of Hunter, ND. As Superintendent Cory Steiner explains, Northern Cass serves six rural communities, some as small as 250 residents. Many of these are employed in the agricultural sector, while others commute to and from Fargo, a metropolitan area of more than 200,000.

“Our communities do not have a lot of businesses in them,” Cory notes. “Probably the one negative thing people would tell you,” he says, “is that our location sometimes is inhibiting. Everybody has to drive to work here, everyone.” According to Cory, the challenges posed by the rural location have provided impetus for innovation. The district takes to heart the role of their schools as, in Cory’s words, “the hub” of the local community. As a result, he says, Northern Cass has long been known for creativity and flexibility.

Aware that teachers, as well as parents, have other nearby options, he points out that the majority of adults in the school community “might drive by 50 different schools before they leave the Fargo area, so we wanted to provide something that looked so different that people from all over would try to come here.” Enrollment data suggests that Northern Cass has done just that. Cory reports that approximately 35 percent of Northern Cass learners open-enroll from outside the district, an unusually high rate for a North Dakota school system.

In 2017 the district embarked on a deep transformation journey. Change was prompted in large part by a specific challenge posed by traditional schooling: the problem of time. “We took time out of the equation and said, ‘What if we could create a system that values every individual learner for who they are and gives them the time they need?’ That led to us shifting to a personalized, competency-based system.”



Find out more about key features of [Northern Cass School District 97](#) and its [four-year vision](#) for implementing personalized, competency-based learning of academic and Portrait of a Learner knowledge and skills.



Cory describes how what began as a pilot “with a small sliver of our learners in an online program” became the catalyst for a complete district redesign. In the pilot, students had the opportunity to progress through subject-area content at an accelerated pace, which created additional time for them to take college courses or participate in internships. During that year, educators realized that the pilot’s focus on self-direction, flexible pacing, and real-world learning had the potential to better serve all learners.

However, they also understood that nothing short of a complete redesign would allow that kind of personalized learning to happen for every student. “The problem with us doing little pieces,” says Cory, “was that it was never going to be the system-wide change that every learner deserved. So we decided to tear the system down to the bare bones and start all over.”

Building on what the district tried out in the pilot, a key element of Northern Cass’s learning redesign is self-directed, flexible pacing. Within guidelines appropriate to their developmental level, learners are able to take the time they need to achieve proficiency on priority standards and provide the three pieces of evidence required to demonstrate that learning. Empower, the district’s learning management system, supports educators to collect that evidence of proficiency and tracks learners’ progress toward meeting standards.

Once district schools embraced flexibility around pace, educators were inspired to make another significant change in the learning experience, the approach to grading. Northern Cass’s standards-based grading system reflects a growth mindset in which learning is a process. Score levels—rather than letter grades—indicate a learner’s progress toward achieving proficiency on each priority standard. In this model, a score of 1 or 2 does not denote failure or deficiency. Rather, it conveys the idea that the learner is “not yet proficient” and is still working toward it.

Standards Based Reporting Score Levels





01 The Northern Cass Portrait of a Learner

At the same time district schools were rejecting traditional practices like time-based learning and letter grades, the school community was also rethinking another fundamental aspect of education—the definition of student success that learners and educators were aiming for. Through book studies, conversations, and action research projects like interviewing former learners, educators came to the conclusion that a singular focus on academic preparation for college was not preparing learners for success in life.

“We were putting all our emphasis on whether or not kids went to college,” Cory recounts. “We knew we had learners that were going to college and never getting out [with a degree] and that there are whole other pieces for life, career, and the military. So we’ve changed everything to focus on being choice ready instead of college ready.”

Tom Klapp, a longtime science teacher at Northern Cass High School and now the district’s director of personalized learning, was one of the first innovators and teacher-leaders in the transformation to personalized, competency-based learning. He recalls those early conversations about learner success. “When we looked at our kids, content wasn’t the thing that they would go to college and struggle with. It was things like time management. It was things like, do they know how to be autonomous learners? Do they know how to be self-directed and know what motivates them? Those are the things that our kids were struggling with.”

Though Northern Cass is small, the district’s ambitions for learners are anything but modest. One of the books that inspired the work in the early days of the district transformation was *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap...and Others Don’t* by James

“ We're helping kids get the skill set they need to be successful. Not all kids are going to college. Not all kids are going into the military. Not all kids are going to go directly into the workforce, but some will. So we need to prepare them all for whatever that choice might be, whatever the future holds, which is a scary thing, because we have no idea what the future holds. So we look at it from a skill set standpoint, and that's where that idea of a portrait of a learner comes in.”

— Tom Klapp, Director of Personalized Learning, Northern Cass School District 97



Portrait of a Learner

Accountability

Able to show responsibility for all choices and following through with commitments

Communication

Clearly sharing thoughts and opinions so others can understand

Adaptability

To think deeply to find solutions to difficult problems

Learner's Mindset

Being flexible and willing to put in extra effort when things are difficult and striving to always improve

Leadership

Develops abilities in themselves and others in order to make a positive impact at school or in the larger community

A C.A.L.L. to

Greatness!

C. Collins. Since then, the theme of greatness has taken hold in nearly every aspect of the district's identity. For example, the short list of Collective Commitments for the district calls out "acknowledging greatness" alongside other important—and certainly more common—elements like relationships, innovation, and continuous improvement. Even the district's hashtag, #NCGREATNESS, expresses Northern Cass's bold vision for learner success.

One misstep along the journey to redefine success, Cory acknowledges, was excluding learners from the development of what was originally called the Portrait of a Graduate. "We messed that up," he admits. "The first time we built ours, we didn't have kids at the table." Consequently, when learners saw what the adults had created for them but not with them, their response was less than enthusiastic. Cory recalls, "One of the kids said, 'We should have a learner's mindset on there and here's why.'" Recognizing that the learners were right, district leaders let go of sole ownership of the Portrait and invited them to help revise it.

The current version of the Northern Cass Portrait of a Learner not only reflects the ideas and goals of learners, but it also resonates with parents. As Cory puts it, "I can walk into a room and tell parents, 'Your kids will have these five skills. They will demonstrate them hundreds upon hundreds of times throughout

their time at Northern Cass. They will do a capstone presentation where they will tell the story of how they built these skills. If they walk out the door with that, would you feel like your child has a chance to be who they want to be?" According to Cory, parents are unequivocal in their support of the Portrait skills as "the most important outcomes for ensuring their kids can be happy, healthy, fulfilled human beings."

The Portrait also expresses a shared vision of success for educators across the district, but developing the mindsets and skills system wide took time. For example, third grade teacher Megan Margerum, a finalist for North Dakota's 2023 Teacher of the Year, remembers how she and other educators at the elementary level originally reacted to the Portrait of a Graduate. "Honestly, I thought, 'That's just for seniors. That's just for high school kids. I don't need to worry about that.'"

However, after connecting with other educators at conferences and on social media, Megan started to ask herself, "Why are we not introducing little kids to these portrait skills that they need? I thought of the things that I could have done if I knew who I was as a learner—my whole schooling as a young kid could have been so different if I would've found out how I was as a learner and had those skills."

In addition to listing essential skills for success in college or career, the Portrait's acronym serves as a rallying cry for what their schools strive for: "A C.A.L.L. to Greatness" for all learners.



Reflections like these inspired Megan to become an innovator for personalized learning and a champion of the skills in what is now called the Northern Cass Portrait of a Learner. Especially in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and "all the things kids went through," Megan believes that even the youngest learners "need these skills now more than ever."

Learners of all ages in Northern Cass schools are supported to envision their futures through the lens of the Portrait of a Learner as in this Watch Me Grow project. (Photo is by Megan Margerum)



02 Agency and Relevance: Teaching and Learning for Life

Flexible Pacing.

According to Tom, providing learners with voice and choice is “a pretty easy way for people to start” the work of sharing ownership of learning with students and helping them develop Portrait skills like accountability and a learner’s mindset. The district’s learner-centered approach to the use of time is a prominent example of what learner self-direction can look like in practice. “We honor the fact that some kids will move faster and honor the fact that some kids need more time,” Tom explains.

Luke Bush, who teaches a variety of secondary courses, from seventh grade Geography to dual-credit classes in partnership with Valley City State University, describes the evolution of mindsets and practices around what Northern Cass educators now refer to as flexible pacing. Learners in Northern Cass schools still work with guidance from educators around timelines, but deadlines are flexible and,

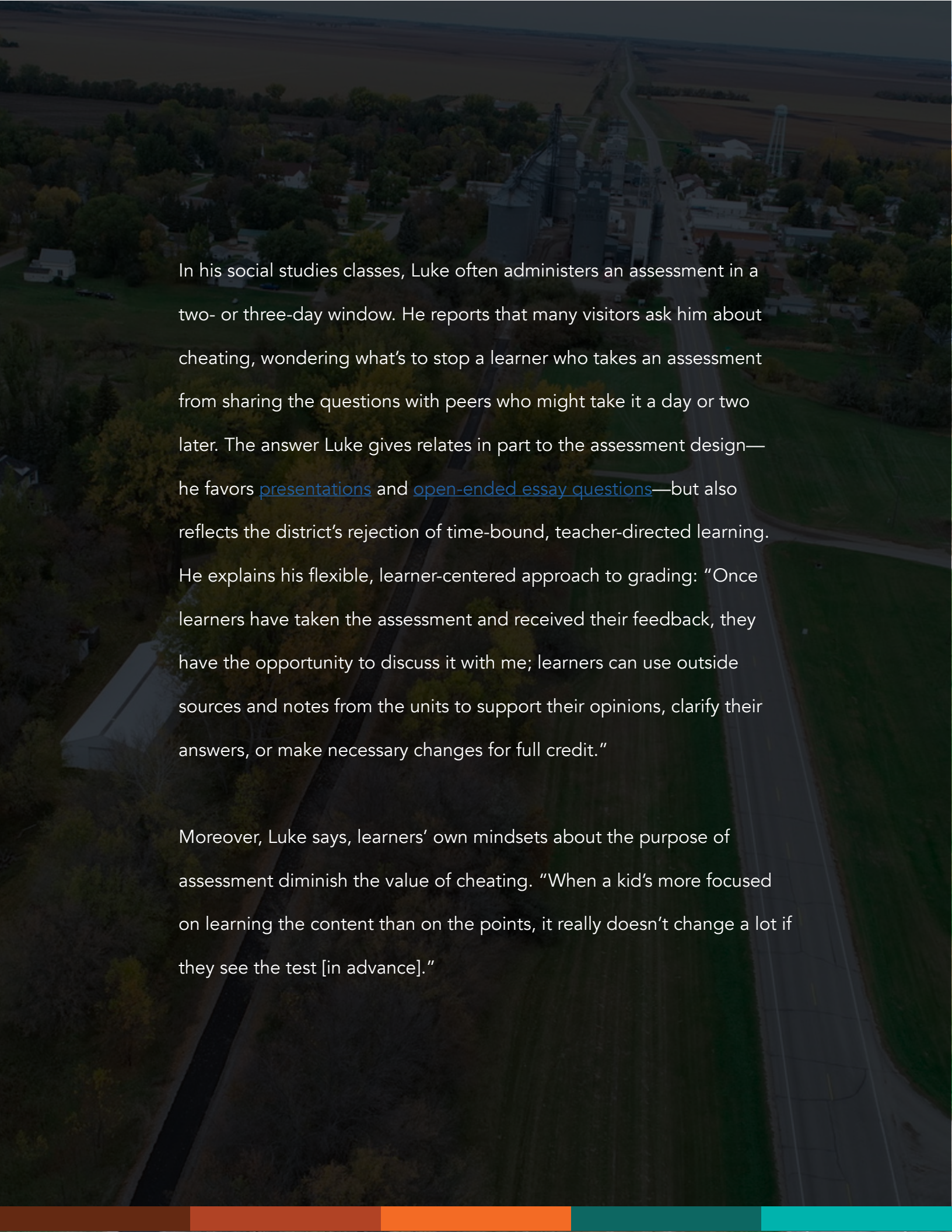
according to Luke, once they’ve demonstrated proficiency, learners can choose to work ahead or explore a topic more deeply, beyond the level of proficiency.

“Pace has been kind of a hot-button word for us because when we started personalized learning, it was about making sure that a kid can go as fast as they want to get through content,” he recalls. “We realized pretty quickly that they can fly through it fast, but hold on a second, they’re not getting the content at the depth that we want.” Today, he says, pace is more overtly tied to the broader commitment to learner agency.

An added benefit to flexible pacing, Luke observes, is that, “through freedom of pace, kids are more focused on learning the content rather than memorizing and just getting pieces done to meet a certain deadline.”

“ One of the things learners have said across the board is that **they’ve experienced having a say in their learning**. So if they feel like they could learn it differently or they’ve already learned it, they can advocate for that, and their educators will actually listen. They will tell you that the idea of a sit and get where they’re lectured at for 30 minutes and then they do the work is not what happens.”

— Cory Steiner, Superintendent, Northern Cass School District 97



In his social studies classes, Luke often administers an assessment in a two- or three-day window. He reports that many visitors ask him about cheating, wondering what's to stop a learner who takes an assessment from sharing the questions with peers who might take it a day or two later. The answer Luke gives relates in part to the assessment design—he favors [presentations](#) and [open-ended essay questions](#)—but also reflects the district's rejection of time-bound, teacher-directed learning. He explains his flexible, learner-centered approach to grading: "Once learners have taken the assessment and received their feedback, they have the opportunity to discuss it with me; learners can use outside sources and notes from the units to support their opinions, clarify their answers, or make necessary changes for full credit."

Moreover, Luke says, learners' own mindsets about the purpose of assessment diminish the value of cheating. "When a kid's more focused on learning the content than on the points, it really doesn't change a lot if they see the test [in advance]."

Learner Agency.

Learner voice and choice are also hallmarks of classroom instruction and assessment. Learning in Northern Cass schools, says Tom, "is not a regurgitation of information. We're changing it to problem solving. You have this information—now how do we apply that information to something new so that your learning becomes unique to you and you're making connections with something that sticks?"

"You see a lot of coaching sessions and conferencing with an individual learner or small group," says Cory. "You see a lot of station work where learners are engaging in different things. You see a lot of collaboration, a lot of open-ended work. Is there still direct instruction? Certainly, but it's very purposeful."

At the beginning of the district's transformation, Tom recalls, educators would often provide voice and choice by generating multiple options for how learners might tackle an assignment or provide evidence of proficiency. However, that approach not only "tripled the workload" for educators, it also meant that the adults still owned the process and were responsible for creating all of those options. Today, he says, educators are transitioning to co-designing more projects and tasks with learners. "After our kids have been in the system for three or four years, they're much

better at advocating and proposing something different" that aligns with their interests as well as to standards, he observes.

Northern Cass educators are quick to clarify that co-designing learning with learners and offering opportunities for self-direction, voice, and choice does not mean that learning is a free-for-all. Tom explains, "I don't want people to get scared and think that kids are just creating their own learning. They're not; there's still structured things that we have them do. There's still a lot of information that leads up to that point. But we ask them, 'Now that you have this information, how do you want to apply it? How do you want to show me that?' That's where we get into some real co-design of learning with kids."

Stacy Duffield, now the director of the office of teaching and learning at North Dakota State University, worked with the district for 18 years as part of NDSU's teacher preparation and master's degree program. Her frequent visits to schools and observations of educators provides a vantage point for describing what sets Northern Cass classrooms apart from traditional pedagogy and from her own practice as a former secondary teacher.

Stacy often shares examples of learner agency at Northern Cass with her pre-service teachers.



Listen to seniors talk about how Northern Cass's Intro to Teaching course has prepared them for future success.

For example, she describes a Language Arts learning environment with tables, comfortable chairs, and moveable desks arranged so that learners can face each other and work together and where learners “do more talking than [the teacher] does. There’s a lot of collaborative thinking and opportunity for student voice. Everything is about facilitating learning however the students needed it to happen. And if some students just need quiet, they put headphones on and noise block or listen to music. It doesn’t look at all like my classrooms did or probably most classrooms do.”

Stacy is also struck by how transparent and visible learning is at Northern Cass, a prerequisite for ownership and agency. Whether it involves a Candyland-style learning pathway on the bulletin board in a lower grade or a poster with exemplars and specific expectations around performance levels on a high school task, she says, “students know where they’re at and are tracking their own learning.”

In addition, she notes, educators provide learners with numerous opportunities to advocate for themselves in support of their learning. For example, she describes her visit to a high school science class shortly after an assessment of physics standards. Learners who had not yet demonstrated proficiency were afforded space, time, and educator support to re-engage with the learning and be re-assessed. The teacher, Stacy says, empowered learners to “tell what you need in order to work on the learning, what you need in order to build your proficiency here.”

“It was just incredible,” she recalls. “You had kids just all over the room, finding their spaces and then getting what they needed, with [the teacher] moving around to support them, and then, when they were ready, reassessing them on the spot using a different kind of assessment. It was like watching that light bulb in a cartoon going on above their heads.”

“When I first started out in education, it was about me directing the learning and me telling the kids where they were after a summative assessment. ‘This is where you’re at and that’s just it. You didn’t make it to where I’d hoped you would, but now we’re onto the next thing.’ At Northern Cass, the focus is on how we’re all gonna get there and it’s okay if you need to do something different.”

— Stacy Duffield, Director, Office of Teaching and Learning at North Dakota State University





Deep Engagement with Priority Standards.

“You have to start with the standards: what do kids need to truly know?” Tom asserts. However, when he and other district educators talk about a standard, they most often pair it with the word “priority.” As Cory points out, “If you were to teach every standard that the state of North Dakota lays out for you, it would take you something like 23 years to get through.” According to Cory, educators at Northern Cass applied criteria such as whether or not a standard was essential for future learning or life and worked together early on to distinguish low leverage standards from those that they judged to be high leverage. “We went from 35 to 40 standards down to ten or twelve in most courses,” he says.

According to Tom, identifying priority standards was an important step in the district’s personalization journey and is a key lever for supporting learners to achieve the Portrait of a Learner competencies as well as subject-area learning targets. “We assess the priority standards,” he explains, “and we guarantee that all kids get those at a proficient level. It doesn’t mean we don’t address the other ones.” However, by focusing on high-leverage standards, educators open up space for learners to engage deeply with both content and skills and to demonstrate proficiency in a variety of ways. “We require three pieces of evidence for proficiency. Not three tests, three pieces,” Cory points out.

“Do our kids still take traditional pencil and paper tests?” says Tom. “Absolutely. Kids need to learn those skills, too. But if the standard says ‘create a model,’ that doesn’t lend itself well to paper and pencil. So assessment definitely looks different, with a lot more interaction, a lot more presenting, a lot more building and creating than just sitting down and taking tests.”

Beth Head, who teaches science at Northern Cass High School, describes what learner self-direction looks like in her class: “My role is that I probably answer a thousand questions a day. If you walked into my room, I would most often be sitting next to an individual learner or a small group and answering questions versus standing in front of the room.”

With respect to assessment, Beth de-emphasizes “scoring” in the traditional sense. “It’s really about transparency, getting the proficiency scales in kids’ hands and interacting with them so that they know what’s being assessed from the start. As my kids are working through, say, a physics concept, the keys are all available,” she explains. “They’re checking their own work, they’re scoring themselves. I’m there to clarify, maybe re-explain something in a different way. So my role is more of giving feedback: ‘Okay, we got this one wrong. Let’s figure out where we went off.’ It allows me to sit down with that kid and work with them immediately.”



Hear from three Northern Cass educators who are rethinking their teaching practice through personalized learning, real-world connections, and relevance.

Integration of Portrait of a Learner Skills and Content Standards.

Not surprisingly, Northern Cass's goals for supporting all learners to develop the skills articulated in the Portrait are ambitious. As Cory puts it, "My long-term dream is that we would not be able to tell the difference between a priority standard and a Portrait of a Learner competency because they would be so enmeshed. We're challenging our educators to purposefully plan lessons this way. Like if [they are] teaching a priority standard in calculus, what is the corresponding Portrait skill that needs to be taught with the same level of depth and focus and level of urgency?"

According to Cory, Northern Cass schools worked on making this dream a reality throughout the 2021-2022 school year. Starting in the fall semester of 2022, educators are providing feedback on a Portrait standard in conjunction with each priority content standard in their courses.

Like Cory, Tom favors an integrated approach to content and competencies, and he argues that planning lessons that support development

of Portrait of a Learner skills alongside content does not have to be "that big of a lift. I think a lot of people struggle with this idea of 'Well, now I need to teach math and organization. And I don't have activities to teach organization.'" His response is, "Do math and just be intentional about how you organize math. How do you organize this question? How do you organize your work and materials? Be intentional about those conversations with your kids and then give them feedback on it."

Recognizing that developing choice-ready skills like those in the Portrait of a Learner is a multi-year journey, Tom adds, "It's not necessarily the job of the educator to say, 'You're proficient in time management or you're not proficient in time management.' The expectation is to be intentional about the [competency] that you pick to go along with the content you're currently teaching and to give feedback intentionally around the Portrait of a Learner. It just adds focus to what you're already doing."



Week _____ Name: _____

Day	Goal Today I need to learn/improve on/ complete...	Goal Achieved?	Behavior (Effort) Score
M		Y/N	1 2 3 4
T		Y/N	1 2 3 4
W		Y/N	1 2 3 4
Th		Y/N	1 2 3 4
F		Y/N	1 2 3 4

What are you proud of this week?

What collective commitment will you improve on next week?

What are you grateful for this week?

"Time management and goal setting are skills that seniors consistently bring up" as challenges, Beth notes. To support her students in science class to developing these and other Portrait of a Learner skills, Beth has implemented this daily goal-setting activity. At the end of each class period, learners reflect on their performance.

"Every day it serves as a check-in for where they are in the pacing guide, but it also works as a time management piece," Beth explains. Even learners who were previously disengaged, she says, respond well to this simple activity. "Kids that normally would just try to sit there meet their goal because they don't want to let themselves not meet their goal."

Experiences to Promote Portrait of a Learner Skills.

In parallel to the ongoing work to integrate Portrait of a Learner competencies with priority content standards across the curriculum, Northern Cass provides a number of signature experiences that focus on developing the Portrait skills. Some of these are well established, like internships and job shadows, community service projects, senior capstone projects, and performances of learning.

For Mackenzie Tadych, Northern Cass's director of college, career, and life readiness, real-world experiences are an ideal context for developing and reflecting on the Portrait of a Learner competencies and are also a way to provide learners with the relevance they consistently ask for. Although her official job description includes managing programs like internships, she describes her work as "really helping build that bridge between the school and community, helping kids figure out how they can relate what they're learning in school to what their passions are."

According to Mackenzie, Northern Cass has a long tradition of requiring community service as a requirement for graduation, whereas real-world workplace experiences aligned to the "soft skills" of the Portrait have been presented as "an opportunity if kids want it." However, in order to ensure that every learner has access to such opportunities, all Northern Cass High School students from the graduating class of 2026 onward will participate in either four job shadows or two job shadows plus an internship.

"All of those experiences," she says, "relate to our Portrait of a Learner." For example, learners currently engage in a reflection activity around the Portrait skills they observed or practiced during a job shadow experience. "For the internships," she explains, "it is more of a performance. At the end, they present on a Portrait of a Learner skill," including assessing their progress on developing that competency.

Another signature experience for practicing, reflecting on, and sharing growth with respect to the Portrait of a Learner competencies is the [senior capstone presentation](#), a requirement for graduation from Northern Cass High School. The capstone experience can take many forms, including workplace experiences like learning diesel mechanics on John Deere tractors or creating marketing campaigns for a local yoga studio, or independent scholarship through a multi-year research or art project on a topic of interest. "I have a freshman girl right now writing a graphic novel about the role of women's rights in history," says Cory. "She's starting it as a freshman. Her capstone will be finishing that book and publishing it. That's a really powerful experience."

As in the writing project Cory describes, learners apply and demonstrate content-area knowledge and skills throughout the capstone learning experience. However, the capstone presentation itself "is not about the content," explains Tom. "It's about the Portrait of a Learner skills they've gained" through the learning experience, and it's about sharing those with an audience of peers, educators,

leaders, and often external partners and mentors.

According to Tom, "There's two avenues that kids can go through to do their capstone [presentation]. One is a showcase of evidence." In this scenario, learners focus on one competency from the Portrait and highlight multiple activities in which they demonstrated it. For example, he says, "They might take leadership and showcase different opportunities they had to develop their leadership skills and identify their own leadership style."

The other option is to unpack one learning experience, such as an internship or a powerful school-based project, and explore all of the Portrait of a Learner skills they developed and demonstrated. "Kids do the capstone about one experience they want to highlight," he explains. "They take that really amazing experience and say, 'Here's how I used these skills in a very authentic, meaningful way to me.'"

Northern Cass educators report that the senior capstone has proved to be a peak experience for students, one that combines relevance to learners' passions and goals with the Portrait's broader definition of success. As a result, the capstone concept has, as Tom puts it, "filtered down to the transition levels—the eighth grade, fifth grade, and third grade. At those levels we call them gateways."

Luke, who co-teaches the year-long eighth grade gateway course with Tom, describes how the class leverages the Portrait of a Learner: "We know that our transition from eight to nine is big. Even though we're in the same school, there's a lot of changes that happen academically and maturity-wise. We go through our Portrait of a Learner skills, we have them reflect on what they are going to need to do to get more prepared for their freshman year, and we design activities and lessons to get learners to engage with those and prepare for their gateway project."



See how the [rubric](#) for the senior capstone presentation defines and assesses the Portrait of a Learner competencies.

Ongoing Innovation in Support of the Portrait.

The newest element in the Northern Cass portfolio of Portrait-inspired innovations is the “studio” model, which was piloted during the 2021-2022 school year as a potential way to increase learner self-direction, motivation, and engagement. “We want kids to enter this building with a sense of purpose, a sense of pride, and to really want to learn,” explains Tom. However, he points out that data collected from learners indicates that Northern Cass “is still really low on relevance and self-direction. That’s what the kids are telling us. We took that data and said, ‘What are we going to do about it?’”

To try out one possible answer, the studio pilot included nine high school students who were either not experiencing success or felt disengaged from learning. Some were seniors who, as Tom describes, “were behind pace and really on the verge of not graduating.” The time in their schedule set aside to get caught up was not working, he recalls, so that time was repurposed, replaced by a studio experience. Other pilot participants were “kids that had advocated to us that the school wasn’t really working for them. They were doing fine, but they just wanted to learn differently.” Instead of repeating or replicating course content, he explains, “We co-designed studios with them to get the standards they were missing” while at the same time, “doing something that matters” to them.

According to Tom, the key feature of studio design is leading with engagement, relevance, and Portrait of a Learner skills rather than

content. “They’re still working on the standards they need, but we designed the experience first and then said, ‘Okay, how are we gonna embed the standards you’re missing into that?’ We design the experience backwards to make sure that we’re hitting those Portrait of a Learner skills very intentionally. We build the content in there, too, but we do the skills first.”

For example, Tom tells the story of a senior who had not met standards from a film studies course and also needed support in time management and communication. “This particular young lady is very musically talented, but shy, not confident, so for film studies, we co-designed [a studio] with her to alter a scene from a movie by changing the soundtrack, by singing and recording a song. Then we set her up with a professional musician who has a recording studio.” Over the course of the project, the learner was given coaching support to set goals, manage her time, and communicate authentically with an external partner, as well as demonstrate proficiency in content standards.

Film studies studio

by Emily K

Experience the culminating product of one learner’s studio, a new version of the final scene in the film *Into the Wild*, updated with an alternative song performed and professionally recorded by a Northern Cass senior.

The studio’s “experience-and-skills first” design approach proved so successful that starting in the 2022-2023 academic year, any high school learner can apply to participate, and educators are already discussing ways to further expand the studio experience at the high school level in the future. In the meantime, the entire Northern Cass middle school schedule has been redesigned so that all learners will

spend their afternoons in six-week studios, such as “Rugged Readers,” a hybrid of nature-themed literature and outdoor experiences, or “Fantasy Sports Math.” Mornings will focus on core subjects, but the studios will provide opportunities to apply content and develop Portrait of a Learner skills—like leadership—while pursuing an interest and creating a culminating product of their own choosing.





03 A Culture of Innovation and Continuous Learning

In Northern Cass schools, Portrait of a Learner competencies like Adaptability and Learner's Mindset apply to the adults in the system as well as to the learners. Again and again, leaders and educators highlight the role of change-positive mindsets and a willingness to take action to learn, even if the result is failure. One of Cory's signature phrases is, "Brave before perfect," and, educators report, district leaders' modeling helps create a "safe to fail" culture.

For example, Beth notes that the schedule has changed numerous times in the past decade. "To me, it shows that our administrators are very willing to adapt when our educators see that something isn't working or that a change needs to happen. We're willing to try it, we're willing to fail. And if it does fail, then we find a different solution to it."

Tom describes this aspect of culture as an "action research mentality," which he sees as vital to continuous improvement. "People say you shouldn't experiment on kids. Well, we always experiment with kids. We're always trying new activities and new methods. That's the whole point. And sometimes they don't work, and sometimes they work fantastic. That's how we grow our practice and become great at what we do. But we have to constantly be in the state of action research and be willing to try something, be willing to look at it and stick with it long enough to get a sense of whether or not it worked."

From her experience observing student teachers at Northern Cass schools, Stacy draws parallels between the adult culture and the personalization of student learning. "I'll use the word agency," she says, "because that's an

" We're okay with change because we know that **change is going to make us better**. It doesn't matter if we're learners in elementary school or high school educators, it's an expectation and a mindset that everyone is always growing. Everyone might be running at a different speed, but we're all going forward together. That's the mindset of the school, and I'm just grateful to be a part of it and have the reward of seeing all of those learners go out and change the world one step at a time."

— Mackenzie Tadych, Director of College, Career, and Life Readiness

important concept in personalized learning for students, but also for educators. There's freedom to take risks and to do what's best for kids. And then if you need to, try again. It's not that you're just flying by the seat of your pants, because personalized learning is very playful, but you're fluid in that if this isn't working or a student needs something different, we're going to go in a different direction."

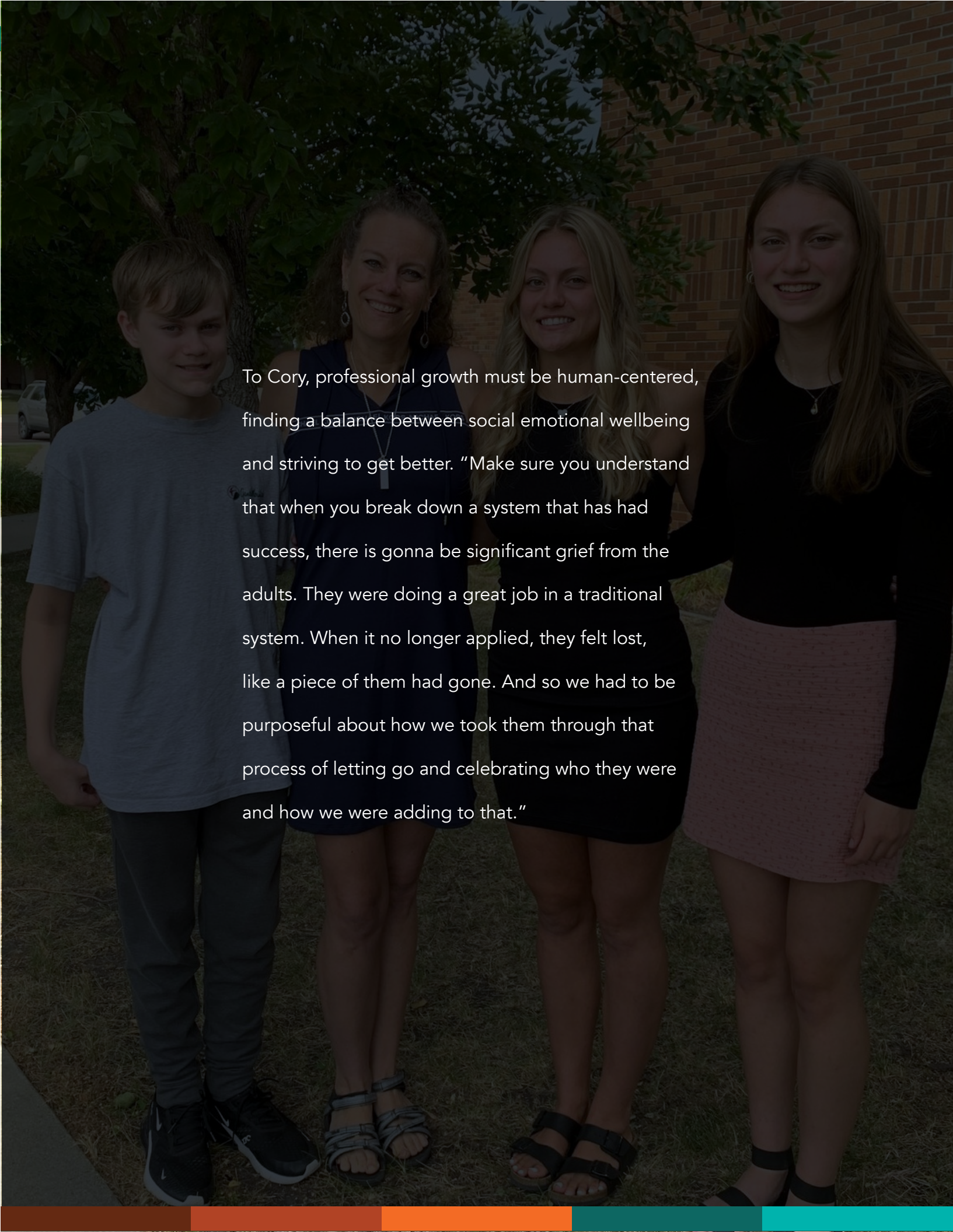
According to Northern Cass educators, a powerful example of agency and a learning mindset working together is the approach to professional learning. Key features of adult learning in the district include personalization, collaboration, and learning from peers within Northern Cass schools, from partner organizations like NGLC and Transcend, or from other districts as far away as California, Maine, or Pennsylvania.

Tom describes the rationale and format for personalized adult professional learning. "To personalize education for our kids, we've personalized PD for our adults. We have a PD day every month, and four of the eight hours are protected time where educators engage in a personalized professional learning plan" and then report back to their administrators. "So whatever it is you're trying to accomplish in your learning center (classroom) with your kids," he says, "you can find the learning that you need to do to continue to grow as an educator."

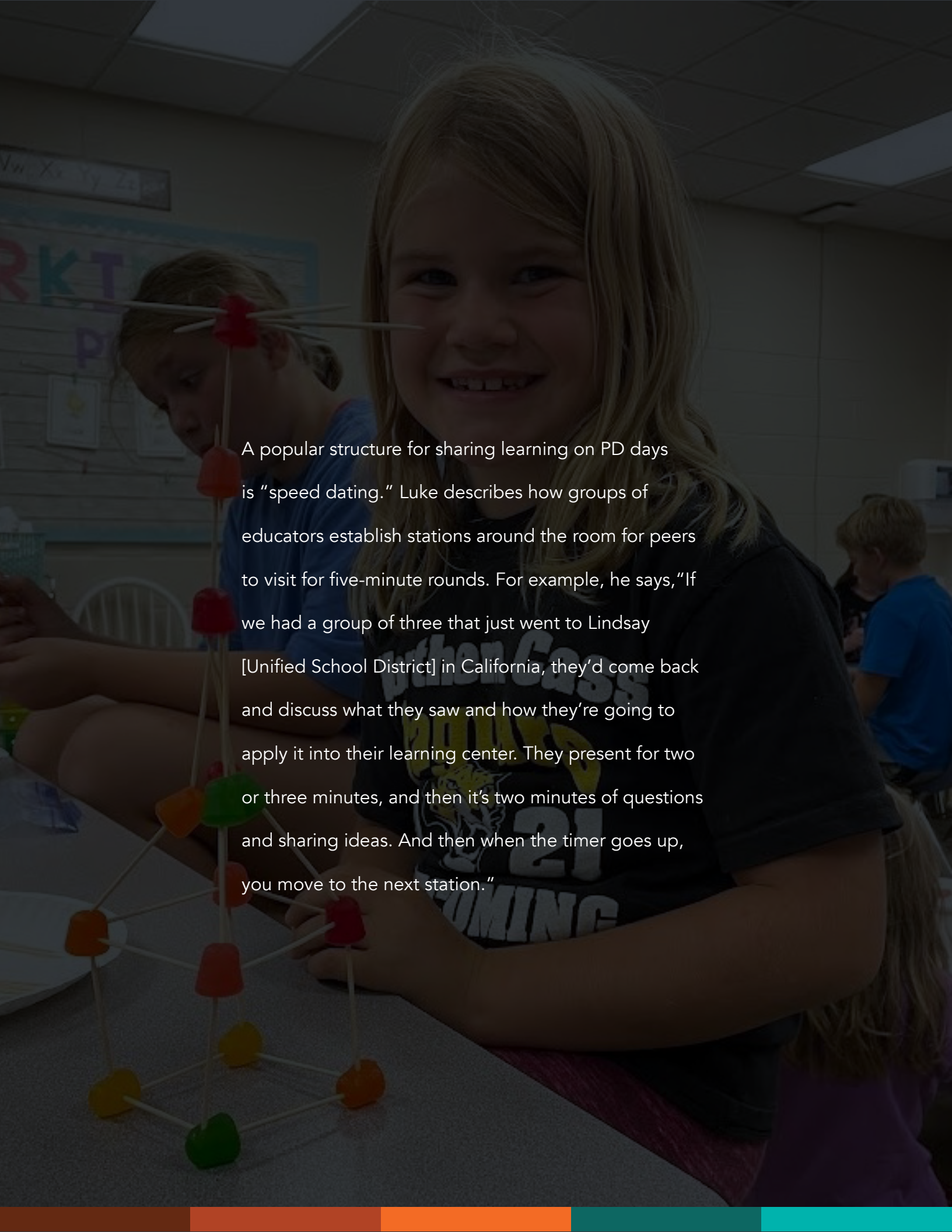
Common self-selected learning activities for educators include webinars, site visits to other schools, and spending time with Tom or personalized learning coaches for individualized support. Megan, who calls the many PD options a "cool way for people to decide what they need next," has used Twitter chat as a learning experience, and often invites others into her room as part of her professional learning.

More formal structures for adult learning include a Teacher Leadership Academy offered in partnership with the University of Jamestown, where educators can earn a master's degree in education. According to Cory, the district has also created a micro-credentialing process through which educators can engage in action research in their learning centers. As an added incentive for educators, he says, "They actually get a bump to their base salary the following year" for participating in this action research project.

Working in tandem with the self-direction and personalization of professional learning is a shared commitment to collaboration and sharing. Stacy sees this as a notable departure from traditional practices. "When I was a teacher, nobody shared anything because it was like a rite of passage. 'I worked so hard on this. I'm not gonna hand it all to you.' The level of collaboration that's required to be part of the Northern Cass culture is much higher than at most schools. It's just a really different way of thinking about work and being a colleague."



To Cory, professional growth must be human-centered, finding a balance between social emotional wellbeing and striving to get better. "Make sure you understand that when you break down a system that has had success, there is gonna be significant grief from the adults. They were doing a great job in a traditional system. When it no longer applied, they felt lost, like a piece of them had gone. And so we had to be purposeful about how we took them through that process of letting go and celebrating who they were and how we were adding to that."



A popular structure for sharing learning on PD days is “speed dating.” Luke describes how groups of educators establish stations around the room for peers to visit for five-minute rounds. For example, he says, “If we had a group of three that just went to Lindsay [Unified School District] in California, they’d come back and discuss what they saw and how they’re going to apply it into their learning center. They present for two or three minutes, and then it’s two minutes of questions and sharing ideas. And then when the timer goes up, you move to the next station.”

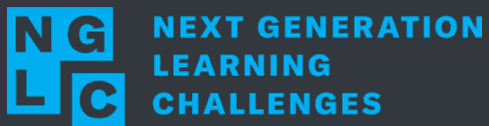
One collaborative learning activity that Beth finds particularly meaningful is monthly instructional rounds, in which a mix of educators from different subjects and levels observe each others’ teaching, provide [feedback](#), and discuss what they saw using a [debrief protocol](#). “We have a tight-knit culture across the schools. We’re all going through the same thing at the same time, and we lean on the common experiences,” she notes, adding, “I think I’ve learned the most from our elementary educators.”

Another way educators balance the personalized aspect of professional learning with collective capacity building is by regularly sharing what they are learning with their peers. According to Luke, district leaders seldom say “no” to an educator’s request to visit a school or attend a learning experience. However, he says, “The question a lot of times is, if we’re going to pay for you to do this, what are you going to bring back?” By providing structures for collaboration and sharing, he says, “You can use one PD session to make twelve educators better.”

For Cory, collaboration among peers and stakeholders is essential to learning and improving. Within the Northern Cass community, the district conducts empathy interviews with learners, parents, and educators. “And what we heard is that our parents no longer are asking us to go back to the old system,” he reports. “They’re asking for

more of this one.” Cory also meets regularly with a learner advisory council. “They’re great at advocating. They’re not afraid to give feedback about what’s good and what’s not good.” What they are asking for, he says, is even more power and control over their learning. “And they know that something will be done with that feedback,” he adds, noting that innovations like studios and expansion of workplace experiences were inspired by learners’ expressed needs and advocacy.

With respect to collaborating with those outside of the district, Cory urges districts new to personalized learning and implementing a broader vision of learner success to “find out who your partners are out there. This work is really difficult. We’re one of the small five or ten percent in the country that are doing it, and it can be isolating.” He adds, “What we have found is that everybody who’s doing this work wants people to do it with. And we all believe it’s so important for more people to be doing it that we’re willing to help in any way possible.” ■



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