



Keeping the Kids Front of Mind:

Going from Central Office to Elementary
Principal with a Special Education Lens

Leadership in Action: Wanda Suarez

When Wanda Suarez first joined the School District of Lancaster, Pennsylvania 19 years ago, she was working in the district's curriculum office. But, from her days as a Special Education teacher in Chicago Public Schools prior to moving east, she realized that while she was certainly able to make an impact in the central office, her heart was really with the students and parents.

She soon left central office and returned to a school setting, first as a dean of students then as an assistant principal, and is now completing her ninth year as principal of Lafayette Elementary School where she's getting the time with students and parents she was missing.

"This is going to sound silly," she said in a recent interview with NISL, "but you feel kind of like a rockstar when you're a principal at an elementary school. I get to walk down the hallways and get high-fives and knuckle punches. The kids are just fantastic, they fill my soul is what they do."

The students are truly the central focus for Suarez, especially as someone with a background in special education.

"It's really easy to see where the kids' deficits are and we're all pretty good at identifying that as educators. But when you come from a special education background what you're always looking for are the child's strengths."

She explained that her background in special ed frames her approach to all students; she looks for the students' strengths as her entry point to build from, reaching every student where they are.

This is closely tied to Suarez's goal of ensuring that Lafayette's students are college and career ready, even if they are only in third, fourth or fifth grade.

"It's my responsibility to start the foundation so that they have the knowledge and skills to either go to college or have what employers are looking for," she explained.

This mindset is especially important in the Lafayette Elementary School community since the student population is so diverse. Lafayette is on the southwest side of Lancaster which has a large refugee resettlement community and, as a result, students at her school speak a total of nine different languages. The Lafayette community also has a rising poverty rate of 89% and nearby Lancaster city has some housing instability challenges.

While Suarez said Lafayette students have performed well from a student growth perspective, lagging overall achievement rates pose a real challenge.

This is where NISL came in at an opportune time for Suarez. Last year, she was invited to participate in the NISL Executive Development Program (EDP) under the SEED grant. While at first she was hesitant, a bit overwhelmed by the amount of work the EDP seemed to require, she eventually decided to commit to the process. She says it was the best decision she had made in a long time.

“Principals struggle with leaving our building a lot of the time because we like to be in control. So with NISL, you have to be at two-day trainings once a month. And in between those trainings there was a lot of homework, a lot of reading, a lot that needed to happen.”

Describing her interactions with her cohort of SEED participants across the state, she said “at first when they gave us all these books and materials in huge binders, we thought what did we get ourselves into? But every month we would leave the NISL trainings thinking, ‘Wow, this was really good.’”

She discussed how she began to really start implementing, in small doses, what she was learning at the EDP facilitations each time she’d return to her school.

“The more I kept doing it, the more excited I got. I just became completely engrossed in it,” she said. “It got to the point where I was taking what I was learning there and doing it with my leadership team at the school.”

For example, Suarez took the conversations from NISL around aligned systems and the importance of having a clear mission and a clear vision back to her school staff. They found that the mission statement was not aligned to the broader goals of the school, members of the school community did not even know what it meant or where to find it. In the end, the school leadership team re-worked their mission statement to be: “At Lafayette, we learn and teach by providing equity for all students as we prepare them to be college and career ready.”

For her EDP Action Learning Project, Suarez decided to focus on what she knew needed her attention most: the schools’ achievement scores. She decided to take what she had learned about formative assessment from the EDP and apply it at Lafayette.

“I took all the information that we were learning and I really was intrigued by formative assessment as a high-leverage strategy that costs nothing but that would yield some incredible results if you were to implement it correctly,” she explained.

So she purchased the book that NISL had provided her on formative assessment for her entire leadership team by Dylan Wiliam, *Embedding Formative Assessment*. The team came to an agreement on how they would implement formative assessment in their school context and, coming back to her special education roots, concluded that they would use any evidence they had to adapt teaching in order to meet the kids where they were.

The day the achievement scores were released in the Fall of 2017, Suarez says she did a little dance.