



Nebraska Department of Education

300 Centennial Mall South ♦ Lincoln, Nebraska ♦ 68508

High Ability Learning

April 2021

Remembering Your "Why"



In a year where everything we have known is turned upside down, we have been challenged like never before. This school year has undoubtedly been the most taxing year of many people's careers. New regulations, technology, inconsistency, and doing

everything on the fly as it changes is exhausting. That being said, it has also made us stronger. We know more now about how to deliver knowledge to students in ways we never saw possible. We have opened doors to new possibilities long after the pandemic is over. We have learned that we are capable of way more than we ever thought.

That being said, these crazy times can make us lose our "why." Your "why" is the reason you got into teaching, the reason you love your job, and the reason you stayed through this whole crazy year! As the school year comes to a close, I call on you to reflect upon your "why."

This newsletter is not filled with more information. It does not have strategies and research. I am taking this time to be vulnerable and share with all of you why I am so passionate about my position. Feel free to read or to pass this edition by. Whatever you do, please remember that spark and that reason you are here with these children.

If you feel compelled, I would love to hear from you! You can tag me on Twitter (@NDE_HAL) and share with the hashtag #MyWhy, or you can shoot me an email. I would love to hear some other "whys" out there!

Thank you for all you do!



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#MyWhy

I am going to start by telling you a story.

A young child in a rural school district lived with her mom and younger sister. Her father left when she was in first grade, her mother barely had a high school diploma, and her sister had medical disorders causing her to be sick often. Meals were scarce and her mother was not always kind. She loved school and went into kindergarten able to read. She loved books and read voraciously. She was a quiet child, so she was often overlooked.

As she got older, her mother was not around often. She was left with her younger sister and tasked with ensuring she was taken care of. She did not have time to do schoolwork, and she often slept at school after being up late. Her teachers became frustrated and her grades fell. She still showed high aptitude in reading and writing, but there was a stigma surrounding her home situation. Investing in this student was not something that the school was interested in.

The day she turned fifteen, she started working to support her family. She was often pre-occupied with taking care of her sister, so she continued the same pattern into high school. She was put into Honors English, but the preconceived notions about her because of her background continued to follow.

She was not sure she wanted to continue with school when she had her family to feed, bills to pay, and responsibilities, but she applied to college. She was not expecting to get in or be able to go if she did. To her surprise, she was accepted to a college out-of-state, and she decided to attend. When she left for her freshman year, her mother told her not to come back. No support system, new state, and all alone, she looked forward and set out to achieve her goals.

She felt so far behind her peers. It seemed like everyone knew what they were doing and had so much more preparation. There were times she was completely lost, times she thought she wouldn't make it, even times she almost had to drop out.

She went on to be an English major. She went on to win two writing awards in her time at college. She went on to graduate Cum Laude with her bachelor's degree. She went on to earn her master's degree in teaching. She went on to be a middle school teacher. She went on to be the director of gifted services for the state of Nebraska.

The girl is me. My name is Sheyanne Meadows, and this is my story.

My purpose, my "why", my passion comes from this story. Because I was a student from a poor home, I did not have access and opportunities to develop my talent. Teachers did not see me as a gifted student, so they did not challenge or give me opportunities to show my skills. I did not



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have the experiences that my peers had because I could not afford extracurriculars, enrichment activities, or access to learning outside of school. My resilience and tenacity got me to where I am today. I want to help students who are like me, and I want it to be easier for them. I want gifted students to be seen, to grow, to have opportunities. This has framed my work and my beliefs.

I believe that opportunity and access is important for all gifted students—including the ones that we have not found.

Underrepresentation of ethnic minorities, low socioeconomic status, English language learners, students from rural settings, and other marginalized populations is a huge issue in gifted education. From identification procedures to quality of programming, gifted education favors middle to upper class White students. What speaks to me most is data, and the data is bleak. For the 2015-16 school year, the Office of Civil Rights collected data on the composition of schools and gifted programs. The results were disheartening, showing that African American students comprise 19% of students in the United States, but only 10% are represented in gifted programs (Ford, Grantham, & Whiting, 2008). This is nearly 50% underrepresentation for African American students. Similarly, Hispanic students make up around 25% of students, and only 16% are in gifted programs (Ford, Grantham, & Whiting, 2008). Additional data reveals startling information about tests. In 2017, 2% of African American students scored "Advanced" on the 4th grade NAEP math assessment, and 3% of Hispanic students scored in the advanced range (Peters, Rambo-Hernandez, Make, et. al, 2019). 11% of their White counterparts and 24% of their Asian American counterparts scored "Advanced" on the same assessment (Peters et al., 2019). According to data from the Office of Civil Rights (2012), 55% of high schools in the country offer calculus, but only 29% of those schools with the highest enrollment of African American and Hispanic students offer calculus. Similarly, 66% of high schools offer physics, but of the schools with the highest enrollment of the previously mentioned minority groups, only 40% offer physics. This is just a small picture, but the lack of access to rigorous programming for African Americans and Hispanic students is prevalent. Similarly, students from low socioeconomic backgrounds are also underrepresented. In an article published by NAGC and the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, they note:

"The raw gaps we identified were profound. Among those in kindergarten through fifth grade, students in the highest SES quintile (top 20%) were nearly seven times more likely to receive gifted services than those in the lowest SES quintile (bottom 20%). That is, just 2% of the lowest-SES students received services, compared to 13% of the highest-SES students. But the highest-SES students were much more likely to receive services even than the students in the next-highest SES quintile, about 7% of whom were marked as gifted" (Grissom, Redding, Bleiberg, 2019).



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Students from underrepresented populations often do not have access to high-quality curriculum, social/political capital, or equal access to opportunities such as summer programs, experiences, technology, etc. Because these students may not be identified and challenged, they often fall through the cracks and do not have a chance to tap into their potential and actualize their talents. We have to look harder for these students in order to provide appropriate services and unlock potential.

I believe that every student has the right to an educational experience that helps them learn and grow, including gifted students.

In the era of No Child Left Behind, we have put a focus on ensuring all students are achieving the standards that we have set for each grade level. RTI, MTSS, IEP, IDEA; the list of acronyms goes on for ways to support learners who are not meeting set expectations. But what about students who exceed our expectations? What about the students who know what they need to know for their grade level? In a study by Farkas and Duffett (2008), they found 65% of teachers reported that they received little to no preparation for meeting the needs of students who met grade-level expectations in their pre-service programs. If gifted learners are not being fed at the level of their ability, they are not going to make growth. We value if a student performing at the 30th percentile makes growth to the 40th percentile, but a gifted student who goes from the 99th percentile to the 90th percentile is still above the line of achievement, so we do not perceive this as a negative. Unfortunately for our high ability learners, closing the achievement gap means stagnation at the top. One quote that is poignant to illustrate this fact, from Wade Nelson, "When minimum expectations are mandated or even emphasized, they often become maximums." Gifted students DO need services to meet their unique needs.

There are so many negative stigmas surrounding gifted programming. Many call gifted programs "elitist" and "inequitable", not understanding that the goal is not to favor some over others, but to give everyone a chance to learn. This especially rings true for parents. They do not like the dichotomy of gifted/not gifted, especially if their child is in the latter category. Rather than drawing hard lines, we must see students as on a continuum, and the goal of gifted education is continuing to move high ability students along the continuum equally, just as we do their "non-gifted" peers.

I could go on and on about every topic in gifted education, but I digress. As a state director, I sit in a pretty cool position. I impact state policy, provide expertise and assistance, provide professional learning, and get to learn the ins and outs of the schools in my state. Currently, I am working on a revision of the legislative rule, which has not been updated since 1998. In this role, I can use my background and beliefs to shape policy and procedure. My passion to bridge the wide gap between research-based best practice and what is happening in schools is what



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drives my work. I want to impact gifted student learning in a positive way. I want to make the little girl from a rural school proud.

This is my why.

Share your why!

Twitter : #MyWhy to @NDE_HAL

Email : Sheyanne.meadows@nebraska.gov

I look forward to hearing from you!



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