



Glean Education's Ed Leaders in Literacy Podcast Episode #10 - Hilderbrand Pelzer III

- Speaker 1: There's no way we should be in high schools, engaging in guided reading. That is a early literacy experience. So in the early grades, this has to be fixed.
- Speaker 2: The results, they've been immediate. And we had one of the biggest shifts in the state.
- Speaker 3: It's almost magical when it all comes together. And I think to myself, this is what education is about.
- Speaker 4: There were inequities everywhere. My students in south Texas ultimately taught me more than I taught them.
- Speaker 5: Over 40% of our students were leaving third grade with less than proficient reading skills. And that was just something we had to stop.

Speaker 6: The bottom line is that we can prevent reading failure. We can change the trajectory of these students' lives. And I just want to shout from the rooftops, "It can be done."

Jessica Hamman: From Glean Education, this is "Ed Leaders in Literacy," a podcast series that features educators and administrators who have made hard decisions about instruction, curriculum, intervention, and school systems to close the achievement gap and build equity by improving literacy.

Jessica Hamman: I'm Jessica Hamman, founder of Glean Education. And on the show today is Hilderbrand Pelzer III. He's an award-winning teacher and school leader with three decades of experience in urban education. He's the author of the book, "Unlocking Potential: Organizing a School Inside a Prison" and a speaker whose Ted Talk, "What Incarcerated Youth can Teach Teachers" addresses issues of reading instruction, educational equity, and illiteracy in the juvenile justice system. Mr. Pelzer is a thought leader and activist who is raising awareness about educational inequities and the strategies for fixing them. Mr. Pelzer, it is such a pleasure to have you here today. I've heard so much about the work you've done and I'm thrilled to be able to share it and hear more about what you've done. So take us to the beginning and tell us a bit about what brought you into education in the first place and what fueled your passion for supporting disadvantaged youth.

Hilderbrand Pelzer: Absolutely. And thank you for having me. I come from a family of educators, my mother and father, both educators. My mother in



fact is a retired principal. My father is a retired guidance counselor. And so education has always been a part of my life, even going through high school and college, really wasn't sure what I was going to do, even though I knew education was something that I could do or I was familiar with. But when I came out of college, I graduated as a health and physical education teacher. And I took on a job at a juvenile correction facility for health and physical education at the time. But it was in that setting that I was exposed to some learning disabilities, literacy concerns, and just seeing the educational environment from a perspective of incarcerated youth, which got me to really think about maybe what I knew about from my parents was something that I should be doing, which is education.

Hilderbrand Pelzer: And I eventually made a decision to go back to school for education administration and pursue a career in leading a school. And that's how I got into this profession really with, through the exposure of incarcerated youth. And since I haven't looked back. Served as a teacher assistant principal. A principal, worked at the district level. Currently still a principal at an elementary school. And so this is something that I'm very passionate about and trying to bring equity to issues that help coach up teachers and just really make education what it is, powerful.

Jessica Hamman: So bring us back to that first experience of working in the correctional facility in Philadelphia, I believe. Tell us, kind of lay the scene for us and some of the things that you started becoming aware of when you were working there.



Hilderbrand Pelzer: Yeah, so I applied, it's interesting. I applied for that particular job because I needed a job. And so they were looking for a health and physical education teacher. I didn't know anything about incarcerated youth or juvenile justice other than what I read or heard. And so I was invited to interview. And it was a place, a state facility, one of nine across the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania for juvenile males from across the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. And the place is barb wires, all around, wired fences, that type of thing, really secured environment. And I interviewed for a health and physical education position. And still at that time, really didn't think too much of it other than I needed a job. And really, that's being very transparent. I just wanted to work at that time. And so I got the job, I was teaching health and physical education.

Hilderbrand Pelzer: I was coaching. I was learning about education with my colleagues who were math teachers and science teachers and social studies teachers. But it was an experience where the principal of the school who in fact was a mentor. And he was a physical education person. So I always knew, wow, you could be a principal coming from the physical education background. But on days that he was absent, the assistant principal, another fine gentleman... And both of these gentlemen, gentlemen had passed on since. So they're mentors that are no longer around, but their mentorship still stays with me today, would invite me to help him look over the classes. And really that's all I did. I just looked over the classes, walked around the building, made certain nothing happened because, remember, it was a secure facility. So I wasn't being an administrator of something or really supervising instruction.



Hilderbrand Pelzer: But I was just really checking on making things, making sure things were safe. But what I saw were the same students who I saw in the physical education setting, athletic, strong, could lift weights, could articulate, play sports, all of those kind of things, great quarterbacks, great basketball players, you name it, in the classroom just looking very, very fearful of what the teacher was asking them to do, write, perform math, present. All of those things was just shocking to me to see the same kids in two different environments performed totally opposite than what I knew them of.

Hilderbrand Pelzer: And then that is what really was profound and something I said, "Wow, I'm looking at these young people from a aspect of athletics, I'm developing relationships with them from the aspect of athletics. I'm able to coach them from the aspect of athletics and really connect with them. But I see teachers aren't able to have that same experience that I was having with them. And so that inspired me to go on and use those talents that I had or those skill sets. And maybe I could run a school and really connect with young people who were disadvantaged, in despair, illiterate, coming from dysfunctional homes, and those kind of things. And that's what I did.

Jessica Hamman: And so in those moments that you saw your students who were kind of bold on the sports field, but then shy and shameful in the academic realm, what were some content takeaways that you saw were missing?



Hilderbrand Pelzer: So a lot of it started with writing. One of the things that the principal used to teach us is when they write, not to mark it up, right? So, typically, in a traditional school, kids would turn in their writing samples of things or essays or what have you. And the teacher's instinct is to mark it up, to edit it and to give it back and to make corrections. So the principal was always giving us training. I didn't understand it then, but he was always giving us training around, not discouraging them, not marking it up with that red pen type of thing, but really accept the fact that they completed the assignment, look at the completion of the assignment, through what it is. And then I could see the writing. So it started with writing, not being able to spell words, write coherent sentences. The writing in fact was in graffiti.

Hilderbrand Pelzer: In some instances it wasn't print or it wasn't cursive. It was actually, if you've seen, if you've been to large cities and you see graffiti, even in San Francisco and other places, it was like that.

Jessica Hamman: Like tags.

Hilderbrand Pelzer: Like tag. And so that got me more engaged. And then I learned through talking with my colleagues that they didn't know their letters. They didn't know sounds, phonics, syllables, large words, words with multiple syllables, and all those things. And so that's where it started, it was the literacy that grabbed my attention. And then everything else from there, I could understand why they weren't performing math, why they weren't doing well in social studies or why they weren't doing well in science. And I connected



that with the athletics again, because athletics was just physical skills, take the ball over here. Then I want you to make the cut over there. The ball is going to come to you over here and make the cut to the basket. Right. They could hear me say that and they could do that and it could happen. But when it came to them actually writing things, they couldn't. So that was the distinction.

Jessica Hamman: Because what I'm hearing is a large group of students who were significantly below grade level, not even knowing their letters or the ability to read and write. And what age ranges, remind me, you were working with?

Hilderbrand Pelzer: This is under 17. So we're looking between the ages of 13 and 17.

Jessica Hamman: Okay.

Hilderbrand Pelzer: Yeah.

Jessica Hamman: Yeah. That's a pretty glaring thing to witness. And what were some of the things you started thinking about how they got there without that knowledge and in what ways could we improve their school experience before prison to enable them to read and write at 13 through 17?



Hilderbrand Pelzer: Right. So one of the things that in addition to really talking more with my content colleagues, so again, I'm a health and physical education guy. I'm thinking I'm going to be a big time athletic director or coach or general manager. In fact, I had started going back to school, Temple University, for sports management at the time. So teaching wasn't something long term for me, it was just, "Okay, I got to go back to school." My parents weren't paying for it. And so, but I started being a part of, and I was a part of, but really understanding what a professional learning community is really about, the principal holding PD, professional developments, beginning to be a part of workshops around math and workshops around literacy and those type of trainings I began to get exposed to, and really talking to my colleagues and hearing from them what they were hearing in the classroom.

Hilderbrand Pelzer: But what I would also do is at lunchtime, it was a secure facility. So all of the teachers would go out to restaurants and things like that. There was no teachers lounge or that type of thing. And so we would go out to lunch. But from time to time, I would stay in with the principal and I would sit with him and just talk to him about what I was seeing on days that he wasn't there. Because I wanted to get his perspective like, "Are you seeing the same things I'm seeing because this doesn't look like this is going to turn around anytime soon. This is really bad." And so I wanted to get his perspective. Again, he was a physical education guy who was a principal and now was running this education organization. And he would, day to day, we would talk about the different challenges and how he selected his teachers and why he selected the teachers that he selected and what skill sets those teachers brought to the table.



Hilderbrand Pelzer: And then I started to see the connection about organization, teacher development, the right fit. And so those conversations kind of guided me from sports management to education administration. I talk a little bit about it in my TED Talk about how I made that transition. But what I didn't say in my TED Talk, because this story is like really my leadership story and staying inside with him, and learning so much with him, one day, he said, "You sound like you would want to run a school." And I said, "Yeah, that sounds pretty interesting." And he said, "Do you want to run a school or do you want to run a gym?" And it shocked me, because I was like, "Is he like insulting me?" Like that I don't have a vision or a purpose.

Hilderbrand Pelzer: He said, "Do you want to run a school or do you want to run a gym?" And running the school just sounded so much better. And that I could do more than just running a gym. And the way he put it really, he was urging me and pushing me to do more to help the kids because just as he was telling me how he selected the teachers, he also selected me as a teacher. I never really understood why I was selected as a teacher. For me, I just needed a job, but he saw something in me. And the students, who were a part of the interview process, saw something in me that made me become a part of that community.

Jessica Hamman: So interesting. One one of the articles on your blog talks about the things a teacher needs to be successful in prison, which is very similar, you say, to the things a teacher needs to be successful in any classroom, demand respect, but provide respect, show that you're curious, make a safe environment, all those things. And it's really



interesting to hear that about the selection process. One of the elements that you mentioned in this blog also is a deep understanding of content. Know what you know, be able to apologize if you do it wrong and start over again, but know what you need to know. What did you learn about literacy that teachers need to know? And what are the implications for teacher preparation so that we can bring teachers who know how to prevent this kind of student academic failure and support students moving forward in the prison pipeline and outside.

Hilderbrand Pelzer: So that early part of my career is really the exposure to education and getting me to rethink my career pathway from sports management to education. But as I went on to traditional school districts, I worked in a Chester School District and the Philadelphia School District. And as I went on and worked more with teachers and even became an administrator, assistant principal, those experience about teenage kids not being able to know their letters. So now I'm in middle school and high school settings. And my instincts is, as I'm moving around the building, is that happening in my school. Now obviously, I'm the teacher or I was an assistant principal and I wasn't leading the school, but as I move around and talk to my colleagues, I'm looking for this now. So those were some takeaways I'm looking for. How are teachers teaching?

Hilderbrand Pelzer: And I'm just a teacher myself or assistant principal when I go and do classroom visits early on in the late '90s early 2000. So I'm looking at how teachers are teaching. And I see there's not a lot of teaching of reading, specifically in the high school level. We have English class, so it's literatures, readings, essay writing, but not the teaching of reading. So you do see high school students who



struggle with English in the high school realm or love for literature or understanding what they read, being able to pull out the main ideas or infer and all those kind of things, because they were missed. In my opinion, they were missed in the earlier grades. And so those were things that I saw. And so, as I pursued the principalship position, I said that literacy would be one thing that I would try to focus on.

Hilderbrand Pelzer: And what I saw was still more programs to teach kids how to read, right, computer programs or this curriculum or that curriculum, but not... And they were evidence based or research based. They were those type of things. So school districts would engage with that and buy that and train the teachers on that, but not enough training of teachers on the elements of when Hilderbrand's phonemic awareness is not where it should be, what are you going to do about it specifically and explicitly. That skill set for teachers was not there. And it's not that much better today, although there's more information out there about it. And so as a assistant principal and a principal, those were things that I always wanted to integrate in my schools. Are we helping teachers? And it was really the experience of the incarcerated youth that motivated me to really look at the work that I do in the way of literacy.

Jessica Hamman: Was it a shock to you to see the amount of students that struggled with literacy in the non-incarcerated population and what were some takeaways?



Hilderbrand Pelzer: It didn't shock me because they were the same students in the sense of, from the same neighborhoods, the same interests as young people went to the same school, same exposure, but it was really when I became a principal in 2000, it was the same time of No Child Left Behind. It was the time of George Bush. Rod Paige was the US Secretary of Education at the time from Houston. It was the fact that, at that time, data was important, right? Data has always been around. But I think despite what folks may think about No Child Left Behind as a principal, as a new principal, it helped me think about data.

Hilderbrand Pelzer: And then I could see data telling me that kids can't read, right? Before that, there was really no picture, other than what you see, but you still see kids graduating. You still see the honor society. You still see all of these things, but when No Child Left Behind came around, for me, it was the first time that data was strategically introduced to me. And I could see now the data saying, "Hey man, your kids can't read." And that was the high school setting. So you're really at the end of the line, so to speak. And so as my career evolved and I was able to also transition into some alternative settings, the correctional settings, I was really able to use more of what I wanted to do with helping young people learn how to read, despite the ages that they were.

Jessica Hamman: What would making a commitment to teaching high quality literacy instruction? What difference would that make to students who are facing the school-to-prison pipeline?



Hilderbrand Pelzer: If I understand your question, what would make the difference or what would help the most?

Jessica Hamman: Yeah.

Hilderbrand Pelzer: Is exactly what I said in the TED Talk things. One explicitly I said in the TED Talk was we have to get to the teacher preparation programs, in terms of, what are elementary school teachers in particular... Because anyone pursuing education may go through a new teacher preparation program, but if you are definitely pursuing elementary education, then your preparation should include learning the components of reading. And I'm just talking about first step, knowing each one of them and what each one means. And what does developing vocabulary really mean? It's more than just spelling tests, right? What does phonemic awareness and me not understanding syllables and those type of things, whether it's one word syllable or multiple syllables in a word like, do you really understand what that means?

Hilderbrand Pelzer: Do you understand what comprehension means? When I was a young person growing up second, third grade, I could remember my mom being upset with me because I wasn't able to tell the story back or what have you. And that was really comprehension. And the teacher preparation program, higher education folks have to really dive deep into that. And I don't know that that capacity is there. And then what I said in the TED Talk, but not explicitly necessarily was that this is an elementary thing. It has to happen in the kindergarten to second grade space, right? There's no way we



should be in high schools engaging in guided reading. That is a early literacy experience. So in the early grades, this has to be fixed. It has to be, what type of professional developments and trainings are we giving teachers? Are we doing it as a whole, right?

Hilderbrand Pelzer: And one of my articles I wrote, and I write for an online publication, Philadelphia Citizen. And I wrote a story about this very topic with teaching the teachers. And what I said at the end was really, how are we delivering that training? So for funding reasons, sometimes we train individuals in schools, then they come back to the school and they have to turn around and train into everybody, right? That could in fact be you training the principal, and the principal not really understanding all of that, right? But then he or she has to come back and turn it around to the teachers, or you send out some teacher leaders and they come back. That doesn't always work effectively. And you talk about a district, and I know it's tough in a large district, maybe not as tough in a smaller district, are we training teachers?

Hilderbrand Pelzer: So they're hearing this all at the same time, they're unpacking this all together over weeks of time. And then there's some follow-ups. So how we train teachers to build capacity for this work is where to raise the instructional bar. And to add to that, I'm passionate about this. Every year we get new teachers into our profession. Many of them are not strong or knowledgeable about assessments.

Jessica Hamman: Mm-hmm (affirmative).



Hilderbrand Pelzer: So there are multiple types of assessments, aimsweb, DRA, other types of assessments, and not knowing how to administer the assessments could skew your data. But more importantly, it's doing harm because you're not capturing anecdotally or so that you can inform your instruction on your next steps, if you are not able to implement assessments well. So all of those things would be a framework of ideas that need to happen.

Jessica Hamman: So tell us a little bit about where you are now and the work that you're doing as a principal these days.

Hilderbrand Pelzer: So I'm currently elementary school principal. I'm so happy to have that experience because throughout my career was mostly middle and high school, but I am at elementary school. And so I get to see firsthand the challenges of just elementary school, but also with reading specifically. You talked earlier about some of my articles. So in trying to get across the effectiveness of reading instruction, there are other issues that teachers are challenged with, whether that's student mental health behaviors, professional development and trying to turn it around or working with parents, all of those kind of things. So I do see that part of my work is really helping teachers navigate those barriers. How do you teach a classroom of 30 students in small groups and make certain that the other, if you're working in a guided reading setting in five, four or five students, how do you ensure that the other 25 are independently on task, are doing the skill-based curriculum work that you need them to do?



Hilderbrand Pelzer: And they're little people, right? So it's a lot that goes into that. So I've learned a lot over the years in elementary, and it has allowed me to have that whole K to 12 perspective. And so that is what I'm doing now. I also had some opportunities early on to work at the higher ed level at Gwynedd Mercy College, where I helped aspiring principals who were pursuing their master's degrees or principal certificates. And that work was also rewarding. As I look forward, however, as I look forward, because I've been doing this since the late '80s now, I look at how I could really work more widely in whether that be an area of helping incarcerated facilities, engage with education more or more, what would it be like? People call it social entrepreneurial stuff where you're able to help communities more widely, even in other countries with issues around education. So those are things that I think about, I think about more writings, more speaking and how I can get this word out more globally.

Jessica Hamman: You had mentioned your mentors in those early years of teaching. And I have to imagine that you are a mentor to many right now, so you pay it forward. And that's an amazing thing.

Speaker 1: Yeah. So I enjoyed that as well. I look at assistant principals who come under me and should they want to pursue a principal, I want them to do that and be successful because it says a lot about me. People who have helped me, have said to me that my success was part of their success. And so that means a lot to me, but also, I really enjoy helping teachers at my school. I've had teachers who started with me in the classroom who are now on my leadership team and to see them evolve in the work and see them grow based around buying into a vision and an idea of how instruction should look.



And then they taking that step to leadership and doing some wonderful things. Working with parents, at my school, we started a family resource center for our parents, but more importantly, we started a five-minute learning walk for our parents.

Speaker 1: And the five-minute learning walk is the opportunity. Every month after we have our school advisory council, which is made up of parents, they are able to go to any classroom they want to, and they take a little look for, I'll call it observation sheep, and go into classrooms and really look to see what they hear and see in the classrooms. And then they're able to give me some feedback on what they see or hear in classrooms.

Jessica Hamman: I love it.

Hilderbrand Pelzer: It helps them understand academic component of schools and it moves them away from any negative perceptions that schools may have because many times parents only know what their children tell them if they're not totally engaged. So if the child says, "Hey, something happened on the schoolyard today, it was a fight in the schoolyard today" or "something happening in the lunch room today." Then the parents think, "Well, that's what's happening in the school."

Jessica Hamman: Yeah.



Hilderbrand Pelzer: But this gives them an opportunity to see the balance, to see the academics, to see the purpose of the school, and to give me feedback. And it's something that I can use to take back to teachers or try to change something.

Jessica Hamman: And it's keeping in mind all the stakeholders, because parents are teachers too, and they need to be a part of what we're doing in terms of building the community and having them understand-

Hilderbrand Pelzer: Yeah.

Jessica Hamman: ... as well. What's the name of the school that you teach in?

Hilderbrand Pelzer: Carnell. Laura H. Carnell school.

Jessica Hamman: Right. Well, they are incredibly lucky to have you.

Hilderbrand Pelzer: Yeah. We have our challenges. We've had up years. We've had down years. Always say, if you're going up and down, you don't necessarily want to go down, but you're alive. Right? You're not flat. So we've had some years, but my team regroups, and each year we try to do our very best to have an upward trajectory. But we have our



challenges. I mean, I'm talking about reading. And I still have teachers who struggle with reading. I have teachers who thrive with reading, and then we're talking about reading, but I also have to work with them around teaching math, right? Teaching other subjects. So there are some other things beyond reading that I experience, and also I have challenges with so, but the commitment is there. And so I just want to see teachers get better, because that way kids are getting better. And we just stay the course.

Jessica Hamman: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Your whole discussion here talks about and touches upon three of the things that we do in our training at Glean, which is focus on core instruction, making sure that's really good and teachers know about it. Focus on school systems so that the administrators know how to put the people in place that are appropriate for the area, but also the systems that need to be in place and then intervention and assessment. That's everything. And if we can tackle those things, then we catch the kids who need to be caught and don't rise to be 17 and not able to read.

Hilderbrand Pelzer: Absolutely.

Jessica Hamman: So, so important. And I'm glad you mentioned the Philadelphia Citizen articles. I urge every one of our listeners to look those up. You have amazing thoughts on mental health and education, and just ways we can support disadvantaged youth through positive behavioral supports.



Jessica Hamman: And there's just amazing topics to consider and think about as leaders and teachers. And on an ending note, I just want to say a quote that I had heard you say, I believe it was on your website, but you said, "The work of corrections education is a part of public education that's rarely talked about." And I know that was the beginning of your career working in corrections education. I have to say it was really amazing, a miracle if you will, that you were taken into that area and it guided your path because you've done such incredible work. And it's just the beginning, I can tell, about raising this awareness of incarcerated youth, disadvantaged youth, and how we can consider all of our youth as students that need to be treated equally and deserve an education. And that education is lifesaving and how really critical it is. And it's a social justice issue that we all need to get behind. So I personally thank you for all the work you've done.

Hilderbrand Pelzer: Thank you so much. I appreciate it.

Jessica Hamman: If you'd like to learn more about Hilderbrand Pelzer III and his amazing work that he's done as an ed leader and advocate for disadvantaged youth, please visit his website at hilderbrandpelzer3.com or visit him on Twitter @HP3potential.

Jessica Hamman: Thank you for listening to our ed leaders and literacy podcast. To find links to the articles and resources mentioned in this podcast, go to gleaneducation.com/edleaderspodcast and access them in the show notes. Bye for now.

