



Glean Education's Ed Leaders in Literacy Podcast Episode #19 - Brent Conway (Pentucket Regional School District)

- Brent Conway: There's a real need to help teachers understand what should be used, but also, then, what shouldn't be used. So, we can build our practice and our understanding of what's effective. At the same time, we have to learn what might be undermining some of that good instruction.
- 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 rooftops, "It can be done."

Speaker 7: 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. First, a word from our sponsors.

Speaker 8: Go ahead and state your name and title, and what you enjoy about working here.

Andrew Follet: My name's Andrew Follet. I'm the chief executive officer. I have four young kids at home, and they're learning to read. So, when I think about the doors that reading has opened for me, obviously I want that same thing for my kids. And that's what excites me about working here, about being able to provide a curriculum that gives all kids the opportunity to learn those vital skills and to be able to learn to read.



Speaker 7: Heggerty's Daily Phonemic Awareness Curriculum is used by over 450 school district nationwide. Learn how you can get started at heggerty.org. That's H-E-G-G-E-R-T-Y.O-R-G

Jessica Hamman: I'm Jessica Hamman, founder of Glean Education, and today we're speaking with Brent Conway. We'll be talking with him today about his work as the assistant superintendent at Pentucket Regional School District in Massachusetts, and beyond. So, welcome, Brent. It's nice to have you here today. Can you take us to a little bit of how your educational career started and what got you interested in the work you're doing today?

Brent Conway: Sure. I was an elementary education major coming out of the University of Rhode Island and was going to set off and teach fifth or sixth grade. And I don't think I paid much attention to teaching early literacy. Frankly, I think it scared me to death to have that level of responsibility, to teach a kid to read. And that's how I started my journey in teaching, back in my hometown, teaching fifth and sixth grade. But recognized, as we started to learn a little bit about teaching in a workshop model. There always felt like there was something missing as far as the explicit nature, like having to teach kids exactly what it is that they needed to be able to do.

Brent Conway: From there, I became an assistant principal and a special education team chair in another district. And then, at a young age of around 30, I became an elementary school principal in Melrose, Massachusetts, at Lincoln Elementary School. I was there for seven years as an elementary school principal. And it was really there,



where I learned, as a principal, the evidence based practices and the research around how students really learn to read.

Brent Conway: And Lincoln Elementary School went on a journey while I was there. We were a school that was struggling. There were about 400 kids there. There were 24 different languages spoken in the homes of the 400 kids. It was about 50% high needs, which was not typical for the rest of the city. Melrose is a fairly affluent, suburban city just outside of Boston, but the neighborhood school, we had no buses. The kids all walked to school, and the neighborhood we were at had a little bit of a different student enrollment population than the rest of the city. And the school was struggling. And our proficiency rates on our MCASTs were around 50%, and we started on a journey to fix that. And it took a little while, but in that, we learned a lot about how students learned to read, how we would support them, and how we need to tier the systems in order to help students learn to read.

Brent Conway: We became a three time Massachusetts commendation school for closing achievement gaps, and then became a National Blue Ribbon School in 2015, as well, for closing achievement gaps. And we brought our proficiency rates up to 80%. And the teachers were just so incredibly proud of the work that they did, and as a community, it was great to be part of that work.

Brent Conway: After leaving Lincoln, I went to the middle school in Melrose, where I was the principal for four years. And now, this is my third year at Pentucket Regional School District in Massachusetts, which



is tucked in the top corner of Massachusetts. And with three small towns, but a regional school district with about 2,500 student, four elementary schools. And our work here has been focused on developing evidence based practices to teach literacy. Because similarly, as when I started as an elementary principal, our performance scores here don't really reflect what they probably should be. So, trying to work with multiple schools across an entire district to use data, to inform our practices, and where we need to alter our curriculum, but where we also need to alter our instructional approach, so that we can tier the supports and help the students who need it the most.

Jessica Hamman: So, take me through some of those first steps of how you step into a school that you recognize needs some sort of change, and you start to take the steps to make that change. Where do you begin and what's the first thing you tackle?

Brent Conway: Sure. As an elementary principal, I know our first step really was we let the data inform us initially, and we allowed the data to help us determine what was not working for students, where were the deficits. And then, from there, we could walk and connect where the deficits were from a data perspective, to what was our instruction and what was our curriculum that might be a cause for that.

Jessica Hamman: So specifically, what data were you looking at?



Brent Conway: So, going back to 2007, 2008, our first day certainly was our state assessment, the MCAST, just as an outcome. But that doesn't start until third grade. Third, fourth, and fifth grade. And to think that is a third or fourth or fifth grade problem was not accurate. That was a problem starting back in kindergarten, and it's all connected.

Brent Conway: At the time, we were a school that was utilizing the DRA as a leveled assessment, and it really wasn't informing our practices. There wasn't a lot that it was telling us about what we could do with students. We were using the, I think it was DIBELS fourth edition back then, and what we were finding, even on that, back then, it wasn't correlating to our state assessment results. So, we made adjustments in the third grade outcomes on the DIBELS to match what was a predictive measure for the MCAST test.

Brent Conway: And in later versions of DIBELS, the DIBELS sixth edition, and on, they're correlated to national results. It's much more. But back then, we had to make adjustments on our own benchmarks using the DIBELS. Because we had kids in third grade who seemed like they were fine on the DIBELS in second grade, fine on the DRA, and yet they weren't scoring proficient on the MCAST test, and that was a problem. So, we needed to correlate those, so that we could begin to do that work. And once we did that, I think teachers recognized there were signs earlier on in first grade of kids struggling with certain aspects of literacy that we needed to address.

Jessica Hamman: And so, what's the next step after that? So, data's taken a deep dive into and teachers recognize their gaps. Where next?



Brent Conway: So, the next step we took was really beginning to learn more about how students learn to read. And we did that at the same time that we were setting up some structures and systems, so that we could implement a tiered system. And there's two sides to this. And I often like to equate it to the simple view of reading, that we have two sides, and then the outcome is reading comprehension. We got the decoding side and your language side.

Brent Conway: In order to do this right, there's two sides to the work in a school. The professional development and the training for teachers, so that they have the knowledge and the wherewithal to be able to instruct students with the way we know students learn to read. But then you also have to have the data systems and the schedules in place to provide those tiered supports, because some students are going to need more support. Some students might need a little different support. Some students will need a lot of differentiated support, and you need to have schedules and systems in place to inform that, and then to have that in place. So, you have different levers you need to be able to access to do that. So, while we trained teachers in those evidence based practices and understanding how phonemic awareness plays a role, how the early decoding plays a role and why it needs to be systematic in its development and how it builds into fluency, and then how you teach vocabulary, so that students can create greater meaning. All of those are really important.

Brent Conway: If we didn't have a schedule that allowed us to give those tiered supports, it gets lost. The kids who need the most support, don't



get it all the time. So, we had read a book together. The book was called Annual Growth For All, and Catch Up Growth For Those Who Were Behind. And it was the story of Kennewick Washington. And we read it as a whole school book with our teaching staff. And that became our mantra of annual growth for all and catch up growth for those who were behind. And it was how are we going to do this? And that was our goal. And I think we did a pretty good job of it.

Jessica Hamman: I love that you mentioned that book. I'll link it in the show notes as well.

Brent Conway: Sure.

Jessica Hamman: But I think it speaks to the importance of having a roadmap for supporting your school. It's one of the reasons that I started this podcast, is that I know there's so many wonderful administrators doing this work, and a lot of administrators who want to do the work, but don't know where to get started. So, it also seems to me like it's an all hands on deck situation. When we look at literacy progress in a school district, we need teachers on board to implement curriculum, to take the time to invest in PD. We need administrators to look at their systems and how they're working. Are there any other elements? Any other players outside of the administrators and the teachers that play a role in this as well? Like classified staff who are often not spoken of, or the board making these curriculum decisions that go into it? Can you tell us a little bit about those less seen players and the role they play?



Brent Conway: Yeah. I think behind the scenes, having a schedule, for instance, that worked for us, that allowed us to do this required a lot of work with various people outside of the actual building. We shared specialist teachers with other elementary schools. So, required a district wide approach. So, fast forward to my role here as assistant superintendent. That was one of the first things we did, is talk about it. We're going to set up the structure to allow all this to work, and we're going to begin to use the data. And now, the professional development and the curriculum tools will come into place because, if you don't have all that and you're trying to do it, people get frustrated and they don't see the results right away. But if you set up the structure for it and then give the training and implement it, that comes into place.

Brent Conway: So, we needed our fine arts department to understand we're going to have to change the way the music schedule works, because we need first grade to all be teaching literacy at the same time, so that we can flood that grade level with support personnel for 45 minutes, and every kid's getting what they need, when they need it, for the duration they need it. And then we need to stagger that.

Brent Conway: And in the district like I'm in now, that meant doing the entire district schedule that way. You couldn't just do it in one building. You had to do it in the entire district. So, that took a lot of people to understand how you were going to change things, but it was all based on how and what is best to teach literacy for students. And that was the bottom line. And if it meant some people were



inconvenienced, if it meant some people had to change the way they had always done things, that's what we had to do in order to give kids what they need.

Brent Conway: So, in Pentucket, we started, like I said, with the schedules and data systems. So, we were a district, prior to me being here, was using a guided reading assessment, or a leveled assessment. We have switched to use an assessment that is a predictor of reading success in the future. So, we're using DIBELS eighth now, and our data meetings around that help to discuss the specific skills that students need, that they develop.

Brent Conway: We added in Heggerty to use with our foundations to have a really strong foundational component. And as we move ahead to next year, there's another component of our curriculum we'll add in that will match that. And that probably Whitten Wisdom and the geodes and the decodables that go with it. So, really, once that comes in, now the focus really is the ongoing professional development to support people, to understand how to utilize all of those components to teach literacy.

Brent Conway: Every time you think you're done, there's another step that you need to take to just enhance it and to build knowledge. But we're also one of the, Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education has an early literacy grant that we were a recipient of. And we're in year one of that. It's a two year grant. And it's around taking the evidence and knowledge from research and putting it into practice. And the professional development,



even despite the COVID pandemic and having to do it virtually, the coaching and professional development related to that has been phenomenal.

Brent Conway: And most impressive about it is the dissemination by the staff that are participating to the other staff. So, when you walk into classrooms and you see a teacher utilizing the hard word method to teach sight words, when you see a teacher using one minute drills for phonemic awareness, and they didn't participate in any of the professional development, but they're learning it from their colleagues. That level of excitement, enthusiasm, and the collegiality among the staff is really impressive. And that's how practices grow and expand. And that's how we make this work for kids.

Jessica Hamman: Can I ask you a little bit about the professional development, as well? So, it seems like you tackled the data, you tackled the systems. Once you learned from the data, you're making changes in the curriculum, which is critical. And then also you mentioned PD. So, tell me a little bit more about that PD, because it's a large term and it could be so much. Is it PD that's tied with the new curriculum that's coming in? Is it a mixture of things, tackling what you need to know about the science of reading? You tell me. What does that PD look like?

Brent Conway: So, the PD evolves as we go on. Initially, in year one, it was bigger picture PD around shifting practices away from a workshop model into more of a tiered model where they were skill focused in the instruction. You had whole class instruction, you had small group



instruction. So, helping teachers to understand how to maybe shift that, PD around utilizing the data. So, a lot of our data meetings are almost like professional development conversations around how to interpret the data and use it, for instance.

Brent Conway: We also participated regionally with a group of districts early on with our reading specialists and leaders. So, training the principals and reading specialists, in the science of reading, really understanding how the brain works, but connecting it to practice. So, we were part of a whole regional group. We were fortunate. We brought Emily Hanford up three years ago and she spoke to 200 educators in Massachusetts. And we had our whole literacy leadership team part of that.

Brent Conway: And that was the type of work training them. So that, as we continue to train teachers, they continue to expand their knowledge, as well. And now, the professional development now is much more into the nuts and bolts. It's the coaching. And that's fortunately being part of Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education for our literacy grant really is giving us the coaching model of how you make this happen in your classroom.

Jessica Hamman: And that's another critical component we haven't mentioned, is coaching and the implementation of it all.



Brent Conway: We're not a big district. We don't have literacy coaches in our district. As the assistant superintendent, I end up doing some of it. Our reading teachers, our specialists, spend most of their day supporting at risk readers, so that's not embedded into our district because we're small. So, to leverage some of that from the state has been really impactful.

Jessica Hamman: And it's important to have that policy to guide the steps that you're taking as well, so I could see how that would be really helpful. I had heard that you're involved with a Facebook group called Science of Reading for Administrators: What Teachers Want You To Know. Tell me a little bit about your involvement in that.

Brent Conway: So, I had got connected with the larger, what I guess is now referred to as the mothership group, of the Science of Reading. What I should have learned in college, that Donna had started. And then, at this point, is now over 70,000 people across the globe, which is just fascinating. And it was from just following along with that, and every once in a while, chiming in with some of the work that we were doing. Very interesting to see around the country and even the globe, the folks in Australia, for instance, and the UK.

Brent Conway: And then, from that, Donna had reached out to a few folks who she recognized as administrators, who were part of that, and had said, "We really think there should be an administration group." At the same time, I was working here in Massachusetts with our Department of Education because they were rolling out their new,



early literacy guidance. And it coincides with the dyslexia law guidance in Massachusetts that's happening, too.

Brent Conway: So, I was one of the administrators who was part of that and it just all fell into place. And Donna asked myself, Sharon Dunn, Ernie Ortiz, and Stephanie Stahler, if we would moderate and get an administrator's group started because the conversations for the administrators tend to be different. For instance, I see a lot of conversations in there among teachers on the big one around which sequence do you teach the models in and so forth. And to be honest with you, I don't really think of myself as a science of reading expert or anything like that at all. The people are far more knowledgeable about that.

Brent Conway: But when it comes to the system side and how you utilize the data to inform all that, that was things from the bigger perspective that I think I could offer. And yet, for some of the folks in there, that wasn't a conversation they were necessarily interested in. So, it just became this break off group. And we're up over 1000 members now. And of course administrators were a smaller group. And we're actually running an MTSS scheduling webinar in March on a Sunday night, for administrators, on how to do that. How to set up your schedules in a tiered system for teaching literacy.

Jessica Hamman: I think that's so important. It seems like one of the amazing benefits of that mothership Science of Reading group is the connection, especially in today's COVID situation, where people are not together and communicating about their strategies and resources.



So, this gives administrators a way to connect and to have some common space to talk about something that they are working on, or want to work on, and to get resources from other people who have done it in the past. What an amazing opportunity. That's huge.

Brent Conway: I think in the end, for many years, this is not a pendulum swing. And I think sometimes people, they get hung up in terminology and pendulum swings. Research and science is not really a pendulum swing. It's just an ever-growing body of evidence to support how students learn. And that's true of any field, right? So, as we learn more, we should change and alter our practice to match that. So, that's really what we're doing. And I think getting an opportunity to hear and speak with folks across the country around some of these issues, some of it generated from that Facebook group, you realize that there's a real need to help teachers understand what should be used, but also, then, what shouldn't be used.

Brent Conway: So, we can build our practice and our understanding of what's effective. At the same time, we have to learn what might be undermining some of that good instruction, because we can't just say, "Do this, do this, do this," and pile it on. Then it becomes overwhelming. Well, how do I fit it all in? How do I do this? What should I prioritize? Because there are sometimes there are things that we're doing that we learned at the time might have been an appropriate practice, but we realize now that practice might be undermining the real good instruction I'm giving. So, most of the time, in life, we want balance in life. I want balance in my diet. I



want balance with exercise, in my relationships. All those things, we want balance.

Brent Conway: Sometimes, in literacy, if the balance means sometimes this undermines what the good instruction is for kids, then that's not necessarily the best thing. And that's what really the evidence and the research is showing us. And that's not always what's best. And I think the other thing we really work to do, whether it be in Melrose or in Pentucket, in a tiered system, it's that there's shared ownership here of the kids. It's not, "Oh, that kids need help, so they go to the reading specialists."

Brent Conway: It's, "No, we're all in this together. We're all capable of supporting almost every one of these kids. We can do it." And that every special education child is a general education student first. And if we do this from a tier one perspective, based on how we know students learn how to read, the need for the more intensive supports later on really are diminished. That's a really critical aspect of this. And there are a whole group of kids, probably almost 50% of our kids, and Nancy Young talks about it. She's a great visual of the ladder of reading, those kids pretty much will learn to read almost regardless of the approach we use. Assuming we give some approach and the there's reading, and there's some instruction. It doesn't have to be overly organized as systematic. Those kids will just generally learn to read.

Brent Conway: But there's another group of them, 50%, who they really need things a lot more direct, explicit, sequential, systematic, and even



among them, there are some who need it intensively taught that way. But if those kids need that, half the kids need that in a direct, explicit, systematic way, that's the way we should be doing it for everyone. And if kids need more intensive stuff, then we can add that in by having a system and having that schedule, and having those pieces in place. But the data's pretty clear. That's what we need to do at tier one is, is teach all students in that way. And then tier the supports for those who need it more intensively.

Jessica Hamman: And I think it just speaks to the importance of the administrators in this process. We often think of the teacher's instruction, but you make such important points that sometimes we need to remove habits or practices that are hurting. And really, the administrators need to be the ones to support that step. And they also need to know the systems to put in place. So, well, Pentucket is lucky to have you as their assistant superintendent, and I'll look forward to continuing to see the growth that your regional district is making. So, thank you for coming on.

Brent Conway: My pleasure.

Jessica Hamman: If you'd like to learn more about Brent Conway and his work at Pentucket, you can visit him at www.prsd.org.

Speaker 7: Thank you for listening to our Ed Leaders in 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.

Jessica Hamman: This episode was edited and produced by Nita Cherise.

