



## Glean Education's Ed Leaders in Literacy Podcast Episode #4 - Shannon Wheatley (Lighthouse Public Schools)

Speaker 1: The results, they've been immediate, and we had one of the biggest shifts in the state.

Speaker 2: It's almost magical when it all comes together, and I think to myself, this is what education is about.

Shannon Wheatley: There were inequities everywhere. My students in South Texas ultimately taught me more than I taught them.

Speaker 4: 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 5: 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 with us today is Shannon Wheatley. He is the Chief Academic Officer at Lighthouse Community Public Schools in Oakland, California. He most recently served as Chief of Schools at St. Hope Public Schools in Sacramento, California, before joining the Lighthouse team. Wheatley served as the Vice President of Collaborative Teaching and Innovation for Teach for America's national team, and was Founding Principal at Kipp Sunnyside High School in Houston, Texas. He started his career in education as a Teach for America core member in the Rio Grande Valley in Brownsville, Texas. Shannon, welcome today. I'm so excited to have you.

Shannon Wheatley: Thanks for having me, Jessica.

Jessica Hamman: Take us back to the earliest start of your teaching experience.



Shannon Wheatley: Sure. I grew up in a household where I knew education was important, but I didn't necessarily have the language around that. I had a father who really struggled to read. I had an older brother who was on an IEP earlier and having to navigate both those experiences as a child, I knew that education was something important to strive for, and yet, even then, I knew it was a complex thing.

Shannon Wheatley: And so I ended up beginning my teaching career with Teach for America. And I know that over the trajectory of that organization, there are a lot of opinions and perceptions about that organization. But for me, it was about getting in the classroom, and that was the best way to do that given where I was in my life, and my students in South Texas ultimately taught me more than I taught them.

Shannon Wheatley: At that time, my orientation around social justice was very black and white, and at that point, living in the valley, living in Brownsville, there were inequities everywhere and I was struggling to understand them, and then also struggling to understand how I, as a teacher, could continue to support my students confronting some of the challenges that were there.

Jessica Hamman: What grade were you teaching?

Shannon Wheatley: I taught high school at James Pace High School, and from there, I continued in the classroom in Houston. I was a founding teacher at



the first Kipp high school in the country. And at that time, the question then was really us thinking around, what does a college preparatory school look like for high school, specifically in partnership and service with the students that we had in Houston. And from there, I was a teacher, teacher leader, founded a school. Then I worked at Teach for America on their national team, having a chance to support teachers and leaders. And a significant event happened in our country, which is tragic that this was a motivation for me. Michael Brown's murder was something for me that began to question the work that I was doing and really had a desire to get back on the ground and be on working with teachers and leaders. And that's what brought me to St. Hope, as well as a second child. My partner is from that region. And here I am at Lighthouse as the chief academic officer.

Jessica Hamman: Tell me a little more about the inequities that you saw when you were first teaching in Brownsville, Texas.

Shannon Wheatley: Well, I think one of the things is how invisible some of the barriers are to our students in regards to access. For example, I was a United States citizen, I had a driver's license. I knew that if I got on I-20, that would drive me to Austin, which was the state capital. And so it was initially not the things seen that really started to push me and drive me in my teaching practice.

Shannon Wheatley: Language is also... In my context, initially, it was a challenge until again, being in partnership with our students and families, realized that language is actually a power, right? My students were bilingual,



and I was not bilingual, and I began to reframe what was actually, again, potentially seen as obstacles to teaching and learning as a teacher, but then also trying to figure out how to leverage them. But access was a really key thing, and it was some of the invisible things that made barriers difficult for our students and for myself as a practitioner.

Jessica Hamman: And was building literacy for your students a way to break down those barriers?

Shannon Wheatley: Literacy absolutely was the pathway for that. I was fortunate that there were several incredible teachers at our school who quickly saw that I needed some help. I think with my training wheels as a teacher, it really began by leveraging graphic organizers, as often simplistic as that might sound, as a way to increase fluency and increase the amount of reading and writing my students did in class. And then also, really taking the time to create space in the learning day for reading. Again, I don't want to say I was doing close reading back then, but just really creating a container for students to actually do some of that reading, thinking, processing and manipulation, both with words and language, in class. And part of that was, again, understanding what the context of my students were living in and then not seeing that as a deficit or a problem, but also just leveraging the things that were within my locus of control at the time, which was the space in my classroom. And literacy was just at the forefront of that work.



Jessica Hamman: And so you came into your classroom understanding the complexities of education, which is impressive because a lot of times us teachers come into the classroom not realizing how complicated it is, so you already had that background and you very quickly saw these inequities in these barriers. How did that inform the work you started doing as a founding principal, and then moving onto your work as academic officer?

Shannon Wheatley: How that has really motivated me... It's really more of an anchor. Literacy is the backbone of learning. And again, just from my childhood experiences, deeply feeling the shame that my father felt when he wasn't able to read documents or paper for business or work. I mean that stuck with me, and how that translated into the work was making sure that first we take steps to understand what you need to know and do to have cognitive empathy with your students. And understanding also that it's important to take the time to prioritize literacy in your professional learning spaces because it's also one of the areas too that I do know often people make assumptions about. About what kids can and can't do, what they can and can't read. There's a need to create awareness around literacy. And then, it really leads into selecting a great curriculum and trusting that curriculum and doing the work of internalizing it and being prepared to not just teach students, but teach the students that are in our classroom spaces.

Jessica Hamman: Do you have an example of a particular student that helped you visualize this transformation?



Shannon Wheatley: Yes. This was a student who, he was a junior and had a GPA of about one point something, and he was displaying a lot of behaviors that weren't necessarily setting himself up for success, both within our school context and beyond, and I believe he had missed the PSAT earlier in the fall. So we gave him a practice test and he scored the highest of amongst all of our students, and in particular in the reading sections. And the reason why I highlighting this student is because I think, again, that our perceptions about what kids can and can't do with complex texts is often misinformed. And often, sometimes our implicit bias disrupts that, or gets in the way. There is an inherent belief amongst the adults that he can't read, or he can't read at the level that's needed, or we can't put a grade level text in front of him. We can't have complex topics within what we're reading and writing. And for the student, it took a practice PSAT for us to realize that obviously he had tremendous potential. He had the ability to grapple with texts that were well beyond what we had actually been giving him. He was living up to the expectations that we were having for him.

Jessica Hamman: And it's so problematic because that perpetuates the cycle of low expectations, so unfortunately, he stays level, as opposed to understanding that literacy can be a barrier, but if you find the right off ramp, you can tap his intelligence, and I think that's a really powerful example of that. I think it also points out that you can be rigorous within the area of literacy, you can be rigorous in your curriculum, and it will help build equity.

Shannon Wheatley: Yeah. We are discussing this today, and I think if we want to keep it very simple, understanding your basic job application has a literacy



requirement that our kids need to be able to understand. Getting a loan, getting a credit card, signing up for an apartment, trying to fill out the FAFSA, or trying to fill out information for a specific scholarship. These are just life things, and what we are trying to actually adjust for is making sure that we have a commitment to being equity practitioners.

Shannon Wheatley: Everyone knows that the core of social justice work is rigor and complexity, and really inherently in the English and humanity spaces where kids are actually having to grapple with materials that are going to both push them, as far as their thinking, and broaden their horizons, as well as having opportunities to see mirrors, both within themselves and maybe their community. But also truly prepare them for the challenges that we know that they're going to face in college, or to be change makers in the community.

Shannon Wheatley: So it's about making sure that in our hope to love and care and to push and to provide counter narratives, that we don't also in the process really wash away the rigor. It's about... Actually, I think now we're in this movement where we understand that the what matters. The curriculum matters. And we're fortunate that there's more and more focus on curricula and opportunities for folks to try on and explore. And I think that's a great thing.

Jessica Hamman: And so if I'm understanding correctly, it's not just about what you put in front of them to tick a box, but it's about building your entire curriculum so it integrates all the complexity that's there. It enables you to break down those barriers and those inequities, so





that we're able to take those hardships away and then provide curricular rigor in the process. What are your tips for school systems in doing this?

Shannon Wheatley: My recommendation for systems is, for leaders that are in large districts, I think the more that you can be closer to the ground and in those spaces, be in the PD, I think is one step. I think the other thing is there's a need for I think the community of practitioners of educators to continue to do more sharing across different lines. I'll speak personally. There's a close friend of mine who works in a phenomenal school district here in Northern California, and we just compare notes. We look at syllabi, we look at course selections, we talk about our curricular choices. And so, having that dialogue with someone who's a leader of a system whose students are not predominantly Latino and African American, or low income, has created a space for him to sort of see what else is out there.

Shannon Wheatley: I also think that students can play a really important role in this, and it's about making sure then that we're creating opportunities for students to speak and learn across different spaces. Ideally, we want to try to have that happen prior to it happening in college or in the real world where there's this moment of like, in some cases, a cultural clash. And in my own personal experience, I remember in college Fahrenheit 451 came up, and I'd never read it. And there was this entire discourse about this book that I had never read. I had that moment of like, okay, I didn't get that. And as a person of color, as a student of color at the time, I was just like, okay, I missed that, and I think for some students, they might internalize that as not being or not belonging or potentially being less than.



Shannon Wheatley: And then on the opposite side of that, there are other texts that I read later, and I've discussed with some of my other peers who haven't had that kind of exposure to text or materials outside the canon, and what I felt in those conversations and spaces is a real sense of loss. And again, if these sort of diverse texts or curricula only exist in places or spaces where there are students of color primarily, it's a loss for everyone. And again, on the other side, in spaces that are predominantly white or affluent or privileged without a lot of diversity, there's a big loss there too. And I think again, education is the bridge that happens, and I think the first step is again, leaders getting close to the ground, but then also to educators thinking about, how do I cross lines and be in partnership and learning with people from different spaces so that it can benefit all of our students?

Jessica Hamman: What advice would you give to an administrator working in a high performing school or district that might not be holding equity in the center?

Shannon Wheatley: I think what I would say to them is, there's an opportunity that their students and staff potentially are missing out to engage in a world outside them that is real and that is changing. There's a district that I'm thinking of that's at outside of Oakland that's coming to mind where the truth is, folks within that school system do believe that everything is okay. What their students being provided as far as an educational learning experience, whether that be the teachers they have access to, the curriculum materials they



have in front of the students, or the pedagogy and the way that it's being taught, there's a lot of folks that feel like that is okay, and there's no need to change that because the results that we're getting in those spaces are satisfactory.

Shannon Wheatley: I think if you don't center equity, we have potentially a learning experience through K-12 where the learned experience in their schooling is that everything is fine and all these other things aren't necessarily important to me, and I think that's a problem, especially when we think about our need in our country to continue to be fully literate and making sure that access is available to people of all backgrounds.

Shannon Wheatley: And I think by leaders being close to the ground who have done the work of reflection themselves, who have made a commitment towards equity, who really want to become a social justice practitioner, you've got to be close to the ground for that to happen, and then I think it then comes from finding the right teachers to then champion that work and begin to, in many ways, disrupt that system in what others perceive as a well run machine, or a school system that doesn't need to center that.

Shannon Wheatley: And for me, I often think of my former students who go off to college and what I'm hearing more from my recent students is not just, I got to college and I wasn't necessarily prepared for both the college experience, or in some cases, being on a predominantly white college campus. But what I'm hearing more is, I'm in a lot of these classes and my classmates actually have no idea about me, my



self identity, or the context of Oakland or Oak Park in Sacramento, or Third Ward and Sunnyside in Houston.

Shannon Wheatley: And so I again think that as educators, that's a part of our responsibility to build those bridges, and I think at a teacher to teacher level that can happen, whether it's just sharing materials, whether it is sharing lesson plans. Lighthouse is an expeditionary learning school, we do a lot of high quality work protocols. But building that bridge between school system that is status quo and/or, we're fine, nothing needs to shift, and I'd say spaces like Lighthouse that is focused and centers equity every single day, I think that exchange and building that bridge is advantageous both to adults who are working with students, and then also students who, again, in the future will be neighbors.

Shannon Wheatley: And I think just on a very personal note, it doesn't make a difference how far a school district or a community is from an urban center, we're all connected. And so being okay and everything's fine in that school district outside of the city, that doesn't center equity is, in my eyes, problematic. And I think as educators, we're missing that opportunity.

Jessica Hamman: Yeah, absolutely. And there's an opportunity in larger districts where there's a large disparity among different schools even within one particular district, so there's a real opportunity for sharing and collaboration in that capacity.



Jessica Hamman: Tell me a little bit more about PD and the role it plays in this area and how you support your instructors, your teachers, to internalize the PD that you're providing.

Shannon Wheatley: Where we are now is we always have to work on ourselves first before we can get into some of the technical pieces of teaching and learning. For example, we commit several days over the course of our school year specifically for being in affinity and talking about DEI work.

Shannon Wheatley: As it relates to being prepared to teach our students, we've really focused on having a few internalization protocols for the curricula that can be both used individually for a teacher, but then also in teams with a focus on planning, doing short cycle data reflections, and then also then modifying for both acceleration or intervention, depending on the learners in our space. And that sounds pretty status quo, but the thing that we're actually pushing that we feel... And maybe the "we" is royal "we" right now - Is we're trying to just keep it at that. We're trying to keep it simple. Taking the time to do the work first before you actually teach the lesson, but then really taking that next level of like, okay, I know this is where my students need to get, and I'm going to continue to build backwards from that and design learning experiences pushing towards that grade level target.

Shannon Wheatley: But what our push is, both for myself and our team and our leaders is that we're at the table too, doing the work. And it's a lot easier when we are removed from classroom spaces to be in partnership



with kids, because we know what their learning experience is like because we've actually had a chance to align and discuss curricula together. So a lot of planning time, internalization protocols independently or in groups, and then really keeping it focused there versus a desire to layer on 75 other things.

Jessica Hamman: Yeah. I was checking out your Twitter feed and you were discussing your prep work for the 2019-2020 school year, and you were talking about the curriculum institute that you had just hosted. You listed four key learning targets for your staff. One, "I can analyze student data for strengths and areas of growth to inform planning." Two, "I can navigate my curriculum and accompanying resources." Three, "I can backward plan impactful learning experiences for all students." And four, "I can provide and receive feedback on my instructional plans and tools."

Shannon Wheatley: And even hearing those again, what I was processing is the need to continue to keep it simple as far as the "inputs" from leaders. Each of those required the summer, and require ongoing practice in feedback and reflection. And reflection not only on aptitude or mastery, but then also again, holding equity at the center of it.

Jessica Hamman: And I think it's also really important to realize that these four key concepts will not happen over a summer. This is a list to be built on over years or decades, and an understanding that this is the foundation for building that rigor and supporting the equity work that you're doing and support each other in the process.



Shannon Wheatley: It was great for you to read those again.

Jessica Hamman: Oh, good.

Jessica Hamman: Where do you see your work in administration or education taking you next?

Shannon Wheatley: For me, it's really continuing to create the condition and spaces for teachers to do their best work. I think that I'm really fortunate and blessed to have been developed by great educators over my career. And I also think what's exciting for me now as I continue to be in this work is that I'm learning from different folks in different spaces.

Shannon Wheatley: So one is just learning, two, creating spaces for teachers and leaders. And then I do feel that the discourse right now in education has become, in many ways, overly simplified, and I think helping folks to really understand all the things that are at play in our work and that they're not reduced to either/ors, or quick solutions. And I think our effort to try to slow things down, it's running in direct confrontation with our need to, as Dr. King said, operate with the urgency of now. Not to be confused with the urgency associated with like white dominant culture, but us really trying to slow down and saying, "If we're going to do this right, we have to do it right."



Shannon Wheatley: And if we're going to keep folks in the profession, we have to commit to their growth over time, which means that we have to be intentional about designing learning arts for their professional development, and also hold ourselves at bay by saying, this is the area that we really want you to grow in, because the foundation that you'll have here is going to push your practice further. There might be a couple things that we can teach you here and there, but that commitment to deep learning as a practitioner is something that I'm excited about and I'm still continuing to learn.

Jessica Hamman: Thank you so much for taking the time to walk us through your experience and what you're working on at Lighthouse and all that you're doing for the teachers and the students at your school.

Shannon Wheatley: I'm really appreciative of this opportunity, and I hope that we get a chance to continue this conversation. Thank you so much. It's been a pleasure.

Jessica Hamman: Did you like hearing from Shannon Wheatley about his work at Lighthouse Public Schools? Learn more about his school, their focus on equity, and their investment in literacy by visiting [lighthousecharter.org](http://lighthousecharter.org). Or, learn more about Mr. Wheatley on LinkedIn or on Twitter by visiting the handle @SWheatley9.

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