

Leadership Academy

Leadership Conference 2025

July 6 – 8, 2025

Welcome to the Leadership Conference, the culminating experience for the Leadership Academy 2024 cohort. The conference is held in Bowman and Murdock Halls on MCLA's campus in North Adams, and remote access is available for each session.

Dr. Darcy Fernandes will open the conference with a keynote presentation on Sunday July 6th, from 6:30 – 8:30 p.m. in Murdock Hall, Room 218. Additional keynote presentations include **Brendan Sheran**, BERK12 Project Facilitator of *Portrait of a Graduate*, and morning presentations by **Scott Brown**, Principal of Leptondale Elementary School in Wallkill, NY and **Nadine Gardan**, Principal of the Early Learning Center in Poughkeepsie, NY.

Concurrent conference sessions run on **Monday July 7th and Tuesday July 8th** from 10:00 a.m. until 3:45 p.m. and are presented by members of the Leadership Academy 2024 cohort on topics ranging from leading inclusive, anti-racist schools to implementing instructional programs that enhance success for all. Sessions are organized according to the four standards established by MA DESE's *Professional Standards for Administrator Leadership* (PSAL):

- Instructional Leadership
- Management and Operations
- Family and Community Engagement
- Professional Culture

In this conference program you'll find:

1. Session schedule and links (pp. 1-3)
2. Session descriptions (pp. 4-10), and
3. Cohort Presenter Bios (pp. 11-16)

Thank you to the Leadership Academy 2024 cohort for their engagement, tenacity, and professionalism throughout the year.

Thank you to all educators.
Thank you to all students.

Marianne R. Young
Leadership Academy Director



[Register](#)



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<p align="center">Sunday July 6, 2025 6:30 – 8:30 p.m.: Keynote Address Dr. Darcy Fernandes, Senior Associate Commissioner, MA DESE Murdock 218 Link: https://us02web.zoom.us/j/82277905214</p>			
<p align="center">Monday July 7, 2025 9:00 – 9:45 Thoughts to Start the Day: Scott Brown, Principal, Leptondale Elementary School, Wallkill, NY Bowman 122 Link: https://us02web.zoom.us/j/82277905214 Meeting ID: 822 7790 5214</p>			
Time	Bowman Hall Room 201	Bowman Hall Room 202	Bowman Hall Room 204
10:00 – 11:00	MTSS Using a Data Driven Approach Sarah Myers, Whitney McRobbie: https://meet.google.com/nsf-yxmz-jsr?hs=224	Society and Culture Within Schools: Teacher Morale and the Student Experience Paul Widjeskog https://nccsk12-org.zoom.us/j/94887564629	Mentoring for a Better Tomorrow Meg Marsden https://meet.google.com/vef-sfjz-cki
11:15 – 12:15	Strive-for-Five Conversation Framework: Strengthening Language Comprehension in the Early Grades Sarah Brooks https://meet.google.com/dhc-vyfd-bpo	Welcoming Every Family: Culturally Responsive Strategies to Support Engagement Laura Hurwitz, Sarah Yasses Teams Link	Cultivating Positive Environments Cassandra Lynn Hughes https://meet.google.com/pcg-vdmv-nhk
12:15 – 1:15	Lunch		
1:30 – 2:30	Learning Recovery: Building Systems to Support Every Student Marie Prizzi https://meet.google.com/bye-ttcb-rhv	Beyond the Score: The Role of Education-Based Athletics in Holistic Student Development James Rolince https://meet.google.com/iki-dkcy-dni	Rooted Leadership: Leading with Energy, Empathy & Intention Shannon LaRocco https://wallkillcsd-k12-ny-us.zoom.us/j/93964207610
2:45 – 3:45	Courageous Leadership: How Vulnerability Can Transform School Culture Laurel Dunn https://meet.google.com/sdb-rpzx-usz	The Power of Privilege and Perspective in Education Sarah Prinzi https://meet.google.com/mhn-rgns-nea	
7:00 – 9:00	6:30 – 8:30 p.m.: Keynote Address Brendan Sheran, BERK12 Project Facilitator, <i>Portrait of a Graduate</i> Murdock 218 Link: https://us02web.zoom.us/j/82277905214		

	<p align="center">Tuesday July 8, 2025 9:00 – 9:45 Thoughts to Start the Day: Nadine Dargan, Principal, Early Learning Center, Poughkeepsie, NY Bowman 122 Link: https://us02web.zoom.us/j/82277905214 Meeting ID: 822 7790 5214</p>			
Time	Bowman Hall Room 201	Bowman Hall Room 202	Bowman Hall Room 204	
10:00 – 11:00	ELL’s Parent involvement in School Ivelisse Valdez Questa https://meet.google.com/uov-hgpv-zsv	Building Better Schools Through Circles and Restorative Practices Todd Huston, Colin Klepetar https://meet.google.com/eqn-khsw-xsn	Work Based Learning Rachel Abate-Comini https://meet.google.com/gpu-iwdc-zsw	
11:15 – 12:15	Cultural Ed Spark: Igniting Inclusive Practices Through Culturally Responsive Teaching Michelle Rivera, Cindy Rivera-Ortiz https://meet.google.com/qgx-udat-bed	Connections Before Curriculum: The Power of Relationships in Education Anita Hoyt, Jordan Barbach https://meet.google.com/gsd-wzxb-ucu	Investigating, Not Intervening (Yet): A Mindset Shift in MTSS-I Academic Support Dylon Peertamsingh https://meet.google.com/fsf-fgvr-kax	
12:15 – 1:15	Lunch			
1:30 – 2:30	The Velvet Hammer: Speak Hard Truths. Lead Real Change. Olivia Harrison https://meet.google.com/xca-uegn-fwe	The Impacts of AI in Education Brandon Huyck; Allison Burns https://meet.google.com/aiv-srgj-daa	DEI in 2025: Where Are We At and What Does It Look Like? Dan Gibbs https://meet.google.com/vmu-ndxp-kbz	
2:45 – 3:45	Creating a Positive Culture and Community in your School Aaron Zimmerman Teams Link	Attendance: Closing the Achievement Gap Rohan Graham https://meet.google.com/gib-vxrr-qor		

Participant Schedule – Notes

Sunday July 6, 2025

6:30 p.m.

Opening Session:
Dr. Darcy Fernandes, Senior Associate Commissioner, MA DESE

Monday July 7, 2025

9:00

Thoughts to Start the Day: Scott Brown, Principal, Leptondale Elementary School, Wallkill, NY

10:00

11:15

1:30

2:45

7:00 p.m.

Brendan Sheran, BERK12 Project Facilitator, *Portrait of a Graduate*

Tuesday July 8, 2025

9:00 <https://us02web.zoom.us/j/82277905214> Thoughts to Start the Day: Nadine Dargan,
Principal, Early Learning Center, Poughkeepsie, NY

10:00


11:15

1:30

2:45

Session Descriptions

Monday July 7	
9:00 – 9:45	
10:00-11:00	<p>Sarah Myers, Whitney McRobbie MTSS Using a Data Driven Approach</p> <p>This professional development session will explore the implementation of Data-Driven Decision Making (DDDM) within a Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) framework in schools. Participants will learn how to establish a collaborative data team, analyze various types of student data, and design a responsive support system that includes core instruction, targeted interventions, and intensive individualized support. The session will emphasize the importance of continuous improvement through regular evaluation of system effectiveness using metrics such as growth scores and stakeholder feedback. By integrating data into instructional planning, educators can make informed decisions that enhance student outcomes and ensure the system remains adaptive to student needs.</p> <p>https://meet.google.com/nsf-yxmz-jsr?hs=224</p>
10:00-11:00	<p>Paul Widjeskog Society and Culture Within Schools: Teacher Morale and the Student Experience</p> <p><i>Society and Culture Within Schools: Teacher Morale and the Student Experience</i> is a discussion that examines the landscape of public-school education within the broader context of American society and culture. The session is guided by the following questions: How are students in the United States performing compared with students in other developed nations? What are some of the current social and educational conditions that adversely affect American students? How are American teachers impacted by the current educational conditions? How do educational leaders build staff morale? And how can educational leaders create a thriving school culture? Attendees will compare educational outcomes in the US with other countries, examine socio-economic and educational statistics within the US, make connections between societal challenges and teacher morale, explore strategies used by educational leaders to motivate and inspire teachers, and imagine cultural shifts within schools that emphasize a dignified and wholesome school community.</p> <p>https://nccsk12-org.zoom.us/j/94887564629</p>
10:00-11:00	<p>Meg Marsden Mentoring for a Better Tomorrow</p> <p>What does it truly mean to be an effective mentor? In this 60-minute session, participants will explore the key qualities of successful mentoring, identify their own strengths as mentors, and learn how to develop and sustain a strong, supportive mentor program within their school district. This session is designed to empower educational leaders with practical strategies and insights to foster meaningful mentor-mentee relationships and cultivate a culture of continuous growth.</p> <p>https://meet.google.com/vef-sfjz-cki</p>
11:15– 12:15	<p>Sarah Brooks Strive-for-Five Conversation Framework: Strengthening Language Comprehension in the Early Grades</p> <p>Transform your teachers' classroom conversations and accelerate student language development with the research-backed Strive-for-Five Conversations Framework. This interactive session will equip educational leaders with concrete strategies to strengthen language comprehension in early</p>


	<p>elementary school classrooms. Discover how to help your teachers move beyond brief, three-turn exchanges to meaningful five-turn conversations that build the foundation for reading success. Learn practical strategies your teachers can implement immediately to strengthen each strand of Scarborough's Reading Rope. Join us to discover how a simple shift in conversational structure can create profound changes in student language development and set the foundation for lifelong reading success.</p> <p>https://meet.google.com/dhc-vyfd-bpo</p>
11:15– 12:15	<p>Laura Hurwitz, Sarah Yasses Welcoming Every Family: Culturally Responsive Strategies to Support Engagement</p> <p>In this interactive session, school leaders will explore family engagement practices that support the creation of culturally responsive, welcoming, and affirming school environments for all families. Grounded in equity-centered leadership practices, this session will provide participants with a framework for discussion, opportunities for reflection, and practical strategies to foster belonging, build trust, and lead to lasting cultural transformation. Attendees will leave with actionable tools to strengthen engagement practices and elevate every family's experience in their school.</p> <p>Teams Link</p>
11:15– 12:15	<p>Cassandra Lynn Hughes Cultivating Positive Environments</p> <p>This session focused on practical strategies for enhancing positivity in personal and professional contexts. Participants will explore how even brief, everyday interactions can significantly impact relationships, productivity, health, and overall well-being.</p> <p>Key takeaways:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The power of small moments: Recognizing how brief, positive interactions can strengthen relationships and workplace dynamics. • Emotional influence: Techniques for increasing the frequency of positive emotions in daily life—for oneself and others. • Well-being and performance: Understanding the connection between positivity, physical health, and productivity. • Practical application: Strategies to reduce negativity, foster supportive environments, and create a lasting impact through mindful engagement. <p>Overall, the session will encourage participants to be intentional about cultivating positive moments, which will ultimately improve collaboration, resilience, and satisfaction in all areas of life.</p> <p>https://meet.google.com/pcg-vdmv-nhk</p>
12:15– 1:15	Lunch
	 MCLA

1:30 – 2:30	<p>Marie Prizzi Learning Recovery: Building Systems to Support Every Student Ready to lead with purpose?</p> <p>Unfinished learning is one of the biggest challenges schools face—and future leaders need real solutions. This session is for aspiring administrators who want to design strategic, student-centered systems that close learning gaps and build equity. Learn how to use data to drive decisions, strengthen MTSS, and create school cultures where recovery means growth—not just remediation. Whether you're focused on summer learning, credit recovery, or in-school interventions, you'll walk away with practical tools to lead learning recovery with clarity and confidence.</p> <p>https://meet.google.com/bye-ttcb-rhv</p>
1:30 – 2:30	<p>James Rolince Beyond the Score: The Role of Education-Based Athletics in Holistic Student Development</p> <p>In an era where travel teams, NIL deals, and the transfer portal dominate the conversation around youth and collegiate sports, it's easy to lose sight of the true purpose of athletics in K–12 education. This presentation explores the unique and essential role of education-based athletics—a model grounded in personal growth, character development, and lifelong success, not just an elusive quest for wins and scholarships.</p> <p>The presentation will contrast education-based athletics with the transactional nature of travel and professional sports, where participants often seek a return on investment. Drawing on insights from Joe Ehrmann's InsideOut Coaching, the session will explore the distinction between transactional and transformational leadership and how coaches and educators can create athletic experiences that foster empathy, resilience, teamwork, and integrity.</p> <p>https://meet.google.com/iki-dkcy-dni</p>
1:30 – 2:30	<p>Shannon LaRocco Rooted Leadership: Leading with Energy, Empathy & Intention</p> <p>As educators, our energy, mindset, and presence shape the classrooms and communities we serve. In the vital role of school leadership, sustaining your own energy and inspiration is essential, not only for your well-being but to empower your teachers and staff to do the same.</p> <p>In this session, participants will explore how intentional leadership presence creates a ripple effect - nurturing a culture where balance, empathy, and purpose are not only modeled but sustained across the school community. Through meaningful engagement, attendees will reflect on what fuels and drains their energy, discover practical strategies to build resilience, and leave with simple, powerful tools they can use, and share, to support a grounded, human-centered leadership approach.</p> <p>Leaders will walk away reconnected to their core values and equipped to foster an environment where both staff and students can thrive.</p> <p>https://wallkillcsd-k12-ny-us.zoom.us/j/93964207610</p>

2:45 – 3:45	<p>Laurel Dunn Courageous Leadership: How Vulnerability Can Transform School Culture</p> <p>Brené Brown's book, Dare to Lead asks the question: How do you cultivate braver, more daring leaders and how do you embed the value of courage in your culture? Using her vast career and research, Brown presents four skill sets that are teachable and measurable as pillars for developing daring leaders. This work is challenging and also enduringly valuable. This session will study the concepts of Dare to Lead from the viewpoint of a school. How can these tenets be applied to a school culture, both inside and outside of the classroom? We will dig into the four skill sets developed by Brown and take a look at how the teaching and implementation of these skills can transform culture for every member of the school community.</p> <p>https://meet.google.com/sdb-rpzx-usz</p>
2:45 – 3:45	<p>Sarah Prinzi The Power of Privilege and Perspective in Education</p> <p>The purpose of this session is to provide opportunities for educators to grow in self-awareness as well as resources they can apply in their educational settings in order to help build a welcoming, safe and supportive environment for all.</p> <p>Educators will be given a few minutes to identify aspects of their personal identity and how these impact perspectives and decision-making tendencies. Educators will be provided short video segments and an article that define the concepts of privilege, microaggressions, macroaggressions, majority and marginalized cultures as they exist in both large and small scales. Discussions will occur in a restorative circle conversation format. Participants will have the opportunity to hear from actual students who have experienced marginalization so that they might connect the concepts discussed with the lived experiences of adults and children in school (and wider) communities. The concepts and realities discussed in this session will be followed up with resources and guidance from New York State, including links to the New York State Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Education Framework (or CRSE). The resources provided in this session can be used in the classroom as lessons, or as professional development for faculty as these are important mandates for educators as New York State. They can be used for the purposes of building self-awareness, empathy, and a quickness to listen, aiding in the creation of a welcoming, inclusive and supportive environment for all in the school community.</p> <p>https://meet.google.com/mhn-rgns-nea</p>
<div data-bbox="625 1453 997 1772" data-label="Image"> </div> <p><i>Program Descriptions continue on next page</i></p>	

Tuesday July 8th	
9:00 – 9:45	
10:00 – 11:00	<p>Ivelisse Valdez Questa ELL's Parent involvement in School</p> <p>This workshop is to help educators to involve immigrant parents in their children education and to teach them the process that their children go through to learn English as a second language. Also, to invite them to be active parents in their children's education by being volunteer in their kid schools. I will present a districtwide plan to involve ELL parents in their children's education. https://meet.google.com/uov-hgpv-zsv</p>
10:00 – 11:00	<p>Todd Huston, Colin Klepetar Building Better Schools Through Circles and Restorative Practices</p> <p>During this session, we will explore using circles in schools as a way to improve the culture and climate through care and connection. We will also explore restorative practices which allow schools to shift from blame and punishment towards resolution and connectedness as they resolve conflicts. Note: This will be an interactive presentation where attendees will participate in a circle, thereby gaining experience of this process. https://meet.google.com/eqn-khsw-xsn</p>
10:00 – 11:00	<p>Rachel Abate-Comini Work Based Learning</p> <p>This session will explore what work-based learning is, how it can support special education or struggling students to meet graduation requirements and set students up for post-graduate success in transitioning into the workforce. https://meet.google.com/gpu-iwdc-zsw</p>
11:15 – 12:15	<p>Michelle Rivera, Cindy Rivera-Ortiz Cultural Ed Spark: Igniting Inclusive Practices Through Culturally Responsive Teaching</p> <p>How do we transform classrooms into places where every student, especially multilingual learners and students with disabilities, feels seen, supported, and empowered? Join dynamic educators like Cindy Rivera-Ortiz and Michelle Rivera as they lead an engaging and reflective session on Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) and its powerful role in creating equitable and inclusive learning environments.</p> <p>Grounded in neuroscience, lived experience, and decades of classroom and leadership practice, this workshop will:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> I. Deepen participants' understanding of CRT and its connection to social-emotional safety, brain-based learning, and academic success. II. Explore how CRT enhances instruction for English learners and students with disabilities through differentiation and strength-based approaches. III. Share practical, ready-to-use strategies and tools for classroom teachers, instructional leaders, and advocates. IV. Invite participants to reflect on their own educational journeys and positionalities to identify areas for growth and transformation. <p>Participants will leave with a renewed sense of purpose, concrete ideas for implementation, and a shared commitment to advancing equity in education. This session aligns with multiple PSAL standards and is designed for educators, school leaders, support staff, and community stakeholders dedicated to inclusive-to-inclusive excellence. https://meet.google.com/qgx-udat-bed</p>

11:15 – 12:15	<p>Anita Hoyt, Jordan Barbach Connections Before Curriculum: The Power of Relationships in Education</p> <p>Connections Before Curriculum: The Power of Relationships in Education explores how meaningful student-teacher relationships serve as the foundation for both academic success and social-emotional well-being. This session emphasizes the critical role of connection in creating safe, supportive learning environments where students feel seen, heard, and valued. By prioritizing relationships, educational leaders can foster a culture of trust, resilience, and motivation—ultimately enhancing student engagement, behavior, and achievement.</p> <p>https://meet.google.com/gsd-wzxb-ucu</p>
11:15 – 12:15	<p>Dylon Peertamsingh Investigating, Not Intervening (Yet): A Mindset Shift in MTSS-I Academic Support</p> <p>How often do we rush to fix students’ academic struggles only to discover something new? This session challenges educators to shift from a mindset of immediate intervention to one of deliberate investigation. Using a revised MTSS-I Academic Support Flowchart, participants will explore how each phase, from teacher observation and parent input to collaborative work analysis and classroom-based strategies, can act as a lens for inquiry. Rather than jumping to tiered support, this approach prioritizes deep understanding of student needs, especially for English Language Learners and culturally diverse populations. Through case examples, tools, and reflection protocols, this session will equip educators to slow down, ask better questions, and make informed decisions that lead to more equitable outcomes. Investigating before intervening isn’t a delay; it’s the most effective path to meaningful support.</p> <p>Learning Objectives: Learn how to use the revised MTSS-I flowchart as an inquiry tool before initiating interventions. Explore how collaborative analysis and teacher-family communication uncover root causes of academic struggle. Understand how investigation-first practices lead to more equitable support for ELLs and underserved learners. Reflect on their own MTSS-I practices and identify areas for mindset and system shifts.</p> <p>Session Outcomes: A framework and language to advocate for observation and inquiry in their school’s MTSS-I process. Ready-to-use tools for collaborative student work analysis, classroom-based data collection, and family engagement. A reframed understanding of MTSS-I as a process of curiosity and care, not just compliance.</p> <p>https://meet.google.com/fsf-fgvr-kax</p>
12:15 – 1:15	Lunch
1:30 – 2:30	<p>Olivia Harrison The Velvet Hammer: Speak Hard Truths. Lead Real Change.</p> <p>What happens when leadership requires difficult conversations, but trust is on the line? Enter the Velvet Hammer Approach where direct, honest communication meets empathy. Educational stakeholders are deeply invested— and often divided. They want leaders who are authentic and willing to say what matters without sacrificing educational well-being.</p> <p>This session explores how to lead with courage and compassion when engaging a wide range of stakeholders— from the resistant staff to concerned families, district leaders to community partners. Whether you're navigating change, conflict, or high expectations, your words can either build bridges or burn them. Walk away with practical Velvet Hammer strategies to lead bravely and build lasting trust across your educational community.</p> <p>https://meet.google.com/xca-uegn-fwe</p>

1:30 – 2:30	<p>Allison Burns, Brandon Huyck The Impacts of AI in Education</p> <p>We want to explore the impacts that AI is having and will have on education as it continues to grow and become a part of our everyday lives. We understand how ingrained technology has become in society, but do we fully comprehend the magnitude to which people rely on it? How can we utilize AI as a resource for ourselves and our students without jeopardizing learning for them? Our goal is to give attendees a clearer insight into the possible benefits and dangers that AI poses in education. Attendees will learn how to utilize AI to their advantage to help them with planning, but also on ways they can utilize it to support their students. We hope that after our presentation, attendees will not only have a better understanding of how AI can be utilized, but also what they can do to leverage its potential in a way that is beneficial for themselves and their students.</p> <p>https://meet.google.com/aiv-srgj-daa</p>
1:30 – 2:30	<p>Daniel J. Gibbs DEI in 2025: Where Are We At and What Does It Look Like?</p> <p>In this presentation, we will talk about the current state of DEI in education in 2025, how it varies from one place to another and the variables of why that occurs, we will look at some well-received books for children and adults, as well as some websites, and engage in some activities to help participants' understanding.</p> <p>https://meet.google.com/vmu-ndxp-kbz</p>
2:45 – 3:45	<p>Aaron Zimmerman Creating a Positive Culture and Community in your School</p> <p>One of the most important things we must prioritize as administrators is to cultivate and maintain positive culture and community in our schools. In this session, participants will analyze and reflect on both macro level actions we take, but also the small day-to-day things that builds towards creating a positive environment. Prior to coming to this session, we ask you to consider what are things in your educational profession that make you feel good? And then consider how can you leverage that for an entire building to constantly cultivate that positive feeling?</p> <p>Participants will have an opportunity to share their own successes and walk away with additional ideas and actions that their colleagues share as well as a list of research backed ideas. Finally, in an 'Understanding by Design' style format, participants will consider the legacy they hope to create as educational leaders and brainstorm the essential steps that they need to take to achieve this impactful career.</p> <p>Teams Link</p>
2:45 – 3:45	<p>Rohan Graham Attendance: Closing the Achievement Gap</p> <p>Ever notice how some groups of students seem to miss school more often, or why certain students consistently fall behind their peers? This session digs into the reasons behind these patterns, focusing on how attendance plays a role in the achievement gap for our most vulnerable students. Using real student stories and data, we'll look at how showing up — or not — can either widen or narrow that gap.</p> <p>https://meet.google.com/gib-vxrr-qor</p>
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Presenter Bios

Rachel Abate-Comini is in her 11th year of education. She has worked primarily in special education, both in consultant teacher and special class/self-contained settings, and as of this year has taught at least 1 student in every grade level Pre-K through 12th grade/postgraduate. This upcoming year she will be transitioning into a new role as MTSS coordinator at the Brunswick Central School District. Her passion for special education began in her undergraduate program at Houghton College studying Inclusive Childhood Education. She then continued her studies at the University at Albany for a Masters in Literacy. She will be completing the Leadership Academy at MCLA for educational leadership this summer. When she is not at school, Rachel enjoys teaching horseback riding, volunteering at Camp Cedarbrook in the Adirondacks, and also serving on the Board of Directors. She would like to thank her special education team for inspiring her to present on Work Based Learning today and for their support throughout this past year.

Sarah Brooks brings over 16 years of teaching experience to her role as a reading teacher in the Mount Markham School District in West Winfield, New York, where she has served since 2008. Throughout her tenure, she has taught across multiple grade levels and specializations, including second grade and special education, bringing a comprehensive understanding of diverse learning needs to her literacy instruction.

Sarah's educational journey began internationally, having taught at Amwell View School in Stanstead Abbots, England. She holds a B.A. in Elementary and Special Education from Eastern University in St. David's, Pennsylvania, and earned her Master of Science in Literacy Education from SUNY Cortland. She will complete the Leadership Academy at MCLA in July 2025.

Committed to staying current with evidence-based literacy practices, Sarah has pursued professional development over the past five years through The Reading League and The Writing Revolution, which has enhanced her ability to implement research-backed instructional strategies in reading and writing.

Allison Burns joined the Coxsackie-Athens Central School District in 2022 as a member of the Social Studies Department working within the FLEX Program to help serve at-risk youth. As of November 2024, Allison transitioned to the role of Principal for Student Support. As the Principal for Student Support, Allison is the district Wellness Coordinator, co-chair for MTSS, and works with eighth grade, ninth grade, and identified at-risk youth students to help guide students towards graduation.

Having spent her teaching career with a focus on underprivileged youth, Ms. Burns believes that through evolving instruction and positive staff and student relationships we can work together to help build our students up, hold them accountable when needed, and guide them on their educational journey where all learners can be successful. This philosophy still holds true as she serves eighth, ninth, and at-risk youth at the secondary level. We must preserve joy for growth to happen.

My name is Laurel Dunn. I have been an educator for over 15 years. The majority of my teaching experience has taken place in urban school districts, working in the City School District of Albany as an assistant in an 8:1:2 classroom, a third grade teacher and finally as a prekindergarten teacher for 6 years. As a young mom with three children, I became certified as a Relationship Development Intervention(RDIconnect) consultant. This program is a next generation approach to autism and developmental disability intervention that is based on the latest scientific research into the human brain. I served as a coach and mentor for families experiencing this reality. As my children entered school, I found my way back to teaching in the classroom. Over the past 4 years, I have taught in the Troy City School District, serving as a second grade teacher in an ELL classroom. This summer I will complete course work at MCLA in order to receive certification as a School Building Leader and a School District Leader. Working with children and families to foster self-confidence, empathy, critical thinking and a deep love of learning has been a consistent joy in my life.

Daniel Gibbs has been teaching in elementary schools privately, publicly, and internationally for 27 years. His career took him teaching in schools in New York State, Los Angeles, Germany and the French part of Switzerland. He has been on accreditation teams in Denmark, Portugal and San Francisco through the Council of International Schools and the New England Association of Schools and Colleges. Over the course of a few years, he finished the Principal Training Program in London and Miami. He has also presented at a conference for gifted learners in Palm Springs, California with a focus on diversity in picture books. He has been a Math Coordinator, Mentor Coordinator, run numerous after school programs (his favorite being baking) and been on numerous school committees, including his favorite work with DEI committees. He is also on the Board of Directors for the Adirondack Theatre Festival in Glens Falls, NY where he resides and works nearby in South Glens Falls. He received his bachelor's degree from the State University of New York in Albany and his M.Ed. from The College of Saint Rose. He also received a certificate from the University of Southern California (USC) in Differentiated Curriculum in Gifted Education and Instruction. He plans to complete his Educational Administration Leadership Academy through Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts this July and receive his Certificate of Advanced Graduated Studies in Educational Administration in August. Outside of his educational career, he loves to travel, read, cook, bake, garden and spend time with his loved ones.

Rohan Graham is a dedicated educator with a strong background in curricular innovation and community engagement. Committed to cultivating academic excellence and leadership in diverse educational settings. Rohan began his journey as an educator over two decades ago as a teacher's assistant in the Albany City School District and now serves as William Hackett's sixth grade English teacher. Rohan has worked with a diverse range of students from English Language Learners to students with minor to severe disability. Being a former ELL student himself, being born in St. Thomas Jamaica, he knows the difficulties many of our student face, and he has championed for students' rights throughout his educational journey. In his current role at William Hackett, he oversees his department's CPT, serves on multiple committees, including the MTSS committee as well as his school's BLT. Rohan believes that every student can learn whether that pace is that of the hare or turtle learning can be done.

Olivia Harrison joined WSWHE BOCES in 2014 as a member of the Exceptional Learners Division. She was an Assistive Technology Provider for ten years and recently pivoted to Dean of Students at Sanford Street Teaching and Learning Center (SSTLC). Prior to her tenure at BOCES, she worked in a medically fragile classroom as well as taught a kindergarten/first grade multiage classroom. She has been a key leader on the Assistive Technology Evaluation team for the past five years. In conjunction of her current Dean of Students position, Olivia has pivoted her role and absorbs duties as an Autism Consult Teacher for the Autistic Classes and New York State Alternatively Assessed Classes. In addition, Olivia spearheads Advisory Committee for the Elementary School as well as works with students in the Therapeutic Support Program at SSTLC.

Raised in New Paltz, NY, Olivia attended New Paltz High School, earned her Bachelor of Science degree at The College of St. Rose in Albany, NY with a concentration in Communication Disorders and Psychology. She holds a Master of Science Degree in Literacy from The College of St. Rose. In addition, Olivia holds a Master of Science Degree in Special Education from Adelphi University. She has certificate of completion from MCLA Leadership Academy and is currently finishing up her Certificate of Graduate Studies from MCLA. Olivia has collaborated on the book, Let's Write alongside Assistive Technology guru Caroline Musselwhite. Olivia also enjoys volunteering as a wish maker for Make-a-Wish. Olivia empowers voices for those who cannot.

Anita Hoyt has been a dedicated educator with the Wallkill Central School District since 2003, currently serving as Leptondale Elementary's Intervention Specialist and DASA Coordinator. Throughout her career, she has taught Special Education, General Education, and GED courses across multiple grade levels, earning recognitions such as the 2021-22 Board of Education Award for Accomplishment and Q92's Teacher of the Month in 2017.

A graduate of Marist College with a B.A. in Childhood Education/Psychology and an M.S. in Literacy from the University at Albany, Ms. Hoyt is furthering her leadership training through the Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts. She actively contributes to school culture as a PBIS Coach and member of multiple committees, while also leading the Weekend Backpack Program and co-advising the student-run Newscast.

Beyond school, Ms. Hoyt founded the Spartan Youth Flag Football League and continues to volunteer within her community. She champions student voice, empathy, and relationship-building as the foundation of positive school environments.

Cassandra Lynn Hughes has been teaching agriculture since 1996, with a Master's in Agricultural Education from Cornell University. After my 17-year career as a high school Ag and Technology teacher, school-to-work coordinator, FFA advisor, and athletics coach, I have decided to take a new path. I have always been passionate about how learning extends beyond the classroom, and coaching has given me a different perspective. Now, my focus has shifted to pursuing a job as an Athletic Director. I am excited to announce that I have completed the MCLA's Leadership Academy, Cohort of 2025, and look forward to where my new journey takes me.

"A true leader has the confidence to stand alone, the courage to make tough decisions, and the compassion to listen to the needs of others. He does not set out to be a leader but becomes one by the equality of his actions and the integrity of his intent."

~Douglas MacArthur

Laura Hurwitz is a Resource and Referral Specialist at the Mid-West Family and Community Engagement (FACE) Center, located at Monroe 1 BOCES in Rochester, NY. The FACE Center is part of the NYS Education Department's Office of Special Education Educational Partnership. Laura supports families in navigating the special education process for students ages 5–22, builds partnerships with community agencies, and helps educational organizations strengthen their family engagement efforts. She also provides ongoing professional development for stakeholders supporting students with disabilities.

With over 20 years of experience in education, Laura has worked in Early Intervention, preschool special education, general education Pre-K, and elementary special education. She also served as an Early Childhood Specialist at the Regional Early Childhood Direction Center. Laura holds a bachelor's degree in child development from Tufts University and a master's in Special Education from St. John Fisher University. She will complete the Administrative Leadership Academy at Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts in July 2025.

Todd Hutson holds a BA in German with minors in French and Latin from the University of Dallas and an MAT in secondary education from Union College. He has taught German and Latin for nearly 20 years at both middle and high school levels, offering college credit courses as an adjunct professor with SUNY Oswego and now Hudson Valley Community College. He led Shenendehowa's German

exchange program for over a decade and serves on the school's safety and partnership teams, as well as the Instructional Support Team. A longtime advocate for Comprehensible Input, he helped pioneer the shift away from grammar-based instruction to the now-standard language teaching method.

Brandon Huyck joined Troy High School in May of 2019 as a member of the mathematics department, first taking a temporary leave of absence position for the remainder of the 2019-2020 school year and majority of the 2020-2021 school year, until being hired by the district at the end of the 2020-2021 school year. Mr. Huyck has worked with students in all grade levels of high school, teaching Algebra 1, Algebra 2, Intermediate Algebra, PTECH Algebra with a focus on project-based learning as well as piloting equity labs as part of a district wide initiative. He has served in the capacity of club advisor of the NYS Math Honor Society, building representative for the teachers union, a mentor, member of the building leadership team, safety committee, and as a member on the contract negotiations committee. Born and raised in Ballston Spa, New York, Mr. Huyck attended Ballston Spa High School, earning his Bachelor of Arts degree at Siena College in Mathematics with a concentration in Educational Studies in 2019. He holds a Master of Science degree in Curriculum Instruction and Technological Development. Mr. Huyck continues his education through Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts (MCLA) working towards his certificate for administrative licensure for grades K-12 in New York. He enjoys leisurely activities during his free time, playing golf, exercising, watching and attending sport events, spending time with his wife, as well as some more mind provoking tasks, some along the lines of studying stock market data trends and DIY home improvement projects. Mr. Huyck believes in the idea and right that everyone deserves to have their own voice, to be heard and treated with dignity no matter your beliefs, race, ethnicity, religious views or identity; to have the freedom to live your life the way you choose without being judged for doing so. People may not remember what you said, but they will remember how you made them feel. - Maya Angelou

Colin Klepetar graduated cum laude from Union College with a BS in Mathematics and a Master of Arts in Teaching in Secondary Education, earning the Eugene W. Hellmich Memorial Prize. Mr. Klepetar has been in the classroom for over 20 years and currently teaches 7th and 8th grade math at Ballston Spa Middle School. In addition to his teaching responsibilities, he is the Instructional Teacher Leader for the middle school math department, a member of the Building Leadership Team, a mentor, and a New York State Master Teacher. In the past, Mr. Klepetar has coached soccer and was an advisor of the Environmental Club where he organized tree plantings and initiated school-wide recycling and composting programs. Professionally, Mr. Klepetar's focus is to make mathematics more accessible and fun for his students while building relationships in his classroom to create more confident life-long learners.

Shannon LaRocco is an emerging educational leader with over a decade of experience at Wallkill Senior High School, where she served as the Life Skills Teacher. Passionate about fostering inclusive environments, Shannon founded the Be-You-tiful Club and spearheaded district-wide events and athletic partnerships inspired by the Big Brothers Big Sisters model, promoting connection and belonging for students of all abilities. As a committed educator, she has actively contributed to numerous school and district committees, shaping initiatives that drive instructional innovation, student engagement, and inclusive practices. Shannon also coaches Unified Basketball and volunteers extensively in extracurricular activities and community programs, including coordinating weekly food distribution for students in need. Now transitioning into educational administration, Shannon is dedicated to building school communities that nurture academic excellence, social-emotional growth, and overall well-being for students and staff alike, creating spaces where every individual can succeed and thrive.

Margaret Marsden has been a dedicated educator in the Broadalbin-Perth Central School District in New York since 1997, serving as a valued member of the elementary school team. She has taught both second grade and, more recently, sixth-grade English Language Arts. In addition to her teaching responsibilities, Mrs. Marsden plays a key leadership role within the school community. She leads the ELA Department for grades 3–6, coordinates the BP Mentor Program, and was instrumental in establishing the Literacy Rebuild Committee. She also currently serves as Head Coach of the Varsity Girls Golf team. Mrs. Marsden earned her Bachelor of Arts degree from Niagara University and a Master of Science in Literacy from the University at Albany. She holds New York State certifications in Reading (K–12) and Elementary Education (Pre-K–6) and is currently pursuing certification in Educational Administration through MCLA, with completion expected in July. Outside of the professional environment, she enjoys golfing, following the Red Sox in various parks, and spending quality time with her two grown children and her husband.

Whitney McRobbie has served as a school psychologist at Potsdam Central School District since September 2020. She brings experience from St. Regis Falls Central School District, Centennial BOCES, and the SUNY Plattsburgh Neuropsychology Clinic. In her role, Ms. McRobbie conducts psychoeducational evaluations and behavioral assessments, provides individual and group counseling, and leads the MTSS process to support student achievement and well-being. She collaborates closely with educators, families, and administrators to address academic and behavioral concerns. Ms. McRobbie is also a therapeutic crisis intervention for schools trainer and a member of the district threat assessment team. A native of Hermon, NY, Ms. McRobbie earned a Bachelor of Science in Psychology and Sociology from St. Lawrence University and a Master of Arts/CAS in School Psychology from SUNY Plattsburgh. She recently completed a 500-hour administrative internship. Outside of work, she enjoys family time, outdoor adventures, and all

things dog-related. She is passionate about creating safe, inclusive environments where every student feels seen, heard, and empowered.

Sarah Myers, Incoming Principal, Stafford Middle School – Plattsburgh City School District brings over a decade of experience in education, having served the past 11 years as a dedicated middle school math teacher in the Plattsburgh City School District. Her passion for data-informed instruction and student growth has been a driving force throughout her career. In her role as the Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) Data Coordinator, Sarah played a pivotal role in developing and implementing a district-wide, tiered support system for mathematics. Her leadership in analyzing student data, guiding instructional programming, and collaborating with district leadership teams has helped shape a comprehensive, equity-focused MTSS framework that supports all learners. Sarah is deeply committed to continuous improvement, innovation, and student-centered teaching. Her collaborative approach and data-driven mindset have earned her the respect of colleagues and the broader school community.

Beginning July 1st, Sarah will step into her new role as Principal of Stafford Middle School. Outside of her professional life, she enjoys spending time with her family and friends and is a proud mother of three.

Dylon Peertamsingh is a passionate educator and advocate for equity and multilingual education. Since 2019, he has served in the City School District of Albany's ENL department, following prior teaching experience in Schenectady City School District and working for the New York State Assembly. He has taught middle school math, ELA, social studies, and ENL, and holds leadership roles as a mentor, team leader, and curriculum developer. Dylon also leads the MTSS-I process at the secondary level, focusing on the needs of Multilingual Learners in addition to leading his school's equity committee.

Born in Trinidad and Tobago, he immigrated to Albany, NY as a teen and graduated from Albany High School. He holds degrees from The College of Saint Rose and Clarkson University, with certifications in TESOL and Educational Leadership.

He has presented for the National Consortium for Teaching about Asia and the New York State Association for Bilingual Education (NYSABE). Outside the classroom, Dylon volunteers with immigrant communities, sings in a choir, and enjoys traveling, Broadway shows, and time with his family and dogs.

Sarah Prinzi's teaching experience includes AP Psychology and Sociology, Spanish 2, 6th, 7th, and 8th grade Social Studies. Over the last twenty-two years, Sarah has participated in union negotiations, PBIS, Professional Development committees, advised Yorkers and Ski clubs, mentored new teachers, and was a facilitating member of the GCS DEI focus group for educators. Sarah has also served as a class advisor, National Honors Society and History Club advisor, and taught Summer Academy for six summers. Sarah's further professional responsibilities include creating and facilitating professional development courses for educators throughout the Genesee Valley Region through the Genesee Valley Teacher Resource Center, writing curriculum for the Migrant Center in Leicester, NY and grading Advanced Placement Exam essays online for the College Board.

Sarah earned her Master of Science degree in Social Studies education from the State University of New York at Geneseo. Sarah holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in History and a certification in Social Studies education, grades 5-12 and has earned additional graduate credits in ESOL instruction from the University of Rochester and anticipates completion of her certification in education administration at the Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts in July 2025.

Marie Prizzi is a dedicated educator with over 30 years of experience teaching mathematics at the secondary level. She currently serves at Webster Thomas High School, where she has taught everything from Math 7 through Precalculus. Marie works with a diverse range of learners, including students with IEPs and English Language Learners, and is passionate about building inclusive classrooms where all students can thrive.

Beyond the classroom, Marie plays a leadership role in credit recovery and serves as a lead teacher. She has contributed to curriculum development, professional learning communities, and tutoring initiatives focused on student success. She recently completed her administrative internship and continues to pursue leadership opportunities that center on equity, instructional improvement, and student-driven learning. Marie is known for her reflective practice, collaborative mindset, and strong commitment to school-family partnerships. Whether supporting learning recovery or leading professional workshops, she brings energy, empathy, and deep instructional expertise to all she does.

Michelle Rivera began her career in education with the NYC Department of Education in 2014 and joined Accion Academy in 2017 as a Special Education teacher. In 2024, she transitioned to the Greenburgh Central School District in Westchester County. Before becoming a teacher, Michelle worked as a paraprofessional in both classroom and one-to-one crisis support roles. She has taught English Language Arts and Social Studies in many capacities.

A Bronx native, Michelle graduated from Cardinal Spellman High School and earned her B.A. in Literature with a concentration in Secondary Education from Lehman College. She holds an M.S.Ed. in Students with Disabilities from City College of New York.

Michelle has completed a wide range of professional development workshops, including Word Morphology, Small Group Instruction, Culturally Responsive Education (NYU), Quality IEP Writing, Crisis De-escalation, SHSAT/NYSESLAT Proctor Training, DASA, and more. She has earned tenure

At Accion Academy, she served on the Instructional Leadership Team, contributing to the DATAWISE process and supporting school initiatives such as Creative Writing Club, Reading Intervention and PBIS events. Michelle is deeply committed to equity, culturally responsive teaching, and community engagement. She believes all students can exceed their goals in a nurturing, high-expectation environment that values collaboration, respect, and student voice. As a proud Bronx native, she remains passionate about giving back to the communities that shaped her.

Cindy Rivera-Ortiz is a bilingual educator, instructional leader, and lifelong advocate for equitable education. With over two decades of classroom experience serving elementary, middle, and high school settings, she has dedicated her career to supporting multilingual learners and students with disabilities through culturally responsive, inclusive practices. She holds certifications in Elementary Education, Spanish, Special Education, English as a New Language (ENL), and Bilingual Extension.

Currently pursuing a Certificate of Advanced Graduate Studies in Administration at the Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts (MCLA), Cindy is completing her School Building Leader certification and administrative internship at Pine Bush Senior High School. Her leadership extends to managing an after-school peer mentoring program and contributing to IEP meetings and inclusive scheduling decisions that are in compliance with federal and state education laws. Cindy has led and assisted international student travel programs, served as a Civil Air Patrol senior member, and presented workshops for educators and families on the prevention of bullying. As a board member of PULSES- Parents United Learning the Special Education System, she supports families navigating complex educational services. Cindy is known for creating welcoming learning spaces that promote confidence, connection, and high expectations. Her journey is deeply informed by personal experience as a parent of a child with significant medical and educational needs, which fuels her passion for inclusive leadership, empathy-driven advocacy, and systems change. Cindy envisions schools as spaces where every learner is seen, supported, and inspired to reach their full potential through intentional leadership, collaboration, and a deep commitment to equity.

James Rolince joined the Solvay Union Free School District in 2009 and currently serves as Director of Athletics, Health, and Physical Education. He previously spent 12 years as a literacy coach for grades 5–12 and began his career in special education. Before Solvay, he taught middle school at The Cobblestone School in Rochester, NY. James has worked closely with teachers to support literacy, led RTI/MTSS teams, and coordinated academic interventions. He coached cross country and track and field at Nazareth University, as well as soccer and basketball at the interscholastic level. A Solvay High School graduate, he holds a bachelor's and a master's degree from Nazareth University. He continues to grow professionally through Cognitive Coaching and Adaptive Schools training and holds memberships in the ILA, ASCD, and local and national athletic administrator associations. James enjoys time with family, running, reading, and cooking, and is committed to developing self-directed, compassionate learners.

Paul Widjeskog is a professional Special Education teacher at North Colonie Central Schools in Latham, New York. Mr. Widjeskog has served as an educator in both public and private settings for 20 years. Prior to his tenure at North Colonie Central Schools, Mr. Widjeskog taught at St. Albans City School in St. Albans, Vermont, Woodstock Day School in Woodstock, New York, Claremont Preparatory School in Manhattan, New York, and for the NOVA Corporation in Tokyo, Japan. Mr. Widjeskog earned his Bachelor of Science degree in Childhood Education at SUNY Plattsburgh in 2005 and holds a Master of Science degree in Special Education from Brooklyn College. He is a graduate of the MCLA Leadership Academy in North Adams, Massachusetts and is currently pursuing administrative certification in the state of New York. In the field of Educational Leadership, Mr. Widjeskog is focused on instructional leadership, school climate, and building culture.

Sarah E. Yasses is a Special Education Administrator in the Rochester City School District with over 22 years of experience supporting students from PreK through grade 12. She is a passionate advocate for inclusive education, equity, and culturally responsive practices that affirm and empower all learners. Her leadership is rooted in building strong relationships and fostering meaningful family engagement as a foundation for student success.

Sarah holds a Bachelor of Science in Elementary and Special Education and a Master of Science in Special Education from Canisius University, as well as a certificate of completion from the Administrative Leadership Academy at the Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts. Throughout her career, she has led initiatives focused on improving outcomes for students with disabilities, supporting inclusive classroom practices, and providing coaching and professional development that strengthens educator capacity. Sarah is dedicated to creating welcoming school environments where all students are seen, supported, and given the opportunity to succeed.

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