



## Reimagining Education through CCLR

### Real-world Experiences and Testimonials by Educators

By Scott Carr | CESA 2 Career, Community, Life Readiness

In many ways, the start of the school year for Waterloo School District teachers and staff mirrored previous years. Educators eagerly returned to their classrooms, diving into preparations for their incoming students with refreshed enthusiasm after summer break. However, as in previous years, the week progressed with teachers participating in the familiar in-service rituals—those policy reviews and procedural meetings that had become a predictable part of their back-to-school experience.

What no one anticipated, however, was the pivotal moment that would unfold during their final in-service day. As teachers prepared to depart for their last weekend of respite before students arrived, Superintendent Brian Henning called a collaborative large group meeting that would fundamentally challenge their mindsets regarding what school could be and propel them into a journey of innovation and creativity to connect students to their purpose.

#### ***The Waterloo Transformation:*** **Building a New Educational Purpose**

After more than two years of deep investment in CESA 2's Career, Community, and Life Readiness Framework, Waterloo School District has undergone a remarkable evolution. What began as a re-culturing approach has blossomed into a comprehensive transformation. The process has strategically engaged administrative leaders to champion the vision, challenge teacher teams to test new approaches in controlled environments, activate students to provide critical feedback on their experiences, and lean into community partners to provide authentic workplace connections. Together, this carefully orchestrated coalition has crafted the foundation for new student impact outcomes through their Portrait of a Graduate Framework while experimenting with educational redesign that incorporates authentic work-based experiences with local businesses.

Now, Henning recognized it was time to bring this vision into full focus for the entire staff. His decision—marked by transparency, calculated risk-taking, and unwavering conviction—aimed to secure the emotional investment of every educator in the building.

Students are more engaged in the lesson and with problem solving. They are more willing to take risks and are more open to trying new things. Having students create art with a purpose to see an end result is so valuable!

- Theresa Habeck, Art Teacher, Waterloo School District

The district leadership, school board, and community partners had collectively determined that this approach was essential for their students to truly become future-ready, breaking free from the limitations of traditional metrics that had for years contributed to the cognitive dissonance many students experienced in their educational journey.

As Henning articulated this new found vision, staff responded with remarkable engagement and investment. While some educators naturally questioned aspects of the process and necessity, a substantial contingent of committed teachers immediately recognized the critical need for this shift. Their professional intuition, shaped by years in the classroom, had already identified the gaps this initiative aimed to address.

One particularly powerful moment came when a veteran



teacher shared his formative experience transitioning from education to the workforce. He recounted being deliberately challenged by an early employer who tested his perseverance and grit through what initially seemed like a frustrating "wild goose chase." Though irritated at the time, his persistence ultimately led to success—an experience that revealed the value of non-academic skills rarely developed in traditional educational settings. With conviction in his voice, he expressed profound concern that today's educational system fails to cultivate these essential qualities in students, potentially leaving them unprepared for workplace realities.



...is what we have been doing working?... the evidence would tell us "No!"

**Brian Henning, Superintendent  
Waterloo School District**

His testimony resonated visibly with colleagues across the room, who nodded in recognition and built upon his insights. A collective realization emerged: despite good intentions, their current system prioritizes academic content knowledge almost exclusively, neglecting the durable skills employers consistently identify as crucial. This imbalance, many noted, stems directly from the achievement-driven metrics and high-stakes testing mandates imposed by state and federal education policies—creating a disconnect between what schools measure and what students truly need for future success.

As the discussion deepened, another educator courageously shared her daughter's journey through the educational system. Despite coming from a family with a strong tradition of four-year college degrees—including many educators—and seeing her older children thrive in traditional academic pathways, she recounted how her youngest daughter had struggled within the college-for-all paradigm. Now in her mid-twenties, her daughter was finally discovering her authentic career direction—one requiring specialized training but not a four-year degree.

The poignancy of her story emerged in the details: her daughter had followed the prescribed path into college only to withdraw early, accumulating significant debt and losing valuable years before finally identifying her true aspirations. As she spoke, the educator's expression revealed both parental concern and professional reckoning—a recognition that despite her best

intentions, she had been part of a system that narrowly defined success and inadvertently limited options for students like her daughter. The room fell silent as colleagues absorbed this personal testimony that transformed abstract discussions about educational purpose into a deeply human story with real consequences.

As the discussion continued, another staff member leaned forward emphatically. "This is exactly what we're attempting to eliminate here—the fact that students don't know their direction!" Her voice carried the conviction of someone connecting theory to urgent practice. She articulated how aligning career and community connections from the elementary years forward would provide students with both purpose and direction, inspiring them to move purposefully toward meaningful goals rather than following prescribed paths that might not fit their strengths and interests.

Superintendent Henning delivered a compelling message articulating a vision that transcended traditional educational boundaries—one he invited teachers to embrace as partners rather than merely implement as directives. As the discussion intensified, educators expressed justified concerns with systemic constraints that

often impede meaningful change. Some thoughtfully challenged the feasibility of such a transformation within current structures, raising legitimate concerns about implementation.

Rather than becoming defensive, Henning responded with the penetrating clarity that defines effective leadership. When pressed, he simply posed a fundamental question: "Is what we have been doing working?" The evidence, he noted, clearly indicated it is not—quickly adding that this reality reflected no failure on the part of the dedicated educators before him, but rather the limitations of the system they had been directed to uphold.

This willingness to question entrenched practices exemplifies the courageous leadership essential for educational transformation. With over two decades in education, Henning has established himself as both a community cornerstone and a visionary thought leader. His deep roots in Waterloo give him the credibility to challenge conventions, while his forward-thinking perspective illuminates new possibilities.

Under his guidance, Waterloo is pioneering a shift toward an authentic community-educational ecosystem—a model where

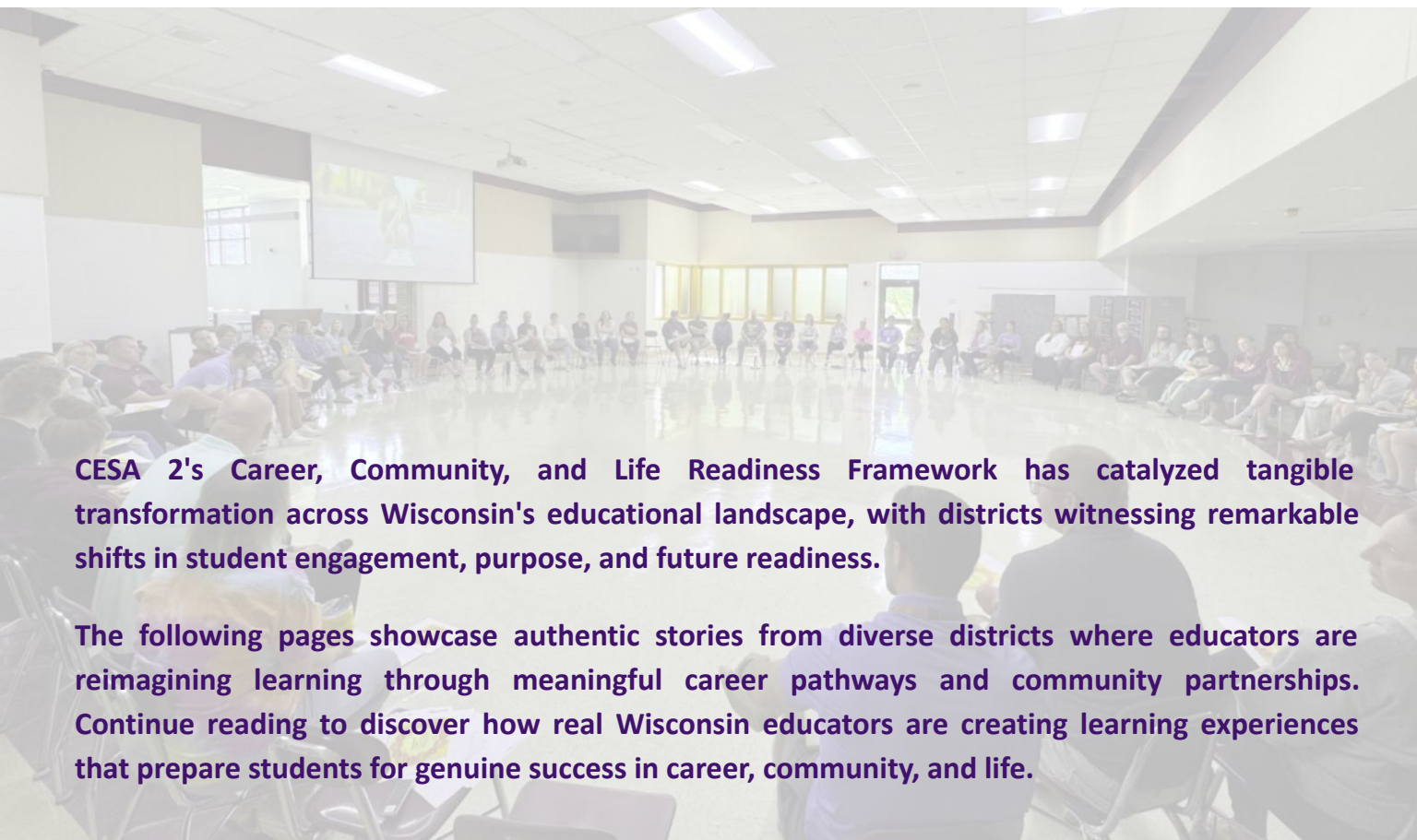




learning transcends classroom walls and connects meaningfully to students' futures. The anticipated outcomes extend beyond traditional metrics to encompass genuine student preparedness, yielding substantial returns for all stakeholders: students discovering purpose, teachers reclaiming professional fulfillment, and community partners developing their future workforce.

As the session concluded, Henning observed with quiet satisfaction that sustainable change was already emerging—not from top-down mandates but from a growing professional consensus about what students truly needed to thrive. Waterloo's journey toward a career, community, and life readiness approach had moved beyond conceptual discussions into the realm of practical implementation, with teachers themselves becoming the most compelling advocates for transformation.

The path ahead will undoubtedly present challenges, but the foundation has been firmly established: a shared vision, emerging evidence of impact, and most importantly, a faculty increasingly united in their commitment to preparing students not just for tests and credits, but for meaningful futures. In this rural Wisconsin community, education was being reimagined not as a system of compliance but as a dynamic ecosystem connecting students to purpose, community, and possibility.



**CESA 2's Career, Community, and Life Readiness Framework has catalyzed tangible transformation across Wisconsin's educational landscape, with districts witnessing remarkable shifts in student engagement, purpose, and future readiness.**

**The following pages showcase authentic stories from diverse districts where educators are reimagining learning through meaningful career pathways and community partnerships. Continue reading to discover how real Wisconsin educators are creating learning experiences that prepare students for genuine success in career, community, and life.**





## **Pedro Vasquez**

Phoenix Middle School, 6th Grade ELA/SLA Teacher  
Delavan-Darien School District

### ***Shifting to a Career, Community, and Life Connected Classroom***

Despite Delavan-Darien School District's two-year immersion in career-connected learning, Pedro Vasquez hesitated at the threshold of transformation. The Phoenix Middle School ELA/SAL teacher wrestled with disciplinary doubts until April before taking his first tentative steps. "I didn't see how to do it," he confesses. "I teach Language Arts. How do you do careers in Language Arts?" His initial skepticism, however, quickly dissolved once he witnessed the framework in action. What began as professional uncertainty blossomed into passionate advocacy as Vasquez discovered unexpected pathways to connect literacy skills with authentic career contexts—creating learning experiences that resonated deeply with his students and reinvigorated his own teaching practice.

"I wanted to do it, but I didn't know how to do it. I waited until last month, unfortunately. I really wanted to work on it earlier and implement this approach. But it really goes against everything you learned and how to teach." Vasquez's candid reflection reveals the profound paradigm shift required of educators trained in traditional methodologies. He acknowledges that conventional teaching approaches have increasingly failed to capture student engagement, becoming ritualized practices disconnected from students' lived experiences and future aspirations. "The traditional approach of teaching just isn't gaining the attention of the students," he observes, noting that educational practices really haven't changed.

After making this commitment, and recognizing how much more students engage with a career and community connected approach, Vasquez now understands the profound impact it can have. "It was really rewarding for me as a teacher. I could see their potential and how they could go deeper and different ways with how they could approach their learning. Students expressed how they enjoyed learning as a team and on their own." Rather than having students constantly sitting and listening to him provide information, Vasquez quickly realized he didn't need to be the sole knowledge provider. Learning can flourish when students drive the work and take ownership of their education. "If we teach in a traditional way, we won't see this. We are not forcing them to think outside of the box. We will not notice their full potential teaching that way."

As he embraced this innovative approach, Vasquez discovered that students readily accept responsibility not only for their individual learning but for collaborative teamwork as well. Within the design learning process he implemented through the CCLR Framework, students consistently work in collaborative teams

with defined responsibility roles. This structure naturally builds accountability while transforming the teacher's role into that of coach and learning guide—two critical components of successful Career, Community and Life Connected learning embedded within CESA 2's CCLR Framework.

Vasquez quickly leveraged this new instructional freedom to introduce authentic workplace practices. For students needing

**Now seeing what we did, it changed my mind. I know that kids can do it. After going through the process, I realize that they can do it.**

**- Pedro Vasquez, Phoenix Middle School**

additional support or stronger coaching, he implemented real-world protocols: students scheduled appointments through calendar invites, prepared meeting agendas, and followed structured role protocols when collaborating across teams. He found students thrived on these authentic workplace parallels, engaging enthusiastically with professional skill development that extended far beyond traditional academic exercises.

What surprised and delighted Vasquez most was the students' growing capacity for self-directed problem-solving. "When we would meet, students came up with solutions for these problems. I would only have to guide them through it. It was really amazing how they took on this role!" This evolution toward teacher-as-facilitator represents the ultimate goal of career-connected learning—students developing initiative and collaborative skills that transfer directly to workplace success. The transformation extended beyond teamwork as well. "Creativity was really impressive. With this approach, I had seen sides of students that I had not seen all year... creating new things that I didn't know they could." Through authentic, career-connected learning experiences, Vasquez unlocked previously untapped potential in his students, revealing capabilities that traditional instruction had left dormant.

Vasquez went on to describe how one team had elevated the design profession-based learning to remarkable heights. During







the eight-day design sprint, students tackled creating a graphic novel requested by an external publishing company. This project, which seamlessly integrated unit standards, culminated in a formal presentation to the industry partner. As the sprint unfolded, Vasquez discovered that one student was already an accomplished writer with a substantial YouTube following. The project sparked such enthusiasm that this student and his team continued developing their work beyond the classroom, ultimately publishing their book on the student's YouTube platform—a perfect example of classroom learning extending into authentic creative production.

**At the end of the day, we say to our teachers, “This work is voluntary, but it is inevitable!”**

**- Keith Johnson, Nekoosa High School**

Student engagement emerged as the standout achievement of this project. Despite initial concerns about whether students would master required standards through this approach, Vasquez's doubts quickly dissolved. "Not only can they learn the same standards, they learn them in a more engaging way!" he exclaims. Evidence of this deeper engagement manifested not just in final projects and student-created checkpoints throughout the process, but in students' day-to-day investment in their work.

One particularly telling example involved a student who, despite being homesick, chose to participate virtually with his team rather than miss the day's collaboration. When asked if this level of commitment would have occurred in a traditional classroom setting, Vasquez's response was immediate and unequivocal: "No!" This moment crystallized for him the profound motivational difference between compliance-based and purpose-driven learning experiences.

One of the most profound impacts of this approach is how it transforms teachers' beliefs about student capacity for independent learning. Teacher collective efficacy—the shared belief that educators can positively influence student outcomes—has one of the highest effect sizes (1.57) in John

Hattie's educational research. Through his willingness to reimagine classroom dynamics, Vasquez didn't just witness impressive results; he experienced a fundamental shift in his understanding of student capability. "We often do not think that kids can learn by themselves. We think that kids learn by just listening to teachers, and teachers doing the work," he reflects. "Now seeing what we did, it changed my mind. I know that kids can do it. After going through the process, I realize that they can do it. They can do what we put in front of them and say, go figure it out." This revelation represents the deepest form of professional growth—a transformed perspective on student potential that will influence every instructional decision moving forward.

### **Keith Johnson**

Nekoosa High School, Principal  
Nekoosa School District

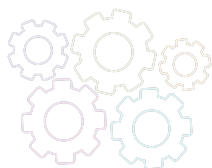
#### ***Building a Community-Educational Ecosystem***

In Nekoosa, the approach to career and community readiness extends far beyond school walls. Over the past two-plus years, the district has methodically shifted toward creating an integrated community and educational ecosystem. This transformation began with developing a focus on career and community preparedness for their high school students, and has evolved to include a pilot group of teachers who intentionally connect design learning, profession-based projects, and work-based learning with community partners.

Keith Johnson, Nekoosa High School principal, serves as the visionary architect behind this movement. His ability to reimagine educational possibilities has catalyzed collaboration across the district. What began as targeted high school engagement with CESA 2's CCLR Framework has expanded to include the middle school, an Academy Program serving at-risk students, and an online charter school serving over 300 students statewide—all now equally invested in this approach.

The CCLR work has fundamentally altered educational philosophy throughout the district. "Our work around CCLR has been shifting our thinking as a staff around education and what students need to be doing and learning while in school," Johnson explains. With over 25 years in education, Johnson has long championed preparing students for future success, but this framework has provided structured pathways toward that vision.

Johnson acknowledges that quality transformation requires patience. One of his primary goals is moving away from compliance-based leadership, where staff constantly seek prescriptive direction. This "playbook" approach often stifles creativity and innovation—pitfalls Johnson skillfully avoids





through his transformative leadership style and deep understanding of his team. "It is slow work, in order to do it right, but vital to helping set students up to be successful in their lives after high school."

Perhaps the most significant impact of Nekoosa's ecosystem approach has been the unprecedented community investment. The Portrait of a Graduate process served as a catalyst for systems change, with community partners making explicit commitments that enhance students' social capital and future readiness. This collaboration promises to increase not only student economic mobility but also strengthen the local economy itself. Johnson notes appreciatively, "As a result of this work, we have been able to work much more closely and collaboratively with businesses and other organizations in our community."

The district's two-year investment in this transformation is already showing remarkable promise. "The staff who have been involved have realized the impact and believe it to be the 'right' work. We are at a great point with the work with people starting to really dive in. There is a lot of excitement!" Johnson enthusiastically stated. While participation remains optional at this stage, Johnson's leadership philosophy embraces both patience and clear direction about where education must ultimately head. Johnson went on to conclude, "At the end of the day, we say to our teachers, 'This work is voluntary, but it is inevitable!'"

### **Dale Green**

Director of Curriculum and Instruction  
Wisconsin Heights School District

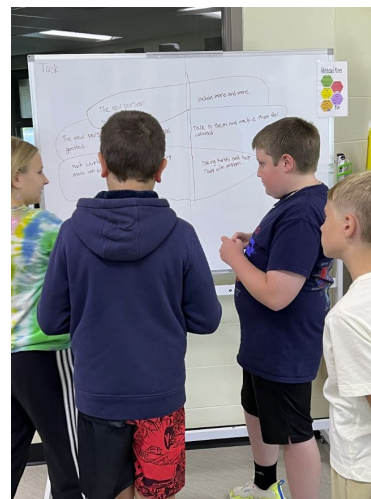
#### ***Balancing Academic Excellence with Future Readiness***

Wisconsin Heights School District, known for its high academic achievement, recognized that excellence in test scores alone wouldn't fully prepare students for life beyond graduation. While acknowledging that academics will remain a priority, Director of Curriculum and Instruction Dale Green understands that a complete educational system must offer more. In their close-knit community, integrating a career, community, and life readiness approach alongside academic rigor resonated with local partners and residents. The ultimate goal: creating stronger connections between students, career pathways, and their community.

"For students, especially at the middle school, it means earlier exposure to career pathways, authentic learning, and local

partnerships," Green explains. This early exploration helps students develop deeper self-awareness —understanding their character traits, values, and strengths—which in turn allows them to identify potential career and community matches. This alignment of personal attributes with future possibilities helps students discover purpose and prioritize educational experiences that support viable post-secondary plans.

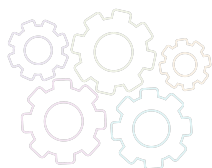
A cornerstone of the CCLR Framework implementation at Wisconsin Heights is developing each student's unique Career and Community Identity. This foundational element, central to Phase 2 of the framework, enables educators to understand students' authentic interests, aptitudes, and aspirations beyond traditional academic measures. With this deeper insight, teachers'



partnerships," Green explains. This early exploration helps students develop deeper self-awareness —understanding their character traits, values, and strengths—which in turn allows them to identify potential career and community matches. This alignment of personal attributes with future possibilities helps students discover purpose and prioritize educational experiences that support viable post-secondary plans.

Green fully appreciates the depth of cultural transformation this work requires. Known as "re-culturing" in the CESA 2 CCLR Framework, this process demands ground-level investment guided by a strong rationale. As a veteran educator and relationship-focused leader, Green has carefully cultivated support through a methodical approach. Leveraging framework resources to develop the "why" behind this work—driven by understanding pain points in traditional education—Green strategically engaged key individuals he knew would embrace the work and develop the necessary emotional investment.

As the initiative progresses beyond establishing purpose, the next phase involves developing a Readiness Team—a coalition that implements initial classroom work with school support. This team experiments with innovative framework processes in a strategic, controlled manner without overwhelming the broader faculty. Their goal: develop proof of concept while building capacity, confidence, and enthusiasm among early adopters before showcasing the impact on authentic student learning to others.





"Our CCLR Readiness Team plays a key role in modeling and coaching for both staff and students, weaving readiness into daily learning," Green emphasizes. As this work expands and generates interest, it naturally becomes contagious. This "build from the bottom, strengthen the middle, and intrigue the top" approach, inspired by Michael Fullan's change theory, forms the foundation of their implementation strategy. The systems transformation that Green is carefully orchestrating has already inspired his strategically selected team members. "Staff are energized by this shared focus, and our community recognizes it as preparing graduates who are truly ready for life beyond school," he notes with pride.

Green envisions the Readiness Team continuing to guide colleagues in integrating real-world skills into instruction while expanding partnerships with local businesses and higher education institutions. By prioritizing implementation at the middle school level, allowing organic growth through peer leadership, he believes students will develop strong foundations that will extend naturally into high school and eventually reach elementary classrooms.

"We are working toward a cultural shift with CCLR, building on our long-standing strength in academics while also placing intentional focus on preparing students for life beyond the classroom," Green emphasizes. While academic excellence remains paramount, the Readiness Team's support and coaching will help students develop the skills needed to thrive in their community and future careers.

Green's thoughtful leadership and skillful orchestration of this movement have already yielded impressive results. A diverse team, including counselors, literacy coaches, teachers, and administrators, embraced the challenge with immediate action. They collaboratively restructured an Academic Lab period to focus specifically on life and future readiness skills. Green's hands-off coaching approach, providing guidance and resources without micromanagement, allowed for organic change to flourish—clear evidence that the cultural shift is well underway.

### **"Build from the bottom, strengthen the middle, and intrigue the top!"**

- Michael Fullan, *The New Meaning of Educational Change*, Sixth Edition (2025).



### **Chloe Evans**

Waterloo Middle School, 7-8 Grade Math Teacher  
Waterloo School District

#### ***Beyond Traditional Teaching: A Journey to Career and Community-Connected Learning***

When selecting implementers for career, community, and life readiness frameworks, particularly in classrooms, strategic foresight is essential. While you want believers in the new vision, including some skeptics and resisters, creates a valuable balance. The ideal team combines enthusiastic advocates, those in the middle ground, and thoughtful challengers who push thinking in productive ways.

From the beginning, Chloe Evans, a 7th and 8th grade math teacher at Waterloo Middle School, was unmistakably a believer. This stemmed not only from her STEM background as a student—where project-based learning and problem-solving were familiar territory—but from her fundamental approach to education. Evans embraces the challenge of innovation, and when asked, she emphasizes that this work isn't "one more thing" on an overflowing plate, but rather a different approach to teaching. And when Evans does things differently, she excels.



Evans immersed herself in the Career and Community Connected Learning CESA 2 Framework with immediate intensity. She not only valued the personalized coaching provided by CESA 2 but also collaborated at a level that accelerated her growth and experimentation, creating a significant impact for her students. She embraced student-directed learning, transferring responsibility to them. "This format is not for all teachers initially; you have to be open to the idea, ready to dive in, and allow students to make decisions," Evans explains. Teaching mathematics, she initially struggled with relinquishing control over concept and standards instruction. "It is hard, not being in control. You have to really trust yourself, and the students!" she admits. Ultimately, by integrating standards



directly into designed learning experiences, she discovered students preferred team-based learning and thrived in this environment.

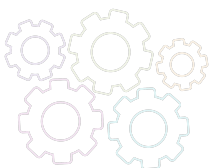
Evans mastered Design Sprints—both single-day activities and extended projects. She estimates student proficiency increased by over 25% in her classroom and expects further growth as she refines this approach of collaborative, profession-based learning. Her role transformed into that of a coach, inspiring students to reach higher. "It can be difficult to assess individual student learning in this way because design sprints are intended to be completed by collab teams," Evans acknowledges.

Evans found that building in reflection time, both individually and collectively, provided insight into student learning. "I was doing traditional formatives alongside the design sprints because I was worried about individual understanding, but I always remind myself that in a real-life work environment, everyone won't know everything perfectly." Evans believes this authentic approach better prepares students for their futures, where teams leverage individual strengths and weaknesses while developing crucial teamwork skills.

## My role in the classroom has shifted from traditional teacher to facilitator of learning.

- **Chloe Evans** Waterloo Middle School

Evans estimates that traditional teaching methods only engaged about 40% of her students. "I knew it, I felt it, but I did not know how to change it," she reflects. After transitioning to design learning with career and community connections, she saw engagement rise to approximately 95%. She attributes this dramatic improvement to collaborative learning with real-world applications. Initially, students resisted—some even pleading to return to traditional instruction and assessments, which Evans interpreted as seeking the path of least resistance. "This approach is not natural for students. Odds are, students have been trained by traditional schooling, believing that is the best possible way," she observes.



Evans also identified underdeveloped durable skills as students began their design learning journey. "Following the design sprint, many students were frustrated," she notes, explaining that the interdependence and teamwork requirements challenged them. She helped them understand that these experiences mirror college and career expectations. Evans emphasized to students that "Durable skills like collaboration, honesty, leadership, and delegation are necessary when given large tasks to do as a team." She points out that these critical skills rarely receive focused attention in traditional education, despite their essential nature.

After multiple design learning experiences, Evans witnessed a transformation in her students. They became more comfortable with the approach and began to excel, asking fewer content-specific questions and taking greater ownership of their learning. "My role in the classroom has shifted from a traditional teacher to a facilitator of learning," Evans reflects. She finds fulfillment in guiding and coaching, empowering students to direct their own educational journey. "I want to be a support to students who need further instruction, advice, or guidance. I am not driven by standing in front of the room and telling students about concepts; I want to have conversations and allow students to be the leaders in their learning." Through this approach, Evans is undoubtedly helping students discover purpose and prioritize their own learning pathways.

## **Drew Halbesma**

Superintendent  
Delavan-Darien School District

### *Cultivating and Educational Ecosystem*

When Drew Halbesma accepted the role of superintendent in Delavan-Darien, he immediately recognized the potential for creating an authentic educational-community ecosystem. With an abundance of engaged business partners, organizations, and community resources, Delavan-Darien offered fertile ground for developing the comprehensive CESA 2 Career, Community, and Life Readiness system. Halbesma wasted no time investing in his talented staff and forging connections with a community eager to participate.

Central to Halbesma's vision is his recognition of the critical need to develop students' durable skills. While acknowledging the fundamental importance of academic and technical competencies—and the accountability systems that measure them—he believes preparing students to be truly future-ready requires a more comprehensive approach. "We have really started to see momentum in the number and quality of partnerships with area businesses and business leaders as we discuss more about emphasizing Durable Skills and Readiness





focus with our students," Halbesma explains. With a cohesive leadership team and staff who have been engaged in the career, community, and life readiness process for over two years, community opportunities are naturally emerging. "Our hope is that our students graduate from Delavan-Darien and impact their local community in a positive way," he adds.

Halbesma guides this transformation through his guiding principle: "Do Simple Better." He identifies the district's fundamental purpose as Career, Community, and Life Readiness (CCLR), with Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) serving as the implementation vehicle and their Portrait of a Graduate representing the desired outcomes (see Chart #3). The district is working diligently to align these three foundational elements.

## Do Simple Better



CCLR  
Career, Community, Life Ready

WHAT  
our  
fundamental  
purpose  
is.



PLC's  
Professional Learning Communities

HOW  
we  
communicate &  
collaborate.



POG  
Portrait of a Graduate

OUR  
collective  
outcomes.

In their second year, Delavan-Darien established their strategic goals. These goals have gained momentum within the district by allowing teachers to determine how the work is done. As a result, teachers view this work as an opportunity, which has increased their emotional investment in the process.

Chart #3

This work has gained remarkable momentum throughout the district. Teachers are collaborating more effectively and embracing innovation. Whether developing career-specific activities or integrating durable skill development into learning experiences, educators have invested deeply in the process. "As innovative teachers in our district begin to share these practices they are experimenting with in their classrooms, and as more teachers collaborate and discuss this work, I see the CCLR focus spreading like wildfire!" Halbesma observes.

At this year's opening professional development sessions, one of the initiative's teacher leaders (Morgan Huntley, featured elsewhere in this whitepaper) presented the Durable Skills Framework—which became the most highly attended session of

the day. This enthusiastic participation demonstrates growing teacher interest and recognition of the work's relevance. Halbesma notes, "This session was full of robust discussion and many teachers making the connections on how to embed the idea of Durable Skills into their content areas. It was great to see!"

### Dawn Schlick

Wisconsin Heights Middle School, 6th Grade Social Studies, Reading, and Language Arts Teacher  
Wisconsin Heights School District

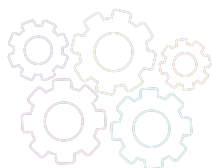
#### Embracing the CCLR Authentic Learning Process

Embracing the CESA 2 CCLR Framework came naturally to Wisconsin Heights 6th grade teacher Dawn Schlick. From the outset, she recognized the troubling signs students were displaying. She immediately connected with the reality that many students were actively disengaged—deliberately focusing on anything except what teachers requested. Schlick knew a different approach was needed, and she and her team were determined to implement change through a collaborative approach that would transform their entire learning environment.

During her initial framework training, Schlick resonated deeply with the observation that "Students aren't buying what we're selling!" When students disengage, there's typically a valid reason—most commonly, they struggle to connect classroom content with education's broader purpose. Schlick recognizes the CCLR framework's potential to address this disconnect. "I think the biggest impact of our work with CCLR will be that it makes learning feel real for kids," she explains. "Too often, a student will ask 'When am I ever going to use this?'—a question that reveals the fundamental gap between traditional instruction and meaningful learning experiences. By grounding academic content in real-world applications and future-focused skills, Schlick found that the framework provides what students have been seeking all along. "This work and how we implement it into class gives them an answer."

Schlick emphasizes that this approach requires genuine commitment. She and her colleagues understand the need to deepen implementation across all subject areas. At Wisconsin Heights, Schlick recognizes students must see how mathematics, science, and literacy connect to the durable skills they'll need throughout life. "As we continue to invest in this work, our next step will be to expand it beyond Academic Lab and into every classroom," Schlick notes.

As their implementation grows, Schlick and fellow educators see natural opportunities to engage local community partners—a





vital element for connecting students with authentic experiences. This community-based learning process represents an essential component of the CESA 2 CCLR Framework's Phase 2 integration. Schlick anticipates these developing relationships with enthusiasm: "Our community is eager to be involved, and we see exciting opportunities to welcome businesses and organizations into our schools to help students apply their learning in authentic ways."

"I believe education is in need of a shift, and this work is one way we're moving our culture at Wisconsin Heights to better support students," Schlick asserts. Building momentum and fostering teachers' emotional investment in this approach aligns perfectly with her vision. "For teachers, it's rejuvenating to see students engaged in authentic, real-world learning rather than just mimicking the 'right' answer for a test. Instead, they're actually thinking—solving problems, questioning, and applying what they know in new ways," she adds. "Student engagement increases teacher engagement and enthusiasm."

Schlick believes that while their schools have traditionally been community cornerstones, they must intentionally open their doors wider. Their career and community readiness initiatives are deliberately building stronger engagement between educators and community members. "The overwhelming enthusiasm showed us that our community wants to be an active part of our school's journey," she observes, adding that they're creating more opportunities for partnerships to flourish. "From local business leaders mentoring students to community members sharing their expertise in classrooms, this is what we are striving for!"

Ultimately, Schlick emphasizes that students remain at the center of this work. "For students, the biggest shift is mindset—seeing academics not as isolated tasks, but as tools to connect directly to their goals and futures." Whatever aspirations students hold, understanding durable skills and connecting to real-world experiences will propel them forward.

**"For teachers, it's rejuvenating to see students engaged in authentic, real-world learning rather than just mimicking the 'right' answer for a test."**

*- Dawn Schlick, Wisconsin Heights School District*

## **Mitchell Waterworth**

Director of Human Resources  
Auburn Ridge Building Supply Co.

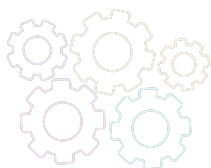
### ***Bridging Education and Community Partnerships***

As a member of Waterloo School District's Portrait of a Graduate design team, Mitchell Waterworth recognized the profound importance of his investment. He quickly grasped the educational system's complexity and the challenge of transforming it to maximize student impact—ultimately benefiting his company, Auburn Ridge, as well. Waterworth understood how these two entities naturally complement each other in supporting post-graduation success. The opportunity to help identify the guaranteed attributes and skills the district would develop in every student was one he couldn't pass up.

"The Portrait of a Graduate emphasizes preparing students not only academically, but as contributors to their communities and workplaces," Waterworth notes. He sees the partnership with the school system as a natural extension of that vision—translating valued attributes like collaboration, resilience, communication, and adaptability into authentic student experiences. "It makes the Portrait of a Graduate more than a framework—it makes it a reality," Waterworth emphasizes. When properly implemented, the portrait becomes a catalyst for systemic change, enabling the community-educational ecosystem to flourish.

At the core of both the portrait and work-based learning lies the development of durable skills. Auburn Ridge intimately understands the workplace demand for these competencies, which form a cornerstone of the community-based learning framework. "Durable skills—like problem solving, adaptability, teamwork, and communication—don't expire with new technology or shifting markets," Waterworth explains. While tools and industries evolve, these fundamental capabilities remain relevant throughout a lifetime. "By prioritizing them in K-12, we ensure students are not only employable, but resilient in the face of change," he adds, noting that for employers, this translates to team members who can grow, lead, and thrive regardless of future challenges.

The CCLR Framework includes a Community-Based Learning System that builds business partners' capacity to support local school districts through work-based learning opportunities. By combining his involvement with the portrait work and investing in this program, Waterworth discovered valuable connections to students and schools. "Investing in community-based learning deepens our roots in the districts where our employees live and our future workforce is being shaped," he explains. His investment focuses on families and students, "positioning us not only as an employer, but as a partner in education—helping create a pipeline of talent familiar with our industry."





Waterworth recognizes the long-term strategic benefits: reduced hiring gaps, increased employee retention, and a strengthened reputation as a company that genuinely values people and community youth beyond mere business interests. Auburn Ridge's leadership team immediately embraced this opportunity with enthusiasm, recognizing both its necessity for workforce development and its value for community vitality.

The comprehensive community-based learning program provides essential training and capacity building for business partners—filling a critical gap as one of the few structured opportunities available for companies seeking meaningful educational engagement. The collaborative efforts between Auburn Ridge and CESA 2 have demonstrated that this partnership model delivers multifaceted benefits not only for students and school districts but also for the community partners themselves, creating an ideal community-educational ecosystem where all stakeholders thrive through authentic, purposeful connections.

Waterworth believes that every community's future business success stands directly before them—in their school system. He sees tremendous potential in bridging classroom learning with real-world skills. "We often talk about 'future talent' as if it's distant, but the truth is, tomorrow's workforce is sitting in today's classrooms," Waterworth states. Beyond this realization, Auburn Ridge aims to create purposeful, meaningful work-based learning opportunities, quickly recognizing the mutual benefits.

"Getting to inspire and mentor students early gives us a chance to shape not only career readiness, but confidence and curiosity," Waterworth notes. When students find purpose through work-based learning, they're motivated to prioritize post-secondary planning. With viable community partnerships supporting these plans, authentic work-based learning flourishes. "Students gain more than exposure—they gain clarity and direction. Instead of waiting until post-graduation to explore careers, they can test and refine their interests while still in school," he explains. This particularly benefits non-traditional learners, as Waterworth observes: "It gives them 'on-ramps' to success, whether through technical skills, apprenticeships, or durable skills like teamwork and problem-solving." This approach enables all students to graduate with a head start, equipped for both employment and lifelong learning.

Waterworth credits CESA 2 for guiding Auburn Ridge through the education system's complexity. "They help us align with district needs, navigate logistics, and ensure our involvement isn't one-off but systemic," he explains, noting this support is crucial for a company of their size. The partnership prevents them from "reinventing the wheel" while ensuring strategic investment of time and resources. This unique coaching model balances support with impact-focused guidance—an approach Waterworth believes would benefit all communities.

## **Morgan Huntley**

Phoenix Middle School, 6th Grade Dual Language  
Science Teacher  
Delavan-Darien School District

### ***Transforming Education Through Collaborative Leadership***

Michael Fullan asserts that system transformation requires the conjoint development of individuals and groups working cohesively toward shared goals. When Delavan-Darien embarked on its CCLR journey, Morgan Huntley, a 6th grade Dual Language Science Teacher, emerged as a catalyst, ensuring the initiative not only maintained consistent direction but delivered meaningful impact for students.

Beginning this work over two years ago, Huntley immediately recognized its relevance and implemented changes that captured colleagues' attention, creating a cascading effect throughout her school. Delavan-Darien developed a strategic collaborative approach that provides teachers with opportunities to share and support this vital work. The district culture empowers educators through trust-based decision-making, prioritizing student preparation for post-graduation success. "Our school culture is built on trust which allows us to do what is best, and if something does not work, you are able to try something different," Huntley explains.

Superintendent Drew Halbesma characterizes this environment as a "Green Light" culture—one that empowers teachers to innovate and create. While entrepreneurial thinking typically resides in business contexts, Delavan-Darien actively cultivates these skills among educators. Huntley thrives in this risk-taking atmosphere, with her pioneering work earning her the opportunity to lead all-staff professional development around her CCLR approach. This leadership-endorsed initiative exemplifies Fullan's concept of conjoint development—individuals and groups aligned in purpose and direction to achieve educational transformation.

Huntley acknowledges the district's wealth of talented educators doing exceptional work. Her professional development sessions generated significant interest, with teachers eager to learn about her methods and implementation strategies. "Sometimes it just takes a little jump to tweak a lesson in a new way for there to be incredible success," Huntley observes. What began as modest experimentation has evolved into a movement, with increasing numbers of teachers seeking her guidance—tangible evidence of Delavan-Darien's successful "Green Light" culture.

Durable skill development forms a cornerstone of Huntley's CCLR approach. "There is nothing but benefits in working to get students career, community, and life ready," she affirms. Her classroom practice demonstrates that moving beyond traditional teaching methods is essential. She recognizes that educators



often hesitate to blur boundaries between education and the "real world" because of a desire to maintain complete control. "Teaching with the CCLR approach means there are days where you become extremely frustrated because the work (of students) may not be turning out how you want it to," Huntley candidly admits.

Huntley embraces the principle of "going slow to go fast" in this work. She intentionally integrates durable skill development throughout her classroom practice. As a fundamental element of the CESA 2 CCLR Framework and the Career, Community, and Life Connected Learning process, these skills—aligned with portrait attributes—are essential. Teaching durable skills in isolation through traditional methods yields predictable results: compliance from most students. Instead, strategically blending all component areas creates authentic relevance in the learning environment.

I hope that when students return to school, they will be motivated to continue learning skills that will help them directly with what they want out of life. School should give them meaningful experiences that allow them to both fail and succeed, as these experiences help them learn more about themselves.

- Morgan Huntley, 6th Grade Science Teacher, Delavan-Darien School District

"We take the time to bring awareness of durable skills to our students, and that they will be blended into their learning day," Huntley explains. A key aspect of their connected learning process involves helping students recognize how their personal attributes contribute to both individual learning and collaborative success. Huntley observes that this awareness enables students to identify and leverage strengths while addressing growth areas. The resulting self-efficacy and agency transform the classroom dynamic. "You will see that even 6th graders can be independent, that they can tell you what skills they are trying to get better at, and then give feedback to others on how they can continue to grow and build skills," she notes.

Huntley believes student engagement has reached concerning lows. "Students need to know how content relates to their life," she emphasizes. While students may not retain specific content knowledge, they deeply value the future-ready, real-life skills they develop and refine through application. Her approach has inspired students to discover educational relevance by connecting learning to career, community, and personal contexts while developing essential durable skills. "I have seen remarkable growth in all-around general comprehension of my specific science content due to the way I have students working," Huntley reports. Her commitment to career, community, and life readiness is undeniably creating transformative student outcomes.

## Shawn Bartelt

Waterloo High School, Principal  
Waterloo School District

### *Building and Leading From Within*

Waterloo School District's growth in career, community, and life readiness has paralleled Principal Shawn Bartelt's own professional evolution. As his staff immersed themselves in CCLR implementation, Bartelt focused on deepening his understanding to better support the experimentation team. He's witnessed remarkable teacher professional growth through his role as a resource provider. "Traditionally, schools are structured in departmental silos; however, this work encourages teachers to co-plan and co-facilitate learning experiences that transcend subject boundaries," Bartelt explains.

The CCLR Framework naturally fosters cross-disciplinary collaboration among educators. "At Waterloo, we've seen teachers organically form collaborative teams to design interdisciplinary projects," Bartelt notes. This shift has enhanced staff communication while creating a more cohesive and innovative professional culture. "Educators are engaging in meaningful dialogue around instructional strategies, real-world applications, and student-centered learning," he observes. This collaborative approach has reinvigorated professional practice and strengthened the overall instructional capacity across the school.

Students have experienced significant benefits from the CCLR framework implementation. They now have opportunities to identify career and community matches that align with future pathways—a critical component of the Framework's Phase 2 work that helps students develop their Career and Community Identity. "When students develop a clear sense of their career and community identity, their classroom experiences take on greater relevance and purpose," Bartelt explains. Waterloo High School integrates this self-knowledge into their refined design learning process.

### *Check out the...*

#### **CESA 2 Community-Base Learning System**

Toolkit [click here](#)

*For School District & Business / Community Partners*



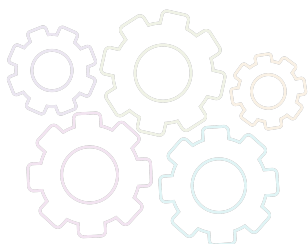


Profession-based projects have become central to helping students understand education's broader purpose. Waterloo High School teachers create learning opportunities that extend beyond academic content to develop collaboration, creativity, communication, and problem-solving—the durable skills essential for post-secondary success. "The level of student engagement, paired with authentic learning experiences, supports the expansion of CCLR initiatives," Bartelt notes. The evidence appears in measurable student outcomes: increased motivation, deeper learning, and an enhanced sense of purpose. Bartelt believes this approach has tremendous potential for widespread impact when scaled across districts and partnerships.

The initiative has also strengthened community connections, fostering a collective vision that benefits the entire ecosystem. "This work has significantly strengthened our relationships with local industry and higher education institutions," Bartelt affirms. Through strategic community networking, Waterloo School District has generated substantial interest in the CCLR framework. With over 30 businesses, organizations, and higher education institutions uniting to support systemic change, the district has built the momentum necessary for meaningful impact.

"The response from our community partners was overwhelmingly positive," Bartelt shares. Many expressed interest in collaboration through youth apprenticeships, facility tours, mentorship opportunities, and inviting students to address real-world challenges within their organizations. "This network has laid the groundwork for a sustainable partnership model that supports workforce development and enriches student learning," he continues. Additionally, stakeholders have actively contributed to developing the district's Portrait of a Graduate, ensuring graduates embody skills and competencies valued by the community.

Bartelt emphasizes that districts pursuing similar transformation should exercise patience. This work unfolds gradually, requiring time, consistency, and clear vision. "Building staff capacity across departments—especially in areas not traditionally connected to career readiness—takes thoughtful planning and ongoing support," he advises.



## Mac Chopin

Waterloo High School, High School Technical Education Teacher  
Waterloo School District

### *From Control to Coaching*

Mac Chopin, Waterloo High School Technology Education Teacher, initially harbored significant reservations about transitioning to a less controlling, student-led classroom environment. His hesitation was natural and understandable. Teaching a project-assessed class where students traditionally demonstrated learning through individual creations, the concept of collaborative teams functioning in a profession-based design learning environment seemed incompatible with his training and pedagogical understanding.

Once they realize they can succeed from working as a team and in their roles, it will lead to them having success in the future.

- Mac Chopin, Waterloo High School

"I just didn't feel comfortable having a group produce something that I felt each student was supposed to produce," Chopin admits. "I have always thought students need to prove their learning through their own work, and it was hard to allow the team to produce just one project." His perspective shifted dramatically, however, as he observed the unexpected benefits: "What I didn't consider is how much more they learn from working together, the valuable skills they need to use to accomplish it as a team." Chopin quickly recognized that collaborative work fostered higher engagement and investment from students. Moreover, their collective efforts produced deeper learning of essential skills they would need beyond the classroom.

Chopin acknowledges the challenge of watching students struggle, but has embraced the importance of trusting students to persevere and problem-solve collectively to find their path to success. Embracing his new role as coach and learning guide, Chopin recognizes this approach leads to heightened engagement. "Once they realize they can succeed from working as a team and in their roles, it will lead to them having success in the future," he explains. He understands this pedagogical transformation requires adjustment time for both himself and his students.



A critical insight Chopin gained through this work is that the compliance-oriented structure of traditional education creates resistance to change among students. They typically prefer quick, direct answers—a pattern reinforced by conventional teaching where information precedes problem-solving. In contrast, this approach immediately immerses students in authentic problems and team-based solutions. "Students are generally resistant to change and want the quick answer," Chopin observes. "For students to switch their mindsets, it will take time."

Chopin has deliberately worked to overcome his own hesitations, committing to consistent implementation of student-owned learning environments that boost engagement. "Students have a tough time dealing with open-ended challenges. But once they start to understand what's important to figure out, it becomes much easier," he notes. His experience with profession-based projects has demonstrated that students will rise to these challenges when properly supported. He believes students need this approach and benefit from being encouraged to embrace this transformative learning model.

"I think the most important part of this is having the students run the project," Chopin emphasizes. He believes students should design projects from conception to completion and present final outcomes as a team. Working with adult mentors and coaches develops the authentic skills students will need in professional settings. Chopin has committed to guiding students through this process, culminating in self-evaluation and assessment of their progress. His role in providing feedback and skill recognition becomes a valuable learning experience in itself.

"With this approach, I believe students are able to better understand the different aspects of expectations and completing these types of projects as they relate to real life," Chopin explains. When faced with authentic challenges mirroring real-world situations, student engagement increases significantly. While the learning approach has transformed, he notes that students still complete required projects—but with heightened relevance and deeper understanding.

Chopin takes pride in his professional growth and his commitment to providing optimal learning experiences for his students. He recognizes that transferring ownership to students—empowering them to direct their learning and accountability—represents a bold pedagogical risk. "It is a tough transition; teachers naturally want to help students," he reflects. "Making them struggle with finding out information on their own can be difficult." Yet this productive struggle has become central to his evolving teaching philosophy and practice.

## Brooke Thurber

Nekoosa High School, High School Alternative Education Teacher  
Nekoosa School District

### *Reimagining Alternative Education*

At the heart of meeting diverse student needs lies the challenge of doing education differently. When working with students who struggle in conventional settings, our instinct often leads us to create something entirely separate from traditional structures. While sometimes necessary, what these students frequently need most is consistency within a framework that acknowledges their unique circumstances and aspirations.

Students now recognize school's relevance: "I've watched students who once struggled to even show up now walk through the door excited, asking, 'What are we doing today?'"

- Brooke Thurber, Nekoosa HS Alternative Education Teacher

Brooke Thurber, Alternative Education Teacher at Nekoosa High School, leads the Nekoosa Academy—an alternative program supporting students on their educational journeys. Deeply committed to her students, Thurber recognized when traditional approaches weren't working and knew fundamental changes were needed. As part of the initial implementation team piloting the CESA 2 CCLR framework, she immersed herself in determining how to implement this approach with students who had fundamentally disconnected from the educational system.

After initial experimentation during the first year—perhaps earlier than some might recommend, but driven by her dedication and desire for better outcomes—Thurber observed increased student understanding and interest, with promising early results. This glimpse of potential convinced her to fully commit to the approach for the following school year.

As the new year approached, Thurber and her colleague Brehon Hoffman, who was new to the program, engaged in collaborative coaching opportunities and dove deeper into the process. Their intensive planning resulted in a shared vision they believed would drive student success.

Thurber understands that conventional education doesn't serve every learner. "Many of the young people I work with carry academic, social, or personal challenges that make the 'one-size-fits-all' approach feel impossible," she explains. She sees the career, community, and life readiness framework as



essential for student success: "It gives us a way to meet students where they are, not just by focusing on grades, but by helping them build real-world skills, self-awareness, and a vision for the future." For students who often feel marginalized, this approach restores purpose and helps them connect learning directly to their post-high school lives.

"When students check out of school, it's usually because they can't see how the work in front of them matters to their future," Thurber observes. As students engage with the process, she witnesses how career and community-connected learning transforms their perspective. "It allows them to explore their strengths, interests, and values, then connect those discoveries to real career and life opportunities," she explains. With her unwavering belief in the process, Thurber knows students will succeed: "Suddenly, school feels less like a box to check and more like preparation for something meaningful."

"This approach also opens doors," Thurber enthusiastically notes. Students discover multiple pathways—college, trades, workforce, military, or entrepreneurship—while developing essential life skills applicable to any path: communication, collaboration, and problem-solving. Within their program structure, students create resumes, portfolios, and post-secondary plans, providing tangible evidence of their progress. "Even students who once felt stuck begin to realize they have options, choices, and a future worth investing in," she affirms.

From the beginning, Thurber knew this direction was right, despite diverging from traditional practices. "Even in the early stages of this work, I've seen a real change in students' mindsets," she shares. When engaging with career exploration, skill assessments, or hands-on projects, students develop new self-perceptions—capable, motivated, and future-focused. This represents the transformative impact the framework brings to educational systems change.

"Some of the students who used to be the most disengaged are now stepping up and taking ownership because the work connects to their own interests and goals," Thurber proudly states. The impacts run deep, with students discovering purpose in their educational journey. What was once a structure of students using computers merely to accumulate credits and passing grades has evolved into students using technology to research, problem-solve, and invest in profession-based projects and design learning.

Thurber acknowledges the diversity of student aspirations, from four-year universities to technical schools, community colleges, military service, or direct workforce entry. "What matters most isn't just having a plan on paper, it's knowing they have the skills, habits, and resilience to follow through," she emphasizes. Their goal is for every student to graduate with a clear pathway and the confidence to succeed in their chosen direction.

By graduation, Thurber ensures students know how to advocate for themselves, set meaningful goals, and adapt to life changes. They won't merely receive a diploma—they'll depart with direction, confidence, and tools for continued growth.

This transformation is well underway at Nekoosa Academy, with student engagement and interest visibly rejuvenated—a critical need for all students regardless of educational setting. Thurber proudly affirms, "The impact goes far beyond academics; it's about building confidence, resilience, and drive." Students now recognize school's relevance: "I've watched students who once struggled to even show up now walk through the door excited, asking, 'What are we doing today?'" Nekoosa's investment in this work is yielding precisely the results they sought.

### ***Theresa Habeck***

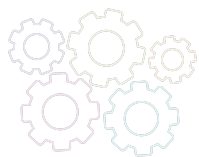
Waterloo Middle & High School, Art Teacher  
Waterloo School District

#### ***Bridging Grades Through Purpose***

A critical need in educational transformation is introducing career awareness and readiness at the elementary level. This early exposure connects students to their interests and potential strengths, fostering emotional engagement with education. Moreover, a career and community-connected approach at the elementary level doesn't diminish children's natural curiosity and imagination—it amplifies these qualities in impactful ways.

Theresa Habeck, a Middle and High School Art teacher, embraced this philosophy when she designed a cross-grade learning project connecting her high school art students with early elementary students. This bold initiative to bridge such diverse age groups was courageous and yielded remarkable outcomes. When students find deep purpose in their work, "Students are far more engaged in the lesson and problem," Habeck observed. She noticed students become more willing to take risks while experiencing greater intrinsic rewards from their learning.

When Habeck initially committed to this design learning process, she questioned whether the project would succeed. Combining students at any level presents challenges, but the significant age difference heightened the risk considerably. She noted that students can sometimes approach projects with skepticism.





However, with authentic real-world connections, they demonstrate greater openness to experimentation. Habeck found that students can recognize how profession-based projects relate to real life, though this requires a structured framework that clarifies the underlying purpose. Like most people, students typically resist change.

As the project progressed, Habeck witnessed students becoming increasingly invested, discovering relevance in the work's fundamental concept. In an art class where students typically complete assigned projects, the shift to something with real-world connections, structure, and meaning inspired stronger ownership of the process.



The project's design was elegantly simple yet profoundly engaging: kindergarten students were tasked with drawing a "Plushie Doll" with the understanding that their creation would be brought to life by a "business"—the high school students. The high school artists transformed these drawings into actual dolls, which were then presented to the elementary students who had conceived them. The young students provided feedback to both the high school creators and the "business" that produced their designs. The results of this career-related project were extraordinary. While the elementary students were delighted to receive physical manifestations of their drawings, they also provided thoughtful feedback to the older students who created them. This pairing of real-world responsibilities with educational processes transformed into a deeply meaningful learning experience.

Habeck observed that the project's clear purpose significantly enhanced student engagement. Although creating dolls might not have been a typical choice for high school art students, the profession-based learning context elevated it to a priority and point of interest. "I've seen a greater commitment with design learning projects because there's a purpose behind them," Habeck explained. She believes that the additional layers of meaning help students envision concrete outcomes.

Collaboration proved essential to the project's success. "I've become more aware of how I can collaborate with other teachers, and in turn, they are more open to collaborate with me," Habeck noted. This organic teacher collaboration develops naturally, without requiring structured Professional Learning Community (PLC) meeting times. Within such a culture, Habeck believes administrators will find educators more receptive to expanding their instructional approaches. The key insight is that this represents not additional work, but a different approach to existing work—with collaboration at its core.

Habeck emphasized that student engagement increases substantially with design learning approaches. "Students want to 'dive deeper' into what we are learning in the classroom." This heightened engagement refreshes the educational experience and significantly enhances student learning outcomes.

### **Irma Nixon**

Phoenix Middle School, Dual Language Coordinator /  
Instructional Coach  
Delavan-Darien School District

### ***Breaking Barriers Through Relevance***

As a dual language coordinator, Irma Nixon understands the vital importance of diverse educational approaches. In today's complex learning landscape, creating systems that offer relevant skill-building opportunities and develop social capital for all students isn't merely about innovation—it's about educational equity. Nixon, who serves as an Instructional Coach and Dual Language Coordinator at Phoenix Middle School in the Delavan-Darien School District, is deeply committed to this principle. Her comprehensive understanding of future readiness encompasses all these elements.

Working alongside Pedro Vasquez and his design learning approach, Nixon has witnessed firsthand the transformative potential of the CESA 2 Career, Community, and Life Readiness Framework. Her participation in this work deepened her commitment to creating meaningful impact on student learning. "I realized students really can rise to the occasion as long as the work is meaningful to them," Nixon explains. She believes that when educators treat students as the capable, dynamic





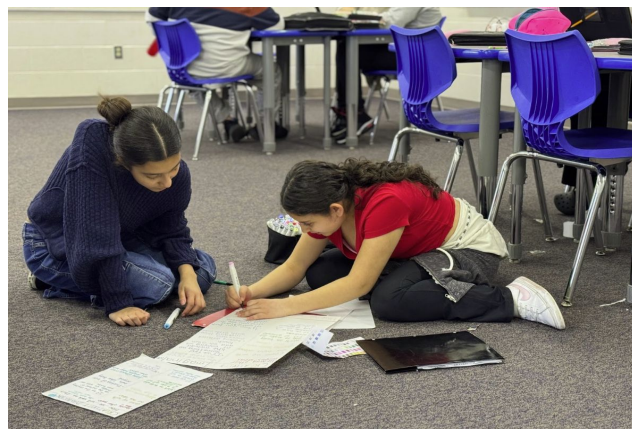
individuals they truly are, students respond by demonstrating their best capabilities. This philosophy proved accurate as she and Vasquez observed profound learning taking place.

As their implementation progressed, students weren't provided with traditional, explicit instructions about their tasks. Instead, curriculum standards were thoughtfully embedded within design learning experiences, with the expectation that students would discover and acquire these skills organically while engaging in profession-based learning. "They initially felt confused, but quickly enjoyed being treated professionally," Nixon recalls. She observed growing excitement as students progressed through the learning activities. With authentic real-world connections, students internalized concepts in ways that proved unforgettable. "The students became personally invested in the project," she notes. This investment enabled them to apply speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills in genuinely authentic contexts.

Nixon observed students taking ownership of their learning journey. "Initially they had many questions, but they quickly realized that they were responsible to collaborate, be creative, and to really enjoy the work they were doing," she explains. Working in collaborative teams with authentic roles and responsibilities allowed students to develop essential future-ready skills. Students rapidly identified their teammates' specific strengths and leveraged these capabilities to benefit both the team and the final project. Engagement was immediate and profound; students became thoroughly immersed in career-related projects. Nixon found that real-world connections combined with defined role responsibilities naturally elevated student engagement.

Nixon noticed students demonstrating abilities to collaborate effectively, solve problems, and apply academic skills that wouldn't typically be utilized in particular classes. They investigated, performed research, and even employed mathematical reasoning—skills not conventionally associated with language-focused courses.

"I saw students rising to the occasion... they all did what they were asked to do without complaining, refusing to work, being distracted, or turning in mediocre work," Nixon shares. Their effective teamwork stemmed from a genuine interest in the content. While traditional classrooms might occasionally incorporate group activities, the fundamental difference in the CCLR framework is the implementation of intentional collaborative teams with authentic professional responsibilities. Students consistently work in groups that require genuine

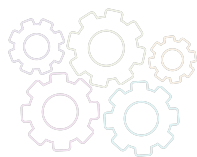


Nixon highlights a particularly telling experience that wouldn't occur in traditional educational settings. A student who was ill—and typically disinterested in conventional assignments—went above and beyond to maintain connection with his collaborative team. This student independently arranged to join his group virtually to continue contributing. "That is when I realized this is a much more efficient way of covering standards," Nixon enthusiastically recalls.

As Dual Language Coordinator, Nixon was particularly impressed to observe that students with language barriers actively engaged with and embraced this process. "In my experience, English Language Learners do not perform well in traditional classrooms due to the language barrier. This method allows students to show their understanding in a non-traditional way, while in fact truly learning skills that will stick with them forever," she explains.

Nixon believes this approach enables students to develop and apply skills essential for success not only in careers but throughout life. "I am concerned when I see students not using their language abilities (speaking, listening, reading, and writing) every day. It is proven that strong language skills transfer to strong literacy skills," she emphasizes. She observes that many classrooms still employ traditional approaches where students passively receive information without producing meaningful work or exercising communication skills. This creates not only compliance-based learning environments but also significant skill gaps—particularly in the durable skills crucial for future success.

Nixon acknowledges the demanding nature of education as a profession. She recognizes that transformation can feel daunting, especially for those accustomed to traditional teaching methods. "It is scary to let go of control of the classroom. However, if what we have been doing has not shown us the results we are looking for, wouldn't it be worth trying something different?" Nixon encourages. "Trust this process—you will not be disappointed!"





**Brian Henning**  
Superintendent  
Waterloo School District

## **Reimagining What School Could Be:** *Waterloo's Commitment to a Journey of Educational Transformation*

When Brian Henning, Waterloo School District Superintendent, first encountered CESA 2's career and community readiness approach, he experienced natural hesitation. His concern wasn't about the need for educational transformation, but whether his system and teachers could embrace such fundamental change. Yet the evidence speaks volumes—current students, recent graduates, and mid-career professionals all signal the same urgent message: if not now, when?

Henning's exceptional leadership combines visionary thinking with practical implementation skills. During a recent strategic planning meeting, when he declared, "I want every teacher doing this work this year!" he quickly embraced a mentoring thought that helped him recognize how authentic re-culturing requires patience—"This isn't about doing more, it's about doing differently!" offered the advice of CESA 2 mentor and coach, Scott Carr.

Over two-plus years, Henning has transformed patience from a perceived limitation into a cornerstone leadership strength. "Educators are the most dedicated, selfless, amazing people ever; they will work themselves nearly to death to implement an initiative that will help kids," he acknowledges with genuine appreciation. The Waterloo faculty, recognized among Wisconsin's finest educators, consistently demonstrates this extraordinary commitment. During the culminating in-service meeting—a pivotal moment highlighted earlier in this whitepaper's introduction—Henning affirmed with conviction, "You are all great teachers, and do great work, there is no question!" This powerful validation balanced his celebration of their current excellence with an inspiring vision of their collective journey toward continued professional growth and transformation.

"This work has had a more immediate impact on our students than many other past initiatives!" Henning notes with pride. The results have been remarkably swift: "A few phone calls, a committed business partner, and student interest, and overnight the learning environment looks significantly different! This can profoundly affect how students perceive the relevance of their education to their interests and goals in a relatively short period."

With strong support from community partners and their School Board, Waterloo School District has committed to a transformational process that disrupts traditional educational paradigms. "This is not only rejuvenating for staff, but it provides renewed hope that we can prepare youth better today than at any time in the past," Henning concludes with great enthusiasm.





## Forging New Pathways Together

The transformational journeys documented throughout these pages represent more than isolated success stories—they embody a growing movement across Wisconsin's educational landscape. From Waterloo's patient leadership evolution to Nekoosa Academy's reimagined alternative education approach, from Phoenix Middle School's dual language innovation to cross-grade collaborations bridging elementary and high school experiences, we witness a powerful pattern emerging. When educators courageously step beyond traditional paradigms to connect learning with authentic purpose, students respond with remarkable engagement, ownership, and growth. These pioneering districts have demonstrated that educational transformation isn't merely aspirational—it's achievable, measurable, and profoundly impactful for students across diverse backgrounds and learning needs.

Central to these successes has been the collaborative partnership with CESA 2's Career, Community, and Life Readiness team, which provides the framework, coaching, and implementation support that empowers districts to navigate this complex change process. Through intentional re-culturing, strategic pilot programs, and community-connected learning experiences, CESA 2 helps districts build sustainable pathways that honor local contexts while preparing students for future success. The journey toward educational transformation is neither simple nor swift, but it is unquestionably worthwhile—as evidenced by the renewed purpose, engagement, and achievement documented in these case studies. If you're ready to embark on your own transformational journey to reimagine what education could be for your students and community, reach out to CESA 2 today. Be the next to ignite student purpose through re-culturing and reimagining what school could be. Your students—and your community—deserve nothing less.

**Are you interested in moving this work forward in your district?**



Reach out to: *Scott Carr* @ [scott.carr@cesa2.org](mailto:scott.carr@cesa2.org)

