
Allyson Criner Brown

Associate Director of Teaching for Change

Allyson Criner Brown is the Associate Director of Teaching for Change, a DC-based nonprofit organization that seeks to equip teachers, parents, and students to build a more equitable, multicultural society both inside and outside the classroom. She leads the Tellin' Stories parent organizing project, an initiative that uses storytelling to connect people from diverse backgrounds and to overcome barriers to family engagement for traditionally marginalized communities. A former middle school teacher, Criner Brown is an active member of DC's Ward 7 Education Council and a representative in the Coalition for DC Public Schools and Communities. She received her BA from the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill in 2006 and her MPA from the Trachtenberg School in 2011. In February 2019, Erik Chen interviewed Criner Brown for Policy Perspectives.

Please note this interview has been edited for clarity and brevity.

Policy Perspectives: So you're the Associate Director at Teaching for Change. Can you tell us a little bit about your job and what it entails?

Allyson Criner Brown: So in my role as the Associate Director, because we're a small nonprofit—we have less than 20 people on staff—that means that I wear a number of hats, which quite frankly is one of the exciting things about my job. It's both exciting and challenging. In another organization, our Executive Director would be the CEO, and I would be the COO. So that's one way to look at it. And I'm also the program manager for our Family Engagement Project. I help to really drive the strategic planning behind the operations of what we're doing with the Executive Director, with the board, and with the staff.

And so a big part of my job is to help steer the organization to make sure that we're accomplishing the goals that we set out to. So that includes a number of external and internal responsibilities. Earlier in my career here, that meant that I was everything from HR to the office administrator. Right now, I'm the board liaison, and I do coordination for our legal issues and our partnerships. I also do a lot with communications and how we are crafting our message internally and externally to what we do and the impact that we make. I'm the lead for program evaluation, and I do a lot of grants, fundraising, and development.

I tend to focus on the internal staff meetings and board meetings. But what's unique particularly for me here is, when I took this position, the executive director and I actually sat down and we looked at what were the areas that really played to my strengths and that I was really interested in, and what played to her strengths and where we were not so excited about. So, for instance, I'm actually the lead with the board. Generally speaking, the executive director position would be the lead with the board. That was an area of interest for me both through working experience and through getting my degree at Trachtenberg. That was an area that I really took interest in and wanted to continue to develop and just have a deep understanding of what the role of the board is and how it can really be beneficial to the organization. So a lot of my larger understanding of the role that the board needs to play is actually a point where I take the lead.

I want nothing to do with the website, so our Executive Director takes a lead on communications. And so there are areas where we overlap and areas where she and I serve as the two main representatives for the organization. I also do a lot of content development and public speaking representing the organization. That's something that I like to do. I have no problem getting up in front of a microphone. And so I often will go do interviews and be the organization representative and present at conferences. I could probably say that in a much more concise way but it depends on the day and it depends on the week. I can also tell you everything about how to get an MPD borrowing notice. Because we also we used to run the bookstore Busboys and Poets.

PP: Oh really?

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ACB: Yes. So when we talk about HR and hiring, I was doing that and then if we had issues and had to work with the restaurant or work with MPD, I was a lead contact. So I've gotten a lot of experience—everything from our business license to, you know, preparing to present at conferences and doing trainings for DC public schools. So yeah, it's enough to keep me excited.

PP: It seems like it [your role] just keeps on expanding.

ACB: Yeah, it keeps on expanding. We're one of those small organizations that does really big work. And so it's good. It gets busy sometimes. But I've been here for going on nine years. And I really like the work that I do.

PP: So, the Tellin' Stories Initiative really emphasizes the power of using stories to connect people from diverse backgrounds. Can you tell me more about that approach and why you think that storytelling is a good medium to connect those families?

ACB: Sure. So, it actually started with work we were doing with teachers at a school here in DC. They did a project having students make a quilt, and each student would make a square to share something from their life story about where they came from. And that was in part, recognizing any potential literacy challenges, but the organization's work started because there were large waves of Central Americans fleeing the U.S.-sponsored violence in their countries. And so, Teaching for Change started because these students who started showing up in the public schools may not have gotten much, if any, instruction on their own history, of, you know, Guatemala, or El Salvador or Nicaragua. But people know their story. And there's a lot of power in that. And so, that's how this work started. It initially began based on the Family Literacy Project and the work of Alma Flor Ada. And so, the idea was "Let's bring parents together to share our stories." And so when the staff was working on that, we found that sharing our stories is actually a really powerful way for us to overcome the barriers, both real and perceived, that tend to divide us.

So this work, organizing with families and doing family engagement in DC schools, started because you had largely Central American populations who were coming here and were moving into neighborhoods that had been African-American strongholds. And so you could have families pitted against each other. But there are stories. If I get to know your story, that helps us build the relationships that we need to get over any stereotypes or biases we may have about people so that they don't become "the other." It becomes "us." And that's a big part of the importance of sharing our stories. If we're going to work together, we need to build trust. We need to build relationships. And so, the work to really start it is building trust relationships between parents and then between parents and their schools. What we do is, we utilize a community-organizing approach: community organizing, racial equity, popular education, and the research in family-engagement best practices. And so, for the past 20 or so years, this has grown organically with these influencers in schools and to the work that we do today.

PP: And what really drew you to this career in the nonprofit sector, because you also started out as a teacher? And in terms of working in education and social justice, was that something that you always knew you wanted to do? Or was that something that you figured out after college or during college?

ACB: So, I was a history major in college. I was also doing some tutoring, and I didn't know what I wanted to do for sure. I actually I knew I did not want to go into academia. I loved history, but I didn't want to go and just research history just to be researching history. But also, whatever is the more formal way of saying "no shade" to anyone who does. It was more so what I thought was the direction for my life was to take lessons from history and look at how to practically apply those to drive change in the world today. So I still love history, I still read a lot of history. And that's actually one of the things I love about working at Teaching For Change, we do a lot around history curriculum. I get to use my history degree, my teaching experience, and my nonprofit experience. It really all comes together in the work that I do here.

But yes, I did a teaching program and taught after college because I wasn't sure if I wanted to be a teacher, and I wanted to try it out. It was extremely challenging, and I loved my students. But, I did not like the classroom because I did not feel support. I did not feel classroom teachers were supported. So, I switched into an afterschool program, which was the equivalent of what we have here, DC SCORES. And I loved it. I was still working with schools, I was still working with teachers, I was still working with students, and as I got a sense of the landscape, I realized that if you wanted to do work directly in schools and benefiting schools without being a classroom teacher, the nonprofit sector was where a lot of these kinds of organizations were.

So, I worked for a tutoring program at the YMCA and was still partnering working with schools and teachers. And I realized that having good intentions was not enough; wanting to do good in the world was not enough. I actually needed to develop a strong skill set because there are a lot of excellent programs out there. But, wanting to do good versus actually having the leadership and management experience and the deep understanding behind how to make a program successful are different. Like with program evaluation: How do we know this program is getting the impact that we seek? How can we use the knowledge that we have to drive policy changes so that we're not only doing good work in our little corner of the world? And so, that was why I decided to get an MPA. I wanted to stay close to education, recognizing that nonprofits were a primary area that was directly working with schools. And so, I got my MPA because I didn't just want to be well intentioned, I wanted to be well informed.

PP: And is there a reason why you chose GW in particular versus the other DC schools?

ACB: I can tell you a one of the biggest deciding factors for me, and, maybe other programs have changed, but what I immediately got when I was just scoping out programs was that GW, quite frankly, kicks you out into the world. The Trachtenberg School kicks you out into the world at least a couple of times during your time there,

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between the Capstone and Program Evaluation where you have to take on a pro bono client. And that was one of the questions that I had asked: How does this go beyond just classroom-based learning? At the time, I got that more from GW than I did from other programs. And that was very important to me. If this is a public administration program, what are you and your students doing that is contributing to it? Is this knowledge only staying in your classrooms or is there some connection to the world around you? So that was why I chose GW in particular.

PP: Yes, I can also connect with that practical experience. And when you were getting your MPA, what were you doing at the same time, and how did that influence the kind of classes that you wanted to take or what you wanted to do after?

ACB: Yeah, so because I'd worked for at least three, maybe four years before I came back to get my MPA, for me, it was coming back to school, and I wanted homework and assignments. I was both also able to get some scholarship money and was just moving to DC, so felt that I didn't have to work my first semester, which now I'm like "how on earth did I afford to not work the whole semester?" So thank you student loans.

That fall semester I said, "Let me just focus on school and get a good start." And by the end of the semester, I was working in Campus Health and made some connections there. I was an athlete in college, and I've been my whole life. And one of the things I did while I was a grad student was teach group fitness classes. So, I taught a boot camp for a little bit as one of my side hustles when I was at GW. And then I also did two paid fellowships, both of which were very informative for what I did not want to do.

PP: That's great. That's very important.

ACB: Yes, very much. And it really did affirm that I wanted to be in the community and in grassroots-minded kind of organizations. I also recognized that you have oftentimes a lot of people from those communities who really want to make a difference. But there's a whole body of knowledge about how nonprofits and organizations should run and operate that is not necessarily reaching them. So, you may have good programs that are well-meaning but not actually high quality with well-informed leadership. And so, I wanted to be able to be a part of organizations that were both doing really meaningful work and also had the resources. Again, going back to questions like, "What does the role of the board play?" And there have been a number of times where [the degree] has paid off.

PP: So speaking of the board, you're also a member of the Trachtenberg School Advisory Board. Why was that important to you stay connected to Trachtenberg in particular?

ACB: Well, I became a member of the board because Kathy [Newcomer] asked me. Kathy asked me, and I respect her a lot. I say it was a combination. Kathy asked me, and the time commitment was manageable. You know, I have a full-time job, and I've got two kids at home now. And I work for an organization where I wear a lot of hats. And you know for me, why I ultimately decided to do it was because I enjoyed my

time at Trachtenberg. I felt I got a lot from my degree that has directly helped me career-wise. I'm really involved in the local education scene—I'm one of the members of the citizen task force for the State Board of Education's Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which took over No Child Left Behind. So, the State Board, after there was a big fight over what should go into school report cards, set up a community task force to work on that. I'm a member of that. And I agree with things that I learned through my Trachtenberg experience, and I can bring that in there—it's not just me and my opinion, but I can connect it to policy analysis understand how things are being framed and have a sense of where to look.

So, my degree has helped me in that work, but also beyond that. It was not only valuable for me, but also while I was in the program, there were only a few people, relatively speaking, who were focusing on nonprofit, I think, even less who were focusing on local government, and a whole bunch of people who were going into the federal workforce. And Kathy and anyone who's been on any of those boards or in any meeting with me knows that I purposely step into spaces to do things that I think need to be done. And so for Trachtenberg, as an alum, I try to step into the space to make the school understand that a lot of the people here are going into federal agencies that are doing all kinds of things. But if you're going to agencies such as Health and Human Services or Department of Education, chances are that that block grant that you're working on is going to trickle down to the states, which is going to trickle down to the *city*, which is going to trickle down to *someone like me*. So there are a lot of people who, I think, get this degree and end up, quite frankly, at the federal level or the top level. I'm on the ground, and I think there's a very real gap. And particularly for DC, because even though you're working on federal issues, you are also a local resident with a say in local things. So, I like that connection. We're not just educating for career, we're also educating for citizenship.

PP: And in terms of those gaps that we were talking about, what are some of the biggest gaps that you see in speaking to the disconnect between the federal level and where you are?

ACB: So it's a combination—the biggest gaps that I see, I think, have to do with access and knowledge. And it's because a lot of times, people who are in communities that have very real needs and really are looking at community-based solutions don't have the access to figure out: How do I access this this resource that could potentially come from the federal government? And just in my area of education, where I can tell you the things that I see walking in and out of classrooms and talking with students and teachers and principals. I'm in the schools every day now in part because I have one child in DC Public Schools (DCPS) now. But, even before this, I was in schools two, three times a week. And what was happening on the larger policy level does not match what I see in both the challenges and the opportunities in schools. And one of the biggest issues is that the people who are on the ground who are involved in this work or whom this work is impacting are not at the table and do not have access or the knowledge of how to communicate to the person who is doing policy analysis or crafting these large policies.

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The class Policy Analysis was very eye-opening for me in seeing how these things actually get formulated and analyzed. So, I understand how the people who are making policies and making decisions. I understand how they're crafting it and what's behind it. I think that's where there's a big gap—when you're talking about, again, access and knowledge because the communities who are most affected are not able to speak, to advocate, or to push in the language and in the way that it's expected to be received. And so who loses out?

PP: Of course, the people who need the services.

ACB: Yeah, and so, I think there need to be very real bridges that aren't only able to be built through getting knowledge and skills through a Master's degree. For those of us who have advanced degrees, there are real opportunities in which we need to be bridge builders between policy and people.

PP: You said you have two kids: a five-year-old and a nine-month-old. And in the classroom, we've also talked about how DC public schools are notoriously ill-equipped.

ACB: That's a broad stroke. It's a lot more nuanced than that. Yes, there is a broad stroke perception.

PP: Yes, and in terms of navigating the school system for your children, what are some of the things that you've seen in terms of the disparity between neighborhoods, or really, different schools and how they operate?

ACB: We could be here for the whole rest of the day. But, I'll say a couple of things on that. So one thing: DCPS has excellent schools. That's one thing that people don't even have a concept of. DCPS not only has excellent schools, and schools that are performing on test scores or otherwise performing measurably very well, DCPS also has schools that are not Title I and that have small percentages of lower-income students. When people think DCPS they think of Ballou, they think of these schools where you have 99 percent free and reduced lunch and are largely African American. That's not all what DC public schools look like. Some are majority white and majority higher income. And that mirrors the rest of the nation: where you have higher concentrations of wealth, there come higher test scores, and quite frankly, also more resources. Where you have largely poor and black and brown communities, there's less wealth, and that tends to correspond with test scores.

But these are how policy decisions are being made. And so there are things that make the headlines.

And so people think there's this broad view of "Oh, D.C. public schools are just, 'bad,'" if you have to pick a word. That's what people think. But, there is a spectrum. I'm in the camp that is saying that the real conversation we need to be having is not about good and bad schools—it's about equity. And particularly, if you're not involved in the schools, you get very little information, and a lot of that information, quite frankly, is based on the test scores. And that's one of the reasons why I'm involved in this

through the task force. It's actually very problematic to just base the quality of the whole school on how the third, fourth, and fifth graders, in a school that starts at Pre-K, perform on the annual tests that are taken on the computer, when we also don't have working computers most of the time.

PP: Do you think you will ever want to go into the federal space? Because right now, you're acting as a bridge builder, but do you feel like you'd be interested in actually being one of those policy makers?

ACB: So career-wise, that's a good question, and actually I have been kind of thinking about that.

PP: Especially in relation to how the trend has been going in terms of the widening gaps.

ACB: Yeah I think so. You know, perhaps one day, more so on the policymakers' side. So through my lived experiences, which is also another thing kind of getting back to the other question—when it comes to policy, there is not enough value. I understand when we're talking about validity. So I understand the rigor that needs to go into things like policy analysis and statistics. But the human side of it—the lived experiences of what people see and experience walking in and out of communities. That's also a very huge gap. Particularly because there's also the issue of, in statistics, if we can't measure it, it's not reliable. If we can't measure those personal experiences in ways that are valid and reliable, then we can't make decisions based on it. And so that's a big part of what I see as part of my work right now, the people who are or could be most affected by policies that are or could exist. That's just a very real bridge that needs to be strengthened, and I think right now this is what I would like to do.

I have some partial training as a community organizer. And there's a difference between organizing and advocacy. Advocacy is speaking for, and when you're organizing, you're organizing *with*. I do a combination of both right now, but currently where I'm at in my career, I really want to spend more time trying to figure out how to crack the case of how to elevate the voices of those who are impacted, those who are at the end of the chain, how to elevate them further up the chain—which is a lot of what our work with the parents is about. How do we get parents' input? How do we get parent voices into decision-making? So that's where I see myself for the foreseeable future.

PP: So, in terms of advice for current students at Trachtenberg who are thinking about their next step in their career. Are there any things that you wish you had done while you were still a student or that you would have known?

ACB: I have two pieces advice: one on how I approached it, and second, a piece of general advice. My general piece of advice is, whatever area you want to work on or are interested in, do not just learn about it inside the classroom: get out, get off of the campus, go at least talk to organizations and find out what people are doing. Get your hands dirty. You can't just stroll into a school [to get working experience] in and of itself, but there are programs that you can work with where you will work and interact with students or teachers. But if you're interested in education, please, please,

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please, spend time in a school. Find a way to spend time in a school where you get to interact with teachers and students because once you get there, your perspective will change from rather than if you were making assumptions and decisions from afar. I think there's a lot of crossover too if you want to work on the environment. I have no knowledge about working with energy or what that might look like, but certainly with human-centered activity, you need to be around those humans, not just those policies, and make the human connection. And I think that's beneficial career-wise.

But also if you're really doing this for the right reasons, which career reasons aside, I think that everybody who gets an MPA or an MPP does. You don't want to *make a difference*, but make an *informed difference*. And the degree that you get is not the only way of being informed. The experiences that people around you have and what is out in the world is also knowledge. So there's knowledge that you get in school, there's knowledge that you get outside of school. So get out into the world while you're doing this, particularly if you go straight through [undergraduate to graduate]. I had at least a few years of experience. I'd taught, I had worked in education and nonprofits where we're doing work directly with schools.

So, getting to how I approached it, thinking back: I knew enough both about education, and I had a sense of where I could go to also learn about things that I did not necessarily need to get while I was an MPA—whether it was books or people or organizations. If classes didn't cost so much, and if I had infinite time, I would have taken an education policy course. I didn't take an education policy course, but I took policy analysis. With the education policy, and not to say that there wasn't value in that, but for what I wanted to do, knowing that I wanted to be in nonprofit, I knew I was not going on to be an education policy analyst. I made some concerted choices about the skill set that I wanted to build as opposed to content. I came to Trachtenberg more so for the generalized skillset. As you know, I've been in this organization [Teaching for a Change] for a long time, so I go to conferences and similar types of events, and I know that some of the learning that I could get maybe if I took three or four courses in the education department, I can go to conferences for to get the that knowledge, and I started working here while I was still a student. So that also influenced my decision not taking any education courses because I knew where I could go to get that kind of learning or at least that was particularly relevant to what I do in my role.

So all that to say, I mapped out the skills I wanted and the content I wanted. I was very strategic—we had to take policy analysis, and we had to take statistics. But even if it [statistics] wasn't required, I would have taken it anyway. But the two classes that I definitely made sure to take were Program Evaluation and the Managing Nonprofit Boards.

PP: And did you take Program Evaluation with Kathy?

ACB: So I took it with Kathy, and Teaching For Change was actually my client for the pro bono project. When we were looking for class assignments, and I saw it was in education, I said, "Oh this looks interesting! I have experience in education." So that was where I made an intentional choice to do this. And going back to the content context of what I wanted, I knew I wanted to do nonprofit. But, I wanted to stay in

education, so I took Program Evaluation and picked an education nonprofit. And so I ended up as a graduate student working here at Teaching For Change. I remember first coming here and got right out to schools, shadowed the staff, and came up with survey instruments. And I wrote the logic model for the program I now manage. And we've come a long way since then. Actually for me, it ended up unintentionally being essentially a free-form job interview because the Associate Director at the time was leaving and they actually asked me to apply. I had spent a whole semester working on this project. Also at the time, we weren't sure we were going to stay in DC, but then we decided we were going to stay, so I asked them "Hey, so are you still looking for an Associate Director?"

So when you talk about right person, right place, right time—here, I get to use my MPA, I get to my history degree, I get to use my education, and my teaching experience. So yes, it's been great and I've learned so, so much since I've been here. And there are definitely still classes at Trachtenberg that I take a peek at for, if one day, free time falls out of the sky. So that's essentially how I got here. I found Teaching For Change as a student doing this project, and then they asked me to apply, and now we're eight years later.

PP: For a lot of us who are also trying to figure out what the next steps are in life, was there any time in your career where you felt moments of uncertainty or where you were thinking "I'm not sure if I went the right way?"

ACB: So, I actually got confirmation that I did go the right way. I was weighing taking this job of becoming the Associate Director of Teaching for Change with taking a position that would have been kind of a low-level position, like just above an intern, but a step-in-the-door for the USDA's Center for Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships. I had actually been in contact and was lobbying that director really hard to consider me. And they actually made me an offer at the same time. And so, I did a pros and cons analysis. And when I went through it, I felt like this matched what I wanted to do at the time - I had been a program director. I wanted to be the next level up. You know, more of an organization director. It was in the exact content area—education and history. And just being here and being senior level in a small organization, there's a lot of potential for what I could do, and what I could learn.

And I definitely would say I've gotten confirmation over the years that this was the right decision to make. I've done incredibly cool things: I presented in December and spoke on a panel at the Smithsonian African-American museum with LeVar Burton about representation in children's literature, and I've presented at conferences across the country. I'm considered one of the forefront practitioners in family engagement, and one of the reasons for that is because I understand how to use what I learned in Program Evaluation, use what I learned in Policy Analysis, and talk to the national stage and audience. Our organization and the program I manage have grown since I've been here, significantly. I'm the editor of a publication, I'm in several books. So, I've been able to do some really interesting and cool things.

I took this job after having done the two fellowships where I said "I absolutely do not want to do that." So, I do think, not to say that everyone has to work something where

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you're like "I *really* don't like this," but there certainly is value in wherever you are either just understanding what's happening within you where you are, so that when you do get to the right place, you understand what's happening within you there. And that will give you affirmation. And also knowing that the right place may be the right place *right now*. I don't know where I need to be, or should be, or will be 20 years from now, or 10 years from now, but I have enough confirmation to tell me I'm where I'm supposed to be right now.

PP: That's incredibly important.

ACB: Some people like to map everything. And yes, there is an element of that, but also, if you'd asked me before I took this job, or when I was in college, "What do you want to do when you grow up?" I would not have said I want to be the Associate Director of a small nonprofit. I get to do public speaking, I get to do readings, I get to do trainings, I get to do advocacy, and I get to do organizing. And who would have thought that all of that could come together in one role? So, I think there does have to be an element of figuring out what fits exactly for you, you might not know what that looks like, but you may be on the path to getting there.

PP: And in terms of stepping out of your comfort zone: What is one thing that you do now that you didn't think about doing when you first started out in your career or you would have said to back in college, "Absolutely not. That's not something I would want to do or feel comfortable at least doing?"

ACB: Quite frankly, just the thought of being in charge of a whole organization and just knowing that everything that entails: from making sure that you raise enough money to making sure that everyone gets paid on time, understanding all the systems it takes for that to happen, to even situations like, if our toilets flooded, what would we do? And the thing is that when you're in a small organization, you do have to be able to be ready to respond to all those things. Because in my career, I had started as a program director, I knew what it took to manage a program. But thinking about the whole big picture of the organization and all of the small details that are within that is experience that I have gained and has given me the confidence that I know the *if* and *when* I'm to wear that hat.

Sometimes, there are things that you just kind of have to be thrown into and figure it out. And so as you go further along in your career, hopefully there are moments that are learning opportunities. There are the more hesitant learning opportunities that come, but they are learning opportunities in and of themselves. So [maintaining a business license] to me is a much less daunting task. And yes, I can write a lesson plan, I can write an article for publication. And if for some reason we started having issues with the IRS, I can coordinate with our lawyers, we can talk with the accountants, and we could figure out how to resolve the issue.

That understanding of all of the pieces—with my staff I really do try to encourage people to learn the things that you are less comfortable with, particularly if it's a skill that you have. There are people who may like to speak but don't necessarily like the grant writing

aspect of it. But, if you can write well, you should really you know strengthen that. So, I think that's another piece too. The skills that you have, even the ones that may be less exciting to you—keep working on them and keep getting stronger. I'm still growing, I have gotten much more knowledgeable in being able to read financial statements. And you know, if I sit down and I'm looking at what am I going to do today, looking over the financial statements is not the first thing I'm going to pick. But it's a skill set that for me is becoming stronger and making me more complete.

PP: So as a leader of your organization, what are some things that you've observed from your experiences that you see make successful leaders that other people want to work for? What do you think are some traits that you've observed and try to put into practice or improve on?

ACB: So the Introduction to Public Service and Administration course was one and that's when I read about how the field has evolved, even just in the "how do we treat public administrators?" and "how do we view that?" So, I take a servant leadership approach and to me, particularly in the field that I'm in, I think that's most appropriate. My approach is, people who are working *with* me. They're not working *for* me, but the people who are working *with* me are the people that I'm supervising. What do they need to succeed? So I think about investing in people and really being intentional about that. I'm looking in my staff for: "Here's an area where you see that you're really strong." "Here's an area where I really want to see you grow." "What are you going to do to stay strong here and to grow in this area?" I think that's the kind of thing that keeps people.

I think leaders also have to be able to not just come up with a vision, but facilitate and execute that vision. And I get to do that a lot, particularly with the program that I manage. As the Associate Director, that's one of the points where I feel like I'm the lead facilitator or co-lead with our Executive Director. And it's not that you always have to come up with the ideas, but a good leader can facilitate that because then that brings other people on board. You can follow people or you can get everyone together and then we all come together as opposed to me pulling you along. So I think it's investing in people and vision. It's this combination of confidence and competence—you know you want to work for someone who knows what is needed to do the job.

PP: I think this is a fantastic way to wrap up the conversation. But for the people who are interested in education in general, policy or research, do you have any specific go-to reads or journals to recommend?

ACB: So I would say, for people who are in education, my quick recommendations are usually The National Opportunity To Learn Campaign, who is driving the conversation to move from talking about the achievement gap, which is really focusing on test scores, to focusing on the opportunity gap and what's behind those test scores. When you have kids where one subset is spending summers going to elite camps, coding camps, and traveling the world, and another set who is potentially at home with a grandparent all summer—you know, right? We can't just say, "Well they're testing differently," we have to actually look at what are the opportunities that are feeding into that and what students have exposure and access to.

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So, The National Opportunity To Learn Campaign, Alliance to Reclaim Our Schools, and Schott Foundation for Public Education—these organizations, in addition to Teaching For Change, are really trying to shift away from a culture of: “Blame the teachers and the schools for the poor test scores” to “How do we actually create schools that nurture and develop whole children and support the people who are there to guide them?” And that’s not the angle that I see of what some of the more well-funded and influential groups in education are coming from.

And I would say, if people who are in education, whether they are thinking about it from the MPP or MPA perspective, if they are not familiar with the conversation around the opportunity gap, that’s where they need to explore. Anyone who’s in education, who’s interested in K-12 *needs* to explore the opportunity gap, and those are a few leads to get started.