

2017 TEACHER LEADERSHIP INSTITUTE

TRANSFORMING PASSION TO ACTION

INSPIRING
EXAMPLES
OF TEACHER
LEADERSHIP



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ARIZONA
K12 CENTER



**INSPIRING
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OF TEACHER
LEADERSHIP**

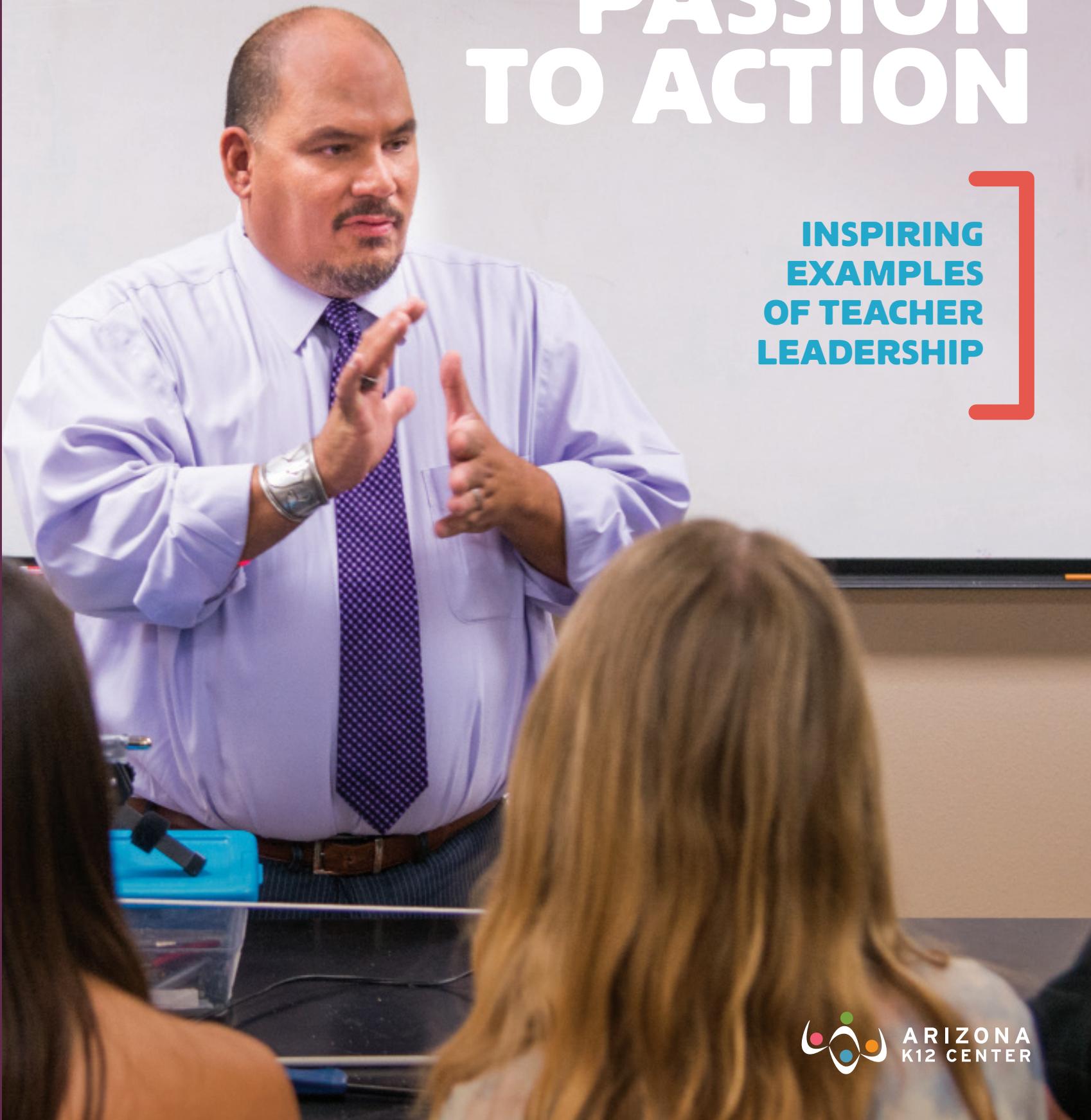
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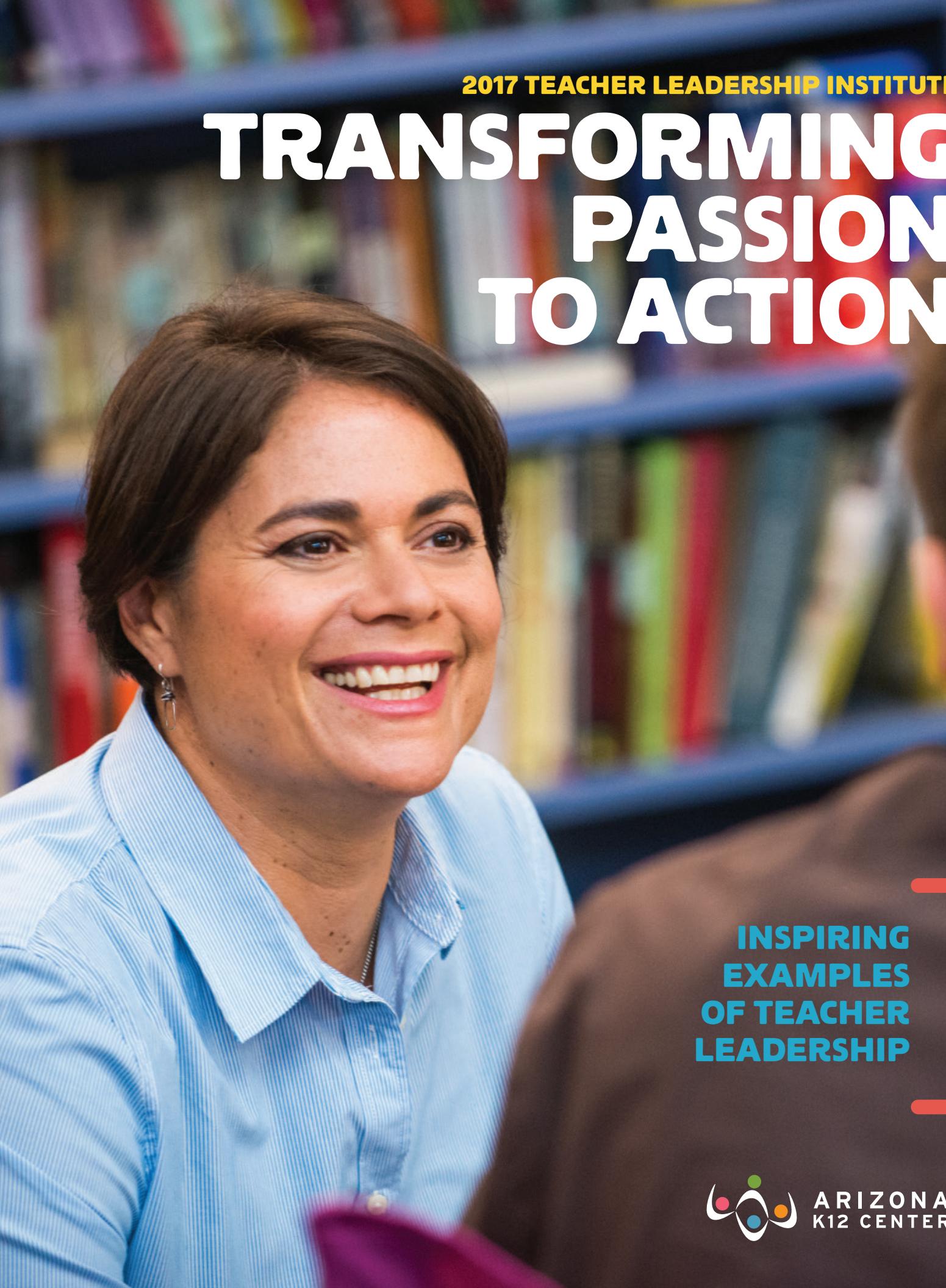
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A close-up photograph of a teacher with short brown hair, wearing a maroon button-down shirt, smiling warmly at a young male student. The student, with dark skin and curly hair, is wearing a grey and black long-sleeved shirt and is focused on writing in a notebook. They are both seated at a desk in what appears to be a classroom setting.

INSPIRING
EXAMPLES
OF TEACHER
LEADERSHIP

**“Education can awaken
the conscience, teach
compassion, and spark
a lifelong dedication
to contributing to a
better world.”**

DENNIS SHIRLEY



INTRODUCTION

The Arizona K12 Center celebrates all educators striving to make a difference, and applauds those who bravely take action to enhance education.

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STORIES OF TEACHER
LEADERSHIP

International Leadership:
Julie Kasper, NBCT

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National Leadership:
Danielle Brown, NBCT

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Mike Vargas

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Christie Olsen, NBCT

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Eve Rifkin, NBCT

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Community Leadership:
Audra Damron

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SPECIAL THANKS

Teacher leadership requires time, energy, dedication, and so much more. We owe tremendous gratitude to our featured teachers, as we showcase their stories to inspire educators throughout the state to step up to lead.

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At its core, teacher leadership

is multifaceted and cannot simply be defined. Similar to learning, it is far from one-size-fits-all. While individuals can certainly favor one, overall interpretation, teacher leadership is a personalized, authentic practice. Further, teacher leaders are constantly evolving along with the profession, which enables individuals' identities to strengthen over time. With experience comes new dimensions, revealing educators' passions with a professional side of tenacity.



The stories of teacher leadership illuminated here are byproducts of educators seeking to be agents of change within their spheres of influence.



Arizona teacher leaders are transforming education, from a single community to international impact.

For a beginning teacher, the initial act of committing to campus committees or engaging in professional discourse serves as the foundation for strengthening instructional craft and advocacy. More seasoned educators may lead a professional learning opportunity at the district level or participate in a nationwide campaign to enhance teacher voice. Whatever the circumstance, when teachers make a conscious effort to boost student success and build aptitude, they are stepping up as teacher leaders. Simply stated, the art of teaching is an act of leadership.

While there's beauty in consistency, there's greater transformation when the concepts, movements, and people behind the ideas – be they big or small – are ever-changing. Therefore, as technology, global perspective, student needs, and

the demands of the field continue to shift, educators must also permit their goals and passions to transform.

In today's society, "organic" is associated with products reserved for those willing to pay a little more. As it pertains to leadership, it seems close to, if not synonymous with projects derived from a wholehearted desire or pure need to adjust and refine for the betterment of stakeholders.

The stories of teacher leadership illuminated here are byproducts of educators seeking to be agents of change within their spheres of influence. While the desired outcome is deep, evidence-based impact, there might not be a perfect timeline or equation to measure the success. Through perseverance, dedication, and advocacy to their passions, true leaders achieve their goals. Teacher leadership initiatives are multidimensional – they require time, thoughtfulness, strategy, and resilience. While the result may be dulled by the professional noise that surrounds it, teacher leaders recognize that the agile, transformative phases are the true merit of hard work.

As Arizona educators nurture and grow the future of tomorrow in their students, the Arizona K12 Center celebrates all dimensions of teacher leadership. We acknowledge that every mission is different in customization, capacity, aptitude, and output. Join us as we highlight six stories of astonishing teacher leadership impacting the field of education at all levels: international, national, statewide, district, school, and community.

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Julie Kasper

NATIONAL BOARD CERTIFIED TEACHER

Lutheran Social Services of the Southwest
Tucson, Arizona

Leadership Project

Collaborative Engagement to Nurture Talent and Educate Responsively (CENTER)

Goal

Connect, understand, and educate the underserved refugee population of Tucson.

Focus

Tends to the needs of refugee families by providing a space dedicated to education that supports students, parents, and teachers in a variety of ways.

It's dinnertime on a school night and the main room of CENTER is buzzing with middle and high school students from miles and miles away. The energy is so contagious and fluid that it's challenging to differentiate between those serving and individuals being served. Albeit most volunteers and staff have name badges, their posture and energy lacks any trace of grandiose self-importance. Instead, one thing is instantly clear when you sit among the refugee students in the plastic chairs or cozy couches — sacrifice is present here.

National Board Certified Teacher Julie Kasper is the K12 School Coordinator for Refugee Education with Lutheran Social Services of the Southwest and the Director of the Collaborative Engagement to Nurture Talent and Educate Responsively (CENTER). Although she made the difficult choice to step out of the classroom in May 2014,

**"I see my role as a catalyst.
stakeholders**

**I aim to ignite the fire in all
so everyone is working toward a shared vision."**

Kasper has since shifted her focus, talents, abilities, and intellect toward the refugee community of Tucson.

"In essence, CENTER is a hub that brings people and resources together around refugee education to improve outcomes and experiences for all involved, including students, parents, teachers, and community partners. Rather than focus on deficits, we build upon the interests and talents of our diverse students and their diverse teachers," the Tucson native says.

The reality of refugee life is much more complex than one might imagine. Not only is there a struggle to become acquainted with a new city and culture, but also there's the reality that many of their loved ones remain in the country of origin. Equally important, education professionals need to better understand how to teach and work with this unique student population, many of which are registering for school for the first time in their lives. For this reason, CENTER, which opened in August 2015, provides a multitude of outlets for stakeholders to connect.

"Rather than follow scripted curriculum, we respond to the students' immediate needs, interests, or requests through more individualized, volunteer tutor-supported instruction. We work as a collaborative with more than 50 volunteers and dozens of community partners, in dialog with local districts, schools, and resettlement agencies," she says.

More than tutoring, CENTER is a place to grow. For many, it's what makes the United States feel more like home. But the physical space wouldn't be more than a building with conference rooms and offices if it weren't for Kasper's sacrificial and diligent leadership.

"There's no end goal, per se, but in my dream world a place like CENTER is not necessary because people are connected and sharing resources. They would be open,

or financial assistance. "We are creating space for everyone to become empowered and find their own agency within the role of the systems," Kasper says.

Despite over two years of 12-hour days, the Board-certified teacher knows her efforts are making a difference. Whether it's students bringing refugee friends to CENTER for the first time or hard-working individuals preparing to graduate high school having never received an education until coming to the United States as teenagers, Kasper celebrates all successes, big and small.

While the work is not sustainable with one person in the driver seat, she believes that with a team of teacher and community partners, anything is possible.

"Teacher leadership is intrinsic. As teachers, we lead every day in our classrooms, schools, and communities. We are able to take it further than the daily practice of guiding children in their learning, resourcing our classrooms, and connecting with community," Kasper says. "However, teachers who recognize they are leaders take risks. They advocate for their students, their communities, and themselves as professionals. Teacher leaders consider what is and imagine what can be. Then, they do something to help move from where we are to where we want or need to be."

CENTER'S IMPACT BY THE NUMBERS

| | | |
|-------------------------------------|---|---|
| 1 | 4 | 88+ |
| Full-time staff member | Part-time staff members | Volunteers |
| 387 | 209 | 700+ |
| Students served since CENTER opened | Parents and family members served since CENTER opened | staff and partners served since CENTER opened |

vulnerable, and willing to solve problems together. That's what I'm trying to cultivate," she admits.

In the meantime, some of the intended outcomes are high school students graduating, learners feeling college- and career-ready, and families having access to help with a variety of applications, be they for schools, jobs, community opportunities,

IGNITE!

1. As you reflect on Julie's story and your own knowledge about teaching and learning worldwide, list three areas, concepts, or ideas you want to incorporate or improve.
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-
-
-

Pick the one you have the greatest potential to change.

2. Reflect on what you already do to support the initiative. For greatest impact, what are the next steps you should take?
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-
-

3. What roles do other stakeholders have to support your vision?
-
-
-
-





Danielle Brown

NATIONAL BOARD CERTIFIED TEACHER

Colonel Johnston Elementary School
Fort Huachuca Accommodation District
Fort Huachuca, Arizona

Leadership Project

On Deck: Preparing the Next Generation of Teachers and Teaming Up: Educators Enhance Teacher Prep

Goal

Engage Arizona teachers to lend their voice to the Hope Street Group Fellows research on pre-service teacher preparation.

Focus

Analyzed data from a national survey and Arizona's rural teachers to share education's realities with federal policy makers, as well as state leaders in education.

Danielle Brown is a spunky, policy-driven kindergarten teacher in a rural district working to make a nationwide impact on teacher preparation programs. The National Board Certified Teacher from Colonel Johnston Elementary School says participating in the Hope Street Group (HSG) national fellowship broadened her ability to support peers and examine current systems, which extended her reach more than she could have ever imagined.

Brown was one of 18 teachers selected from a nationwide pool and was named a 2015-17 HSG National Teacher Fellow. Together, the cohort devoted their time and energy to taking a closer look at teacher preparation programs across the United States. According to HSG, nearly 2,000 American educators shared their opinions and experiences through an online or in-person survey. The results revealed

pre-service teacher preparation programs are lacking in three specific areas, which include instruction dedicated to working with specific populations, college- and career-ready standards, and additional instruction on critical subjects (e.g. classroom/behavior management, hands-on experiences in classrooms, courses on differentiated instruction, and content-based courses).

With stark evidence to back their actions, the cohort set out to cultivate awareness and propose feasible recommendations. First, fellows collaborated to publish the report *On Deck: Preparing the Next Generation of Teachers*. The publication was distributed to the members of the U.S. Department of Education, policymakers, education leaders, and many more.

As the fulltime educators entered into the second year of the fellowship in 2016, they took individual action as proponents of change. Locally, they implemented the report's recommendations. Their second publication, *Teaming Up: Educators Enhance Teacher Prep*, further showcased the untapped educator voice across the country.

Brown's personal contribution consisted of gathering data and stories from within Arizona's rural districts. During the second year of her fellowship, she worked with the Arizona Rural Schools Association to distribute a survey to the niche group.

"The survey brought to light some of the issues and lack in areas where we don't tend to look. You might leave teacher prep and go teach in eastern Arizona in a one-room school, but how do you cope with preparing yourself? How long do you stay? What does the rural culture look like and how do you fit into that social sphere?" she asks.

Brown's teaching experience has been in a rural, isolated district. Colonel Johnston Elementary School is located on the Fort

Huachuca army base. Therefore, resources are often limited and the needs of students, families, and the community are unique.

The HSG fellow discloses that to receive the best professional development possible, she's often driving to Phoenix or flying to other states. Simply put, educators in remote areas don't have the same access to rich professional learning opportunities and resources. In addition, Brown believes current teacher preparation programs do not

Valley may not be a concern here, and vice versa," she says. "We know that retention is directly linked to preparation. If you don't feel prepared to be in a classroom for seven hours a day with students, and all the things they bring, you might not stay in the profession. We see that in Arizona."

Brown admits one of the most shocking elements of constructing and reviewing the surveys was when she heard teachers from certain areas couldn't get Wi-Fi access to take

the survey – further proving teacher resources are often lacking.

As a fellow, Brown says she's committed to seeing the recommendations of her cohort come to fruition in the years to come. The Board-certified teacher will work to see that the county adopts a common understanding of pre-service curriculum, promotes funding of clinical teaching programs, and honors teaching retention and job placement in accountability systems.

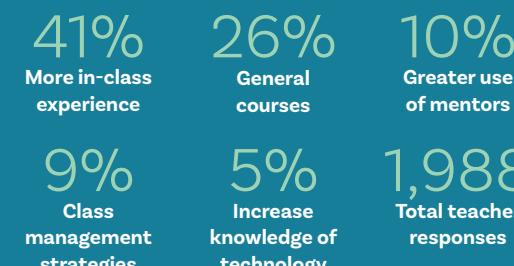
As the 2016-17 school year ends, she's starting another journey of

leadership as a Professional Learning Director at the Arizona K12 Center. In her new role, Brown

will work to strengthen the current mentor and induction efforts through the Arizona Master Teacher Program. Her focus on boosting pre-service preparation will help mentor teachers to support those newest to the profession. She'll continue her work to enhance teacher retention in the state, which is just one goal of the Hope Street Fellows projects, and a major problem facing education in Arizona.

"I need to be a teacher leader here [in Arizona] because it's challenging. It pushes me to learn more about the profession and be an advocate. Teacher leadership isn't a job you can do alone. You really need collaboration," she says.

WHAT WOULD YOU CHANGE ABOUT TEACHER PREPARATION FOR THE NEXT GENERATION?



fully prepare individuals for what's to come when they walk into their first classroom.

Laughing, she says she cried a lot during her first year of teaching. "Now, I'm confident and I've found what I can do well, and that's engaging other teachers and raising [their] voices. Being a leader is about working collaboratively. It's not 'the Danielle story.' It's the story of my school and my students."

Brown talks a lot about the stories and voices of education, specifically of those working with atypical populations.

"Just like any school, we have things that are unique to us, and our voice is unique as well. Things that may be a concern in the

IGNITE!

- As you reflect on Danielle's story and your own knowledge about teaching and learning in the United States, list three areas, concepts, or ideas you want to incorporate or improve.

Pick the one you have the greatest potential to change.

- Reflect on what you already do to support the initiative. For greatest impact, what are the next steps you should take?

- What roles do other stakeholders have to support your vision?



Mike Vargas

Pinnacle High School
Paradise Valley Unified School District
Phoenix, Arizona

Leadership Project

Senate Bill 1038: High-Quality Teacher Professional Development Pilot Program

Goal

Pass a bill that will double the amount of physics and chemistry teachers in the state within a five-year period.

Leadership in Action

Conceptualized the mini-grant pilot program, which will allow current teachers in the field to get new certifications in hard-to-fill STEM subjects.

According to Mike Vargas, teacher leadership isn't a sprint, but a marathon. The Pinnacle High School teacher and track coach has dedicated the last 18 months to cultivating awareness about a dire reality in our state: There are only 159 physics teachers in Arizona.

He first heard the staggering truth during a professional learning opportunity a few years back. Shortly after returning home from Europe where he taught abroad for 10 years, Vargas felt compelled to take action that would impact Arizona, the place he calls home. The 17-year teaching veteran couldn't allow two subjects he loved and viewed as pathways for science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), physics and chemistry, to become extinct.

"I realized if I didn't do something, nobody would. I'm just one guy, but hopefully I can inspire others," he admits. "It's OK to be uncomfortable if we're going to leverage the profession, and this

really does become an equity issue for our students."

After being named a 2016 Arizona Teacher of the Year Ambassador for Excellence, Vargas felt he had a pillar to stand on to make his voice heard. He scheduled meetings with STEM supporters, education leaders, local policymakers, and others, thereby constructing a game plan that was mutually agreeable for all involved. Next, he spread the word through education organizations and served in a capacity he said he'd never anticipated in his life — he acted as an informal lobbyist. Thereafter, the bill survived six committees before landing on the governor's desk.

Although the outgoing and personable educator has no problem speaking his mind and articulating the problem at hand, he

A LOOK AT SENATE BILL 1038

- Jan. 10 Collaborated with stakeholders to craft agreeable language. Senate staff dropped language into a bill folder. Referred to Senate Education and Appropriations Committees
- Jan. 19 Received a "Do Pass" from Senate Education Committee
- Feb. 22 Received a "Do Pass" from Senate Appropriations Committee with an amendment
- Feb. 28 Made it through Senate Rules Committee
- Mar. 1 Senate Committee of the Whole approved
- Mar. 6 Passed Senate 30-0 and sent to House
- Mar. 8 Referred to House Education and Appropriations Committees
- Mar. 14 Received a "Do Pass" from House Education Committee
- Mar. 16 Received a "Do Pass" from House Appropriations Committee
- May 1 Made it through House Rules Committee
- May 4 House Committee of the Whole approved 57-0. Sent to governor
- May 8 Signed by governor. Chapter 284, Laws 2017

severity of where we are. From the science perspective, they should listen to the data and what it tells you, right or left, and make a decision based on that. As a science person, I tackle everything just like the scientific method. I identify the problem, do the research, create a test, draw some results, and repeat," he says.

In preparing to hear the final verdict of the bill, the Arizona native understood he might have to do just that: repeat. As a scientist, he recognizes that 99 percent of the time one doesn't get the answer he or she would prefer. Similarly, the enormity of getting a piece of legislation passed after the first attempt is uncommon.

But, with a year and a half of hard work behind Vargas and a dedicated group of stakeholders, Governor Doug Ducey signed Senate Bill 1038 into law on May 8.

Although the approval was a monumental victory, the race is far from over.

"We're playing the long game," Vargas says. "Now, the goal is to create a program that's sustainable, long-lasting, and will serve Arizona students and the community for years to come. To get the program kick started it's going to take a full-court press in the next few months."

With more work ahead, one thing keeps Vargas motivated to continue with diligence and self-sacrifice: He sees the future of America sitting within his class every day.

"If we're going to make any real change in the state and start doing things, it's got to be teacher-led, from the classroom, grassroots. One person can be a catalyst, but forming a group creates a chain-reaction. We're at a point where we can't rely on others to do it. It's got to be you."

IGNITE!

1. Mike's story showcases a statewide problem impacting the opportunities for teaching and learning throughout Arizona. List three areas, concepts, or ideas that impact the profession throughout the state.

Pick the one you have the greatest potential to change.

2. Reflect on what you already do to support the initiative. For greatest impact, what are the next steps you should take?

3. What roles do other stakeholders have to support your vision?



"Advocate in simple You're always

interactions and break misconceptions. representing the profession, so represent well."

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Christie Olsen

NATIONAL BOARD CERTIFIED TEACHER

Nautilus Elementary School
Lake Havasu Unified School District
Lake Havasu City, Arizona

Leadership Project

Invest, Influence, Inspire = Ignite!

Goal

Provide specific time for first-, second-year, and mentor teachers to collaborate and engage in professional learning communities that will impact practice and teacher retention.

Leadership in Action

Facilitates and advocates for district teachers in a way that nurtures student learning, while cultivating a sense of visionary, long-term teacher leadership.

If a Fortune 500 company saw 23 percent employee turnover in a year, there would be mass chaos and turmoil among the corporation's leadership. Therefore, why is this acceptable in a rural school district, where teachers work to foster student learning to better Arizona's future? As shocking as it may seem, one year ago, this employment tragedy was a reality in the Lake Havasu Unified School District.

With threats of teacher and student walk outs due to the unfortunate circumstances of benefits and pay, National Board Certified Teacher Christie Olsen knew she had to take a stand for her profession.

"Budget cuts are common across the United States, but it's deeply personal when it's your people – your child's teacher, the teacher across the hallway, or your best friend that's considering leaving the profession or the community," Olsen says. "The crisis in

Arizona is that we're losing teachers by the droves because they cannot afford to live and maintain a moderate lifestyle in this state."

Although she first tried to solve the problem through the lens of human resources, the longtime educator knew her passions were elsewhere.

"I started to research the financial and insurance factors of the profession. I realized that wasn't where my heart was, but it was driving teachers to leave. The conversation moved away from learning and teaching and into survival mode. It became fight or flight and I wasn't comfortable with that," she says.

Olsen says she felt called to bring the conversation back to teaching and learning. The desire to shift the focus to the purpose

of the profession revealed the need to create professional learning communities.

"I started to think about what my impact could be in this district. I had zero influence over district finances, but I could influence culture. I could ignite a change," she recalls. Olsen knew that with intense effort and great attention to the teachers' voices she could alter the way they felt about their career.

opportunity to meet with these teachers. I turned that opportunity into a chance for teachers to have conversations with each other. It transformed into teachers coming together to talk about their own strengths, potentials, and barriers, rather than me standing up and distributing my 25 years of teaching knowledge," she says.

As she actively listened to their concerns, she understood a major worry was mentor teachers' inability to observe and work with mentees.

Olsen rallied the support of the school board and district personnel so she could apply for the Arizona K12 Center's Master Teacher Program. After receiving the grant, the district was able to shift resources to better support their teachers.

More than financial assistance, Olsen says through the professional learning communities she's seen a huge improvement in district morale and energy.

"We've gone from 11 teachers who are Board-certified, to eight candidates this year, and I have 28 teachers who have committed to the process for next year. Some of these teachers are finishing up their third year of teaching. These are teachers who can already see their own potential to achieve National Board Certification," she reports. "I don't think we're going to have the teacher turnover we had last year."

IGNITE!

1. Christie's story tells of a problem facing her district and her willingness to step up to the challenge. As you reflect on your own district, list three areas, concepts, or ideas that impact the teaching and learning opportunities.

Pick the one you have the greatest potential to change.

2. Reflect on what you already do to support the initiative. For greatest impact, what are the next steps you should take?

3. What roles do other stakeholders have to support your vision?



“Being a teacher willingness

leader often means standing alone. It is a to take a risk when others aren't yet willing.”





Eve Rifkin

NATIONAL BOARD CERTIFIED TEACHER

City High School
Tucson, Arizona

Leadership Project

City High School

Goal

Create, cultivate, and sustain a caring and rigorous environment for every student at City High School.

Focus

Serves as a staff member and co-founder of City High School where she creates positive change while focusing on the school's mission to foster and nurture a caring and rigorous academic environment.

Imagine a high school where teachers truly know their students. Administrators and staff alike identify learners as more than first and last names on a roster. Instead, the young adults are known for their interests, strengths, weaknesses, and what makes them tick.

What might sound like a dream scenario is the reality at City High School in Tucson, Arizona, which is within walking distance of downtown's hip restaurants, shops, theatres, and courthouses. The small charter school is home to students who sought out a more individualized and personal education where they spend their days learning and bonding with peers. Complete with an artsy, alleyway garden, a large-group meeting space, classrooms, a lunchroom, and more, the physical structure provides a place for students and teachers to connect on a deeper level.

The co-founder and current Director

"You don't have to choose and a rigorous, robust

between a kind, caring environment, academic environment. You can have both."

of College Access for City High School, Eve Rifkin, says students need to feel cared for in order to learn their best. She recalls countless times students have shared that for the first time in their lives, they feel happy at school – this statement made after nearly 14 years in the education system.

Having spent 10 years teaching in a large, district high school, Rifkin and two colleagues acted on their intuition to create a nurturing environment to cultivate student learning. The desire to educate the whole student struck a chord so deep that there weren't any obstacles that could deter them from doing so.

"We kept feeling two forces were limiting us as visionary educators. We were seeing too many kids each day and the notion of relationships in schools was not being talked about. There were human beings showing up in our classrooms and we kind of knew their names, but we didn't know anything else about them. The other force was that the curriculum felt detached from anything authentic. The kids were doing fine, but we knew learning should be so much more engaging and dynamic," she says.

As a teacher, Rifkin recognized that when she was learning about a subject that truly interested her, it was the most exciting thing in the world. Yet, this feeling of enthusiasm did not translate to the learners in her own classroom. After reflecting on the loss of a student, while simultaneously trying to manage the systems-imposed frustrations, she knew it was time for a change.

"A more personal impetus for me was in 1995 when I had a student commit suicide. What everybody said the next day was, 'I didn't really know him,'" Rifkin recalls. She was completely shocked by the lack of humanity in the situation. "No one had anything to say

about this human being. The school never did anything that felt intentional as a community. We lost a kid and there was no gathering, announcement, or moment of silence. The school didn't miss a beat."

As a teacher, she wondered what would happen if one day she wasn't there. Would anyone stop and think about her? She couldn't help but question if her existence in that school mattered.

"This was over 20 years ago, but that was the most compelling moment for me as an educator. We cannot have systems, large

greater good. In our situation, the greater good is much smaller, so we can be more flexible and responsive to what students need," she says. "When you get to know kids well, they do things that they never would if they were invisible or slipping through the cracks. It's not that we are making kids be different. We're not changing kids, we're just seeing them in ways they have not been seen before."

Rifkin says the founding trio worked to create a culture of professional leadership. She admits there is not one educator at City High School who wears just one hat. Instead, employees serve in multiple capacities, whether it be as an advisor, mentor, club sponsor, etc.

"The culture of teacher leadership means you have teachers who are happy and stick around. It's not always perfect or pretty, but it is rich and invigorating. Our teachers ask the hard questions that lead to rich conversations that may lead to real change," she says. Most of all, she hopes her school is a motivator for educators in all circumstances.

"I hope this inspires all teachers because when it comes down to it, knowing kids well is a choice. It doesn't have to mean changing the bell schedule and making a school of 180 kids. It could mean giving someone three extra seconds, giving them eye contact, or pushing pause on the day to sit with someone to ask a question," Rifkin suggests.

"Personally, I'd like to see a K-12 system [like this]. As the parent of a five-year-old, having a school whose No. 1 intention is making sure kids are known and cared for ... I would pick that in a heartbeat."

IGNITE!

- As you reflect on Eve's story and think about your own teaching and learning context, list three areas, concepts, or ideas that you think need improvement.
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-
-

Pick the one you have the greatest potential to change.

- Reflect on what you already do to support the initiative. For greatest impact, what are the next steps you should take?
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- What roles do other stakeholders have to support your vision?
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Audra Damron

Desert Oasis Elementary School
Tolleson Elementary School District
Phoenix, Arizona

Leadership Project

Parent Empowerment Project

Goal

Provide purposeful home school connections to empower parents to actively participate in their student's learning to increase school readiness.

Leadership in Action

Bridges the gap between parents and teachers through monthly trainings that augment skills, provide resources, and increase participation, which strengthens relationships within the community.

On Fridays, in most work environments, employees make a swift dash to the parking lot to start the weekend. But at Desert Oasis Elementary School, there's a dedicated preschool teacher and a couple of helpers who have spent eight Fridays this school year cutting fruits and vegetables, arranging sandwiches and beverages, and preparing learning kits for community families to take home.

Although Audra Damron could spend her time elsewhere, she happily hosts Family Learning Nights because she knows she can create a wave of change in the lives of Tolleson community members. Infused with personal conversations, educational activities, and selfless support, the Parent Empowerment Project gives preschool students and their families an opportunity to interact with a teacher leader in a unique way.



**"Now, more than ever,
have to speak
And, if we don't have**

The motivation for the project derived from Damron's observations during parent-teacher conferences. She saw community parents eager to become more involved in their student's schooling, but there seemed to be a lack of practical resources and tactics for education at home.

In February 2016, Damron attended a Teach to Lead Summit in Baltimore, which empowers teachers to problem-solve from within their classrooms. According to the National Board candidate, the professional learning opportunity gave her a chance to further explore the parent empowerment idea.

In an effort to fund her fledgling project, Damron applied for and received one of 17 ASCD Teacher Impact Grants out of a pool of 580 applicants. Clearly, her project proved promising to Teach to Lead affiliates, which include partners from the United States Department of Education and the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards.

With financial support and a vision, Damron set out to aid her community. She worked with kindergarten teachers from her school to identify eight power standards,

Through the newfound home-school partnership, Damron says both parents and students are more confident. Whether it's extra practice with letters or numbers, preschool students report their parents and guardians are employing the newly learned activities at home.

"Parents are their child's first and best teacher. Having them here, invested, and on our side, is impactful," she says.

Throughout the year, Damron says she's built strong relationships with parents. Sitting in the room during a Family Learning Night, one can feel there is a newfound sense of support and understanding. Families are at home in the school library, where they spend about an hour and a half eating a nutritious meal, asking questions, and practicing with instructional materials to guide their child's learning.

Damron says she hopes the program might expand throughout the Tolleson Elementary School District. Even greater, she would love to see the Parent Empowerment Project become an example for other schools within the community.

so as a team, educators and parents could pack a punch with simple, take-home activities, thereby setting students up for academic success.

"Workbooks and worksheets are not necessarily engaging. What we're doing is giving hands-on, efficient tasks that take five minutes or less that parents can use at home, using inexpensive resources that they can replace themselves," she says.

"I hope teacher leadership is contagious. You're in your classroom and doing the small things that you know are best for your students and you turn them into big things because you realize that they make a huge impact," Damron says. "Teacher leadership is doing what we're doing and making it known."

**teachers have to stand up and we
out. We have to have a seat at the table.
a seat, we have to make a seat."**

IGNITE!

1. Audra's passion manifested itself in a community project that improved the teaching and learning for the youngest learners at her school. List three areas, concepts, or ideas that can engage your community to improve the teaching and learning in your context.

Pick the one you have the greatest potential to change.

2. Reflect on what you already do to support the initiative. For greatest impact, what are the next steps you should take?

3. What roles do other stakeholders have to support your vision?

Thank you.

The Arizona K12 Center sincerely thanks the teacher leaders who shared their stories and expertise with us for the purpose of this publication. Despite their eventful schedules, they were incredibly generous with their time, energy, and personal experiences. In addition, we thank the students and colleagues who allowed us to step into their shoes to catch a glimpse of what it's like to interact with these outstanding educators on a daily basis.

We hope their accounts of passion, courage, selflessness, and resilience inspire teachers across the continuum to take positive action to enhance their education communities.

We dedicate this publication to all of Arizona's educators. As teacher leaders, we salute your willingness to take risks and sacrifice for your students, colleagues, and the betterment of the community. You are cultivating a spirit of hope for the future of Arizona and our nation. The energy you exert and time you dedicate to better our state's education systems are priceless. To all Arizona teacher leaders, we salute you.

FEATURED TEACHERS

Danielle Brown, NBCT

Fort Huachuca Accommodation District

Audra Damron

Tolleson Elementary School District

Julie Kasper, NBCT

Lutheran Social Services of the Southwest

Christie Olsen, NBCT

Lake Havasu Unified School District

Eve Rifkin, NBCT

City High School

Mike Vargas

Paradise Valley Unified School District

WORKS CITED

Dennis Shirley. *The New Imperatives of Educational Change: Achievement with Integrity*. Routledge, New York 2016

SEE THEM IN ACTION

To learn more about these teacher leaders, scan the QR code below and visit the Arizona K12 Center YouTube channel.



“Creative and persistent leadership can uplift the teaching profession even in contested circumstances.”

DENNIS SHIRLEY



#AZTeacherLeader



ARIZONA
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NORTHERN
ARIZONA
UNIVERSITY

ARIZONA K12 CENTER | 99 EAST VIRGINIA AVENUE, SUITE 100 | PHOENIX, AZ 85004

602-443-6444 | INFO@AZK12.ORG | AZK12.ORG