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An interview with Linda Darling-Hammond on the current state of education

By M. Diane McCormick

American education is ready and eager for change, says Linda Darling-Hammond. The Learning Policy Institute president and CEO is "very hopeful" that public schools can pivot to a student-centered approach.

"It is in the nature of teaching and in the attitude that educators bring to their work that they want to be responsive to their students, and they want to see their students being successful," says the renowned education researcher and policy expert, who is the Charles E. Ducommun Professor of Education Emeritus at Stanford University. "Sometimes, making that happen means you need to change structures and some ways of working, but the general attitude is there in many communities. Lots of innovative work is going on."

In a warp-speed world where technology information doubles every 11 months, rote learning doesn't prepare children for full functioning, notes Darling-Hammond. A student-centered system, now enabled by the "open-ended framework" of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), teaches children to analyze and investigate the information in front of them, building the capabilities to solve "problems that have not yet been identified, using technologies that have not yet been invented."

Principals, other educators, and policymakers have already started down the road to revolution, she says in an interview with *Principal*.

Principal: In your vision of optimum systems in education, what does "student-centered" mean?

LDH: A number of things: Designing the work to meet student needs, and drawing on their prior experiences, knowledge, interests, and culture to engage them in the curriculum. We have to bring the curriculum to the child and bring the child to the curriculum. It's also important to have diagnostic assessment tools, and tools for two-way communications with students such as journaling, surveys, and listening closely to discussions that reveal what they know and what they think and what they need.

There must also be ways to respond to these student needs. In some cases, it takes the form of multitiered systems of support in schools. In a classroom, it's about a very alert teacher who has the sensibilities to engage with students, listen to them, and know their parents to design the kinds of curriculum strategies and opportunities to engage that keep students not only motivated, but well-served.

Principal: How urgent is the need for transformation?

LDH: We need to very quickly transform our schools, because we got off-track in the last decade while other nations were moving forward. Starting in the early 1990s, many, many countries began to think about 21st century skills. In states, there were transformations of standards and curriculum. Students were involved in investigations and inquiries and open-ended tasks, and teachers were learning to score assessments based on that kind of material. Then came No Child Left Behind in 2002, and much of that work came to a screeching halt. While the rest of the world has been moving ahead rapidly, we have been basically treading water, so we have a quick need to get back into the 21st century.

Darling-Hammond's pillars of new learning include learning opportunities that teach children to think critically and creatively; school design, management, and funding to support deeper learning; authentic assessment tools that inform rather than punish; a diverse and highly competent educator workforce; and continual improvements through research and inquiry.

The solution includes structural changes, she says. For instance, assigning teachers to stay with the same students for multiple years has been shown to improve achievement even more effectively than small class sizes. High school advisory systems equip every child with "an advocate and organizer of supports. The less stability and continuity kids have at home, the more you need those strategies in schools, to assure they have continuity in other relationships," she says.

***Principal:* What is the role of principals in this transformation to student-centered, personalized learning?**

LDH: Principals are essential to everything. Their role is the most important one. It's a combination of things—educating the public that the needs of schools have changed, helping educators get access to the skills and the tools they need, shared decision-making that's needed to get buy-in, building the leadership capacity of teachers so they can gain access to each other's expertise, and even looking at what innovations are happening in other schools. I think of the orchestra conductor who has to do so many things at once to create a harmonic and well-integrated set of experiences. That's right in the lap of the principal.

***Principal:* How do you build a diverse, caring workforce, and then convince educators to serve in schools that are traditionally underresourced?**

LDH: No. 1, we have to convince principals and policymakers to ensure that all schools have adequate and equitable resources. We need to be clear that this agenda requires the entire system to be committed, not just people within the school level. Then, when resources are in place, the principal is a key person for recruiting and retaining teachers. Teachers almost always list the administration, including the principal, as key to whether they are going to stay in or leave a school. They often talk about the power of having strong collaboration among their colleagues, and good supports from the principal—both moral support, as in having your back, and tangible support, helping ensure you get the tools and skills you need to teach effectively.

***Principal:* Students bring so many difficult issues from home. Where do reforms address these learning challenges, and how can principals tackle them?**

LDH: We have many good examples of schools in high-need communities. One part is personalization—allowing teachers closer relationships with kids over longer periods of time. Another part is having wraparound services. Some do it through community school strategies, where mental health services, health services, and before- and after-school care are available. I helped start a school like that, with 99 percent low-income kids in a community of English learners, and with lots of drive-by shootings. We were able to create a successful environment by providing all those additional services and personalizing the environment, but also by offering social and emotional learning supports. They have lots of opportunities to undertake projects that connect to the community, which gives these students a sense of agency and effectiveness in the face of what can feel like overwhelming odds.

We've gotten to a place in this society where we accept the idea that some people are given less in the context of income discrimination and poverty, and then we give them fewer in-school resources. That's not acceptable. We don't want to hold the idea that magical, heroic educators by themselves, without resources, are able to turn schools around. We need these wonderful, heroic educators, and they need the resources to support that work.

Darling-Hammond once worked with students who tackled the issue of diabetes—a problem in their community—by conducting research, writing their findings in Spanish and English, making community presentations, and presenting to city council their prevention and treatment solutions. While acting as ambassadors for deeper learning, they were "learning the skills of collaboration, communication, inquiry, investigation, and

presentation," Darling-Hammond says. "All those process skills are things you're going to use whenever you encounter a new problem, because with the exploding knowledge base, the most important thing is that you have to learn how to learn. Nobody's going to spoon-feed you the knowledge you'll need for your job in the 21st century."

The best practices of schools successful in enabling deeper learning can be brought to scale nationwide through a number of paths. States transform their expectations for inquiry-oriented, project-based work, with accordingly appropriate assessments. Then, professional development supports administrators and teachers, with motivation and incentives built into the accountability system.

The teachers who become experts in the new strategies serve as master teachers, mentors, or demonstration teachers. Site visits are conducted to see deeper learning at work in schools' organizational structures. Intensive professional learning opportunities and collaborative implementation opportunities help principals and teachers plow the new strategies into their repertoires. "These kinds of strategies are deeper learning for educators," says Darling-Hammond. "They help us create deeper learning for kids. You have to do one on the way to the other."

Principal: **There is recent debate about diverting some public funds for private school choice. Is there room for private school choice, and can it be effectively leveraged as a tactic toward the goal of enabling deeper learning and overcoming inequity?**

LDH: Four studies in the last year found that kids receiving private school vouchers did academically less well—significantly less well—than similar kids in public schools. They did get a choice, but they didn't get a better choice. Sometimes the choices you want to choose are already closed to you because they have waiting lists or are too far away or won't take English-language learners or children in special education.

What we need is a public education system in which all the schools are worth choosing and all the kids are chosen by good schools. That means thinking about choice in the context of how to make your neighborhood pubic school a good choice. That's going to require more accountability and more regulation for the charter segment, as well as high-quality choices in districts.

Ultimately, we come back to the question of what makes a high-quality school and how we get more of them. How do we as a society fund them, manage them, regulate them, staff them with highly qualified educators? Choice is not a bad thing; it's just not nearly enough.

Principal: **You have said that "fighting old, divisive battles over last century's educational models won't prepare our children for the new world they face." True, but in a polarized atmosphere, how do we tear down the barriers of outdated ideologies and use research to convince policymakers to fully implement and fund these reforms?**

LDH: We have had camps and divides and partisan battles, but when you get down to real specifics on how to make improvements, my experience is that many members of state education committees, whether Republican or Democrat, have been former teachers or principals. They care about kids and schools. They want to see things get better. They may start with different general perceptions, but when you engage in a learning process together, it's not at all impossible to get good policy made with bipartisan support.

Perhaps the best recent example at the federal level is the Every Student Succeeds Act, with Sens. Patty Murray (D-Washington) and Lamar Alexander (R-Tennessee) together leading a successful process to get us a law that gives a framework for good work in the states, but I've seen it happen at the state level, as well. We have to continue to try to provide good, solid evidence, working with people over time to match their aspirations and goals with the evidence that exists on how to achieve them. Even in the face of divisiveness, it is possible to bring people together and make progress. P

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