



FINISH THE YEAR STRONG TIPS FOR SCHOOL LEADERS

By Don Vu, EdD

Education is a cyclical business. For school principals, every school year brings us a beginning that comes a tad bit too soon, an end that is typically a schoolwide exercise in controlled chaos, and all of the peaks and valleys in between. While most leaders take time to carefully plan for the beginning of every school year, fewer find time to plan for the end. In any cycle or season, the end is just as important as the beginning. Here are a few ideas to consider as you approach the last few months of school.

Celebrate. First of all, congratulations! You have one of the toughest jobs in the world, and you're nearing the finish line! Whether you've had a banner year or barely survived, take some time to celebrate personally. Not many people can do this work. As for your school, think of fun and exciting ways to celebrate together with staff, students and families.

RESEARCH AND STRATEGIES
FOR PK-8 SCHOOL LEADERS

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They deserve it, too! School culture develops and grows through an accumulation of actions, traditions, ceremonies, and celebrations that are aligned to a vision (Fischer, Frey, and Pumpian, 2012). If you believe in building a positive school culture, then celebrations and end of the year traditions should always be observed. In my former school, we had a picnic BBQ with families and a traditional “staff vs. 5th graders” kickball game on the last day of school. It was a great way to end every year. What are some ways to celebrate the end of the year with your school community?

Evaluate. Yes, this isn’t as fun as celebrating but it’s important to look at your end of the year data. While you will spend a lot of time analyzing it after getting back from summer break, it’s worth a look while it’s still fresh with the current roster of students. Did you achieve your goals? What were the successes and challenges? What can you do at the beginning of the year to hit the ground running? It’s a good time for reflection and brings a little closure to the hard work that your team has done. While you won’t have the state test results until next fall, there should be plenty of data to begin some important conversations. Just don’t overdo it now when everyone is running on fumes: there will be plenty of time to dig deep into the data as the new year begins.

Educate. As the instructional leader of your school community, find ways to help students continue learning and growing during the summer. This doesn’t necessarily mean summer school. Students learn and grow from experiences like reading, traveling and being involved in the community. In fact, research shows sending books home with children over the summer yields greater achievement gain (and is less expensive) than providing summer school (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 2013; McGill-Franzen et al., 2016).

At our school, we made sure students had access to books every summer. We opened up our school library for several weeks over summer break—giving kids a place to read, hang out, and listen to adults read aloud books. We lent out library books over the summer. And, we made sure parents had information on all of the local libraries and bookstores and the summer reading programs they sponsored. One rule we had

with the summer books: Kids could choose whatever books they wanted to read.

Finally, don’t forget a plan to take care of yourself over the summer. Encourage your staff to do the same. Spend quality time with your family. Go on vacation. Read those books that have been sitting in your “to read” pile. Find some time to recenter yourself and perhaps learn something new that may inspire you in your work as an educator.



School culture develops and grows through...actions, traditions, ceremonies, and celebrations that are aligned to a vision.

I’ve always taken time during summer to read biographies of extraordinary people who are not in the field of education. I find it refreshing and challenging to make outside connections to the work that we do in schools. How can you use your time to be inspired and rejuvenated? Summer will go by quickly and, before you know it, a new year will begin and you’ll be saying to yourself, “Didn’t we just

have our end of the year BBQ? Maybe it’s time to have a beginning of the year BBQ to celebrate a new start.”

AUTHOR



Dr. Don Vu has been an elementary school teacher and principal for 24 years. This school year, he’s taking a “gap year” to be a full-time dad and amateur gardener. He is a former refugee and second language learner who understands the challenges of learning a new language and culture. He believes reading can be transformative and life-changing. 🐦 @drdonvu

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How do you prepare for the end of the school year? Share on social media and tag @TEPSAtalk and #WeLeadTX.



YOUR GUIDE TO RUNNING A SCHOOL LIKE DISNEY WORLD

Create a Welcoming, Magical Environment for All

By Lynmara Colón

Every year, millions of people flock to Disney World, the self-proclaimed “happiest place on Earth.” Many return year after year to spend their hard-earned money despite the long lines and unpredictable weather. Why? Because of the magical feeling that exists there and the way people who run the park make them feel. No matter where you come from, what language you speak, or your disability, Disney offers magic for all.

At Mary Williams Elementary, we strive to create a similarly magical feeling. We put our guests—students and parents—first, and work hard to keep those behind the scenes feeling inspired and supported. We also invest in digital technology that we believe can engage students, as well as make the teacher’s job more enjoyable. After all, who wants an autograph from a grumpy Mickey Mouse?

Of course, some people may argue that a school shouldn’t be likened to a theme park, or that entertainment and education don’t mix. We disagree. It’s this student-first way of thinking that’s helped our school go from a School of Improvement to a School of Excellence in just two years. With over 1,000 students, it’s not always easy, but we take pride in the fact that although the lines are long, students come every single day looking forward to the magical moments our classrooms offer.

A Focus on Customer Service

At Disney World, staff are hired for attitude, not aptitude. Whether cast members or third-party employees, the organization unites everyone in a common goal: to help the guest.

At Mary Williams, the magic starts with a similar vision: that students come first. That means hiring with kids in mind. After all, some people may be great educators but may not be the right fit for our students. Can they relate to English Language Learners? Are they sensitive to students with Special Needs? These questions matter because part of the magic is creating inclusive experiences for all.

Teachers also need to be included, especially when it comes to decision making. As principal, I truly believe my role is to create conditions that allow everyone else to be successful. Sometimes that means simply stepping back and listening; other times, it means sharing curriculum knowledge or running to the store to get Oreos for a 'Phases of the Moon' project. I want teachers to know we are part of the same team, with a common purpose.

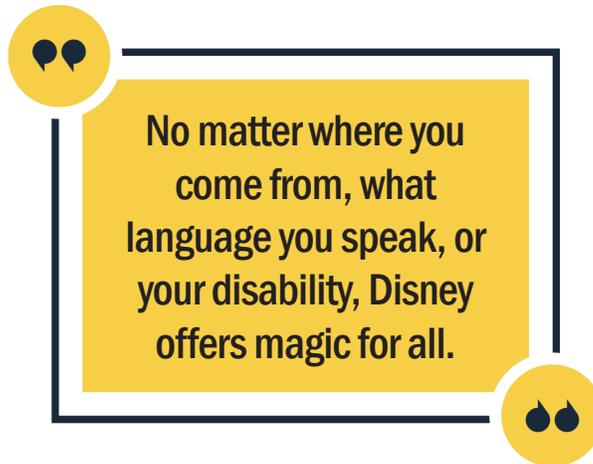
This was the rationale for starting teacher-centered Edcamps during professional development. During these sessions, we don't go in with a plan. Instead, teachers decide what they want to learn, and what they'd like to help others learn, instead of being force-fed one-size-fits-all PD. Once the session is over, staff members know who to reach out and collaborate with. It's this teacher-led model that's the key to our next secret to success: using innovative technology to transform our classrooms.

Creating Magic Through Tech and Relationships

When I started at Mary Williams, two things were clear: students weren't fully engaged, and it wasn't the fault of teachers. So we took a look at our competition—video games, iPads, smartphones—and realized while students were happily spending time on their devices, we were giving them old fashioned paper-and-pencil activities. The solution? Infusing some excitement into our lessons, Walt Disney-style.

Since then, we've experimented with dozens of different apps and online programs to boost learning and interest:

3D printing, spheros, Osmos, virtual reality, coding, cyber security modules, drones, robotics, multiple devices. But we never expect teachers to all use the same tools, and we never use tech for tech's sake. Yes, we want our school to feel like Tomorrowland, but only because we know technology has the power to both differentiate and engage. As a result, the school has become a learning lab for both students and adults: a place of true innovation.



We also know technology cannot replace strong relationships. As Walt Disney said, "You can design and create and build the most wonderful place in the world, but it takes people to make the dream a reality." At Mary Williams, we believe in second chances. We understand that exclusionary practices hurt students and destroy the culture we try to foster. Instead of kicking students out, we lead meetings by letting kids

know we believe in them. We also host lunches, book clubs, and play Minecraft and coding games with students, creating a sense of family and fun. And I don't miss an opportunity to ask them about the things we have implemented and ways we can improve as a school. It's the customer feedback that keeps us improving.

Parents: Both Guests and Stakeholders

Although students come first, we also view parents as guests whose experience is just as valued. From the minute a parent walks onto our campus, they are welcomed, whether with the music playing in the office, the colorful murals that adorn the walls, or staff intentionally asking, "How can I serve you today?" We take time to foster relationships and go the extra mile to exceed expectations.

We've also found technology useful in serving our guests' needs. Our parents have access to me at any time of the day through Remind, which lets them text me if they need anything. We also use DoJo, Smore, Facebook, and Twitter to communicate, along with the occasional flyer for the refrigerator.

Parents are also regarded as stakeholders who deserve to know how we use our resources and time. Anytime I need an expert, I reach out to our parents first. During school-wide events, I make it a point to ask them for feedback and how we can improve; I call them quarterly to ask for input. At PTO meetings, I reveal market trends and student data. As a result, changes are not a surprise because they are part of everything we do. The success of Mary Williams is the result of hard work, dedication, and inviting everyone to sit at what I call “the dinner table.” Magic happens as a result of crafting an environment where people feel safe to make mistakes, feel loved, are allowed to think outside the box, and are excited about coming back every single day. Is it easy? No. But if it were easy, everyone would do it. And like Walt Disney said: “It’s kind of fun to do the impossible.”

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Lynmara Colón brings the perspective of a teacher, assistant principal, and principal—positions she has held since joining education in 2003 — to her work in literacy. As principal, she served more than 1,000 students in grades K-5, and was able to increase reading engagement by leading a

culture of literacy. She now heads the office that provides comprehensive registration services to English learners and immigrant children, including translation and interpretation services, to a school division serving over 90,000 students. These students represent 124 countries and 149 languages. Lynmara is currently pursuing her doctorate in education through Old Dominion University.

🐦 @TheColon_s



How do you create magical moments for all on your campus? Share on social media and tag @TEPSATalk and #WeLeadTX.

TEPSA
10 Ways Educators Are Carrying On & Taking Care of Kids

- Created virtual classrooms overnight** (Illustration: hand holding a smartphone)
- Found ways to continue getting meals to students in need** (Illustration: hamburger and calendar)
- Created social media support groups to share resources** (Illustration: calendar and social media icons)
- Provided sample daily schedules for families** (Illustration: hand holding a clipboard and calendar)
- Advocated with lawmakers to lighten accountability to ease student anxiety** (Illustration: calendar and man in suit)
- Encouraged using this extra time for learning life skills** (Illustration: child with puzzle pieces and calendar)
- Comforted students and families** (Illustration: woman hugging a child and calendar)
- Found ways to reach students who may not have ample resources** (Illustration: hand holding a magnifying glass and calendar)
- Discovered new teaching resources** (Illustration: child with books and calendar)
- Created lessons while taking care of their own children** (Illustration: man with child and calendar)

Thank you! #WeLeadTX

We know you're pivoting to meet new daily challenges while continuing to care for your loved ones. We're here for you! Stay connected, access and share resources @TEPSATalk and #WeLeadTX.



HOW SCHOOL LEADERS CAN HANDLE DECISION FATIGUE

Strategies to Identify and Cope with Decision Fatigue

By Ronald Williamson, EdD, and Barbara Blackburn, PhD

Have you ever noticed how later in the day it gets tougher to make a decision or, even more challenging, to pick an option from among those presented?

It's not uncommon to face this dilemma in both our personal and professional lives. It's a phenomenon called *decision fatigue*, and psychologists and others have begun to recognize how it impacts the decisions we make.

After a long day at work, for example, decision fatigue may impact your personal life. Ever notice how difficult it can be just to decide where to go for dinner or even what to serve? It's just one more decision among many you're asked to make, and it can be one too many.

When decision fatigue impacts one's professional life, the consequences can have far more impact than a poor dinner choice. School leaders, who hold some of the most complicated jobs in our society, are routinely

asked to make decisions—both important and unimportant, complicated and less so—throughout the school day.

The sheer variety of issues faced by school leaders, and the rapid pace at which they are asked to make decisions, mean that those leaders must remain focused and have the mental energy for sound decision-making.

What is Decision Fatigue?

Decision fatigue is a term that describes the deterioration in quality of decisions made by people, particularly later in the day or after we've spent considerable time making several complex decisions, one after the other. It acknowledges that a leader may simply deplete their mental energy and "lose their edge."

Decision fatigue can cloud one's judgment leading to poor choices. It explains a whole set of undesirable

behaviors such as losing focus in meetings, getting angry with colleagues, being impulsive or even making irrational decisions without considering the consequences (Green, 2011).

Implications of Decision Fatigue

People have a finite store of the mental and emotional energy used in making decisions. As their energy is depleted, their ability to handle both routine and complex decision-making declines. This may lead to distinct differences in decisions during different parts of the day.

For example, research inside the Israel criminal justice system found that decisions from tribunals for similar cases were distinctly more punitive later in the day than early in the morning or after a lunch break.

When we experience decision fatigue, we often don't feel physically tired, so we're not aware that fatigue is occurring. But declining mental energy has several implications for leaders. Several effects of decision fatigue have been identified:

Reduced Ability to Make a Choice – Decisions where options exist can be energy-consuming as the decision-maker analyzes both the benefits and costs of each option. People with depleted energy may become reluctant to make trade-offs or seize upon the first option considered.

Decision Paralysis – Decision fatigue can also lead decision makers to simply not make decisions. Lyengar and Lepper (2000) found that when people who'd reached the decision fatigue threshold faced multiple choices when purchasing an item, they often found it difficult to purchase anything at all.

Impulse Decisions – Decision fatigue has also been connected to impulsive decisions. Later in the day the fatigued brain looks for shortcuts and acts impulsively rather than expending even more energy to make a decision. A Florida State researcher found a link between impulse decisions and low glucose levels. They also found when the decision-maker

replenished the glucose, they restored their ability to make more effective decisions.

Impaired Self-Regulation – There is some evidence that decision-making may drain some of a person's internal resources leaving them less capable of handling other activities. Loewenstein (2003) reported that the ability of decision makers to control impulses in their private lives may stem from the burden of day-to-day decision making in challenging professional situations.

Avoiding Decision Fatigue

The good news is that while decision fatigue cannot be avoided, researchers have also identified several strategies for minimizing the effects.

Recognize it is a problem.

First, don't minimize the problem or believe that you are immune to the effects. Monitor your behavior and the decisions you make throughout the day (perhaps keep an hourly 'mental energy diary' for a week) and plan accordingly.

Plan your day. Once you recognize the effect of decision fatigue, schedule your day so that important meetings or decisions occur early. An alternative is to hold the meeting or make the decision following lunch or a mid-day break.

A related strategy: Plan the most insignificant decisions the day before. That might be choosing what you will wear or deciding on your lunch for the next day. That way you avoid depleting mental energy before you even get to work.

Avoid back-to-back meetings. Avoid the tendency to schedule consecutive meetings. Walk the halls, visit a class, check on the physical plant, etc. between meetings so that you can have a short break and recharge your mental energy reserves. Use the time between meetings to get up, move around, and do things that do not require complex decision-making.

Take short mental breaks. As noted earlier, recognize the importance of taking breaks and actually schedule them throughout the day. Pause and let the mind relax



and recover. Boost your glucose with a healthy snack, drink plenty of water and breathe deeply.

Sleep on it. If important decisions cannot be made in the morning, you may want to resist the urge to decide in the afternoon. "Sleep on it" and reconsider the decision the next morning.

Have clear goals. Decision fatigue is linked to making complex choices from among alternatives. The clearer you are about your goals, the more you're able to take irrelevant choices off the table and reduce the drain on your mental energy. Clear goals can also make it easier to delegate some decision making to others on your leadership team (who will also need to be alert to decision fatigue).

Avoid distractions. Don't make decisions when distracted. It's become increasingly clear in the research that we lessen our effectiveness when we try to juggle multiple tasks at the same time. You can't avoid social media or email, but you can set specific times to tend to those tasks and leave them alone when making priority decisions.

Decision Fatigue Won't Go Away

We lead busy lives. Even the best leaders and the most astute decision makers are not immune to decision fatigue.

For school leaders who make countless choices big and small about student welfare, school personnel, building management, and family and community communication, it is imperative to understand the dimensions of this inevitable human condition and adopt strategies to minimize the negative impact.

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DO YOU WANT TO WIN...OR LEARN?

Leading with Grace Through Difficult Conversations

By Jessica Cabeen

We all have them, and sometimes we dread them. Having difficult conversations can happen daily: at work, with family and friends. There is an art to engaging in these difficult conversations with grace, vulnerability and a goal of maintaining, or hopefully, increasing depth to the relationship moving forward.

Too often to count I have entered one of these conversations with a hidden agenda, a plan, or a preconceived outcome. When entering in with my own game plan I can tell you that the execution and the end of the conversation, well...it didn't go well. Outcomes included short-sided goals, frustration, and most often a barrier to a deeper relationship with the other party.

When communication fails,
relationships falter. -Lead with Grace

In my many (probably too many) epic fails of these conversations I have learned a new game plan, one in which I don't come in with an outcome. My new plan has plays that help me in many aspects of my communication game.

Play Number One: Do I want to be liked or do I want to lead?

Too often I worried that what I had to say would hurt

someone's feelings. This ended up with me attempting to sugar coat something that became too distorted to understand. It's key to make sure that you keep at your core what you are trying to accomplish so that when popular opinion attempts to get in the way, you can stay the course. The difference between being liked and leading is not just about the purpose of the message or the delivery. Leading also means allowing others to sit with the discomfort and process a conversation without circling back right away or diminishing the message by flooding the person with positive accolades. Stuck trying to figure out a way to start? Check out Brene Brown's "Let's Rumble" starters and questions at <https://brenebrown.com/blog/2019/05/01/lets-rumble/>.

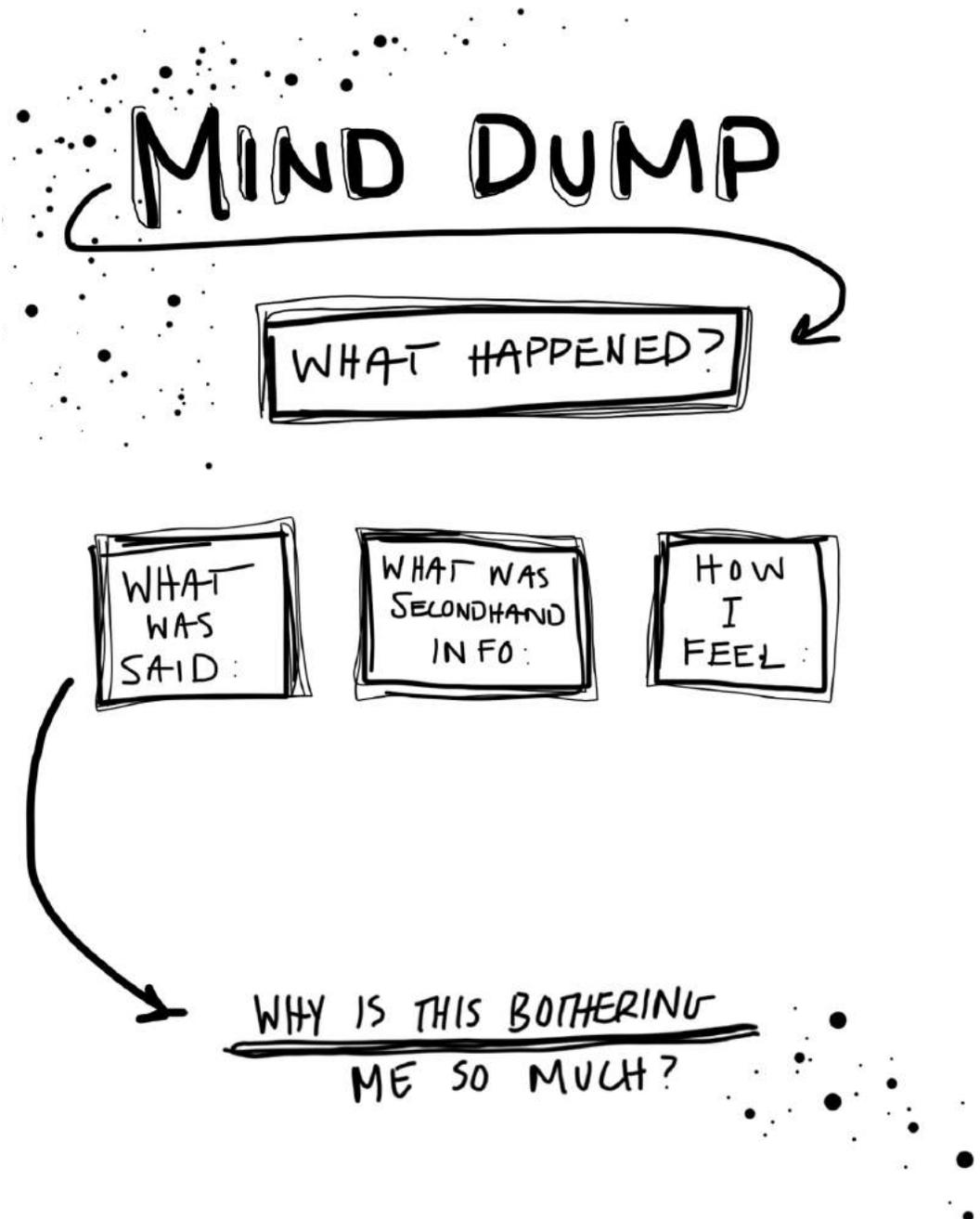
Play Number Two: Keep it professional, don't take it personally.

Trust me, it isn't always about you. Too often we read way too much into things. Be cautious not to awfulize or personalize feedback. Remember to keep it professional and if you feel it turning personal, check out play number three.

Play Number Three: Focus on what you can control.

No matter how well you prepare, how much time you give, or how hard you try, you cannot manipulate, control, or direct the responses of others. What you **can** do is model what you want to see from others. Someone is yelling at you? Take a deep breath and respond in a calm, quiet manner. A student is in the corner, angry and upset? Recognize the emotion and name it without judgment.

One strategy I use if I notice I am not self-regulated before walking into a conversation is to stop, take three deep breaths, and enter the room. Ensuring my own



emotional state is in check before trying to have a tough conversation is key.

Play Number Four: Keep in mind the purpose of the conversation.

When you lead with grace, you can and must care about people. -Lead with Grace

Once a superintendent gave me advice I use daily: "Every parent loves their child. We don't get to decide

or judge how, but we know that they do.” Keeping that in mind, that the person on the other side of the conversation has a point, a plan, and a purpose—no matter how different it is from ours. Recognizing that is essential when framing of the conversations is the ultimate goal.

To support a student, to enhance a relationship, to build a foundation of trust and understand in which to grow? When you keep in mind the long term prize, short term set-backs don’t seem so insurmountable.

At home, I see this play out often in my conversations with my own tween and teen. Too often I feel bad about how many times I say no. No—you can’t have a new phone. No—you can’t go to a friend’s house when you still have homework. No—you are going to finish the sports season and not quit. While I tend to say no to a lot of little things, I am really trying to say yes to being the parent, not the friend, and helping both of them learn about priorities, challenge growth, and express care in our relationship.

The Final Play: Move away from winning and move towards learning.

I won’t deny that these conversations are difficult, challenging, and at times the last thing I want to do. However, through every difficult interaction, conversation, and discussion I have learned, and this

learning continues to help me grow and develop into a better leader, mother, friend, and spouse. So when a difficult conversation is in your future, I challenge you to see it as an opportunity, not an obstacle.

See graphic (page 10) for a mind dump when preparing for a difficult conversation.

AUTHOR



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Jessica was awarded the NAESP/ VINCI Digital Leader of Early Learning Award in 2016 and in 2017 was named the Minnesota National Distinguished Principal. Jessica is the author of "Hacking Early Learning," coauthor of "Balance Like a Pirate," author of "Lead with Grace and Unconventional Leadership." 🐦 @ JessicaCabeen



Share tips for tackling difficult conversations on social media and tag @TEPSAtalk and #WeLeadTX.



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