

LEADING THROUGH PARTNERSHIP FOR EQUITABLE, INCLUSIVE, AND ACCESSIBLE CHILDHOOD EDUCATION: A CONVERSATION WITH RENEE SBROCCO CORNEILLE, EdD

Interviewed by Stephanie D. Gingerich, DNP, RN-BC, CPN

Abstract

Stephanie D. Gingerich, nurse leader and a member of the editorial board of the *Interdisciplinary Journal of Partnership Studies*, interviews Renee Sbrocco Corneille, Superintendent of the St. Anthony/New Brighton School District in Minnesota. Corneille and Gingerich discuss the impact of partnerships between the community and the school district on the children learning within the Pre-Kindergarten-12th grades. These partnerships are explored as they review how the school district is incorporating a more equitable, inclusive, and accessible education for all students within the district.

Key Words: education, partnership, equity, inclusivity, accessibility, superintendent, health promotion, mental health

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Stephanie Gingerich: Renee, you are the Superintendent of the St. Anthony/New Brighton School District in Minnesota, a suburban school district. Can you describe the district? And what in your life led you to this important work?

Renee Sbrocco Corneille: The community of St. Anthony is interesting. There are not many places this close to a large city (Minneapolis) with such a small-town feel. Many homes have been passed down from generation to generation, and many residents stay

in their homes for their entire lives. This demographic made it essential in the 1990s to utilize open enrollment, inviting students from other districts, to keep our schools afloat - open enrollment saved the district. At one point, more than half of our students were from other districts; now it is about 20 to 30 percent open-enrolled students. Our resident student population is more diverse now than it has ever been. When I arrived in the district in 2010 as the middle school principal, the middle school was 90 percent white. It is now 60 percent white.

Many of us have a story about why we went into education. Most teachers have wanted to be a teacher since they were children, and would teach their stuffed animals. I was different. I hated school. I found it extremely boring - not because I was gifted, but because I wanted to move around physically. I also found that what I was learning was inauthentic - it was all school-dependent learning (last time I checked, I have never been given a spelling test). So my lack of engagement in school often got me into trouble. My mom is still on a first-name basis with my middle school assistant principal. I was the kid who was always trying to distract the teacher, make a joke, or find humor in places that were not appropriate.

With this type of behavior, I often found myself in the assistant principal's office. Dr. Soltis decided to take her time with me and make it positive. She actually told me I should be a teacher; I remember looking at her fondly and saying, "Look, I'm trying to get out of this place."

In high school my behavior changed a little, but I still spent too much time in the hallway, either directed by the teacher or with a hall pass just so I could walk around. Then one day Dr. Soltis called to ask me to spend a day shadowing her for "Bring your Daughter to Work" day. As a mother of only boys, she wanted me to shadow her, because she still wanted me to be a teacher. My mother said, "She must have you mixed up with someone else." I did shadow Dr. Soltis; she was committed to my being a teacher, and

I have her to thank. I didn't take this mentorship lightly. I spoke at Dr. Soltis' retirement party, and she was the first person (after my mother) whom I called after I was offered the superintendency. Dr. Soltis was the reason I became an educator, but only because I won the lottery - I won because Dr. Soltis was great. She was an outlier - we can't ensure that all students can win the lottery. So I'm in this work to make sure our education system is not about winning the lottery; rather, the system itself ensures each student gets what they need. This sense of justice is why I'm in education.

Gingerich: What are the unique contributions you bring to the superintendent role?

Corneille: I see my job as superintendent as the Lead Learner. If I'm not learning, then our system is not learning. I see the school district as a learning organization for all - not just our students, but our staff and our community as well. Then, I really like kids. Being in a smaller school system with only 1800 students, I can find ways to be connected with students. This means a lot to me. It is important for superintendents to like kids, but for me, this is an authentic care and enjoyment.

I also don't really fit the model of a superintendent. Women make up 77 percent of teachers in Minnesota, but only 16 percent of superintendents are women. Also, I don't take myself that seriously. I like to say that I take my job seriously, but not myself. I think my desire for humor and laughter seems out of place when I'm around other superintendents.

Gingerich: What efforts are being taken to ensure that equity and accessibility to education exist across the community?

Corneille: It is everywhere. As the school, our entry point needs to be via teaching and learning. We want to ensure that our act of teaching is a response to all of our students. Our strategic direction says, "We have High Expectations and High Support for our students." The support comes in our instruction.

Gingerich: Tell us about how you promote inclusivity within the school district.

Corneille: Again, because we are the school, we must first look at ourselves, since the act of teaching is so personal. Teaching is a relationship between the students and their teacher, set within a system. But that relationship between teacher and student is golden. We know that, as educators, we are missing something. There is a major, predictable gap in learning between groups of students, differentiated by race. When a gap is predictable (in which we know some students will do better than others), it is a systems problem. So, we look at ourselves as individuals. What is my understanding of race in the US? Could I, without knowing it and not in a malicious way, have differing expectations for some students than others? These are the types of things we are trying to unpack as a staff. Coupled with increasing our skills as teachers, this is how we create equitable experiences to ensure an inclusive school system.

We are doing many other things too; as one example, we are moving toward a more equitable calendar representing holidays that are not just Christian (i.e. Eid, lunar New Year, etc.). But as a school, we must center ourselves in the classroom.

Gingerich: In 2016, Philando Castile, a 32 year-old African-American male, was pulled over while driving, and shot and killed by a police officer hired within St. Anthony, the same district as your schools. This led to international headlines in addition to political tension within the community. In the wake of this event, or others that may divide communities, how do you promote partnership and civility between the community and the schools?

Corneille: I know that I have to be consistent; I must, in these moments, lead from my purpose. I truly believe that, in our nation, public schools exist to educate the masses of people, because the masses are where we exhibit power in our democratic republic. As a former history teacher, this matters to me. So, how do I promote partnership? I'm

very clear about who I am, what I represent, and what role the school plays in our community.

Events like this provide a litmus test for reality. My job is to acknowledge this reality and do my job - of educating all students to high levels.

Gingerich: What do you believe is the role of the school district in health promotion? How can we as a community partner with the schools to promote healthy lifestyles and engage families in health education?

Corneille: Schools need to acknowledge more strongly the connection between mind and body. There is enough clear evidence that our students are hurting, both physically and emotionally. To ignore this is to go against our vision and direction of providing high support. I think the more direct partnerships between health providers and our schools, the better - for example, the community school movement.

Gingerich: What efforts are being taken to promote self-care and wellness among teachers and staff who care for students? What more can be done to support self-care for students and the community as a whole?

Corneille: This is definitely something our wellness committee has worked on. Last year our administrative team was able to budget for a Human Resource coordinator to provide onboarding support to staff. She is kicking off an initiative to promote our staff's overall wellness.

Our kids are clearly telling us that they are not well, physically or mentally. We at the school are looking at ways our current systems may lead to unhealthy living for our students (amounts of homework, stress with getting into college, etc.). We are examining how our system can be altered so that our kids can have a developmentally

responsive and healthy experience in schools, from pre-kindergarten through high school.

Gingerich: Mental health resources are limited nationwide. What is being done within your school district to ensure that students and staff have access to mental health resources? How is the stigma of mental illness being addressed with students?

Corneille: We are partnering with a mental health agency to provide three school-based mental health therapists for our students. They are not employed by the district (their work with students is paid for by insurance), but we pay for some of their time to work with us as educators, to help us navigate how our environment may or may not help students with mental health. For example, the therapists sit on our Problem-Solving Team, which meets weekly to review students' issues with academics, wellness, attendance, etc., and can help us design individualized interventions. Also, we want to increase the number of school counselors; they are an important part of our staff, and we need more of them. Our new Human Resources person is providing more specifics to staff about their benefits, via a newly-created benefits handbook, emails, etc.

We don't have systems in place yet to break down the stigma of mental illness, but we surely are talking about it in our middle- and high school advisory classes. Advisory classes are 20-30 minute periods every day, where students meet with a teacher. The goal of the advisory class is not academic, but rather for discussions regarding student well-being. Advisory classes at the high school even allow for conversations about college and/or career planning. Even our elementary school classes have mini-lessons on breathing techniques, etc.

Gingerich: What recommendations do you have for school districts around the nation or the world who are working towards equitable, inclusive, and accessible childhood education?

Corneille: We need to love the child first. If we can see every child as our own, I think that is the first step. We then need to ensure that our system is ready for any child. This is a very different lens for public schools, which have been created (historically) to sort children.

Gingerich: Is there anything else you would like to say to our readers?

Corneille: I think my optimism sometimes seems like naïveté - but I truly believe that as a school, we can create systems to ensure that our students are not only achieving at high academic levels, but are healthy and happy!

Renee Sbrocco Corneille, EdD, is superintendent of Independent School District 282. She has taught middle school and high school social studies, been a dean of students, and a middle school assistant principal and principal. The work in each of those positions was always about the kids- in what ways can we support all students to both learn and contribute in ways that will change the trajectory of their lives. As a long-time student of the University of Minnesota (from undergrad to EdD), she still holds her connection to the institution closely. She is an adjunct professor at the University of Minnesota and facilitator of the Minnesota Principals' Academy and of the Culturally Responsive Institute.

Stephanie D. Gingerich, DNP, RN-BC, CPN, holds a Doctor of Nursing Practice in Health Innovation and Leadership from the University of Minnesota and a Bachelor of Science in Nursing from the University of Iowa. Dr. Gingerich is a Professional Practice Nurse Lead involved in developing, leading, and implementing practice change across M Health Fairview, a large healthcare system within Minnesota. She is also a community faculty member at Metropolitan State University in St. Paul, Minnesota. She spends much of her time serving the nursing community, her own community, and communities overseas through leadership roles in multiple volunteer organizations. Her passion is to ensure that the voices of others are heard and the stories of powerful people making impactful change are told.

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