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Dear Friends,

As the nation’s schoolchildren and college students returned to classrooms this fall, educational leaders found themselves confronting a variety of unprecedented challenges and controversies wrought by the pandemic. Still contending with the serious public health threat, superintendents, school boards and college administrators are dealing with mask and vaccine mandates (or none), as well as vociferous opposition to each; student learning loss; an alarming rise in mental health needs; greater awareness of the systemic inequities that threaten the well-being of children and families; and bitter debates over critical race theory and how to teach the history of racism in America. What a way to start the school year!

To navigate these issues while keeping an eye firmly focused on student support and outcomes, educational leaders find themselves compelled to acquire a new set of skills. Resourcefulness, tact and diplomacy, and an ability to communicate to divided constituencies are just some of the attributes required. What is needed is a form of leadership that many educators lack training or experience in, through no fault of their own.

This issue of USC Rossier Magazine explores how we might address the gap in real-world preparation that educators may be experiencing. How do those in leadership positions break through the challenges they are confronting to make a difference for their students and communities? At USC Rossier, we believe the answers lie in our willingness to re-examine how we prepare these leaders, and we are looking at our own curriculum and approach to graduate training. As one of the nation’s premier producers of educational leaders, USC Rossier is committed to ensuring that these professionals receive the very best training for tackling the complex issues they will face. We will do this, in part, by ensuring that our faculty has the knowledge and experience—but also the intuition and the empathy—to instill the next generation of “Breakthrough Leaders” with these same vital qualities.

One leader and USC Rossier alumnus whom you’ll read about in this issue emphasizes the need for much more of one simple human quality. It’s a quality that is fleeting at the best of times, but one that he feels is in especially short supply in our world right now. You’ll also read how USC Rossier is moving to support him and all Breakthrough Leaders, from K-12 through higher education, through innovative policy proposals and groundbreaking research. And you will get additional perspective from alumni leaders working in fields outside education.

As the return to school proceeds and we watch the news, warily, hoping that our long period of disruption soon ends, USC Rossier is committed to equipping today’s leaders as fully and effectively as we can to meet the historic new demands of their profession.

Fight On!

Pedro A. Noguera, PhD
Distinguished Professor of Education
Emery Stoops and Joyce King Stoops Dean
USC Rossier School of Education
EDITOR’S NOTE

Breakthrough Leadership

What does it mean to be a good leader? Styles of leadership and what makes one an effective leader change with the culture and context of the moment. In antiquity, empires were judged by their size and their ability to expand their borders, and the emperors who ruled them were often worshipped as gods and lauded for their abilities to conquer their neighbors. These days, the idea of leaders being at the center of all things is changing, as we are beginning to see leaders not as the person with all the answers, but the one who is asking the right questions.

It’s easy to be an armchair expert in leadership, but the doing of leadership is no easy task, particularly when one considers the moment we find ourselves in. In this issue of USC Rossier Magazine, we explore what effective leadership looks like in these times. What are the questions leaders should be asking as we seek to rebuild and revitalize our educational systems so that we are adequately responding to the truths that were elucidated by the pandemic? What skills do leaders need to successfully serve their communities? These are the questions we grapple with in our lead feature story, “What Does Leadership Look Like After the Pandemic?” (p. 12). You’ll also read about two alums who navigated the pandemic and evolved their roles as education tech leaders (p. 24). Professor Tracy Poom Tambascia EdD ’17, newly elected president of the USC Academic Senate, shares her approach to leadership in this issue’s “In Conversation” interview (p. 30), and Air Force Maj. Kristine Poblete EdD ’17 reflects on the mentorship from the strong women who have helped her discover her strengths (p. 40).

Just as our society and the institutions that hold us together evolve, so too do the techniques, skills and strategies needed from today’s leaders.
Embracing Change While Honoring Tradition
This Qatar-based Global EdD student is exploring how

By Diane Krieger

MAHA AL ROMAIHI HAS POLITICAL AMBITIONS, and she isn't coy about them. “I aspire to be Qatar’s minister of edu- cation,” says the 43-year-old international student, smiling confidently. Now in her third term in USC Rossier’s Global Executive Doctor of Education program, Al Romaihi sees the doctorate as an essential step.

As founding director of the Tarin Bin Ziad School (TBZ), she’s already a trailblazer. TBZ is a bilingual school run by the nonprofit Qatar Foundation with a mission to fuse a pro- gressive International Baccalaureate (IB) curriculum with a culture deeply rooted in Qatari heritage.

Women like Al Romaihi—backed by Sheikha Moza bint Nasser, wife of the Father Emir and co-founder and chair of the Qatar Foundation—are leaders in Qatar education. The Qatar Foundation, a Doha-based nonprofit, operates 13 independent K-12 schools and runs dozens of other proj- ects based in its centralized Education City, where eight world-class universities operate degree-granting satellite programs on a shared urban campus.

Qatar faces unusual educational challenges and oppor- tunities. “We’re a population of 2.6 million people—almost all live in [Doha]—but only 330,000 are Qatari citizens,” explains Al Romaihi. Eighty-eight percent of students are expats and businesspeople from neighboring Middle East- ern and African countries, as well as from East Asia, Europe and North America.

Qatars appreciate Doha’s multicultural vibe, but they’re proud and protective of their language, heritage and Islamic traditions. “Huge changes are happening,” Al Romaihi says. “At the same time, we are very keen to keep to our roots.”

In 2019, when Al Romaihi took the helm at TBZ, she was tasked with reimagining how it could adhere to the progres- sive IB framework while embracing Qatar’s distinctiveness. The key, she believes, lies in 50-50 bilingual education—half-English, half-Arabic. “The question is: How can we introduce a dual-language program that gives Arabic the status we want it to keep, while also learning English, which is the world language of business and economics and gets you so many opportunities?” she says. For her EdD thesis, Al Romaihi will look at models around the world and determine what best fits Qatar’s circumstances.

Al Romaihi loved the English language from a young age in Qatar and says her “English teacher was my idol.” Her parents spoke little English. Dad worked as a government clerk; Mom was an administrative assistant. Neither had an education beyond middle school. She grew up steeped in 1980s and ’90s American pop culture. “I know all of Madonna’s and Michael Jackson’s songs,” she says. Watching Amer- ican TV shows like Beverly Hills, 90210 and The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air greatly improved her vocabulary.

After earning her bachelor’s in education from Qatar Uni- versity, she became an English teacher. She got promoted to curriculum coordinator, then vice principal and principal. Along the way, she earned a master’s in educational leadership, also from Qatar University. Eleven years ago, she moved from Doha’s public school system to the Qatar Foundation’s network of independent schools. She also raised two sons. Both are now students at Edu- cation City: Abdullah, 19, studies media and communication at Northwestern University in Doha, and Abdul Aziz, 16, begins his freshman year in Texas A&M University’s mechanical engineering satellite program. For Al Romaihi, the decision to enroll in the Global EdD program was driven by curiosity about what works outside Qatar. The ability to study part time and continue as TBZ’s director was “the cherry on top.” Her husband, Soud, a retired police officer, is “very supportive,” she adds.

Al Romaihi can’t look to Los Angeles and Singapore were canceled in 2020, her cohort finally met in person in July, when they convened for their first eight-day residential session at USC. Al Romaihi can’t wait to explore more of the global education landscape with her classmates. Future intensives will take them to Helsinki, Johannesburg and São Paulo, Brazil, where they’ll interact with local education leaders and visit innovative lab schools.

“This is the beauty of the program and why, I think, most of us signed up,” she says. “Because we all love traveling, love to be in different cultures and want to get to know the educational scene of each country.” — R

Dean Noguera interviews U.S. Education Secretary Miguel Cardona as a part of EDTECH WEEK

By Brian Sokia

IN AN EVENT LIVE STREAMED IN APRIL, USC Rossier Dean Pedro A. Noguera interviewed U.S. Education Secretary Miguel Cardona. The conversation spanned a variety of topics related to how schools can leverage funds from the American Rescue Plan to support stu- dents and families impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic and highlighted some of Cardona’s priorities as the nation’s top educational leader.

The interview was a lead event for EDTECH WEEK, an annual educational technology conference. This year the conference featured Shark Tank-style pitch sessions, as well as panels with leaders from technology, business and education. Several USC Rossier faculty members and one student took part in the week’s discussions, including Alan Arkatov, founding director of USC Rossier’s Center for Engagement-Driven Global Education; Doug Lynch, senior fellow; Anthony Maddox, professor of clinical education; Morgan Polikoff, associate professor of education; Shaun R. Harper, Provost Professor of Business and Education; Erika Patall, associate professor of education and psychology; Mary helen Immordino-Yang, professor of education, psychology and neuroscience; and Ammar Dalal, doctoral candidate. — R

KEY FINDINGS FROM DEAN NOGUERA’S INTERVIEW WITH SECRETARY CARDONA

1. Recovery Requires Bold Action

The pandemic has exacerbated inequities in education. Leaders should think big when it comes to addressing the needs of marginal- ized students, rather than taking incremental steps. “If you’re not leading with the unapolo- getic belief that all children can succeed at high levels, you’re in the wrong profession,” Cardona noted.

2. Equity Should Be Integral to School Policy

Too often, schools address issues of equity through small gestures. “Equity’s not a thing you do, it’s a mindset,” said Cardona. It needs to be embraced at the leadership level and incorporated into policies and practices.

3. Internet Access for Students Is Essential

Low-income households and students of color who lack reliable internet have strug- gled throughout the pandemic. To address the problem, The American Rescue Plan provides funding to improve online access. Access will only become more vital going forward.

4. Civic Education Has Renewed Importance

Schools might consider enhancing or expand- ing their civics curriculum. Education can help resolve the country’s deepening divisions, and civics may provide tools to help students navigate confusing or false information about politics and the role of government.

5. Community Colleges Are Key to Rebuilding the Economy

“Community colleges are going to be the backbone of economic growth in our coun- try,” Cardona said. To strengthen the pipe- line between secondary and postsecondary schools, he suggested that the two systems need to improve their coordination, and give younger students the opportunity to think of themselves as college students early on.

Sean C. Driscoll, alumni and current affairs managing editor. To view all of the EDTECH WEEK discus- sions, visit edtechweek.com.

Dean Noguera interviews U.S. Education Secretary Miguel Cardona as a part of EDTECH WEEK

By Brian Sokia
The Avengers student group aims ‘to create revolutionary change in education’

By Kinnamon Hashemzadeh

WHEN JEROME RUCKER, a student in USC Rossier’s Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership online program (EDL online), looks back on his entry into the program in 2019, one thing stands out. Patricia Brent Sanco EdD ’16, who spoke to his cohort that fall, Rucker placed in Cohort A. Sanco not only told the cohort to drink the Kool-Aid, she gave them an identity they could rally and organize around: the Avengers. Their mandate: “To create revolutionary change in education,” Rucker says. Similar to the Marvel Comics superheroes that inspired the name, Rucker says, each member has their own talents.

Rucker’s classmate Marie Martin, CEO of education media company Alexandria’s World, echoes his sentiment. Some Avengers work in mental health or special education; some run nonprofits. Others are administrators and curriculum specialists. The thing that brings the group together, Martin says, is that they all desire to incite change, and each brings their own “superpower” to the table. Martin most closely identifies with Tony Stark, and his superhero alter ego, Iron Man.

For David Smith, chief technology officer at Tustin Unified School District, the Avengers’ moniker is akin to a shiny breastplate each member wears under their shirts. Smith identifies with the Hulk: While Smith is angry with “what this world has become,” he is intent on using that anger to propel change. He stresses that the members of the Avengers student group would have “done amazing things with or without USC” but that USC brought them together. And not only will the USC network help them create change together, they, in turn, will help make USC a better place.

Before enrolling at USC Rossier, Michelle Williams, a former classroom teacher and assistant principal, created the Foundation for Black Excellence, a nonprofit that seeks to empower Black families and communities. Rucker affectionately likens the reserved Williams—who works tirelessly behind the scenes to make things happen—to Doctor Strange. However, Williams identifies more closely with the Black Widow. A product of the Los Angeles Unified School District, Williams—like the Black Widow—wants to change the system in which she was raised, and she chooses to use her super powers strategically.

The Avengers’ efforts have not stopped in the classroom. Together, members have launched the “Brothers from the #B4th” podcast (hosted by Smith), the “Follow the Leader” online journal and the Educational Truth conferences. The conferences, which focus on issues concerning education and social justice, are fast paced Rucker says, which is a better fit for busy educators. In 2020, the Avengers and USC Rossier faculty members shared their expertise at the conference, but in 2021, the group passed the mic to teenagers, who addressed topics including their struggles through the COVID-19 pandemic. The sessions were around 20 minutes each and are available on YouTube.

Rucker, or Captain America (as Smith likes to think of him), was inspired to create educational change well before he set foot on campus. But when he arrived at USC Rossier and met his “dynamic professors” and the Avengers, he thought, “This is going to be life-changing.”


The Education (Re)Open aims to surface solutions to education problems

AFTER A YEAR OF MASSIVE CHALLENGES, USC Rossier’s Center for Engagement-Driven Global Education (Center EDGE) launched the Education (Re)Open to crowdsourcing solutions to education problems from students, parents, teachers, and school leaders.

Intent to gather the best practices, collective wisdom and ingenuity born from the challenges of teaching and learning during the pandemic, Center EDGE sent out a call for ideas in the spring of 2021. Hundreds of submissions poured in from across the country and world. Applicants competed for a $1,000 award and the chance to have their idea showcased on the Education Solutions Exchange (ESE), a hub created by design firm IDEO to house the best ideas. Free to access, the ESE debuted in July with 56 projects.

“When faced with a challenge as momentous as our entire education system and society being ravaged by a pandemic, we must innovate.”
— Alan Arkatov, director of Center EDGE

“Students don’t learn about how color became a way to distinguish who was enslaved and who was free. They learn that the slaves were freed. But they have no idea that the period of Reconstruction—what came after Juneteenth—was the deadliest for Black people.”
— AKILAH LYONS-MOORE, assistant professor of education, in The Orange County Register

“I’m less interested in standardized tests that are used to rank kids, and much more interested in assessments to diagnose learning needs.”
— PEDRO A. NOGUERA, dean of USC Rossier, in The New York Times

Insights from the U.S. Department of Education’s Equity Summit Series

BY BRIAN SOKIS

SINCE MARCH 2020, thought leaders and policy-makers have discussed how to use the COVID-19 pandemic as an opportunity to reform schools. The first event of the Equity Summit Series, hosted by the U.S. Department of Education in June, attempted to more clearly define actions being taken to address long-standing inequities. The event, which featured opening remarks by First Lady Jill Biden and U.S. Education Secretary Miguel Cardona, featured a panel of educational professionals from across the country, including USC Rossier Dean Pedro A. Noguera, superintendents, and an award-winning teacher and school counselor, Moderator U.S. Deputy Secretary of Education Cindy Marten sought insight from the panelists about how to harness the momentum of this moment.

To view this event, please visityoutu.be/RaZAErhvM.

Key Findings

Increase Communication With Parents
Schools should engage families to better serve students, especially as the country faces a student mental health crisis exacerbated by the pandemic. Whether it’s an informal coffee between parents and school leaders, a survey or a dedicated focus group, parents can provide insight into students’ needs that educators may not otherwise know about.

Embrace Creative Solutions
Schools should “think holistically about the needs of children,” commented USC Rossier Dean Pedro A. Noguera. Focusing on academics and standard school operations may not be enough to totally support students if they are experiencing other personal challenges.

Creative solutions panelists employed in their own districts included:

- Mental health clinics for families on site.
- Free transportation to school for students in need.
- Laundry services on site to increase attendance at a low-income school located in a “laundromat desert.”

Students are impacted by many school policies but are often left out of policy decisions. Instead, schools should include them in conversations around topics such as reopening and curricula, suggested Alejandro Diasgranados, an elementary school teacher in Washington, D.C.

Be Accountable for Equity Practices
To fully commit to educational equity, schools must hold themselves accountable for their efforts. This means drafting a formal policy that includes account-ability measures, and establishing a framework to recognize problems, define solutions and measure effects over time.

“Research has shown, for Latinx students in particular, the longer they take gap years, the less likely it is that they are going to return back to campus. So that is something to be very cognizant of, that institutions should be aware of how to support students if they do choose to take a gap year—whether it is by force or voluntarily.”
— EDGAR LOPEZ, USC Rossier doctoral student, in CNBC

“Community colleges are the engine of opportunity. If they are not aggressive at reaching out to these students and creating opportunities for them to be on campus, they are going to lose these students.”
— TATIANA MELGUizo, professor of education, in the Los Angeles Times

“I don’t think that all students should be taught in the same way. That doesn’t make sense, especially if you have a child in that class and you know that child thinks differently or is more advanced than other students.”
— ANGELA HASAN, professor of clinical education, in The Washington Post

“Students don’t learn about how color became used to rank kids, and much more interested in assessments to diagnose learning needs.”
— PEDRO A. NOGUERA, dean of USC Rossier, in The New York Times
The PULLIAS CENTER FOR HIGHER EDUCATION was awarded a $30,000 grant from the Arthur Vining Foundation for a qualitative study of campus leadership teams to explore how they achieve equity goals through equity leadership practices.

The CENTER FOR ENROLLMENT RESEARCH, POLICY AND PRACTICE (CERP) was awarded a $30,000 one-year grant from the Partnership for Los Angeles Schools for its USC College Advising Corps program.

PATRICIA BURCH, professor of education, ADRIANNA KEZAR, assistant professor of education, and ELIZABETH KIM, assistant professor of social work, were awarded a USC Zumberge Grant to continue their work with Los Angeles County Office of Education schools.

YASEMIN COPUR-GENCTURK, assistant professor of education, was selected as one of the National Science Foundation fellows to participate in the three-year Summer Institute in Advanced Methods for STEM education research.

ZOE CORWIN, associate research professor, ADRIANNA KEZAR, Dean’s Professor of Leadership, JOSEPH KITCHEN, assistant research professor at the Pullias Center for Higher Education, and HOPE MCCOY, assistant professor of education, received the 2021 AERA Division G Small Grant for their dissertation on educational well-being.

UCS Rossiess Professor PEDRO A. NOGUERA received the 2021 Social Science Research Council’s Religion, Spirituality, and Democratic Renewal Fellowship, funded by the Fetzer Institute. She also was awarded the 2021 AERA Division G Small Grant for her dissertation on educational well-being.

ADRIANNA KEZAR, Dean’s Professor of Leadership and director of the Pullias Center for Higher Education, was appointed editor of Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning, and, with CYNTHIA LILLARD PhD ’20, post-doctoral associate at the Pullias Center, was awarded a grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to develop tools for leaders engaged in institutional transformation.

ADAM KHO, assistant professor of education, USC Rossier Dean PEDRO A. NOGUERA and ERIKA PATALL, associate professor of education and psychology, were awarded the Zumberge Diversity and Inclusion Award ($30,000) for their research study titled “Hattie’s Influences on Student Achievement under an Institutionally Racist System: What Works for Black and Brown Students?”

NEHA MIGLANI, graduate school fellow in the PhD in Urban Education Policy Program, received the 2021 Social Science Research Council’s Religion, Spirituality, and Democratic Renewal Fellowship, funded by the Fetzer Institute. She also was awarded the 2021 AERA Division G Small Grant for her dissertation on educational well-being.

JOSEPH KITCHEN, professor of education, received a $320,000 grant from the Arthur Vining Foundation for a combined fourth- and fifth-grade class to work together on a project devoted to the Lunar New Year.

Creating the Conditions for Student Leadership

By Julia Slayton, Professor of Clinical Education

THERE IS A LOT OF TALK IN K-12 education about the importance of “student-centered” classrooms and many definitions of what it means to create these types of classrooms. They can be places where students’ language, culture and lives outside of school are used by the teacher to form a curriculum or as bridges to academic content. They can be places where students carry the cognitive load, co-constructing knowledge through discussions that are grounded in the course content and connected to the real world.

A student-centered classroom can also be a place where students develop and demonstrate leadership. To create such a classroom, teachers must act intentionally and think carefully about what it means to them to have students lead. Leading is not the same as handing tasks such as distributing and collecting materials. Leading is taking responsibility in important ways within the context of the established behavioral and academic learning conditions of the classroom. It means having authority in the classroom to make decisions and the responsibility to do so.

Students in a combined fourth- and fifth-grade class

TIPS FOR EDUCATORS

ESTABLISHING EXPECTATIONS
First, for students to lead, clear behavioral expectations need to be in place. These should be established the first day of class. Clear expectations let students know what they can and should do to ensure that they are able to make the most of their classroom time. Behavioral expectations include being respectful of fellow students and the teacher as well as creating a safe classroom by having high expectations for themselves and one another.

Teachers must also model these expectations, reinforce them and ask students to be responsible for them by demonstrating them and holding their peers accountable to them. Power in the classroom cannot only reside in the teacher. It must also be distributed to the students if the teacher expects the students to lead. Thus, when students behave in ways that are contrary to these behavioral expectations—teasing, bullying or interrupting—the teacher should expect students to lead by helping their peers recognize that their behavior violates the expectations of the classroom and asking their peers to abide by these established classroom expectations.

CONSTRUCTING KNOWLEDGE, TOGETHER
Second, with respect to academics, teachers should communicate their expectations that students will participate in the co-construction of knowledge. They will do this by being actively, intellectually engaged in the content—whether it be math, science or English—and with their peers. To foster student leadership during instruction, the teacher will need to help students develop the skills to engage each other in this co-construction of knowledge by modeling what looks like. Teachers must also provide appropriate scaffolds, by assigning roles to students—like timekeeper, moderator or note-taker—and giving them opportunities to practice giving and receiving feedback from the teacher and each other.

As with behavioral expectations, the teacher will need to commit to sharing power with students and enlist them in holding themselves and one another to these academic expectations. For example, the teacher can model ways to invite new voices into an ongoing conversation and then ask students to do the same. This can be demonstrated by asking students such questions as, “I was wondering what your thoughts are about... Would you share them with us?” This sentence stem can then be used by students to practice the act of welcoming their peers into a conversation about the content.

Student leadership can be an essential tool in developing a student-centered classroom. Yet, for students to lead in the classroom, teachers must have defined for themselves what student leadership looks and looks like. And then teachers must be proactive in creating the conditions where student leadership is possible.
What Does Leadership Look Like After the Pandemic?

Kindness, creativity and relationship building are among the essential skills education leaders need to break through the challenges of today.

Story: Elaine Woo
Illustration: Chris Gash
In March 2020, shortly after USC announced it was closing its campuses in response to the pandemic, Emily T. Sandoval EdD ’18, associate vice provost of student affairs and student engagement, found herself with only a few days to come up with a plan that would leave no students unhoused. Sixteen hundred students had asked for permission to remain in USC housing, including many who said they were homeless, were left stranded by COVID-19 travel restrictions or had other reasons they could not live at home. Developing a process to decide who could stay was just one of many urgent tasks Sandoval faced, including ensuring that her staff was safe and able to work virtually.

“There was nothing that could have prepared us for this,” she reflected recently. Sandoval was not alone in discovering that 2020’s challenges tested education leaders like never before. Some found that to be effective leaders, they had to break away from traditional approaches, listen more to their gut and pay closer attention to relationship building and other soft skills, all while upholding their organization’s core values. Leading with equity in mind also became more urgent as the pandemic and the anti-racism movement heightened awareness of long-standing social, economic and educational disparities.

“Our education leaders are on the front lines of addressing many complex challenges that they typically did not learn how to address from their courses in grad school,” said Pedro A. Noguera, the Emery Stoops and Joyce King Stoops Dean of the USC Rossier School of Education. To help break through those challenges, Noguera asserted, today’s leaders “must be resourceful and creative, they must be capable of articulating a clear and compelling vision to lead and inspire their staff, and they must possess a high level of emotional and social intelligence to maintain positive relationships with the school board and community.”

LESSONS FROM THE FIELD

Superintendent Cuauhtémoc Avila EdD ’11, who heads the 25,000-student Rialto Unified School District in San Bernardino County, California, said if he were to design a course on what education leaders needed to know to survive the past year and a half, he would focus on fundamental human virtues.

“There was no greater need for kindness than through this pandemic,” Avila said. As one example, Avila pointed to the free food-distribution program Rialto ran during its lockdown, which lasted from March 2020 until its reopening in August 2021. District personnel went as far as to make home deliveries to families who were unable to travel to the meal-distribution sites. “These were situations we didn’t have any experience in,” Avila recalled. “It wasn’t in the manual that we were now in the business of home delivery of meals. “You can’t manage a pandemic; you can’t control the conditions that have been placed in front of you. But I believe that with the agency of human decency, you can overcome these challenging circumstances.”

For Avila, that often meant personally addressing the needs of families. He recalled a parent who sought his help: “She called for direction, for clarification, when her kids did not want to log on to class and she just did not know what to do. When she came down with COVID and had to isolate from her kids and could not pick up their meals, I did what I needed to do to make sure her needs and the needs of her kids continued to be served.”

Avila has made kindness, honesty and other moral virtues the focus of efforts to change the culture of a district that had been beset by scandals before he became superintendent in 2015. Those efforts include “restorative circles” and “courageous” sessions to help staff members “let go of our trauma that keeps us from being happy with ourselves and kind towards others,” he said. He attributes improvements in graduation rates and staff morale at least partly to the shifting culture.

He also has flattened Rialto’s management hierarchy and removed traditional titles that perpetuate what he regards as an outmoded, corporate education model. Instead of deputy, associate or assistant superintendents, the top central-office administrators are called agents (as in agent of change) with titles such as lead strategic agent, lead academic agent and lead innovation agent. “We are simply encouraging everyone to be on an equal playing field with respect to ideas and how we can improve as an organization,” Avila explained. As an example, he pointed to the district’s award-winning environmental literacy program, inspired and led by a former member of the groundskeeping staff.

Avila believes most education schools reinforce the corporate model of education, which he said is resistant to change and suppresses good ideas. “We have to blow up the system and create something new,” he said. “Understanding human needs will go further than simply knowing how to plan and hold people accountable.”

Halfway around the world in Uganda, COVID-19 upended education as much as it did in the United States. Jane Frances Nakato EdD ’20, who founded and runs five private elementary schools in Kampala, went through two lockdowns and saw her enrollment of 350 pupils plummet by half after switching to online learning. The resulting financial hit led to a reduction in salaries, which caused some teachers to quit.

“One of my deep beliefs is that leadership is about relationships.”
— Ryan Cornner EdD ’10, vice chancellor at Los Angeles Community College District

FALL / WINTER 2021
Her toughest challenge was trying to reorientate rent with her landlords. When all but one agreed to new terms, she made the difficult decision to close one campus about six months into the pandemic.

Nakato says she wishes that she had been better at financial planning and that she had acted before the pandemic to open a fully online school, the focus of one of her projects in the Global Executive EdD program. But what helped her the most as a leader was discussing spiritual books with her book club and practicing mindfulness.

“I have learned to be calm for the sake of the people I lead,” she wrote in an email. “I deliberately refuse to be dragged into negative space. This has helped me encourage my workmates to keep positive, and in the process, I have kept my lead team, including her head teachers, education directors and other administrators. Enrollment has also improved, and the online attendance rate is nearly 30 percent.

For Ryan Cornner EdD ’10, vice chancellor for educational programs and institutional effectiveness in the Los Angeles Community College District, the key was fostering strong relationships within the 30,000-student district and with the diverse communities it serves.

“One of my deep beliefs is that leadership is about relationships,” Cornner said recently. “Part of that is people understanding that you are there to be where they’re at and make sure we’re working together.”

He demonstrated that commitment on the most challenging days of the pandemic, which came soon after the nation’s largest community college system went remote. Only 17 percent of its classes were online before the shutdown, so quick action was needed. The district postponed spring break and scheduled three days of intensive training for 5,000 faculty members.

Instructors could access in-person training and other resources they would need to teach remotely at any of the district’s nine campuses. “You saw everyone there working as hard as they could for the benefit of students,” Cornner recalled. “There was nobody phoning it in.”

Within 10 days the district converted 10,000 courses from brick-and-mortar to online delivery.

Cornner’s keystone, building relationships, extends to the community beyond the college campuses. Through partnerships and private donors, the district distributed 20,000 free laptops and 6,000 $50 Kroger gift cards to students in need.

“In addition to how to be a leader in academia, future training needs to teach how to be a leader in the community and an understanding that the two are inseparable,” Cornner said. “The only way we will truly achieve our equity goals, our student success goals, is by collaborating with other entities in the community to make sure students’ needs are addressed.”

If there was one lesson he could impart to future education leaders, he said, it would be to set a vision that is “broader than the institution itself and focus on the impact the institution has when people leave its doors. That is going to be more and more important in leadership training.”

The Future of Leadership Training at USC Rossier

USC Rossier Associate Professor of Education Tatiana Melguzio agrees that education leaders, particularly in community colleges, need a more expansive view of their responsibilities.

“The reality is these community colleges have become places where you have to make sure there are no issues with food insecurity, access for child care, access to mental health,” she noted. “That is tricky, but the job description has changed and leaders have to adapt.”

To help leaders address challenges and improve learning, this fall USC Rossier will launch Breakthrough Leaders (p. 18), a continuing education program for alumni and other professionals working in prekindergarten through higher education. It will feature weeklong summer institutes, online courses, weekend immersion programs and short-term consultancies on topics including strategic planning, data-based decision-making, labor-management partnerships, professional development and institutional effectiveness.

“Developing equity-minded leaders has been central to a number of our initiatives. But it has become even more critical given the challenges we have faced in the last few years,” she said.

“They have come to understand that education leaders need to think not just about their own institution but the institution has when people leave its doors. That is going to be more and more important in leadership training.”

“Can’t control the conditions that have been placed in front of you. But I believe that with the agency of human decency, you can overcome these challenging circumstances.”

—Cuahtémoc Avila EdD ’17, superintendent of Rialto Unified School District

Leading the Alamo

As executive director of the Alamo Trust in San Antonio, Texas, USC Rossier doctoral candidate Kate Rogers has helped to implement the nonprofit’s $450 million plan to redevelop the Alamo, the site of a 1836 battle that was pivotal in Texas’ fight for independence from Mexican rule. Questions about what the rebels were fighting for have stoked polarizing debate, pitting traditionalists who hold as sacred the heroic narrative taught to generations of Texans against scholars who argue for a more complete view that includes the site’s indigenous history and the role of slavery in the Texas Revolution.

The renovation plan includes constructing a world-class visitor center and museum. Rogers’ work dovetails with her doctoral research, which delves into the role of museums and historic sites as educational institutions.

“The American social studies classroom was designed to be a place for productive discourse … where we could debate the challenges faced by our democracy, but we’ve lost that,” Rogers said. “Wouldn’t it be wonderful if museums could play a role in bringing that back to life?”

USC Rossier has helped her make valuable connections. Professor Mark Power Robison introduced her to a colleague known for his work on reconciling conflicting historical narratives at some of the world’s most controversial sites, including the Robert E. Lee statue in Charlottesville, Virginia. Rogers plans to visit the Apartheid Museum in Johannesburg when her cohort travels there next year.

“Dr. Robison’s class set a strong foundation for realizing that we all have different worldviews … and they can change over time,” Rogers said. “At the Alamo … it means working very hard to build bridges, to bring people together, to find common ground, to work on compromise.”
Recognizing that extraordinary crises demand extraordinarily nimble leaders, USC Rossier is marshaling the knowledge and skills of urban-education experts to help leaders “break through” today’s steep challenges to work more effectively with their communities and improve student learning.

Called Breakthrough Leaders, the professional development program will be open to USC Rossier alumni and others working in prekindergarten to higher education, with a special focus on leadership of large urban school systems.

“We want Rossier to be the place that our alumni and other educational leaders turn to for training and support in addressing the problems, perils and opportunities facing our schools,” said USC Rossier Dean Pedro A. Noguera.

Topics to be addressed include how to: recognize and value diversity and inclusion, identify future trends and develop strategic plans, use research to guide decisions on allocating resources, and build productive relationships with teacher and employee organizations.

The program also will address collaborations with government and private agencies, the use and protection of data to improve education outcomes, and ways to improve student learning.

Harper has given presentations on the framework to student leaders at the University of Massachusetts at Boston and San Jose State University but would like to introduce it to other types of leaders. “I’m interested in calling out White supremacy,” said Harper, who was compelled to create the liberation model in part because of his work on leadership-development curricula for college students. “We’re very good talking about equity, but we still get cold feet talking about whiteness.”

Kezar was also the lead researcher on a study for the American Council on Education on shared equity leadership, a model for scaling up equity work by making it a collective effort instead of the responsibility of a lone office or unit. The study was based on interviews with 63 campus leaders conducted amid last year’s upheavals over the pandemic and racism.

The leaders, who included college presidents, provosts, faculty, staff and chief diversity officers, approached equity as a team effort so that advancing equity “becomes widespread and institutional rather than limited and localized to one individual,” the report says. Central to the team’s effectiveness was that its members had undergone a personal journey, such as an experience or close observation of discrimination, that cemented their commitment to equity.

The leaders also shared certain practices—foremost, putting students’ needs at the centre of decision-making—as well as core values such as courage, transparency, being comfortable with being uncomfortable, and love for those they work with and for.

“Love is not something we talk about in our classroom spaces very often,” Kezar noted recently. “We tend to talk about the analytic skills that are required and not so much about some of these other really important skill sets that fall outside of what’s comfortable in academic settings, and yet they are so important for leading around equity. I would like to see us push on these harder, more delicate spaces.”

For USC’s Sandoval, the responsibility of leaders to show care was a major lesson of last year.

“She got through the crisis by staying calm and being an agile decision-maker but also by realizing that I wasn’t just a supervisor managing people who oversee departments but having conversations like, ‘What’s going on with you? How is home life going? How are you balancing being a teacher to your children at home while trying to lead a department?’

“I just had to think bigger because we all had a lot more going on in our lives.”
“By 8 a.m., I feel a pretty strong sense of accomplishment.”

Shawn Smith EdD ’05, Chief Innovation Officer at McGraw Hill Education

Shawn Smith EdD ’05 is an author, a former classroom teacher and education administrator, and an expert on digital education. Currently, he is the chief innovation officer at McGraw Hill Education. He lives in East Hampton, New York, with his partner.

Typical Day in 2021

5:45 A.M.: I wake up between 5:45 and 6 a.m. I’ve never used an alarm clock—that seems like an unnatural way to start the day. Admittedly, I am a morning person.

6:00 A.M.: By 6 a.m., coffee has been brewed, the local news plays quietly in the background and I snuggle onto my couch with my laptop. Typically, this hour is used to check email, play quietly in the background and I snuggle onto my couch with my laptop. Typically, this hour is used to check email, typically have a salad for lunch, after weight training, I’ll also have a smoothie.

1:15 P.M.: By 135 p.m., my afternoons pick back up with meetings. My work at McGraw is about making the digital workflow of teachers easier. I’m working on a project that connects fragmented data across our programs and combines it with nonacademic data that we know affects learning. Taken together, this learner profile creates a more holistic picture of a student: their academic data, their background, daily social-emotional learning information and executive functioning (cognition) strengths.

4:00 P.M.: By 6 p.m. it’s time to finish dinner prep. During the summer, I’ll wind down with a quick swim in the pool. Then dinner will be cooked on the grill or in our rustic wood-burning oven—one of my favorite hobbies. Dinner is served around 7 and capped off with a Russian River pinot noir or a pinot grigio.

9:00 P.M.: It’s early to bed. 5:45 a.m. will come quick, and the process will begin again. —

Each family trusts us with their youngest members every day. It’s the highest honor.

Deborah Elder EdD ’20, Chief Academic Officer at Los Lunas Schools

After beginning her education career as an elementary school teacher, Deborah Elder EdD ’20 transitioned to administrative roles where she provided leadership and teacher development in a range of positions, including as an elementary school principal and executive director in Albuquerque Public Schools’ Office of Innovation and School Choice. In March, she was named chief academic officer at Los Lunas Schools, where she works to improve student outcomes for the 8,000-plus students in the school district located south of the state capital. Additionally, she is an adjunct professor for USC Rossier’s Master of Arts in Teaching program. She lives in Albuquerque with her husband, Scott Elder, superintendent of Los Lunas Schools.

August 4, 2021

5:40 A.M.: Alarm clock goes off. Much to the annoyance of my husband, I hit snooze twice. I scan the news apps on the phone.

6:30 A.M.: Power breakfast: two eggs, chopped spinach, New Mexico green chile and a bit of cheese. Washed down with two cups of coffee. While I eat, I skim the local newspaper.

7:00 A.M.: Hit the road. My 40-minute commute takes me through Albuquerque, across the Rio Grande, through Isleta Pueblo land and to the village of Los Lunas. I get the full range of New Mexican scenery, from mountains to mesa. My new job is 100 percent in person. I do not miss my home office from the COVID-19 lockdown one bit.

8:00–9:00 P.M.: First school visits of the new year with the superintendent and my colleagues on cabinet. This is my sixth year experiencing the first day of school, and there’s nothing like it. There’s a shared sense of promise and hope.

We visit six schools, and I’m overjoyed with gratitude. Talking with students gives me the best insight. I speak with Catherine, a fourth grader new to the district and not enjoying her first day. Abel, a freshman struggling to find his classroom and relieved to find an assistant principal to help him; Evan, a third grader looking forward to having his socially distant lunch on the field instead of in the cafeteria.

Each family trusts us with their youngest members. It’s the highest honor, and I feel the responsibility to be worthy of that trust every single day, in every classroom, on every campus.

2–5 P.M.: Back to the office to catch up with my team of directors. Then I sit on the other work: preparing professional development for principals, coaches and teachers; matching principals with performance coaches; reading literature on critical race theory; collaborating with colleagues to ensure services for our new Digital Academy, and working on strategy to engage the community for input on the use of Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Funds.

5:00 P.M.: Commute. I enjoy having the time to reflect on the day. My best planning happens in the car.

5:45 P.M.: Workout! I prefer to work out in the morning, but I don’t love getting up super early. A stop at the gym on the way home works for me.

7:00 P.M.: Home. Usually, my husband is already there. Our sons moved to a rental house close to the University of New Mexico a year ago so they could be near campus while they attended class from their rooms. I miss them terribly. My husband and I have learned to enjoy a byproduct of empty-nesting: no meal planning. We figure out what we want and either make a simple dinner or support our local restaurants.

I spend another hour or so on my laptop. My favorite place to work at home is my back porch so I can enjoy the flowers my grandmother planted when she moved to this house in the 1970s. I’ve never been much of a TV watcher, but since the boys are out of the house, my husband and I watch a few episodes of Chef’s Club. We might be the last people in the country (or at least our social circle) to see it.

10 P.M.: I try to follow the steps that magazines recommend—I take a warm shower and give myself time to unwind. I read before I fall asleep but never make it more than a few pages.
Summer Salomonsen EdD ’19, VP of Content Product at Cornerstone OnDemand

Summer Salomonsen EdD ’19 started her career in education as a classroom teacher. After years in corporate learning and development, consulting, and strategic development and education technology, she now works as the vice president of content product at Cornerstone OnDemand, a software provider and learning technology company that helps organizations recruit, train and manage their staff. In her role, she leads the strategy, development, and execution of all content offerings, built to improve the working lives of Cornerstone’s 75 million global users. She lives in Colorado with her husband and two daughters.

**JULY 30, 2021**

**7 A.M.** Yes, I sleep a lot. Usually nine hours a night. Sleep restores your body and your balance. Today, I awoke to the sounds of my girls (4 and 8) pretending to be monkeys. Their laughter pulls me out of bed as I do a quick pass of core work apps on my phone: Slack, Workplace, Outlook, LinkedIn. So far, so expected.

8 A.M. – 12:45 A.M. Back to back to back. You get it. Webcams are on for my team—so important to see people and be human in this way. This time includes two project check-ins (one on track, the other not so much), two 1:1s with direct reports, one unscheduled meeting with leadership, one snappy-fast work session to outline the flow of an upcoming focus group, one tech check for an upcoming webinar, and one meeting with Talent. I take notes constantly, yet discretely, using OneNote. I color-code tabs for key projects and people and capture dialogue, expectations, next steps. This practice empowers me to track the meeting flow and be intelligent about those meetings afterward.

1:15–5:30 P.M. At my desk, surveying the scene. I manage multi-stakeholder projects, each with distinct purposes. Basic principle: Every meeting has both overt and covert goals. I should understand both by the time I hit join. Third shot of espresso it is.

5:35 P.M. Back to back to back. You get it. I hit join. Third shot of espresso it is.

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The Pandemic Changed Their Jobs Overnight. How Did Education Technology Leaders Manage?

USC Rossier alumni share how they led their districts out of crisis and into a brighter, more plugged-in future.

That’s the question Thomas Tan EdD ’09 asked when COVID-19 forced Hacienda La Puente Unified School District (HLPUSD) to switch to distance learning in March 2020. As HLPUSD’s director of network and computer services, Tan had the responsibility of ensuring that the nearly 18,000 students in his San Gabriel Valley school district had laptops, Wi-Fi hotspots and the know-how to attend classes remotely.

The shift in his job when classes went online “was almost night and day,” says Tan, who began his career in Ontario-Montclair School District’s Instructional Services Division in 1992. Before the pandemic, Tan spent his time working to acquire laptops for each youth in the district, helping school faculty use technology to improve teaching methods and supporting district initiatives such as New Pedagogies for Deep Learning, which draws on technology to implement academic goals. After the coronavirus crisis, he worked closely with HLPUSD’s business, human resources and instructional divisions to provide distance learning for students.

But first, he took a moment to recover from the initial shock of the lockdown. “You turn on the news … and it doesn’t look very good; it doesn’t look like there’s a way out,” Tan recalls. “Meanwhile, kids are all at home, so parents are wondering what’s going on.”

Tan and his 44-member team rallied quickly, surveying families shortly after school closed in mid-March 2020 to determine which households lacked laptops and hotspots. In addition to communicating with families via social media and a website that answered common questions about distance learning, Tan established a help desk they could call for direct technological support. Just before summer 2020, he streamlined the remote-learning experience for students by creating a single sign-on to access various instructional programs and classroom tools.

“A big challenge for people who are trying to manage technology for a district or a school site is that they’re now dealing with a lot of inequity, potentially, in terms of whether students even have high-speed internet access to be able to use these devices in their own spaces,” he says. “Overnight there was an instant shortage of computer laptops.”

Tan and his team recognized that a critical part of the equation was access to the devices themselves. Many families didn’t have computer labs, but that’s not the same as a child in the classroom having their own laptop that they can use.”

As distance learning began, district staff set up times each weekday when families could pick up a laptop. Tan also arranged for 3,500 hotspots to be distributed to households without internet connections. A partnership between the Los Angeles County Office of Education and Verizon to offer hotspots, wireless internet service and filtering software at steep discounts enabled Tan to purchase the technology. Families also received user instructions and tech assistance. Parents quickly inundated the help desk, which used remote software to help walk them through problems.

“Overnight, to have thousands of parents [contacting us] and then to train them to be able to use a computer, which for some of them was a new thing—that was challenging,” Tan says. “It points to one of the needs going forward: We need to have parents become more technologically savvy or at least know how to use the computer with their kids.”

Hyde says that opening up schools to the public could foster more technology literacy among community leaders.

A VIRTUAL EDGE

Tan may not have predicted the pandemic, but when the lockdown began, his school district already had a distinct edge over others: laptops for every student.

“We had one-to-one equipment that we could deploy, so we were in much better shape than other places, because overnight there was an instant shortage of computer laptops,” he says.

In 2019, the district acquired the laptops, which Tan says are as important for students to have today as pencils once were. Much of the curriculum requires students to go online. “It was the next natural thing,” Tan says. “We had computer labs, but that’s not the same as a child in the classroom having their own laptop that they can use.”

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Hyde says that opening up schools to the public could foster more technology literacy among community leaders.
The benefits are too great. We looked at our data, and it showed that teachers and students were working at night and ... on the weekends. That’s huge. That tells us how to restructure delivery of instruction and where to provide support."

The heavy use of devices during non-school hours indicates that students might need a helpline on days off, Tan says. It also underscores the importance of training families to give children the tech support needed to complète classwork from home.

Now that school is back in session, each classroom has one set of laptops available for students, and those who need laptops at home can access them from the district by request, Tan says. Students and teachers are using the cloud-based Canvas Learning Management System for creating lesson plans, submitting assignments and organizing classwork. Tan is also helping the district’s community leverage digital technology through methods such as personalizing learning, connecting and collaborating with others, real-time assessment, and connecting families with children’s learning.

"The sky’s the limit for us to offer opportunities that expand the classroom, expand learning, connect to others and collaborate," Tan says. "It’s a really exciting time to be around as we clumb out of this COVID black hole. I think the best is yet to come. We’re just warming up here."

PREPPING TEACHERS AND PARENTS

When COVID-19 led Poway Unified School District (PUSD) to suspend instruction, Jennifer Burks, associate superintendent of technology and innovation at ACSA’s 2020 Technology Administrator of the Year, knew that her district was primed to make the shift.

"We had been rethinking today’s classroom and generation of students and their access to technology," explains the 20-year education veteran who joined PUSD in 2017. "So, when we got word that we were shutting down in the pandemic and moving towards distance learning, fortunately, we had been already moving in that direction in terms of the integration and implementation of technology for our students across schools, as well as professional development and support for teachers around the purposeful integration of technology.

But PUSD still had to make sure all students had access to technology at home. Before the pandemic, the technology team focused on offering in-class support to students, coaching teachers and increasing grant-writing to secure technology, Burks says. When the coronavirus crisis struck, acquiring the devices needed for distance learning became a top priority.

"We just have to stop thinking about schools as these isolated sites that just happen to sit within a community. The school is part of a community."

— Corinne Hyde, USC Rossier associate (teaching) professor of clinical education

Jennifer Burks EdD ’18 on the New Skills Today’s EdTech Leaders Need

EdTech leaders need to take an innovative approach to instruction. They should be adaptable, meaning that they can identify what is or isn’t working and quickly adjust, and they’re unafraid to ask others what’s going well and what’s going poorly, explains Jennifer Burks EdD ’18 of Poway Unified School District.

EdTech leaders don’t necessarily know about all of the latest gadgets, but they’re willing to ask students which devices or programs they enjoy and why. "We need to empower our students to advocate for themselves and to have agency," says Burks. "We don’t have to have all the answers. We can say, ‘Hey, there’s this new program we’re really interested in learning more about. Talk to me what you learned from this, I can get kids on a path and allow their interests and passions to drive their learning.’"

EdTech leaders understand that teachers facilitate learning, Burks says. Teachers are learning guides who help students set up a learning path and "empower [students] to go find answers and seek answers," she says.

EdTech leaders would also be well-served if graduate programs prepared them for what the future might look like. To that end, Burks wants these programs to emphasize collaboration, critical thinking, assertiveness and flexibility.
learning rapidly became the top priority. With more than 32,000 students, the San Diego-area school district is nearly twice the size of Hacienda La Puente, so every child did not start out with their own Google Chromebook. Parent surveys ultimately helped PUSD’s technology and innovation staff identify which families needed this equipment and prioritize providing it for them. By summer, the district had secured one Chromebook for each student in the district, whether or not the child already owned a personal device. The staff also helped families gain internet access by directing them to providers offering low- or no-cost Wi-Fi and providing hotspots.

The district didn’t stop there. By prepping parents and teachers to use unfamiliar technology, the staff helped to improve the remote-learning experience for students.

**Connect Academy**

Connect Academy is a virtual school in the Poway Unified School District (PUSD) that blends online education with elements of the traditional on-campus experience. Students, for example, still have the ability to interact with their teachers and peers and to participate in extracurricular activities such as sports and band. They can also explore the traditional curriculum while focusing on their favorite subject areas for a customized learning experience. Both synchronous and asynchronous learning options are available to students in the program.

Children don’t need to meet special criteria to enroll in the program. For Connect Academy prefers a remote-learning environment, wants a school experience that offers flexibility, enjoys collaboration and is self-motivated. Students who struggle in the online academy can return to a traditional classroom setting. While the school serves students in grades K–8, Associate Superintendent Jennifer Burks EdD ’09 points out that through independent study, high school students currently have the opportunity to learn remotely. Connect Academy will likely expand to include older students in the future, Burks says.

Full-time teachers with the same credentials and qualifications as those at traditional PUSD schools make up the Connect Academy faculty. The school’s core curriculum includes computer science and digital arts, giving students opportunities to study career fields such as coding, digital photography, graphic design and video production.

**“In education, we are dealers in hope. The principals, the bus drivers, the food-services people, the finance people—it sounds cliche, but we’re all in this together.”” —Thomas Tan, EdD ’09, Hacienda La Puente Unified School District director of network and computer services**

“We had educational technology and innovation coaches—teachers who’ve moved outside of the classroom but have a passion for the integration of technology—provide professional development,” Burks says. “So that we could quickly train staff, we offered a large variety of professional development to teachers around the integration of technology and the use of our learning management system, or LMS.”

The professional development sessions took place shortly after schools closed in mid-March 2020. To reinforce these trainings, the district’s tech staff held office hours with teachers who had follow-up questions. Faculty members who missed any of the professional development trainings, or who simply wanted to revisit the material, had the option of watching recorded webinars. By summer 2020, PUSD had purchased laptops for teachers and offered up to 15 hours of optional professional development for faculty on software tools, educational technology (EdTech) tools and virtual teaching.

The 60 tech and innovation staffs put in just as much effort in their parent outreach, setting up tech hotline for families to call and, this year, organizing virtual academies for them. “Those were short videos for families that basically said, ‘This is how you get on to our learning management system. This is how you get on to our online portal,’” Burks says. “We provided these short how-to videos for families so that they themselves felt more comfortable assisting their children.” Short videos suit busy parents and guardians and quickly give them the information they need, Burks explains. Often, they eliminate the need for families to wait for a district staffer to return their call about a technology problem.

The innovative teaching, professional development support, parent videos, tech hotline and other district efforts led a number of students to flourish as distance learners, so much so that PUSD is launching its first all-virtual school this fall (see sidebar).

**THRIVING DIGITALLY**

Giving students in grades K–8 the option to attend school remotely is a way for the district to meet the needs of a wide range of learners and to offer an alternative usually seen in charter schools and other nontraditional academic settings, Burks points out.

“We’re really excited about that,” she says. “We have about 900 students from our district enrolled in our new virtual school, which is called Connect Academy. [It] will be part of independent study, but we are building it as a virtual school. So, it’s about having students and staff build a school community and a culture and providing opportunities in a virtual way for peers to connect. That’s something that’s come from the pandemic, and I do think it’s… here to stay” (p. xiv). Although some highly publicized studies have highlighted the disadvantages of remote schooling during the pandemic, such as rising rates of learning loss and declining youth mental health, other research indicates that a statistically significant group of students prefer learning from home.

“My hypothesis, based on the data that I’ve observed, is that there’s going to be much more increased demand for different kinds of flexible school modalities,” says Morgan Polikoff, associate professor of education at USC Rossier. “While certainly not a majority of parents, it is not a nontrivial minority of parents who really do feel like their kids had better experiences online.”

Concerns over the coronavirus, gun violence and bullying all factor into parental preference for online education, according to Polikoff. A survey called “Understanding America” conducted by the USC Dornsife Center for Economic and Social Research over April and May 2021, found that 22 percent of parents (from a nationally representative sample of U.S. adults) reported that their children were just as happy learning online as they were offline, while 35 percent reported that their children were happier and doing better academically as remote students. Moreover, 10 percent of adults surveyed said that online instruction allowed them to be more involved in their children’s education.

“These findings indicate that the pandemic likely ushered in a new normal, one in which online education remains a long-term option for public school students, Polikoff contends. School tech leaders like Burks and Tan say they are prepared to deliver education to students in ways that help them thrive.

“We want the best for each and every learner, and we have to provide that opportunity,” Burks says. “As the pandemic put intense pressure on technology administrators, Tan says he stayed focused by centering the rapidly evolving needs of students. “We couldn’t just abandon the kids out there,” he says. “We knew that we had something important to do, and we all believed in what we’re doing. So, I think that carries us through, and has made us stronger.” —R

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This fall, Tracy Poon Tambascia EdD ‘07, USC Rossier professor of clinical education, takes the helm as president of the USC Academic Senate, the first woman of color to hold the position. Tambascia joins a growing list of USC Rossier faculty members who serve in leadership roles at USC, including Dian G. Green, faculty athletics representative; Julie Polsky, associate dean, USC Graduate School; Ginger Clark, associate vice provost for academic and faculty affairs and director of the Center for Excellence in Teaching; and Julie Slayton, director of the Office for the Protection of Research Subjects. Here, Tambascia discusses the role of the president, her goals for her term and why she has no heroes.

**What is the importance of the Academic Senate, and what is your role as president?**

The Academic Senate occupies a unique role within higher education. It’s essentially a way in which the faculty can engage in shared governance and work closely with the administration, offering them guidance, perspective and feedback as they make decisions on things related to policy, strategic planning, budgeting or the way in which an administration is run. There’s a central Senate, an executive board and a vast network of faculty volunteers who serve on committees, which is where a lot of the work gets done.

As president, I work closely on a weekly basis with an executive board. We make sure committees are staffed and have charges, and that we’re communicating. But then there are things that pop up. Is there an issue that has surfaced that’s affecting our faculty? Do we need to be anticipating a problem on the horizon? We work closely with the Provost’s Office and regularly communicate with President Carol Folt. It’s important that I listen, that I’m hearing from people and that they reach out to me so I’m able to coalesce that into priorities for the Senate.

**Why is it important to have diversity in these leadership roles?**

Even though many of us at USC work on equity and inclusion, the reality is that representation in race and gender, language abilities, religion and other identities really matters. Having people at the table from those various perspectives to challenge, to question, to uplift ideas, to emphasize and to advocate—all of that matters. Having said that, that’s not enough. Having a place at the table is not enough. It’s also important for individuals within the community to listen—are there more education debts, the higher ed job market and job security looks different. Through one of the committees, we intend to pilot a study that asks junior faculty: What are your hopes, aspirations and concerns? What would motivate you to become a department chair or to co-chair a committee? What would support their ability to serve in these roles so that we can prepare them as they develop in their careers?

**What are the qualities of a good leader?**

I can only honestly speak on good leadership from me. I’m a listener; I observe. I’m a friendly, positive person. I tend to see the glass more than half full. I think sometimes people mistake that for softness, but I’m not. I know when to be firm. Oftentimes, individuals conform their ideas of what leadership is to this concept of rigidity and loudness, and perhaps masculine traits. I feel that I can be successful deploying my own approach. I can often be effective in communicating the way I normally do, with a smile, but that’s not going to work with all individuals. Sometimes I may have to be a little tougher.

Who are some leaders you look up to?

A few years back, I would have identified some political leaders who I admired. But then they do something wrong—that happens in politics—and their name is sullied. There are people I admire, but I also believe that people are human and they’re not perfect. We have superhuman expectations of individuals, so we’re often disappointed when they fail, when they act human. I could say Barack Obama. I do really admire him, but he’s not perfect. There are things that he did not handle well. So, I just hedge when I’m asked.

I don’t like to regard my role as being at the center. To me, that’s hero worship. It’s the idea that you’re at the center, and you’re the only one who’s accountable. That’s such a fallacy. No individual can accomplish everything. If we place so much stock in just one individual, as opposed to our collective responsibility, then we’re not building capacity. We’re not engaging as many as we can.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity. For the extended interview, please visit rossier.usc.edu.

**Interview:** Kianoush Hashemzadeh

**Illustration:** Heather Monahan

**IN CONVERSATION**

‘Having a Place at the Table Is Not Enough’

Tracy Poon Tambascia EdD ’07, newly elected president of the USC Academic Senate and USC Rossier professor of clinical education, on the importance of leaders amplifying alternative perspectives.

“The faculty at-large—reflects a changing and diverse faculty.

**What issues would you like to focus on during your term?**

One is this concept of building capacity for faculty leadership to strengthen our shared governance. That idea is centered on the fact that faculty are experts within our disciplines, but we don’t necessarily know a lot about how universities function and we may not understand how policies are formed, how fundraising happens or what happens in athletics. One of the things I’d like to do is support the development of structured programs to allow faculty who want to be involved, to gain access and meet with individuals who form policies, manage budgets and forecast fundraising goals, [so they can] have a better sense of how the university works. That way we can be better leaders, and shared-governance conversations can happen at a higher level.

Related to that, we have a rising generation of junior faculty who are assuming leadership positions, but there’s little known about how these faculty are different from those who are retiring. But we know they need to amplify positions that are not their own. It’s important that I’m at the table advocating for differences different from mine, and only in that way can we, collectively, ensure inclusion and explore the vast range of ideas and issues out there. Otherwise, it’s an echo chamber. I think that my election—which was the first by the faculty assembly with the faculty-at-large—reflects a changing and diverse faculty.

**“If we place so much stock in just one individual, as opposed to our collective responsibility, then we’re not building capacity.”**

**What makes you a good leader?**

I think that I can be very firm. Oftentimes, individuals mistake that for softness, but I’m not. I know when to be firm. Oftentimes, individuals conform their ideas of what leadership is to this concept of rigidity and loudness, and perhaps masculine traits. I feel that I can be successful deploying my own approach. I can often be effective in communicating the way I normally do, with a smile, but that’s not going to work with all individuals. Sometimes I may have to be a little tougher.

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**After a Harrowing Year, Superintendents From the Nation’s Three Largest Urban Districts Step Down**

Austin Beutner, Richard Carranza and Janice Jackson look back on leading schools during the pandemic.

The past year and a half has taken its toll on all of us—especially superintendents. There is no step-by-step plan for leading schools through a global pandemic. The stress of the office is immense, and the stakes—keeping millions of schoolchildren safe while ensuring these students have access to a high-quality education—are high. Three superintendents from the largest urban school districts in the U.S. resigned in 2021: Janice Jackson, former superintendent of Los Angeles Unified School District. While each are moving on to the next chapter of their careers, education—and helping to prepare existing and future leaders—will still be a focus. Here, the three reflect on their time at the helm of the country’s largest urban districts, looking back on their triumphs, the difficulties they faced and the skills they believe today’s education leaders need to succeed.

**Interviews:** Kianoosh Hashemzadeh  
**Illustration:** Edmon de Haro

**What do you know now that you wish you had known when you started your position?**

**Janice Jackson:** I had spent the prior three and a half years as [Chicago’s] chief education officer, so I had the privilege of working closely with the superintendent. It’s always different when you’re the principal of an organization, because the stress and the responsibility is obviously greater. I wish I had known about the pandemic—I think everyone feels that way. I didn’t anticipate how politicized people would make a health crisis.

**Richard Carranza:** I wish I had known just how deeply entrenched the inequality and segregation is in the New York City public school system. It’s almost something people don’t think about. When I first went to New York City, I thought, here’s [this] bastion of liberalism. Surely this progressive city would not stand for this? I wish I would have known how deeply entrenched it is, because we would have had some tactical changes.

**Austin Beutner:** Many things. There is no substitute for lived experience in almost any leadership position or almost anything you do in life. You can observe a situation, study the data, listen to anecdotes, but the journey of a superintendent in a large urban school district serving predominantly families who are struggling to get by—you have to live it to know it.

**What unique challenges do superintendents from large urban districts face?**

**JJ:** Superintendents are at the center of everything. I don’t know if people fully appreciated that prior to the pandemic. With the wave of resignations, I’m personally focused on support and advocacy for superintendents. This [wave] is in line with resignations happening across the country, but it’s more concerning in [large urban districts] because the [superintendent] skill set is very specialized.

**RC:** Many [urban districts] are larger than city municipalities. You have all the challenges that any large municipality would have. You have constituency groups, advocacy groups, your students, their parents. You have unions and union relations. Are buses delivering the children on time? What are students learning? Are the facilities in shape? Those challenges exist in all school systems, but they are heightened in large systems because of the sheer size and the complexity.

**AB:** There’s about 34 million people living in the U.S. [and] 1.1 million students [are served by] the New York City Department of Education. That means 1-out-of-300 Americans were sitting in one of our classrooms. Couple that with the fact that the budget is $15.5 billion and the 152,000-person workforce—the size and the magnitude of the operation becomes a uniquely challenging issue.

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Two other superintendents from the nation’s largest districts also stepped down this year. What particular challenges do you think contributed to these resignations?

JJ: I would characterize myself as someone who can roll with the punches, and COVID packed quite the punch. It’s a combination of a few things. One, the fatigue from the past year. There were a few key people in school systems who worked throughout this pandemic. Superintendents, nutrition-support staff and many of our school leaders, for the most part, reported to buildings. Anyone who actually showed up to be part of this pandemic, that took a lot out of them. A lot of people had to reflect on whether they have the gas to do what’s needed to recover. I’ve been with Chicago Public Schools my entire life, so I also hope that people see the totality of service. We’ve been through a lot multiple strikes, a financial crisis, a sex-abuse scandal. I’ve been privileged to be in this role. I felt it was time to hand it over to someone else, and I would imagine a lot of people who made similar decisions felt that way.

RC: Anybody in a leadership position got the snot beat out of them this last year and a half. There was a lot of conflicting and even contradictory guidance from the federal and local government. State and local municipalities were caught in the middle. We’re superintendents. None of us went to school to be virologists, epidemiologists or subject-matter experts in personal protective equipment. All of us were thrust into these very difficult situations with constituents. Some wanted us to open quicker than we did; some don’t want us to open these very difficult situations with constituents. Some wanted us to open quicker than we did; some don’t want us to open.

As we emerge from the pandemic what new skills and tools do today’s education leaders need to succeed?

JJ: Crisis management. And you definitely have to be survivor and more skilled in communications (p. 37). Preparation programs should be paying attention to those two areas, particularly in regard to racial justice. Some have been fearful about how to respond. In Chicago, you can talk about equity—we’ve been teaching racial justice and talking about Freddie Gray and reparations for people who have been brutalized by the police here in Chicago because of the history we have. We live in a space where we can speak openly about those things, which, honestly, is only phase one of doing something about it. For other superintendents, it’s a delicate balance.

And, of course, union relations. Big unions in major cities have gone beyond bread-and-butter issues to negotiate for quality-of-life indicators and policies, which obviously are important and make our communities better. I think they’re inappropriate to bring into discussions as you’re negotiating public education. If I’m being honest, that only happens in large urban school systems. People wouldn’t stand for that in affluent, White districts.

RC: We faced three pandemics: COVID-19, the economic pandemic and then the social-justice and racial-equity reckoning. We cannot go back to normal. Normal never served all children. The new normal is going to be characterized by meeting the individual needs of students. We’ve decimated the technological divide for decades, [but the pandemic] forced us to reckon with it. School districts have invested hundreds of millions of dollars in getting devices to students. Teachers now have the opportunity to use technology to truly individualize what students need to learn. I would never advocate for replacing caring, well-trained teachers in front of students, but the ability to individualize is more relevant and prevalent than it’s ever been in my 30 years as an educator.

If you look at the three largest school systems in America—New York, Los Angeles and Chicago—and you overlay where historically underserved communities are in each of our cities, and then you overlay which communities were the hardest hit by the pandemic, they align perfectly. People can’t deny the inequity. Investing in historically underserved communities is something [we] have to do because we’ve seen the results of not having done that. It’s going to be important for leaders to be cognizant that the trauma these communities have faced is real, and it’s not going away. Future leaders are going to have to be resolute about calling out equity issues. They’re going to have to have tough skin. I can tell you firsthand, when you start pointing this out and start moving resources and dismantling systems that are oppressing children, people will come out of the woodwork to keep the status quo.

AB: Our leadership team talked a lot about how we need to take a COVID mindset to everything we do. The emergency authority that I was granted allowed us to act quickly. One example is Primary Promise, a program we launched to help elementary school students build foundational literacy, math, and critical thinking skills. At most urban school districts, roughly half of kids are at grade level and half aren’t. If you can make a difference in early reading, you’re going to see dramatically better life outcomes for children.

In January 2020, we announced an effort to do something different, with Dean Pedro Noguera when he was still at UCLA. We said, let’s put a reading expert into each classroom. When COVID came, we expanded the effort tenfold as we knew students just learning to read would be among those most impacted. We used the extraordinary (COVID)

resources the federal government provided to be able to do it. Our first cohort in August 2020 was 4,500 first graders. Of the 4,500 kids, 9 percent were proficient at the start of the school year; by midyear, 42 percent. Big gains continued through the school year, so we expanded to 6,700 3rd-5th graders this year, ‘til the 14,000 students. The groups that showed the most dramatic increases are Black students and English learners, ahead of their peers.

If we are providing our Black students with a foundation in literacy, math and critical thinking skills at a young age, that is an important start of what racial equity looks like in a school.

What do you consider your greatest accomplishment in the role?

JJ: The creation of the equity office and the equity work that we’ve done in Chicago not only has benefitted our district, but it has served as a national model. There have been a few major initiatives that impact the entire district: our universal enrollment plan, which created greater access and equity to programming across the city, and Skyline, our pre-K–22 curriculum. There are so many indicators pointing in the right direction: increases in graduation rates, test scores, college enrollment and college graduation. These are not isolated areas of success. What that says is that it is possible. It lays the foundation for the next generation of leaders and educators to take it to the next level.

RC: I don’t think my colleagues in New York City had ever heard a chancellor [be] so plainspoken about the inequity that exists in our system. I think that empowered individuals who felt the same way to take it to the next level.

One thing I’m really proud of is that New York has had a long tradition of being a decentralized system. At 1,800 schools, you had 500 curriculums. [Now], we have

“Normal never served all children. The new normal is going to be characterized by meeting the individual needs of students.”

—Richard Carranza, former chancellor of New York City Schools

Austin Beutner’s path to the superintendency was not a traditional one. Born in New York and raised in Michigan, Beutner was an entrepreneur and founded a public company. He served in the Clinton Administration working on international economic development and served as the first deputy mayor of Los Angeles. In addition, he was the CEO and publisher of the Los Angeles Times and the Los Angeles Times Tribune. In 2018, he was elected superintendent of Los Angeles Unified School District. He received his BA from Dartmouth College.

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USC ROSSIER MAGAZINE
“Being a champion for equity in its truest form means you have to disrupt systems and practices.” —Janice Jackson, former chief executive officer of Chicago Public Schools

[addressing] not only our COVID response, but what people thought of schools more broadly. [Around] three-quarters thought we’re doing the right thing. That’s an extraordinary change.

We provided meals, COVID tests and vaccinations, computers and internet access. We kept people safe. We upgraded the air-filtration systems. We delivered on the promise. That leads to something which will bear more fruit down the road, bringing everyone in Los Angeles into the conversation about public education. We brought community partners into schools and set up a not-for-profit to support our relief efforts, which raised over $240 million.

The future of Los Angeles is in our public schools today, and the community better recognize that.

What was your greatest challenge?

JJ: When you do this work—even if you do it well—you expend a lot of energy, resources and other capital to get it done. [You] sometimes we can feel like there’s still so much more work to do. That spirit of continuous improvement and being able to push for higher expectations, but also taking stock of the progress that has been made, was always a delicate dance. It’s critical to make people feel like the work is worthwhile. It’s critical to make people feel like the work is worthwhile.

How would you describe your leadership style?

JJ: I am extremely serious about the work, and I have an unrelenting focus on students. I believe in shared leadership, collective impact and responsibility. But I do believe once the decision is made that people must implement it with fidelity. The trade-off is allowing for diverse ideas, multiple viewpoints and engaging as many people as possible in the decision-making process. You can have people doing great work, but you’re not going to get the same impact that you will get if you have people all working on a common mission with common language and practices.

AB: Inclusive. I’m a good listener. There’s a multiplier where you bring others in, and one and one becomes five. Whether it’s bringing in Microsoft, Johns Hopkins or UCLA to help us think about our COVID challenges or gathering internal folks to look at the challenge of early literacy. I’m a fan of the Socrates approach—the responsibility of a leader is to ask questions, to get to the root cause of a problem and find the best solution.

What advice do you give to your successor?

JJ: Keep student needs at the center. Being a champion for equity in its truest form means you have to disrupt systems and practices, even [those] that seem [they’re] the right thing to do, because we’ve always done it [that way]. Principal leadership is critically important, especially in large school systems. Good principals hire the right folks in schools and create the right conditions.

RC: Before I left, I said to my successor, do you. Don’t apologize or take responsibility for any mistakes that I may have made. But then again, don’t try to be—be you. And be very cognizant that there are a lot of constituencies, and the more you engage with all constituencies, the better.

AB: Start with the kids and families. If it’s right for the kids, then find a way to make it happen. In public education, [the majority] of public comment and the newspaper articles I read don’t start with [what’s] in the best interest of children.

What’s next for you?

JJ: I am leading a new not-for-profit called Hope Chicago. The mission is to create pathways to success for multiple generations of Chicagoans through equitable access to higher education by offering students and their parents scholarships, and wrap-around services to go to college or a professional trade program.

RC: I’m chief of strategy and global development at IXL Learning. There are various facets to my role. One is working on strategy for growing the business in the United States but also internationally—Latin America, in particular. My other role is kind of “superintendent in residence.” What would I want to see? What would add value to a school system? The third role is being the prognosticator: Where are we going in the future?

AB: I will keep trying to find a way to make a difference for others. I didn’t take the traditional path to become superintendent. I’ve had many chapters in my life and there will be another. Most immediately, I’m focused on a not-for-profit I started called Vision To Learn, which provides free eye-glasses to children at schools in low-income communities. It’s now in more than 500 cities across the country, from Hollywood to Baltimore.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

Urban Superintendents Academy Offers Timely Training for Education Leaders

For the seventh year in a row, USC Rossier, in partnership with AASA, the School Superintendents Association, is offering superintendents a unique professional development opportunity via the Urban Superintendents Academy. The yearlong program, which is specifically geared toward education leaders working in urban districts, consists of a two-day virtual retreat, biweekly online classes and an in-person session at the annual AASA National Conference on Education.

At this year’s kick-off retreat, which took place in September, participants discussed strategies to tackle some of the problems unique to urban districts, including crisis communication. In a session led by Stephen Nichols, chief executive officer of Nichols Strategies who specializes in helping school districts communicate effectively during times of crisis, participants discussed situational communications and how to best handle various scenarios, from wildfires to sexual misconduct crises. Nichols also provided an overview of how communications function in a school district and strategies for building messaging within the context of protecting a district’s reputation.

The session also gave education leaders an opportunity to assess their own communications skills. Participants broke into groups, were assigned roles in a superintendent’s leadership team and were asked to prepare for a press conference addressing a particular crisis scenario. Together, they brainstormed anticipated questions and crafted a public statement to be read at the beginning of a press conference. The groups then recorded their simulated press conferences and worked up the recordings with Nichols and the rest of the participants, gaining real time feedback and strategies for improving their approaches.

Nichols also offered participants what he calls a “get out of jail free” card, which allows them to schedule a complimentary consultation with him in the event of a communication crisis.

✦ For more information about the AASA- USC Urban Superintendents Academy, please visit rossier.usc. edu/programs/pd/urban-superintendents-academy.
By Than Answers

Questions Rather

deriving their motivation to adopt new behaviors. Leaders

others, promoting transparency, challenging existing

assumptions, encouraging dissent, promoting curiosity

and review. This process involves collaborating with

and defined in a way that is specific, measurable, achiev

ecessary to achieve the given goal? Do they know what

change? Are they able to see how the changes

of goal-directed behaviors. An organization is inert until

failure, social loafing and unwillingness to change man

leaders tend to assume there are knowledge deficiencies

leaders first must ask if the goal is framed to lead from

must ask: Do stakeholders value the changes needed to

reach the goal? Are they able to see how the changes

leader can then determine how best to

people to adopt in order to get there. Rather

jumping to a quick solution for problem resolution, leaders

leaders tend to assume there are knowledge deficiencies

leaders tend to assume that altering a policy, a procedure

Failure: The Role of the University in Civil Society by

William Tierney (University Professor Emeritus at USC Rossier)

July 2021 / SUNY Press

Democracy and higher education are inextricably linked: universities

not only have the ability to be key arbiters of how democracy is

advanced, but they also need to reflect democratic values. Framed

by the COVID-19 pandemic, and the ongoing crisis of structural

racism, Higher Education for Democracy explores academic’s role

in advancing democracy by using a cross-national comparison of

Los Angeles, New Delhi and Hong Kong to develop strategies that

universities can employ to strengthen democracy and resist fascism.

Taking a comparative approach and drawing on scholarly literature,

archival research and interviews, Higher Education for Democracy

aims to position higher education in defense of democracy in a

globalized economy framed by fascism.

Science Denial: Why It Happens and What to Do About It

by GALE SINATRA (Stephen H. Crocker Chair and professor of

education and psychology at USC Rossier) and BARBARA HOVER

(professor of psychology at Middlebury College)

July 2021 / Oxford University Press

In Science Denial, the authors grapple with some of the most pressing

questions of our time: how individuals decide whether to accept human

causes of climate change, vaccinate their children against childhood

diseases or practice social distancing during a pandemic. Science Denial

offers psychological explanations for why people deny science; provides

solutions for individuals, educators, science communicators and policy

makers; and allows individuals to examine their own thinking as well as

that of others and to become more vigilant about these pitfalls.

Ratchetedemic: Reimagining Academic Success

edited by CHRISTOPHER EMDIN (incoming Robert A. Naslund Chair in

Curriculum Theory at USC Rossier)

August 2021 / Beacon Press

Building on the ideas introduced in his New York Times best-selling book,

For White Folks Who Teach in the Hood... and Everyone Else Who

Seeks Justice, Emdin offers readers a more complex way to think about

education that embraces the notion of ratchetedemic: an educational

model that encourages students to push themselves to higher levels of

achievement, and not to settle for just passing. This collection of essays

is part of an ongoing project to explore and catalyze a new way of

thinking about education and its impact on society.

The Sum of Us: How Racism Costs Everyone and How We Can Prosper Together by

Heather McGhee

This year’s Leadership Month, which was held virtually in July, featured

sessions with more than 40 USC Rossier graduates and faculty members

sharing their leadership experiences across a multitude of institutions, from

the Smithsonian to Apple Inc.

To access the online archive of this year’s panel discussions, please visit

rossiercareers.usc.edu/leadership-month-2021.
LEADING BY EXAMPLE
From Example

Women leaders in her distinctly male-dominated workplace have deeply inspired Kristine Poblete EdD ’17.

Story: Wendy Shattuck

**RELENTLESS AND PASSIONATE ADVOCATE** are words that superiors have used to describe Air Force Maj. Kristine Poblete EdD ’17. One such superior was four-star Gen. Timothy Ray, former commander of the U.S. Air Force Global Strike Command (AFGSC) at Barksdale Air Force Base, Louisiana. Ray was an “elite organization responsible for two legs of the nuclear triad and strategic deterrence support.” As legislative liaison, Poblete coordinated the general’s interactions with Congress, including his “Nuclear Force Posture statement” before the Senate Armed Services Subcommittee on Strategic Forces.

The high praise came along with the Air Force Diversity and Inclusion Recognition Program award, conferred in 2019 “for innovative ideas or concepts in diversity and inclusion.” She had directed AFGSC’s Women’s Leadership Network board members. She was also the “mind” for USC’s Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Week.

**Diversity, equity and inclusion issues**—particularly the professional experiences of women in the military—“have been a lifelong focus.” Today, just 19 percent of the officer ranks are represented by women, according to data from the Council on Foreign Relations.

“Particularly in male-dominated fields,” Poblete reflects, “you’re already somewhat marginalized. You feel like you have to hide your true self … make yourself a little more palatable and prove your value. You’re essentially representing the entire female population just by being there. [you] know you’re worth a seat at the table. You can’t have innovation without inclusivity, and leaders have to create that.”

Poblete’s awareness of these challenges began in high school Air Force Junior ROTC, with the example of one very strong, supportive leader.

Retired Chief Master Sgt. Gayle Wesolowski was the sole female instructor. “I identified with her because we had similar personalities—quiet, reserved, observant, introverted,” Poblete says. “She was extremely intelligent, very insightful and caring. She was one of the first women to break through and make it to her rank. It was pretty astounding at the time, being a senior enlisted woman. Her example was that I could be myself and a good leader. I saw what I could become.”

Wesolowski’s example and those early experiences had set the stage for Poblete’s academic and professional achievements. At Washington State University, she was ROTC vice wing commander, which provided scholarship support while she completed her bachelor’s degree in communications. She went on to earn a master’s in leadership studies from Duquesne University and eventually her EdD from USC Rossier—both while on full-time active duty, through several relocations and raising two kids.

Along the way, Poblete learned that she enjoyed leading a team and was good at it. Using her voice and seeking platforms to make a difference became passions. Her first assignment after her commission nearly killed that passion, but another strong woman leader changed her mind and the course of her career.

Poblete was a missile and operations officer in an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) launch-control center, working mostly in underground bunkers—on duty in case acontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) launch was launched. She experienced misogyny and lack of support, and she planned to quit when her service obligation was complete. Her female supervisor saw she was struggling, but also saw who Poblete was—and what she could become. She offered the young lieutenant a post that would appeal to her strengths and interests and allow her to lead an appreciative environment.

That job—operations support squadron instructor, which required her to train and lead others—proved pivotal, boosting Poblete’s confidence and career prospects. It led to her selection as missile systems flight commander and as assistant director of operations for Vandenberg Air Force Base’s ICBM Right-test squadron in California and then to the job at AFGSC.

Poblete credits USC Rossier and her role models—Gayle Wesolowski (her mentor and AFGSC vice wing commander) who “saved” her career back at the ICBM bunk er continued as a mentor—for giving her the “cred” to lead discussions about women navigating power structures. “I’ve been fortunate to work with a few very self-assured, intelligent and strong women,” she says. “The scrutiny is so intense. They always came prepared. They helped me develop the mantra that my work speaks for itself. It’s better to be respected for your ideas and intellect than for trying to assimilate. I’ve seen women claw and climb in the most difficult circumstances but move forward despite it all. I’m here because of their example, and I’ll continue to move forward.” —R

**FALL / WINTER 2021**
Peter Chang PhD ’71 has retired and is enjoying it immensely.

Daniel Harris EdD ’74 is retired and living in Nashville, Tennessee, where he raises chickens and sells eggs to his friends and neighbors.

Michael McCabe MS ’74, a high school teacher, had a whimsical article, “I Had Bought My Phone With Ms.,” published in the February 2021 issue of the Virginia Journal of Education.

Gary Peterson BA ’72, MS ’74 earned his EdD in leadership and continues to improve from Concordia University Wisconsin in May.

Karen Popovich Levyn BS ’72, MS ’74 is serving as a human relations commissioner in Beverly Hills, Calif., where she helps to advise, recommend and encourage activities and programs to be undertaken to promote positive human relations in all aspects of community life.

Barbara Gregson MS ’76 received an Emmy Award as archival producer for the Netflix series ReMastered. It was her fourth nomination and first win.

Todd Demitchell EdD ’79 retired after 18 years in public schools and 35 years at the University of New Hampshire. While at UNH, he held an endowed professorship in education and an endowed professorship in justice studies and received the University Distinguished Professor Award in 2010.

Judith Carl PhD ’88 retired in February after 33 years as a psychologist. She moved from California to Oregon to be closer to his family and his grandson.

Ann Kwinn PhD ’90 is the manager of instructional design and quality control at the University of California, Riverside, University Extension. She oversees the online-learning function, providing direction, processes and training. During the pandemic, the school implemented the Canvas learning management system and converted all face-to-face courses to online. UC Riverside is Ann’s undergraduate alma mater.

Rive Park MS ’99 earned an MA in educational research and intercultural competency from Durham University in England in 2012 and an EdD in educational leadership from California State University, Fullerton, in 2018.

Rita Bishop EdD ’80 retired in June 2020 after 12 years as superintendent of the Roanoke City Public Schools in Virginia. Rita was named the 2014 Virginia Superintendent of the Year and is proud to have led major equity achievements during her tenure. She is writing a novel.

Gabriela Mafi EdD ’02, superintendent of Garden Grove Unified School District, has mentored a group of around 100 students through the district’s College and Career Mentoring Program since they were in sixth grade. One of those students, Sebastian Lozano, is now head of the district’s College and Career Mentoring Program. The program received the 2020 Golden Bell Award from the California School Boards Association.

Sue Sorensen MS ’02 published a new book, Four Simple Rules of Personal Finance: Wise Up to Rise Up, a good primer for average-to-low-income individuals struggling with financial problems, as well as for young people, particularly those from disadvantaged homes.

Camille Filardo-Kraft EdD ’03 was selected by the leadership of the Women’s National Football Conference to be the league’s next commissioner. Her experience in sports leadership has spanned junior college, four-year college, the graduate level and the NFL. Over the past 20 years, she has served as an associate athletic director, senior woman administrator, Title IX deputy and college dean. Most recently, Camille served as the administrator of the NFL Substance Abuse Program.

John Purcell ME ’03, EdE ’06 is co-author of the book SchoolArts Collection: Early Childhood, which centers on art education for young students using child-centered approaches.

Kevin Baxter EdE ’04, the chief innovation officer at the National Catholic Schools Association and past senior (continued on p. 46)

R. Elana Glasenberg EdD ’21 brings students with disabilities out of the shadows in Ukraine

In 2018, Switzerland-based educational consultant Elana Glasenberg EdD ’21, now a member of USC Rossier’s Board of Councilors, was observing and evaluating schools in Ukraine when she made a chilling discovery. “I asked whether I never saw a disabled child in the schools we visited,” recalled Glasenberg. She learned that nearly 100,000 disabled children were institutionalized in Ukraine.

On the same trip, when parents in Kiev expressed the need for a school to house 1,000 students, Glasenberg saw an opportunity. She had traveled to Ukraine as a consultant for U21, an educational foundation based in Zurich. Upon returning to Switzerland, Glasenberg proposed that U21 support the creation of an “Inclusive school,” one that would bring students with disabilities into the general population. The Foundation agreed.

Drawing on her expertise in special and gifted education, Glasenberg identified six areas of need for children with disabilities in Ukraine. She designed a model for model for others to follow. Her vision and expertise will be a great addition to the board.”

Glasenberg continues to consult for U21. “I’ve taken on the cause of inclusion,” she says. “This school will hopefully be a model for other countries. The situation in Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia and Moldova is the same as in Ukraine. Very little is done for children with disabilities. I hope to help develop inclusive schools and contribute something to these countries that wasn’t there before.” — R

ALUMNI NEWS

Highlights From Class Notes

Class Notes are compiled and written by Matt OsGruehe M’03, USC Rossier’s director of alumni engagement. For additional Class Notes, please visit rossier.usc.edu/alumni/class-notes. To submit updates for consideration for future magazine issues, please email alumni@rossier.usc.edu.
director and superintendent of schools for the Archdiocese of Los Angeles. He has named the director of the Mary Ann Remick Leadership Program at the University of Notre Dame’s Alliance for Catholic Education.

CARLOS CORTEZ PHD ’06, who has been president of the San Diego College of Continuing Education (SDCCE) since 2015, will be the next chancellor of the San Diego Community College District. As chancellor, Cortez will be responsible for all operations in a district that is the largest provider of workforce training and education in the region, with a $780 million annual budget. The chancellor oversees San Diego City, Mesa and Miramar colleges, and the SDCCE, assures that the district is administered in accordance with policies adopted by the Board of Trustees and state and federal regulations; and maintains a close working relationship with the community and K-12 and local higher education systems, as well as with local, state and federal officials.

MARINE AYAGAN EGD ’08 rejoined Glendale Unified School District as the director of diversity, equity, access and family engagement, leading the newly renamed categorical department.

THOMAS TAN EGD ’09 was selected as the recipient of the Association of California School Administrators’ 2021 State Technology Administrator of the Year award (p. 24). He serves as director of network and community access at Hacienda La Puente Unified School District.

2010s

CRAIG BARTHOLOME EGD ’10 was promoted to associate professor at Azusa Pacific University.

JIM MOSS EGD ’10 was elected to a four-year term on the Utah State Board of Education, where he serves as vice chair of the Finance Committee, after serving for three years on the Utah State Charter School Board.

BONNIE ALGER MAT ’10 completed her director of musical arts in orchestral conducting in 2018 at the University of Maryland, College Park, and then was commissioned as an officer in the Army. She was promoted to the rank of first lieutenant and serves as the executive officer of the 1st Cavalry Division Band at Fort Hood, Texas. Last fall, Bonnie was a guest lecturer and pianist for music courses at Randolph-Macon College, Humboldt State University and the University of Maryland.

DARIN GRAY MAT ’11 earned his master’s degree in cybersecurity from California State University, San Marcos, in May. Darin was also the recipient of the James E. Ballinger Endowed Scholarship for Individuals and K-12 Organizational Teams Seeking to Improve Professional Practice through Intentional Inquiry, Targeted Professional Learning and Conscious Coaching for Equity.

MATT RUTLEDGE MAT ’12 was selected for the leading the USC Topping Scholars Program. The program was one of 100 schools in the state selected as a California Distinguished School.

Cecilia Santiago-Gonzalez Egd ’12 was featured in a Los Angeles Times article, “College Students Pour Out Emotions Amid Pandemic: ‘I Don’t Want To Go Back to Normal,’” about the use of artificial intelligence chatbots to connect with students, especially during the pandemic.

PATRICIA BECKMANN WELLS MFA ’96, EGD ’13 is the chief academic officer at Emile Cohl Atelier, which was launched as an experiment in displacing the education industry. The institution provides full-scholarship art education for media careers to deserving students who show promising artistic talent but are unable to afford increasingly high tuition rates.

ROBERT MJUARE MAT ’13 moved from Seoul, South Korea, to Singapore to continue working on international design education and a period learning math programs in middle school. As a teacher at the Singapore American School, he brings math to life through practical applications from gardening to designing new exhibits at the zoo.

MARCO NAVA EGD ’13 published an article, “Trauma-Informed Social-Emotional Leadership, Teaching, and Learning,” co-authored with Delia Estrada and Susan Ward Roncalli. The article appears in the February 2021 issue of Principal Leadership magazine, a publication from the National Association of Secondary School Principals.

JANNA BERNSTEIN ME ’14 earned her PhD in curriculum and teaching with an emphasis in cultural studies, international education and multicultural education from the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, in December 2020. She received the Graduate College Medalion honoring exceptionally involved and high-achieving students.

SHI CHEN MAT ’14 completed a PhD in applied linguistics from Northern Arizona University in July.

ROSS MCCAIN ‘76, EGD ’20, a member of the USC Rossier Board of Directors, has been nominated by President Joe Biden to serve as U.S. ambassador to the United Nations Agencies for Food and Agriculture. McCain, whose decades of humanitarian work has focused on ending human trafficking, said in a tweet that she is “deeply honored and looks forward to the work ahead.” The World Food Program is based in Rome and is the world’s largest humanitarian organization.

MICHAEL DAVIS EGD ’17 is president pro tem of the City of Los Angeles Board of Public Works and was named the chief racial equity officer for the commission.

CINDY MCCAIN ‘76, M ’78, a member of the USC Rossier Board of Trustees, has been named a finalist for the National Association of Secondary School Principals’ Principal of the Year award (p. 24). He serves as superintendent of schools for the SDCCE; assures that the district is administered in accordance with policies adopted by the Board of Trustees and state and federal regulations; and maintains a close working relationship with the community and K-12 and local higher education systems, as well as with local, state and federal officials. The chancellor oversees San Diego Community College District, the largest provider of workforce training and education in the region, with a $780 million annual budget. The chancellor oversees San Diego City, Mesa and Miramar colleges, and
SIX TROJANS APPOINTED SCHOOL DISTRICT SUPERINTENDENTS

MARIA MARTINEZ-POULIN EDD ’17 was named deputy superintendent for the Los Angeles County Office of Education.

NATASHA NEUMANN EDD ’17 is part of the Educational Leadership and Administration Program faculty in the School of Education at California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo. She works with graduate students seeking a master’s in educational leadership and also students seeking the preliminary administrative services credential in addition to their master’s. Natasha was hired as a tenure-track faculty member in fall 2019.

SCOTT BRADLEY ME ’18 joined the technology and data company Splunk as the program specialist for onboarding and employee development in Brooklyn, NY.

ALANA BURTON EDD ’18 is creator and founder of Infinity Flow LLC, which helps organizations become stronger, better and more profitable.

JOSEPH CORTEZ EDD ’18 was named to lead the International Association of Chiefs of Police Research Advisory Committee (RAC). The mission of the RAC is to provide input, advice and direction to the association, law enforcement practitioners, law enforcement researchers, Department of Justice leaders and the entire criminal justice system on all aspects of law enforcement policy research and evaluation.

VANESSA GONZALEZ EDD ’18 and her partner, Edgar Vaquerman, welcomed Eva Isabel Vaquerman on Oct. 24, 2020, in Downey, Calif.

STACEY YEE EDD ’18 was promoted from associate professor to professor at Saitama University in Japan. She coordinates the English writing program and the self-access center specializing in motivation, proficiency, reflection and formatting from fundamental to advanced literacy.

EMILY WEISBERG EDD ’18 was elected to the Burbank Unified School Board with the highest number of votes of any citywide official in the history of Burbank.

AERIAL ELLIS EDD ’19 was elected to serve as president by the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) Foundation’s board of directors following her appointment by the organization’s nominating committee. The PRSA Foundation is a charitable organization dedicated to advancing diversity and inclusion within the communications profession.

THERESA HASKINS EDD ’19 is one of the newest faculty members for the master of science-human resources program at USC Bozard College, joining as an adjunct associate professor.

LAUREN LEAHY EDD ’19 was named coordinator of student services for the Solano Beach Unified School District.

MJ MARGGRAF EDD ’19 cofounded a startup company that has developed an application and device with an initial focus on providing a new way to connect older family members with young children. The startup grew out of her dissertation, which was an innovation study related to social isolation. The application addressed how to mitigate the isolation disorders experience when on extended and distant missions. Her research translated to societal social isolation issues and served as inspiration for the startup. Called Kino Inc., the startup includes a team of child development and technology experts. As a result of the unique innovation, first suggested in her dissertation and then developed thereafter, MJ has been awarded two U.S. patents, for the artificial intelligence and the time-sharing methods (an application useful for long-duration flights). She has continued to develop this technology to help our astronauts’ behavioral health when returning to the moon and then to Mars.

DEE MASIELLO EDD ’18 is the founding director of the Center for Continuing and Professional Education at Suffolk University in Boston.

IN MEMORIAM

JACK MCCLELLAN BS ’42, MA ’50, PhD ’56 passed away peacefully at 102 years of age on May 3, 2021. Born on Dec. 16, 1918, in Los Angeles, Jack graduated from Belmont High School in 1936. In 1942 he was called to serve in the U.S. Army Air Forces and was stationed in England, France and Germany. His education career began in 1946 as an elementary teacher with LAUSD. He completed his master’s and his doctorate at USC with assistance from the GI Bill. As a principal, he opened Calvert Elementary School and, in 1960, was appointed assistant superintendent of LAUSD. He was also an adjunct professor at USC Rossier, president of the Education Alumni Association, and a member of Phi Delta Kappa and Phi Kappa Phi. Jack was survived by a large extended family, including seven godchildren.

RONALD G. BENNETT EDD ’30 passed away on March 4, 2021, age 79, due to complications from Alzheimer’s disease. Ronald received his EDD in educational leadership from USC Rossier. His career in public education spanned more than 40 years. Spending his first 20 years as a classroom teacher and site administrator, Ron went on to serve as assistant superintendent, deputy superintendent and superintendent in five different Southern California school districts. After retirement, he served as Saddlemack Church’s grief ministry director for 12 years. He dearly loved his family, profession, faith and all things USC. He is survived by his wife, Linda, son Brandon and daughter Lauren BBA ’09.

THERESA (TERRI) LYNN THOMAS EDD ’21 passed away of natural causes after a short, but serious illness on July 27, 2021. Terri was born on Oct. 22, 1939, at March Air Force Base in California. After her father passed in 1952, the family moved to Minnesota where Terri graduated co-vice-president of her class at St. Mary’s High School. She earned a bachelor’s in mass communications with honors from Drake University in Des Moines, Iowa, and completed her MS in Public Service Management at USC in 2020. At the time of her death, she was a doctoral candidate and director of the EDD in Educational Leadership Program at USC Rossier. Terri was awarded her EDD posthumously. She is survived by her mother, Vicki Leaderbrand; brother, John Leaderbrand; sisters, Angela Thomas and Dr. Katherine Leaderbrand; nephew, Francis Corcoran; grandmother, Helen Leaderbrand, and a large extended family and dear friends.
The Andrew Nikou Foundation backs a crowdsourcing model that seeks solutions to education problems.

By Diane Krieger

FINANCIER ANDREW NIKOU ’00 (USC Marshall School of Business) was looking to take a long-headed position with one of his foundation’s first major grants. Something meaningful, substantive, with good return on investment. His own life experience had taught him that education is at the root of nearly all progress.

A mutual friend introduced Nikou to USC Rossier Professor Alan Arkatov in 2019. As the two were exploring philanthropic options, the pandemic landed. COVID-19 was thrashing the education ecosystem, and fresh ideas were desperately needed. Backed by a grant from the Andrew Nikou Foundation, less than a year later, the Education (Re)Open initiative of Education Solutions Exchange, address new problems in K–12 schools.

Nikou is CEO of OpenGate Capital, an $8 billion, global private equity firm with headquarters in Los Angeles and Paris. He founded the company in 2005.

Born in Vancouver, British Columbia, to Iranian immigrants, Nikou, 44, grew up in Woodland Hills, California. As a boy, he was the target of harsh bullying because he was shorter than most of the other children. His father, who worked for the city’s Department of Water and Power, taught Nikou to “be scrappy and smart, to use my brain rather than my muscles,” he told Entrepreneur in 2016. Nikou credits his dad’s single-minded focus on education with saving his life, after friends were gunned down in a drive-by shooting at a movie theater. Nikou wasn’t with them because his father had made him stay home and study that night.

Both Nikou and his brother, Cyrus, are proud Trojans. After earning his bachelor’s in finance from USC Marshall, Nikou shot to the top of the private equity world. He commends a USC career counselor for setting his feet on the path to success. “Her advice changed the trajectory of my life,” he says.

Twenty years later, he now has his sights set on tackling some of the world’s biggest problems through philanthropic work. Nikou, who also sits on the boards of the Hammer Museum and musician Pharrell Williams’ non-profit YELLOW, founded the Andrew Nikou Foundation to provide young people—particularly those with the odds stacked against them—with the opportunity to fulfill their full potential.

Nikou firmly believes that “education is the cornerstone—there’s no problem that cannot be solved by it,” but he sees the current education system as outdated, built around methods from the Industrial Revolution. He knows this having spent the past year closely observing his three children, ages 6, 5 and 2, as they thrived while homeschooled by their mom, Odelia, and a private teacher.

“COVID has been the ring of fire that we had to step through to really see, understand, bear, feel and confront the longstanding inadequacies and inequities of the current educational structure,” says Jules Ho, executive director at the Andrew Nikou Foundation.

“If we, these Education (Re)Open and the Education Solutions Exchange might be the community-powered fire brigade we’ve been waiting for.”

ROSSIER SUPPORTERS

Paying It Forward

The Andrew Nikou Foundation backs a crowdsourcing model that seeks solutions to education problems.

Arkatov appreciates how Nikou brings a “business aesthetic to his philanthropy.” “Andrew peppered me with a lot of hard questions: ‘Tell me what your assets are. What are the fundamental problems we need to address to make this a better asset? Let me really look under the hood,’” Arkatov says, recalling their early conversations.

Nikou was looking for a different kind of return—one not measured in financial gains but in true innovation and measurable impact. “There was a clear expectation that we’d deliver,” Arkatov says. “Andrew doesn’t like to focus on anything that can’t scale or is unsustainable.”

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As someone who has dreamed about attending USC her entire life, I cannot express how deeply grateful I am for your generous contribution.

— Kaytlin Abad ME ‘21

Our goal is to ensure that every talented student can attend USC Rossier and pursue their dream of becoming an educator. Your support for student scholarships expands opportunities for future leaders, increases the diversity of the field and paves the way to solving education’s greatest challenges.

FINANCIER ANDREW NIKOU ’00 (USC Marshall School of Business) was looking to take a long-headed position with one of his foundation’s first major grants. Something meaningful, substantive, with good return on investment. His own life experience had taught him that education is at the root of nearly all progress.

A mutual friend introduced Nikou to USC Rossier Professor Alan Arkatov in 2019. As the two were exploring philanthropic options, the pandemic landed. COVID-19 was thrashing the education ecosystem, and fresh ideas were desperately needed. Backed by a grant from the Andrew Nikou Foundation, less than a year later, the Education (Re)Open initiative of Education Solutions Exchange, address new problems in K–12 schools.

Nikou is CEO of OpenGate Capital, an $8 billion, global private equity firm with headquarters in Los Angeles and Paris. He founded the company in 2005.

Born in Vancouver, British Columbia, to Iranian immigrants, Nikou, 44, grew up in Woodland Hills, California. As a boy, he was the target of harsh bullying because he was shorter than most of the other children. His father, who worked for the city’s Department of Water and Power, taught Nikou to “be scrappy and smart, to use my brain rather than my muscles,” he told Entrepreneur in 2016. Nikou credits his dad’s single-minded focus on education with saving his life, after friends were gunned down in a drive-by shooting at a movie theater. Nikou wasn’t with them because his father had made him stay home and study that night.

Both Nikou and his brother, Cyrus, are proud Trojans. After earning his bachelor’s in finance from USC Marshall, Nikou shot to the top of the private equity world. He commends a USC career counselor for setting his feet on the path to success. “Her advice changed the trajectory of my life,” he says.

Twenty years later, he now has his sights set on tackling some of the world’s biggest problems through philanthropic work. Nikou, who also sits on the boards of the Hammer Museum and musician Pharrell Williams’ non-profit YELLOW, founded the Andrew Nikou Foundation to provide young people—particularly those with the odds stacked against them—with the opportunity to fulfill their full potential.

Nikou firmly believes that “education is the cornerstone—there’s no problem that cannot be solved by it,” but he sees the current education system as outdated, built around methods from the Industrial Revolution. He knows this having spent the past year closely observing his three children, ages 6, 5 and 2, as they thrived while homeschooled by their mom, Odelia, and a private teacher.

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Doctoral graduates Mercy Willard EdD ’21, Maria-Romero Morales EdD ’21 and Isabel Brenes EdD ’21, from left, arrive for the USC Rossier School of Education Commencement, Sunday, May 16, 2021, at the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum.