

*President's Message*

# Growing Community

*RRCNA President Amy Smith*



When I was elected RRCNA vice president, I never anticipated that my presidential term would coincide with a global pandemic. I always expected that the year would be challenging, but not like this. Even before I gaveled in as president, it was clear that absolutely nothing about the year would look like the year I imagined. As I think about this journey, I realize that for much of 2020, all I could see were the hurdles in front of us. Sitting here today, however, what I see most clearly is the incredible, fearless, collective work our group did to clear them. It's counterintuitive that being forced into isolation and separated from one another could bring us closer together. But from my perspective, that's exactly what happened. In the midst of a pandemic, our community sought connections with one another like never before. And, it was important.

We have always been a professional learning community, but far too often, our connections are limited to a few close colleagues. Indeed, we often operate in silos with limited opportunities to connect and with few systems in place to maximize the outcomes of those connections. When the world abruptly changed in Spring 2020, the structures, systems, and processes that typically guide our work were insufficient to address the myriad of challenges we were all facing.

Although there are likely innumerable examples of how members of our community worked together during the pandemic, one of the most powerful was a partnership established between the UTCs at The Ohio State University, National Louis University, and Saint Mary's College. The trainers at each site joined their TLs together to problem solve and strategize through the summer of 2020 (see page 27). This

---

**We have always been a professional learning community, but far too often, our connections are limited to a few close colleagues.**

---

structure maximized efficiency by distributing the burden of our work across numerous TLs. More importantly, it connected colleagues from different parts of the country and enabled them to share their diverse perspectives with one another. These trainers gave their TLs a process and an impetus to break out of their individual silos and learn together. Throughout the summer, I received frequent messages and updates from many TLs who participated in the collaboration. I knew their work would be exceptional (it was). What I did not anticipate, however, was the

overwhelming emotional impact the experience had on my friends. Their messages revealed a sense of excitement and momentum that was absent at the onset of the pandemic. After months of anxiety and uncertainty, they began to describe their confidence and hope about the future. By cultivating new relationships and connecting with one another, my TL colleagues realized they were less daunted by the work, because they were doing the work together.

Be sure to read the article, "What Is Possible Through Widespread Teacher Leader Collaboration," whose authors shared in this unique learning experience. It begins on page 27 in this issue. The partnership between these sites is a powerful example of systematic collaboration and should be a model for how we might move forward as a more connected community. It illustrates what is possible when people are freed of their silos and joined together with a common purpose. That mattered in 2020. It matters, still.

Just as the three UTCs were trying to solve problems they had never faced, RRCNA was grappling with the challenge of planning a virtual LitCon. No blueprint existed for this endeavor, and we had to draw a new one. As we struggled to find our way forward, we realized that we needed a way to connect with teachers to get their feedback on how to make a virtual conference meet their

needs. With very little time to plan a completely novel event, we needed to do it quickly. Trainers and TLs from across the country and Canada helped us assemble a teacher focus group that represented the diversity of our community. This group provided crucial guidance that reshaped our thinking about nearly every aspect of the conference and gave us positive momentum that continued throughout the fall and winter. These teachers were instrumental in making LitCon 2021 a resounding success and we owe them a debt of gratitude for that.

However, their impact on our work at RRCNA goes far beyond the conference. In essence, this focus group fundamentally changed our understanding about the need to establish systems to give members of our community greater agency and voice in the decisions we make. And, as a result, convening focus groups is now a standard work process for RRCNA to elevate the voices of individual members of our community. In so many ways, a group of 30 teachers helped RRCNA recognize and break out of our own silos and gave us a mechanism to be more connected to the community we serve.

---

Somehow, in the midst of an unrelentingly challenging year, we began to intentionally break free of our silos and seek connection with and help from one another. And the outcomes of these connections were powerful.

---

These are only a couple of examples of how our community came together in new ways in the midst of a crisis. But it is important to elevate them as they are powerful testaments to the ways in which more systematic, intentional collaboration enables us to respond to and overcome the challenges we face. Most importantly, these connections provided an opportunity for each of us to see and hear one another and to *know* one another, not only as professionals, but as human beings. While I've always admired the work ethic within our community, this year made me reflect upon the fact that our laser-like focus on the work in front of us can blind us to the struggles and perspectives of the people doing the work, ourselves included. This, too, is a silo. Perhaps, it's the most isolating of all. But, somehow, in the midst of an unre-

lently challenging year, we began to intentionally break free of our silos and seek connection with and help from one another. And the outcomes of these connections were powerful.

My teacher leader colleague, Braedan Schantz, helped me understand just how important this was when she said, "We have broken out of our silos and there is grain everywhere." Thank you, Braeden. Thank you to everyone in our community. You've helped me stop seeing this year as a crisis and, instead, focus on the remarkable things we accomplished. So, instead of remembering 2020 as the year we were separated and isolated and alone, I'll forever look back on it as the year our community came together.

---

## *RRCNA Board of Directors Election Results*

*We are pleased to share results of the recent election for terms beginning July 1, 2021.*



Vice President  
**Debra Rich**

Reading Recovery  
Trainer  
Sumner, IA



Secretary  
**Kathleen Brown**

Reading Recovery  
Teacher Leader  
Long Beach, CA



Partner  
Representative  
**Rachael Gabriel**

Associate Professor  
of Literacy Education  
Storrs, CT



Trainer  
Representative  
**Lindy Harmon**

Reading Recovery  
Trainer  
Willisburg, KY



Teacher Leader  
Representative  
**Beth Magsig**

Reading Recovery  
Teacher Leader  
Lexington, KY