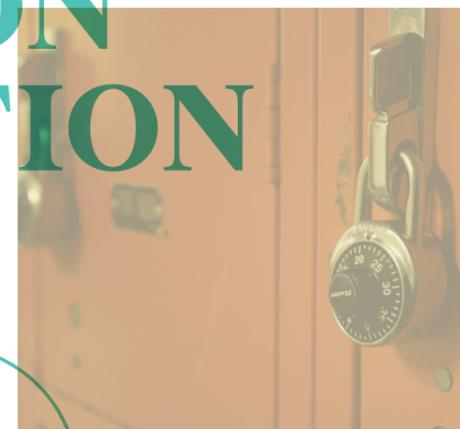


CENTRAL REGIONAL EDUCATION ASSOCIATION



Bold Shifts for Big Systems

STORY BY
Morgan Mercer

The Central Regional Education Association works across sectors, developing intervention strategies and programs to meet the health needs of students in rural North Dakota, while also enhancing and elevating the core educational curriculum.



**“Shared ideas are
necessary to bring
people together.”**

Lyndsi Engstrom
Central Regional Education Association

YEARS ACTIVE
Founded in 2004

GEOGRAPHY
North Dakota / Native nations

BUDGET
\$500,000 – \$999,999

LEADER
Luke Schaefer

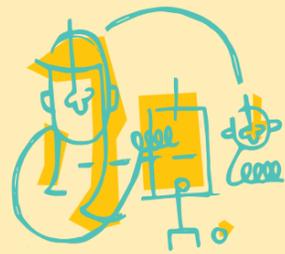
INNOVATION

CENTRAL REGIONAL EDUCATION ASSOCIATION

CREA's multilayered approach to advancing knowledge and developing resources has built the capacity of schools across North Dakota to better respond to student behavior and physical health concerns.

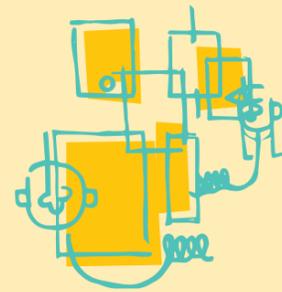
Breakthrough

CREA and its partners in the region led a major effort to increase awareness of trauma and help districts develop trauma-informed practices. This year-long process resulted in the statewide adoption of the Trauma Sensitive Schools Training process, effectively changing the trauma response practices for every school in North Dakota.



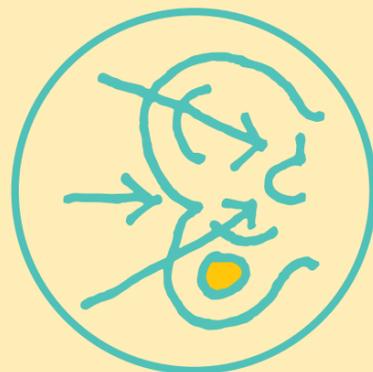
Partnerships That Put People First

CREA builds partnerships and works hard to keep those partners engaged. In the push for statewide adoption of Trauma Sensitive Schools, CREA worked closely with its creator, updating her at every step of the process. The result was a valuable sense of trust between partners that improved the final product.



Gluing It All Together

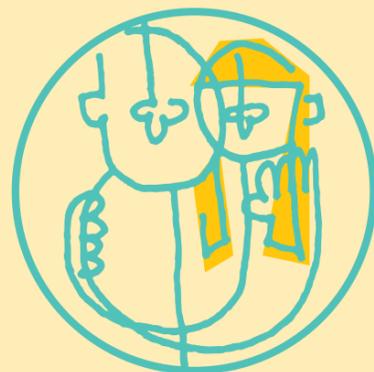
After seeing his staff operate in silos for the first few years of his leadership, executive director Luke Schaefer made a concerted effort to build stronger connections between his CREA colleagues. The team developed a shared set of values, which became a focal point for their work and their relationships with each other.



LISTENING



COLLABORATIVE



BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

With the touch of a button, the iPad screen flickers to life.

The rectangular device sits atop a rolling cart that's usually tucked away in a storage room between the secretary's desk and the principal's office at Des Lacs-Burlington Elementary School in North Dakota. But two or three times a day, the secretary wheels out the cart, powers up the machine and starts a video chat, connecting an elementary student to someone more than 500 miles away.

"What's your name, and what seems to be bothering you?" asks the person on the screen. It's the school nurse. Even though she's a state away, in a hospital room in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, she examines students at the elementary school whenever one of them bumps their head or scrapes a knee. It's all done through the screen with the assistance of the secretary, who uses tools like an otoscope — the pointy-looking device doctors stick into patients' ears — that are fitted with built-in cameras. This kind of remote care is possible thanks to the North

Dakota eCARE School Health Program, a virtual nursing platform developed through a partnership between Avera eCARE, a telehealth provider, and the Central Regional Education Association (CREA), one of eight regional education associations across North Dakota.

"It's our teachers' job to teach. It's our students' job to learn," says Luke Schaefer, the executive director of CREA, formerly the Mid-Dakota Education Cooperative, which provides support and leadership to educators, administrators and schools in 15 different North Dakota school districts. "When physical care or chronic illness gets in the way of those things, it shouldn't be the school's responsibility to figure it out. We exist to make educators' jobs easier and to support them in their efforts to teach."

Managing both chronic conditions, like diabetes, and more common concerns, like a fever, is critical to keeping students in the classroom and focused on learning. Yet many rural schools throughout North Dakota don't have the resources to hire a full-time nurse. For schools in this position, the cutting-edge medical

"It's our teachers' job to teach. It's our students' job to learn."

Luke Schaefer

Central Regional Education Association

With that responsibility gone, she's free to focus on her real job: creating the best environment for the nearly 400 elementary school students who walk into her building each day.

technology behind the North Dakota eCARE School Health Program levels the playing field and currently gives more than 2,400 North Dakota students a direct line to a medical professional.

"The school district my child goes to has 142 students, and we're 60 miles away from a hospital. She would never have access to a school nurse," says Lyndsi Engstrom, the program director at CREA, who — like many other parents throughout the state — routinely drives an hour or two each way between work, home and her child's school. "This is about geographical equity. This program allows places that would never have access to these services to get them at an affordable rate."

Schools pay \$1,500 a year plus \$25 per student to join the eCARE program. With this being so much less than the cost of an annual salary for a new staff member, even CREA's smallest school — with an enrollment of 39 students — can afford a rolling cart decked out with all the technology it needs to call on a nurse with the push of a button.

"I was apprehensive at first because I thought, 'How is this going to work?'" says Sue Kranz, the principal at Des Lacs-Burlington Elementary School, one of 12 schools in the eCARE program. "I just didn't think that we had a need for it."

But then she saw the numbers. In just eight months, students at her school dialed the nurse 682 times. With eCARE nurses on hand, Sue is no longer the person in charge of determining whether her students with diabetes are taking the right amount of insulin at lunch or whether a stomach ache is nervous butterflies or appendicitis. "It added extra stress I didn't realize I had," says Sue. With that responsibility gone, she's free to focus on her real job: creating the best environment for the nearly 400 elementary school students who walk into her building each day.



Jim Hill Middle School

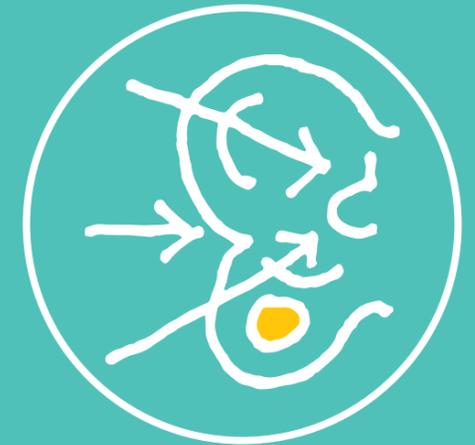


Minot, North Dakota

CHARACTERISTIC

NO

1



LISTENING

HOW DO YOU IDENTIFY NEEDS IN YOUR WORK?

"We conduct a general needs assessment every two years. It's a three-pronged approach. First we look at our schools' data and improvement rates to see if there are specific academic regions we need to focus on. Then we put out a survey to our teachers, which is important because they are the direct line to the kids. We ask them: 'Have you used our programming? Has it made your job better? What do you need that you're not currently getting from us or anyone else?' The third prong is an interview with the principal or superintendent. The perspective is vastly different between teachers and administrators, so it's important to meet in the middle to see great results. We also have two sets of advisories — a superintendent advisory and a teacher advisory. In those two places, we listen for their needs in the moment. We also pitch them ideas we've heard to see if they're accurate. Oftentimes, the only way we can really understand their needs is to be in the school. So we either do some observations or build out a windshield tour where we hop in the car and head out to observe specific 'look fors' in schools."

Luke Schaefer

Central Regional Education Association



Enhancing Opportunities in 15 School Districts



Minot, North Dakota



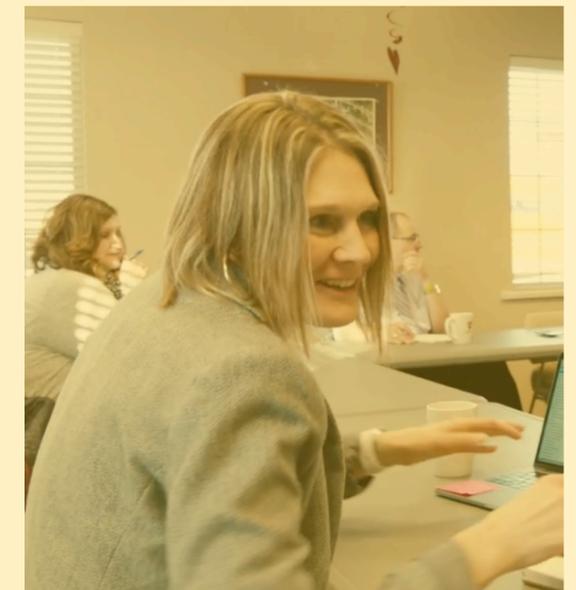
Collective Approach to Education

“This is about
geographical
equity.”

Lyndsi Engstrom
Central Regional Education Association

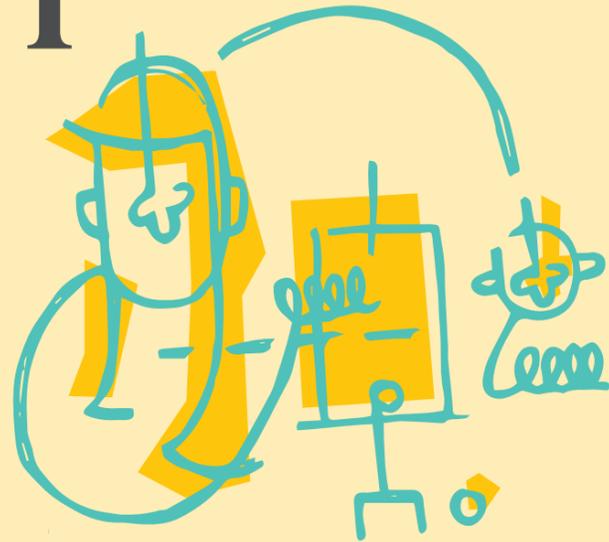


Luke Schaefer



Lyndsi Engstrom

PARTNERSHIPS THAT PUT PEOPLE FIRST



Across North Dakota, a new training designed for educators is ramping up conversations about the impact of childhood trauma in the classroom.

The curriculum, dubbed Trauma Sensitive Schools: A New Perspective on Student Behavior and Learning (TSS), is building awareness of what trauma looks like, how it influences the educational experience and what teachers can do to help students overcome trauma-related adversity. The training first hit schools in 2015, thanks to a unique partnership between CREA and TSS' creator, Heather Simonich.

"Had CREA not come along, nothing would have happened with TSS," says Heather, who lacked the means to distribute the curriculum after she developed it through a Bush Fellowship in 2012. "They brought a ton of expertise about how to deliver professional development to teachers in a way that's palatable."



Collaboration



Building a Bright Future

CHARACTERISTIC
No
2



COLLABORATIVE

WHAT HAS CREA
TAUGHT YOU ABOUT
HOW TO WORK
COLLABORATIVELY?

"What CREA's staff does well is they recognize people who are doing good work and they go after them. They are just crazy persistent in chasing them. CREA could stay in its education silo and work in school systems until it's blue in the face, but its staff recognizes that we all have our areas of expertise and that schools don't have to do this work alone. When people recognize talent in the business world, they often try to hire the person and steal them away [from their current job]. It's threatening, competitive behavior. That's not what CREA does. Their staff asks, 'How can we work together?' or 'How can we team up?' It's more generative. That's important because it's easier to go get those people and hire them. The harder thing is to work the relationship, develop trust across organizations and manage those bumps, but ultimately the partnership is so much richer."

Heather Simonich

Central Regional Education Association

“They really got to know me and focused on the relationship.”

Heather Simonich

Central Regional Education Association

The secret behind TSS’ statewide reach is largely rooted in the reciprocal relationship CREA built with Heather. Throughout every step of the process, from preparing the curriculum to training educators at schools, the organization kept Heather in the loop, including her on every email CREA staff sent about TSS and asking for her opinion — even in areas outside of her wheelhouse.

“CREA specializes in adult learning strategies, yet they still asked me, ‘Does this approach make sense to you? Are you comfortable with that? Could you do the first training so we can learn from you?’” says Heather. “They know the landscape of North Dakota inside and out when it comes to education, but they still made me feel like I had expertise and something to contribute.”

For Heather, that level of inclusion could feel over-the-top or unnecessary at times, but it created a sense of trust between her and CREA that ultimately improved the TSS curriculum and made it more accessible for educators. For example, when CREA first teamed up

with Heather to distribute TSS, the two partners decided to train 12 people who could travel across North Dakota to teach it to educators. “However, we recognized very quickly that we didn’t have enough people doing the work,” says Lyndsi, the program director at CREA. “There was just too much demand.”

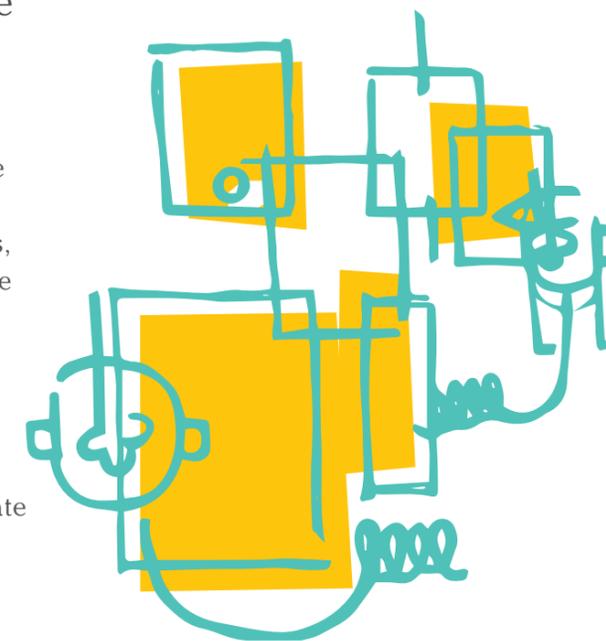
When CREA pushed Heather to increase the number of trainers, she was initially reluctant. She worried more trainers might increase the likelihood that people would deliver the curriculum inaccurately to educators. “You could feel me trying to hold the work,” Heather says. Ultimately, it was CREA’s persistence, strong reputation and investment in the partnership that won her over. “They really got to know me and focused on the relationship,” she says. With that foundation in place, Heather felt open to hearing CREA’s suggestions and trusted the organization’s advice in ways she wouldn’t have if CREA staff had begun their relationship by telling her how to improve the work. Today, about 200 TSS trainers and more than 6,600 North Dakota educators have participated in the six-hour professional development series.

“The way CREA works with people is exactly what we’re teaching with this curriculum. It’s trauma-informed practice. It’s offering choice and sharing control. It’s all the things that help build trust so people feel emotionally safe,” says Heather. “When you feel emotionally safe, you can be more creative, have harder conversations, and good stuff just happens.”

GLUING IT ALL TOGETHER

For the first three years of Luke’s tenure as the executive director at CREA, staff operated independently.

Since they spent almost all of their time in schools, staff rarely saw and hardly spoke to one another. In exit interviews, outgoing staff routinely shared the same feedback: CREA did great work, but it failed to create strong connections among the people who worked there. That isolation not only made it hard to stay at the organization but also meant staff struggled to find ways to collaborate to create greater outcomes in their work. When another employee left the organization just a few months after joining, Luke hit a turning point.



“Healthy relationships are a critical part to students’ behavior.”

Luke Schaefer

Central Regional Education Association

“That’s when I said, ‘We need to have a culture,’” he says. “Around that time, schools started talking about behavior being a big issue with their students. Healthy relationships are a critical part to students’ behavior, and as we talked through what we needed to do with schools, I recognized that we needed to have healthy relationships in our organization as well.”

For CREA, building those new relationships started with a list of words Luke developed for the organization when he first started his job: integrity, relevance, action/reflection, responsiveness and support. Those words became a collective set of values, and those values became a compass by which CREA staff began to orient its work and connect with one another despite long stretches apart.

“Shared ideas are necessary to bring people together, especially when you don’t spend a lot of time together,” says Lyndsi. “There has to be some sort of foundation on which your organization rests. For us, we found the magic within our values.”

Today, CREA’s staff gathers four times a year as a full team, and each meeting kicks off with a discussion centered on those six words. For example, Lyndsi might ask staff to share examples of how they’ve used their strengths to carry out CREA’s values since they last met, or she might call on newer staff members to describe the ways they’ve noticed CREA act responsively or with integrity.

“It’s a connective thread in all of our conversations,” says Lyndsi. “In all of the chaos that occurs in our office, it would be difficult for me to make leadership decisions if I didn’t know what our organization is about. Because we have a set of organizational values, principles and practices, it’s easier to make decisions in an independent manner that move the organization forward, rather than just one person or program.”

When there’s a budget concern, staff talk about the values. When there’s a programmatic question, staff start with the values. When CREA is considering a new partnership, staff look to the values

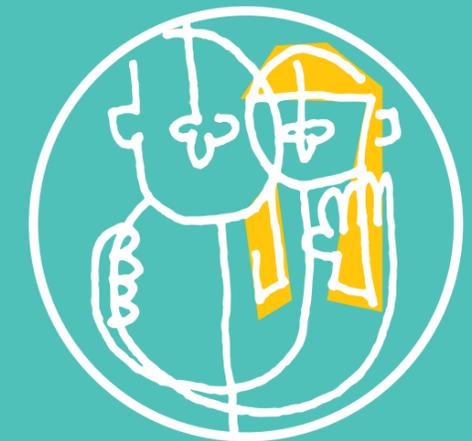


Building Capacity



Meeting School Needs

CHARACTERISTIC
No
3



**BUILDING
RELATIONSHIPS**

**AS AN EXECUTIVE
DIRECTOR, HOW DO
YOU COACH STAFF IN
A WAY THAT BUILDS
RELATIONSHIPS AND
EMPOWERS PEOPLE?**

“It took me a long time to realize the difference between evaluation and supervision: evaluation being the idea of, ‘You are hired to do this job; this is how well you did it,’ and supervision being the regular check-ins that are necessary to determine the progress being made. The most frequent feedback I give is this idea of consequencing: ‘If you choose this, this is what you can expect.’ I rarely say, ‘You can’t do that.’ Rather, I say, ‘If you do that, here are the consequences I see, so determine your absolute best outcome and expect these consequences to follow.’”

Luke Schaefer

Central Regional Education Association



Trauma Sensitive School Initiative

to determine whether it's a good fit. The organization even overhauled its hiring process based on its values, making sure every interview question matches up with one of its five principles. More than a statement on the wall, CREA's values are like a rallying cry — a point of commonality that grounds decision-making, bonds staff together and orients everyone in a similar direction.

“If someone questions a decision, we can come back to those values and discuss whether a choice aligns with them,” says Lyndsi. “It’s easier to have that conversation, and it’s less personal because we use those values as the glue that holds us together.”

It’s also given staff new license to step out boldly in their work. “If I’m making decisions based on our values, I feel safe,” says Lyndsi. That means staff at CREA are willing to take risks on new partnerships in ways they didn’t before. The result is a dramatic shift in the organization’s programming — one that saw CREA transition from simply hosting one-off events and professional development sessions to spearheading wide-reaching programs that tackle systems change.

“Before, we didn’t collaborate well, and our programming stayed superficial. We were trying to do it on our own, and we recognized we couldn’t,” says Lyndsi. “But when we’re willing to be vulnerable, we can work together internally and externally to create lasting outcomes for students.”



Supporting Educators



Building Community



Social Emotional Learning Initiative



Personal Relationships