

TEACHING LEADERS

HOW ONE LEADER FOUND THE RIGHT PARTNER FOR GROWING ADULT TALENT

Elizabeth Berquist started her career in a classroom in Baltimore County, guiding young learners with care and expertise. She loved the art of teaching — and she still does. These days, though, her students are the 10,000 employees who keep Baltimore County Public Schools (BCPS) running.

“I’m still a teacher,” she says, smiling. “I just teach adults now. It’s different, but the core is the same— helping people learn and grow so they can do their best work.”

As executive director of employee development, Berquist leads professional learning for every bargaining unit (union) in the district — from teachers and administrators to building services, maintenance crews, office professionals and food and nutrition staff. It’s a big job, and one that requires creativity, strategy and the right partners.

That’s where the Dr. Nancy Grasmick Leadership Institute comes in.

FILLING A LONGSTANDING GAP

Over the years, Baltimore County had invested heavily in professional learning for classroom educators. But leadership development for central office and support staff had lagged behind. “We wanted to build something for the folks who often work behind the scenes,” says Berquist. “Our fiscal, HR, communications and operations teams, people who weren’t in a traditional induction program but still needed meaningful growth opportunities.”

Berquist had known Nancy Grasmick personally for years, and when the Institute launched, she was curious. Would it be relevant for a public school system? She attended a few events, met with the team, and reviewed the curriculum. It clicked.

“We realized the Institute could help us build out programming in the exact areas we’d been focusing on — communication, customer service, relationship building, problem solving and mutual accountability,” she says. “Their workshops mapped directly to our standards of excellence.”

Just as important, the facilitators brought fresh perspectives. “Our people love hearing from leaders outside of education,” she notes. “It helps them see their work in a new light.”

TAILORED, TIMELY AND TRANSFORMATIONAL

One moment stands out: the summer of 2024, when BCPS was emerging from a difficult year of budget cuts and staff reductions. “Morale was low,” Berquist recalls. “People were exhausted, working with fewer resources and some were in roles they hadn’t signed up for.”

Enter one of the Institute’s expert facilitators. Rather than pulling a session off the shelf, the Institute’s facilitator met with Berquist to understand the specific challenges her team was facing. Then he designed a custom workshop focused on rebuilding a winning culture amid adversity.

“He nailed it,” she says. “He understood our context, addressed what our people were feeling and helped shift the energy toward what was possible. That session gave us a starting point for the year ahead.”

Berquist has sat in on every session the Institute has led. Her team gathers feedback after each event, and the response is consistent: The sessions are relevant, energizing and practical. “They always ask us to bring the facilitators back,” she says. “It’s not just the content. It’s the delivery, the tone, the positivity they bring.”

A PARTNER WORTH INVESTING IN

Having worked with many consultants and leadership firms, Berquist is quick to point out what sets the Institute apart. “They’re incredibly flexible,” she says. “Most firms have a fixed portfolio. You get what you get. But the Institute’s team listens. Even when we select one of their existing modules, they ask questions and tweak it to fit what’s happening right now.”

That level of responsiveness has helped build a long-term, trusted relationship. “They don’t just come in, deliver and disappear,” she says. “They follow up. They want to know how it landed, what they can improve, how they can keep helping our people grow.”

For Berquist, that’s the gold standard. “Leadership for the public good—that’s not just a tagline for them. They live it. And our whole system is better for it.”

