



### Dr. Mark Francis writes...

Growing up in the Midwest, we would quote the adage, "April showers bring May flowers." It's May in Arizona yet most of the state's flowers are already gone; my wife's small backyard vegetable garden is almost depleted. After a year of COVID and the blight it has caused, many teachers feel depleted as well.

And yet there is reason to be hopeful for the future. Below, you will see an extended interview with Colin Seale, founder and CEO of [thinkLaw, Inc.](#) an education consulting company dedicated to bringing critical thinking skills to academically disadvantaged students, that is, creating student equity.

I first met Colin three years ago during a presentation at an Arizona Charter Schools Association conference. I saw immediately that his knowledge, skill, and capacity were closely aligned with AZCSP goals. I'll let Colin speak for himself in the interview. My goal is to show that Colin's goals, AZCSP's goals, and the Mission Statement of ADE, "*Equity for all students to achieve their full potential*" are all aligned and that they drive AZCSP's work

Student equity is not merely a social justice buzzword. Equal access is a core principle of American democracy. A quality education accessible to all is the goal America wants to achieve in its heart of hearts. But what does student equity mean for us as educators, and what does it look like? What is the responsibility of schools and teachers to students who through no fault of their own do not bring a background of knowledge and skill to our classrooms?

Colin Seale has much to say about student equity. Let me go one step further. Nancy Gerson, a senior researcher at WestED, has shown strong evidence that a primary indicator of student equity is student agency. The internationally famous education researcher John Hattie would call it student efficacy, the ability of students to gain control of their learning individually and collaboratively. Hattie would add that evidence of student agency is visible. And if it's visible, we can observe it, work with it, and assess it long before we ever get to unit tests or the state assessment.

If we can assess visible learning in real time and adjust our teaching to address student misunderstanding and misconceptions, the assessment becomes formative; it forms learning. If students and teachers, in proximity with each other, are in dialog in their learning, receiving feedback, testing ideas, challenging each other in dynamic classroom environments, student agency has a chance to emerge. Colin is arguing that this should not be reserved for a privileged few.

So, what can we take away from this, especially when our teachers are exhausted from a year of Zoom teaching and feel as depleted as Arizona's May flowers? It means that AZCSP will continue its Instructional Rounds program and Formative Assessment training.

To that end, AZCSP is expanding its staff this summer to make itself available to your schools this fall. We will become a regular, non-threatening, and dependable resource to your staff. What this will look like will be described in time.

You were awarded your AZCSP grant based on the quality of your vision, your leadership, and your curriculum and instruction. We are not here to remake any of those or to add an additional burden to over-worked and over-stressed teachers. However, curriculum does not teach itself. Once teachers gradually learn that formatively assessing their students profoundly informs their learning intentions and success criteria, that it makes the curriculum deeper and richer for their students, that their teaching becomes easier and more joyful, and it becomes a habit. Bottom line: It's not more work, it's less.

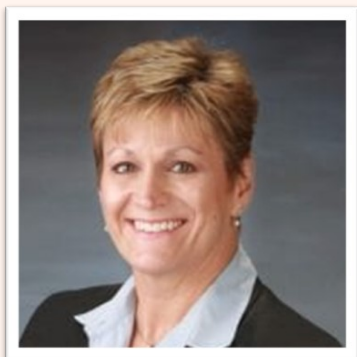
This is why I remain hopeful and grateful to be working with you.

### Looking Ahead

#### Save the Date

#### FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT LEADERSHIP CONSULTATION

Guest: Lorah Neville  
DURING THE FA CAFÉ  
MAY 3 | 3:30 - 4:30



#### Formative Assessment

05/12/2021 FA #6.  
AMS Avondale

05/13/2021 FA #6.  
Empower

[CLICK HERE to join the](#)

### FA Café

Monday 3:30-4:30pm

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### ThinkLaw's Colin Seale in the Spotlight.

This conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

**Q:** You've spoken about "wasted student potential" and how "potential" as determined by the educator may be a limiting factor. How should we really be looking at this?

**A:** Instead of talking about potential it would be better to talk about excellence. We work with students in communities who are not served well in academics and where there has been little opportunity for them to show high levels of academic achievement.

I'm reluctant to go with the idea of full potential because, well, what is potential anyway? One problem with potential is that it's often a very fixed concept. Another concern is how are educators even qualified to say what someone else's full potential is? It's possible to have a fourth-grade student who is two years behind in reading and who is actually gifted. We don't even notice the brilliance that is left on the table. My 6th grade teacher would have thought my full potential was to work in a store at the mall.

We teach to the middle. The middle is an imaginary number. A lot of school mission and vision statements set us up for this. They say something about "all" students. "All" students are graduating with credit, "all" students..., what does that mean anyway? It's meaningless. If we want to see a space where excellence is unlocked, we need to make the shift from "all" to "each." What does each child need to get to that level of excellence?

Teach to the top 10%. If we think about "potential" it might surprise you who can rise to that level of excellence. Students might surprise themselves. We cannot just lower the bar because we're so concerned about closing achievement gaps. Instead, let's shatter the achievement ceilings. Tell students that there are no limits to what they're able to do.

**Q:** You wrote a while back about unfair barriers to excellence and that as much as we cheer for the underdog, we are really only okay with them winning within a narrow range of parameters. You propose that the real system is "If you can't beat them, change the rules." Examples in sport are easy to find. What do those barriers look like in schools?

**A:** It's very interesting because I wrote that piece about Simone Biles because I was really upset with the way that they were basically saying she was almost too competitive and the response was to change the rules of the competition.

I never really thought about unexpected excellence and what happens until I saw how Jaime Escalante, profiled in Stand and Deliver, faced this very situation. He took underperforming students who no-one expected could do much and he taught them calculus.

When they killed it on the AP Calculus exam, the state made them retake the test. They didn't believe it was possible for students like this to get such high scores. The idea that excellence like that isn't even possible is all about changing the rules.

There are a lot of educators who put in their heads that if they've got a fourth grader reading at a second-grade level that these kids can't do any better. All "these kids can't" does is impose a new rule where you have made it impossible for them to do it. You've decided arbitrarily to lower the degree of difficulty. It reminds me of Simone Biles where you're just putting on a random degree of difficulty that makes it impossible for them to get gold.

I am going to be real with you. I believe that when educators say, "these kids can't" what they really mean to say is that they have no clue how to create the learning conditions such that "all kids can". How do we focus on that? Give educators that 'how' to create the right learning conditions, give them the 'how' so they can make it happen. If we don't do those things, we are sabotaging any chance that we have to see equity achieved at the classroom level.

**Q:** Schools are trying to figure out how to spend their ESSER Funds as they move into the beyond-the-pandemic era. Have

you got some guidance for them as they consider equitable ways to do this?

**A:** We often think about these kind of big dollar investments for physical infrastructure and for infrastructure upgrades. When we think about ESSER funds we could consider them as a way to upgrade academic infrastructure.

Arizona has always had human capital challenges in public education in terms of our teacher workforce, how we develop it, and how long teachers stay in the workforce. This could be a time for doing a complete remodeling of schools from an academic standpoint and to do it in a sustainable way.

When we think about raising the academic excellence bar, now is the time to think about how we use our energy in the classroom, how we teach to the middle child, and how teachers spend their time, effort, and brain power. If you actually look at teacher time, effort, and brainpower, so much time is spent on about 10% of the learners who are struggling.

Also, 90% percent of administrators' time, brain power, and strategic thinking is spent on 10% of the staff. What if we thought about our really good teachers and how much support we give to them? Build systems around them. Give them opportunities for growth so during retention conversations they don't see the pathway to principalship as the only option. We have the opportunity to create this pathway for excellence in our instruction.

Think about having high quality instructional materials and in house people so well trained on the instructional model you are using so you don't have to go through an expensive, time-consuming, process to have your teachers ready for the year. This builds muscle memory into the school building.

This is the time to strategize. Focus on what really matters. That critical thinking experience. So, don't think about this money in terms of a bunch of workshops and other things as well.

At thinkLaw we help you find a way to weave together all the academic parts, like SEL time, test prep time, critical thinking, and so on, in a way that is seamless for educators.

**Q:** Education has this obsession with remediation that feels very much like an ambulance at the bottom of the cliff instead of a fence at the top. This approach hasn't gotten us very far in closing the achievement gap or decreasing equity. Is remediation the way out of pandemic learning loss?

**A:** We don't want to over generalize but a lot of educators have a fixation on addressing the negatives. In education, we are using a standardized system that is basically a factory model where we have to fix all the broken things so we can build more stuff. A lot of teachers feel that things should be done in a certain way and that things should look a certain way.

The culture of remediation needs to be addressed. It doesn't mean we ignore where are kids are. We need to check on the data in a real and meaningful way and realize that students struggling with grade level standards don't need to be taken all the way back in order for them to move forward. A lot of remediation is rote drill and kill. It should feel empowering. It should be based on the idea that the learner has some knowledge rather than being viewed as an empty vessel.

These kids are proficient in life, they're proficient in making it through every single day of their life to this point. We've got to figure out a way to leverage who they are and what they already know to get them where they need to be.

I am a living example of the *because-not-despite narrative*. Working with students from diverse backgrounds and high poverty populations teachers sometimes tell stories like mine. "He grew up with factors that would usually lead to failure but *despite* them grew up to be successful."

Let's talk about *because* instead. Because I watched mom negotiate bill payments, I can negotiate deals. Because I grew up hearing Socratic seminars in the barber shop even before I knew what they were I graduated from law school.

And if we consider the *because-not-despite narrative* of our students we'll see the magic sitting right in front of us.



Colin Seale  
*Thinking Like a Lawyer*

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