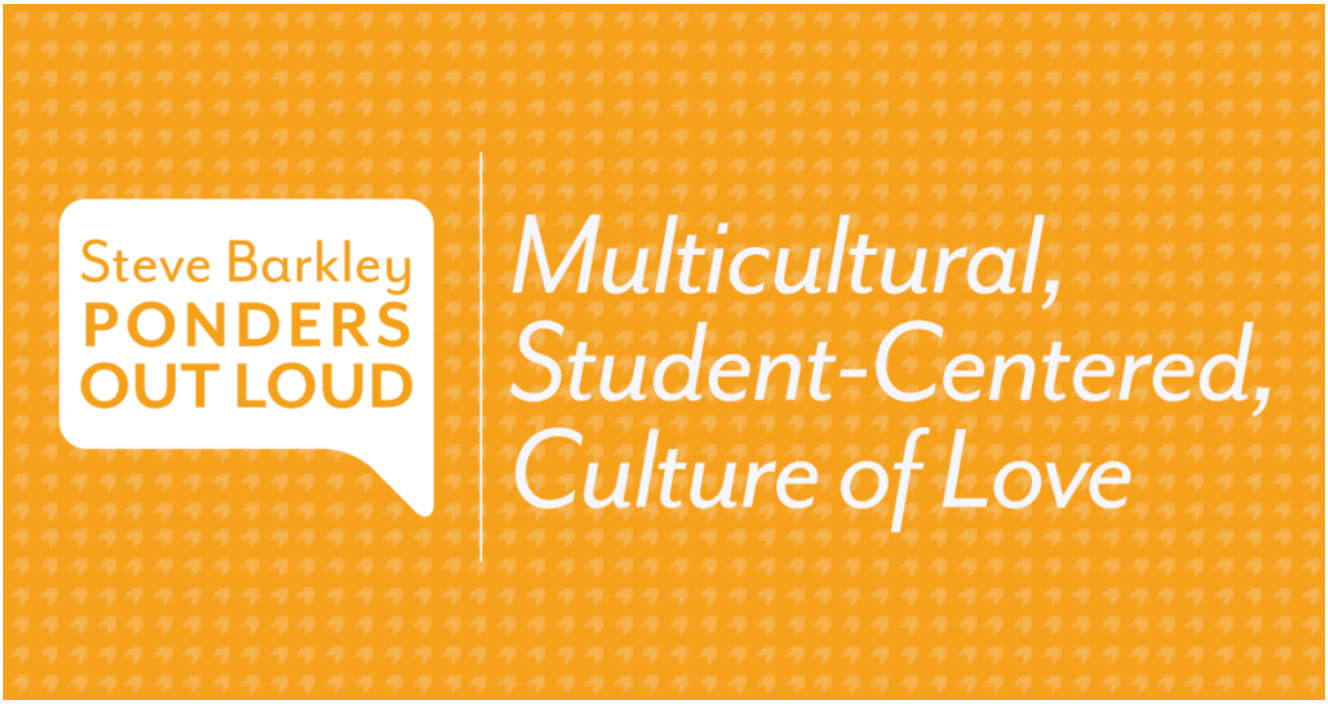
Podcast: Multicultural, Student-Centered, Culture of Love



Are you students partners in your school's decisions? Does your multi-cultural curriculum and pedagogy benefit all students? Does your school have a cultural of love, patience, trust, caring, forgiveness, commitment? Dr. Luvelle Brown, Superintendent of Ithaca Schools in New York State, and the author of "***Culture of Love: Cultivating a Positive and Transformational Organizational Culture***" explores these topics and more.

Find Dr. Brown's book, *"Culture of Love"* here.

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Podcast Transcript:

[00:00:01.450] – Steve [Intro]

Welcome to the Steve Barkley Ponders Out Loud podcast. As instructional coaches and school leaders, you have a challenge to guide continuous teacher growth that promotes student success. This podcast looks to support you with strategies from our experienced guests and insights that I've gathered across many years. I'm thrilled you're here. Thanks for listening.

[00:00:29.370] – Steve

Cultural, student-centered culture of love. I had the opportunity to meet Dr. Luvelle Brown, the superintendent of Ithaca, New York schools, while hosting a podcast for the Leaders Learning from Leaders series sponsored by SuperEval. I wanted to share his passion for students with you. As you listen, consider what you would celebrate about your school and what areas might you want to explore to grow and extend further? Are your students partners in your school's decisions? How does your multicultural curriculum and pedagogy benefit all students? Does your school have a culture of love, patience, trust, caring, forgiveness and commitment?

[00:01:31.290] – Steve

I hope you enjoy meeting Luvelle Brown.

[00:01:36.880] – Steve

Today, our guest is Dr. Luvelle Brown, the superintendent of Ithaca School District in New York State. Dr. Brown is a nationally recognized speaker, consultant, and author of the book, "Culture of Love: Cultivating a Positive and Transformational Organizational Culture." He was the 2017 New

York State Superintendent of the Year, and he has served as Ithaca's superintendent since 2011. Welcome, Dr. Brown.

[00:02:07.050] – Dr. Luvelle Brown

It's a pleasure to be here. Thanks for having me.

[00:02:10.010] – Steve

I'm wondering, for starters, if you could tell listeners a little bit about the Ithaca School District and maybe highlight for us some of the most promising indicators of success you've had during your time there in the district.

[00:02:26.420] – Dr. Luvelle Brown

Sure. I think Ithaca, New York, is one of the most beautiful places in the country. "Ithaca is gorgeous" – it's the thing that's on most T-shirts around here. Central New York, Ithaca, a very diverse town, a college town, great college town. Been recognized as the number one college town in America, the smartest town in America. The home of Cornell University, the home of Ithaca College, Tompkins Community College, so a significant amount of academic intelligence and success in our great town. A very diverse town in that is a mix of rural, urban and suburban. A pretty large geographic area, all still within the Ithaca city school district boundaries. Diverse as far as racial ethnicity, diverse as far as economic status, diverse as far as even religion and even political. So as we define diversity, as we say, access and opportunities for all, we have a cohort of young people who need us to be different and better each and every day because of the various needs that come into a space. So again, I think a very vibrant town, one of the best small towns in America. I've been here now,

this is my 14th year, and I’m loving every minute of it.

[00:03:37.750] – Steve

And highlight a couple of the successes you saw as most promising.

[00:03:44.160] – Dr. Luvelle Brown

Sure. During my time, we’ve established new benchmarks. Our graduation rate has soared during my time here, our enrollment patterns have shifted. Prior to coming, there were significant achievement gaps and tracking going on in our very diverse school district, and we’ve done much to eliminate those tracks, increase achievement for all young people. We have more and more young people participating in performing arts and athletics before and after school. We have more and more young people taking our highest level course offerings. We’ve been recognized by the College Board. for, I think, nine straight years for increasing the enrollment, the diverse enrollment in our highest level academic courses, including AP and Honors, and at the same time increasing the achievement for all those students.

[00:04:19.490] – Dr. Luvelle Brown

We have been now recognized as the second best STEM High school in New York State, nationally. So when we think about I could go on and on and on as we think about student achievement, we’ve seen significant transformations in high levels of performance amongst our young people and embracing the great diversity that comes into our space. What we wanted to do, when I came in, more than a decade ago, was to provide the best education for all of our young people. Not just those

who have been traditionally doing well in our schools and those with privileges, but for those who have been traditionally marginalized in our schools and who had not shown up in the data very well. During my tenure, I can say with much confidence that we've changed the game and changed the world for all of them and we're very proud of it.

[00:05:16.530] – Steve

I think you've touched on my next question, so you may want to just expand it a little bit.

[00:05:21.650] – Dr. Luvelle Brown

Sure.

[00:05:22.160] – Steve

But as I was doing my homework to find out about you, I found a statement that you made that said leaders need to feel a sense of urgency in meeting the needs of young people.

[00:05:34.620] – Steve

Yes.

[00:05:35.540] – Steve

So I was wondering how that sense of urgency played out in your early days in Ithaca.

[00:05:41.710] – Dr. Luvelle Brown

A couple of things, and let me define a sense of urgency.

[00:05:47.490] – Dr. Luvelle Brown

A sense of urgency is when we see that there are issues or where young people aren't showing up good in our data, or they're telling us they don't feel a sense of belonging, we do something.

[00:05:55.310] – Dr. Luvelle Brown

Now, that sense of urgency about doing something doesn't always translate into something's going to happen immediately. Because the work that we've been a part of, the things that we've done, takes time, and we have to impress upon folks to do this well, it requires us to be inclusive, it requires us to build trust, and it requires us to build systems and structures and policies that will be sustainable far beyond who is the superintendent, who's on the board, and who's even an educator.

[00:06:12.790] – Dr. Luvelle Brown

So what we've done takes time. We've been doing this in an ongoing way. And that sense of urgency is that when we see there's an issue, we reject neutrality, we reject retreating back to our traditional ways. We actually do something. And our young people see that, feel that they push us each and every day to be better. And we have.

[00:06:47.810] – Steve

So I want to check, as I was listening to you, I jotted down in my notes, it sounds like the focus is on action rather than immediate results.

[00:07:00.710] – Dr. Luvelle Brown

Yes, and the results are going to be there. Just listening to a young person, just partnering with a young person, just shifting something that happens on a young person's desk the next day, is an immediate action.

[00:07:11.590] – Dr. Luvelle Brown

Where I tend to ask for folks's patience, which is a loving principle, is when we think about how we would then hold ourselves accountable or how would we measure it, from my perspective, we've had accountability measures and metrics that have, in fact, perpetuated inequities. When we think about the standardized approaches to assessing young people or the ways in which we evaluate and then we remediate, it has all contributed to us excluding, us putting in front of young people things that are culturally biased. So we are reestablishing and redefining what we mean by results and how we hold ourselves accountable.

[00:07:50.560] – Dr. Luvelle Brown

Young people to ask me, hold me accountable for partnering with you. Hold me accountable for not being neutral. And we can talk about what those achievement metrics and those data points will look like over time, because what we know is that we've built a model that has contributed to the inequities that we say we want to eradicate.

[00:08:16.190] – Steve

I’m a little out of breath because that statement is so powerful. The willingness to accept where we know what we’re doing isn’t the right thing to be doing. And I guess that drives a sense of urgency.

[00:08:35.100] – Dr. Luvelle Brown

And that’s part of my story and a part of my passion and why I wake up every day inspired and feeling privileged to be a school leader. I’ve lived this for close to 50 years. I was a student who navigated the system. I survived the system. I don’t think I thrived in it, but I did survive. I am now in a system and a leader in a system that I know needs disruption because at the same time, it was harming me as a student and my friends who were students. It has harmed me as a leader. So I know the system we’ve built.

[00:09:06.800] – Dr. Luvelle Brown

The one in which I’ve been successful navigating, have achieved in, is not good for everyone.

[00:09:12.910] – Dr. Luvelle Brown

Now, if more and more educators would be truly reflective about who we’ve served well and who we have not, I hope they can be intellectually honest enough to say that. And then when saying that, that requires us to do something about it, and we know what to do.

[00:09:30.980] – Dr. Luvelle Brown

There's a significant amount of academic research, literature, case studies about what to do to open up access and opportunities and high levels of achievement for everyone. The challenge and the issue is doing that because doing that is where our country is right now, it's seen as a zero sum game. Or if I do something for those who have been marginalized, it will be taken from those who have privileges. And I reject that notion. I know when we do this work that I've been a part of throughout my career, it benefits everyone.

[00:10:06.460] – Dr. Luvelle Brown

And I hope over the next 10, 15, 20 years, I may not see it, Steve, I hope that's where we shift as a country, as a society, the social, political, the geopolitical context understands that notion. But in my little small part of the world, I hope it happens in schools.

[00:10:23.590] – Steve

I've often described it as people seeing it as a pie with pieces. And if you're going to empower one group, the only way they can imagine it happening is taking it away from some other group versus understanding that if you're looking at it as a group and a piece of the group gets stronger, it makes the whole greater.

[00:10:45.590] – Dr. Luvelle Brown

And I will ask Steve, that perspective that you're describing typically rests with those who have privileges.

[00:10:52.390] – Dr. Luvelle Brown

As a person who's growing up without those privileges, who's been outside of the system, who has had family members and friends punished by the system, I've always seen it as a pie that should be bigger and not a pie with…

[00:11:06.610] – Dr. Luvelle Brown

So it just speaks to perspective. And I'm here to create something new, help our young people create something new for themselves.

[00:11:14.870] – Steve

I noted that you're engaged in the Learning 2025 National Commission on Student Centered Equity Focused Education. I wondered if you'd talk a little bit about that.

[00:11:25.210] – Dr. Luvelle Brown

Yeah, that was a fun and significant initiative that was led by the association for School Superintendents. It was a national group. I think there were around 26 of us from various industries. I was honored to be asked to be a part of a conversation about what could it look like if we truly could dream about the best school district, the best system ever. And we debated, we talked, we put in writing, some of our thoughts.

[00:11:56.200] – Dr. Luvelle Brown

I think for the folks who read the report that we produced, you'll see that it's a student-centered and student-led

approach to the next iteration of schools. And it’s an approach that will look like us not marginalizing anyone.

[00:12:13.080] – Dr. Luvelle Brown

And that’s asking us it’s requiring us to be truly reflective of what we’ve done currently and be reflective of how we can interrupt the existing practices.

[00:12:21.350] – Dr. Luvelle Brown

So a great initiative, a great white paper. I will encourage folks and invite folks to read it. And there is ongoing work. That commission has now resulted in annual conference, ongoing coaching sessions, cohorts, et cetera. So the work is not done. We have a lot of work to do, frankly, to get to that vision by 2025.

[00:12:42.380] – Steve

Could you help us zero in on what student-centered means as the way it’s being used in that report?

[00:12:51.060] – Dr. Luvelle Brown

In that report and in my daily conversations with folks, we’re saying that we should partner with young people on everything we do. If not partner with them, then have them lead it. Now, that could be professional development, which is happening in Ithaca right now, young people leading professional development, that can be curriculum development, having young people be at the table with educators to develop curriculum, that can be in our evaluation processes, having young people go into classrooms and look for elements and artifacts of joy

and student learning.

[00:13:21.150] – Steve

Powerful.

[00:13:25.750] – Dr. Luvelle Brown

The folks who are on this, who are listening to this podcast, the work that you are part of right now and the work that you're planning to do this year and next, are students there at the table with you designing it and or leading it? And if the answer is no or you don't know, that's the work.

[00:13:39.590] – Dr. Luvelle Brown

So the report leads with student-centered. I hope everyone understands what we mean by student-centered. It's not for students, it's student-centered.

[00:13:49.270] – Steve

I also know that you were just involved in the Diversity Symposium of Thought leaders. Want to talk a little bit about that?

[00:13:58.080] – Dr. Luvelle Brown

I would love to. Thanks to the Council of School Superintendents in New York State, they've allowed for me and a gentleman named Dr. Oliver Robinson to co-chair a commission. A commission initially intending to create more access and opportunities for educators to become

superintendents. Because in our state, there were far too few superintendents of color.

[00:14:18.220] – Dr. Luvelle Brown

And we needed to do something and along this path and on this journey to create access and opportunities and have more superintendents of color in seats, we've been unearthing policies, professional development, systems, all kinds of other issues. So we come together annually. And it's been in Ithaca where we've brought together hundreds of educators to engage in courageous conversations, to hear from some of the best thinking in the world. We've had amazing keynote speakers. We've had wonderful breakout sessions. So this symposium is folks who are committed to diversity, equity and inclusion. And for the folks who can't say diversity, equity and inclusion, access and opportunities for everybody. See, we're differentiating. We're good educators. We are meeting folks where they are on this journey. But let me be clear. The work is the work. And the work is the work for every young person in America. This is not about just ethnicity. We're talking about religion, orientation, class, gender, nationality and ethnicity. We're talking about embracing the great diversity that comes into every school in America and then shifting our practices to make sure everyone, irrespective of their identities, are successful. That's the work and that's our commission's work and we're super excited about it.

[00:15:38.250] – Steve

And that success has payoffs for everyone.

[00:15:41.560] – Dr. Luvelle Brown

Everyone. We know this. A multicultural education and pedagogy benefits everyone. I've had the privilege of sitting on several dissertation committees over the last few years, and many of those dissertations have been focused on the impact of diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives and what we're finding, and the research is very clear I can share with folks the bibliographies is that when we do this work well, it benefits every student. That's why I say boldly, that not engaging in conversations about access and opportunities for everyone, not including multiple cultures in our curriculum and our pedagogies, it is almost educational malpractice when we know it benefits everyone and we don't do it.

[00:16:19.050] – Dr. Luvelle Brown

It hurts those who are most privileged and it hurts those who have been marginalized. That is something every person in America should be saying today.

[00:16:38.350] – Steve

Your book has "culture of love" in the title, so I want to know what a culture of love is.

[00:16:44.460] – Dr. Luvelle Brown

Let me be clear. I'll start with this – a culture of love is not the default in schools. A culture of love is the struggle.

[00:16:51.510] – Dr. Luvelle Brown

In my book, we define what we mean by love, and it goes far

beyond this emotional connection you may have with an individual or people. It’s about the ongoing practices and principles that are loving. Patience, trust, caring, forgiveness, commitment.

[00:17:11.030] – Dr. Luvelle Brown

How do those principles show up in your individual lives and in the DNA of the organization and the schools? Are your grading practices loving? Are they forgiving when we give zeros or we take points off of work that comes in late?

[00:17:22.900] – Dr. Luvelle Brown

Are we trusting when we don’t embrace the student voice and agency that’s coming into our space to change our policies and curriculum? See, we define what love is. And I can say, having been in schools every single day for 50 years now, that the practices and principles that are baked into the DNA and organizational ethos of schools is counter to love.

[00:17:48.850] – Dr. Luvelle Brown

That’s why I have been working on how to build that loving culture in schools. And there is a process, it can be done. It has been done.

[00:17:56.470] – Dr. Luvelle Brown

Now, sustaining it is another thing, because once you have a loving organization, there are folks who want to interrupt it. Because a loving organization is access and opportunities for everybody. And what I’ve learned on this journey of mine is that not everyone wants that kind of access and opportunities

for everybody because of their perspectives, their biases, their fears.

[00:18:18.910] – Dr. Luvelle Brown

If we just listen to what's happening in our country right now around gender identity, does everybody want that?

[00:18:24.720] – Dr. Luvelle Brown

Does everyone want to love the young people who come into our spaces, some as young as five or six years old? Do you want to love that child who has questions or has made decisions about their gender identity that goes against yours? Do you want to love that child or do you want to create a law or a policy to marginalize or oppress or to shift their thinking? That's one of those questions. I have many we ask but I ask folks to just reflect on that one.

[00:18:49.430] – Steve

So you've got 50 years at this. I'm coming up on 65 years at this. And I have to say, as I was just listening to you, I'll never forget the shock when I was talking about closing the achievement gap a whole lot of years ago, before that was a common phrase. And it suddenly hit me that there were a whole group of people that had absolutely no interest in the achievement gap closing. In other words, they were interested in improvement as long as the improvement kept the gap. And the first time it hit me with a group of parents in a school district, it took my breath away. It took my breath away.

[00:19:42.550] – Dr. Luvelle Brown

Some folks don't want to hear it. Some folks wish to ignore it, and there's others who get guilty and feel like they shouldn't be put in a place where they feel uncomfortable. But let's be clear that our country, our educational system, many of our system healthcare systems, legal systems have been built on this notion of inequity.

[00:20:01.650] – Dr. Luvelle Brown

It has been built on exclusion and sorting and selecting has been built on biased thinking. So we know that. It makes sense why some folks do not want to interrupt or close achievement gaps because it has benefited them. And that's the work, whether you choose to do it or not, is the question I put in front of educators all over the country.

[00:20:31.530] – Steve

So I pulled another statement as I was doing my homework on you, and this one was connected to your book. And the statement was, "a leader is not predicated on a title, but instead, on a way of thinking, working and living." And I wondered if you'd describe a little bit of how you see that showing up in your leadership.

[00:20:54.890] – Dr. Luvelle Brown

A couple of things I've said to folks. If I do my job well, over time there will be no need for a superintendent. I think just the notion of a superintendent and a governance team, perpetuates power, hoarding. A few people making major decisions. In a truly inclusive environment, you have a bunch of independent, autonomous organisms. We see that with birds,

flocks of birds, swarms of bees, a bunch of autonomous, independent organisms that are operating in an inseperable way around a common mental model and vision.

[00:21:20.100] – Dr. Luvelle Brown

So if we have everyone thinking about access and opportunities for everybody, and have a vision for what that thinking would look like, if everybody was thinking in that way, then you won't need a superintendent. And a teacher, a bus driver, there's so many educators in a given day who have access to our young people who can influence them and push towards a culture of love, you won't need a title or the superintendent to come in and influence that. Again, I've been considered or called a leader since I was eight years old, being the captain of my little league baseball team and have been a captain and a leader since then in various organizations and on various teams. And every time I've thought, I'm not a leader unless I have some folks who are with me who are doing most of the work.

[00:22:13.850] – Dr. Luvelle Brown

Now, I'm a facilitator of conversations, I'm a facilitator of work, but in no way am I doing it all or am I better than anybody else. So that's why I say it's not predicated on title, it's a way of being.

[00:22:26.190] – Dr. Luvelle Brown

Our vision for our school district is thinking. If we had everyone in the organization and everyone in the community thinking, oh, man, we would change the world.

[00:22:34.900] – Steve

Yeah.

[00:22:37.250] – Steve

Well, as we conclude, I'm wondering if there's some words of practice and encouragement that you'd like to share with the school leaders who are listening in.

[00:22:48.630] – Dr. Luvelle Brown

I'll ask folks to think about the journey they're on and whether it's a very academic one, if you're reading articles and checking and liking some things on Facebook, or if you're just writing statements or passing a policy to say that you believe in equity and access and opportunities for everybody or are you truly on the authentic journey which is different from the academic one?

[00:23:05.130] – Dr. Luvelle Brown

The authentic one is when you see that there are issues, you actively do something about it. You are actually changing the pedagogies and the curriculum that you put in front of young people each and every day. You're actually looking for oppressive language and marginalizing language and policies, and you shift that language to be more inclusive. You're actually working every day to be more loving in your policies and your practices and in your rhetoric.

[00:23:36.430] – Dr. Luvelle Brown

That authentic journey is hard, but it's rewarding. It will

produce young people who are thinkers, who are engaged citizens, who have a sense of voice and agency.

[00:23:50.230] – Dr. Luvelle Brown

See, I'm on the authentic journey, and I am hopefully inspiring some folks to join me on that journey, knowing it's going to be hard and it will face resistance, but I go back – my ancestors were abolitionists, and they would say all the time, I know I won't see the beautiful country and situation I'm fighting for, but I'm going to fight anyway.

[00:24:13.470] – Dr. Luvelle Brown

And so I have a long vision for this work in our industry. I may not see it, but what I hope I've done is inspired somebody to take my place when I'm gone. I'll leave you with that, Steve.

[00:24:23.550] – Steve

Well, it matches that statement of being able to look out seven generations looking back and having them ask whether or not we did the right things to move it in the right direction. It's where we really need to be. Thank you so much. I'm wondering what's the easiest way that listeners might check in with you, find out more about your book, or connect with you?

[00:24:49.710] – Dr. Luvelle Brown

It's easy. This may date me – my email address, and I answer every email, luvelleb@gmail.com. There are no numbers in that thing. I got one of those original email addresses and send me a quick email and I'll get right back to you.

[00:25:10.980] – Steve

Well, we'll be sure to post it with the podcast. Thanks again. Much appreciated.

[00:25:16.710] – Dr. Luvelle Brown

Likewise. Thank you.

[00:25:22.050] – Steve [Outro]

Thanks for listening, folks. I'd love to hear what you're pondering. You can find me on Twitter or LinkedIn @stevebarkley, or send me your questions and find my videos and blogs at barkleypd.com.