

Linda Brown Tribute Event Boston 9-21-24

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

Linda Brown, charter schools, education impact, mentorship, teaching excellence, curriculum focus, school culture, leadership, student achievement, BES fellowship, quality schools, educational vision, community support, academic performance, legacy fund

SPEAKERS

Dr. Howard Fuller, Sarah Tantillo, Jim Goenner, Ph.D., Jim Peyser, Mia Howord, Linda Brown, Rebecca Cass, Shara Hegde, Sue Walsh, Roblin Webb, Shantelle Wright, Doug Lemov, Lester Long



Jim Goenner, Ph.D. 00:00

The National Charter Schools Founders Library was honored to be on hand to document an event celebrating the contributions of Linda Brown and announced the first six schools to be honored by the Linda Brown fund. We met at the Children's Museum in Boston during the National Alliance for public charter schools national conference in the summer of 2024 Rebecca Cass, former Excel Academy Executive Director and longtime partner to Linda and B.E.S, kicked off the festivities by welcoming the distinguished panel to share and honor Linda's work and life.



Rebecca Cass 00:33

I first met Linda when I was a bright eyed, idealistic recent college graduate, I just landed what I thought was my dream job at the Massachusetts Department of Education, and when the realities of working in the bureaucracy did not really align with my vision for government work, Linda took me under her wing, told me to stick with it promised that together we would do some good.



Jim Goenner, Ph.D. 01:05

Jim Peyser served as the moderator for the panel discussion. Jim, of course, is himself one of the most respected leaders in education in the United States, having served as a managing partner at the New School Venture Fund and the Massachusetts Secretary of Education from 2015 through 2022 but he traces much that he knows about high quality education back to what he learned from Linda Brown.

J Jim Peyser 01:30

Thanks to all of you for being here bright and early to honor our friend and colleague, Linda Brown. And it's hard to believe that she's not with us anymore, but I know she's with us all in spirit, wherever we go, but certainly here this morning, and it's a privilege to be part of this event to honor her and the extraordinary work that she did and the impact that she had on public education and the charter school movement in particular. And obviously, I know all of you will appreciate it's already been mentioned the fact that we're up bright and early having this event, although she would probably prefer that we were on a bus going to a school somewhere, and so maybe we can do that after we leave, although, you know, it would probably only be one of her schools that's still open on July 1. But our agenda this morning is not actually to talk about, at least in this formal setting, to talk about Linda, to tell Linda stories per se, or at least not just telling the stories, but to talk about the work and to talk about the impact that she has had, and in particular the effect that she's had on developing leaders and being a mentor and a support in creating truly outstanding, excellent schools, and in that regard, we're, I think, all honored to have front of us today a panel of extraordinary educators who reflect not only the fact that they were all sort of touched and affected and supported and developed by Linda and the work that you did, and I should say, in partnership with Sue Walsh, you will be hearing from later, but who have created incredible schools that are having incredible and long lasting, lifelong impact on young people, not only who have been through the school, but who continue to go through the school and their Schools to this day. So they're not only talented, talented and talented leaders who have achieved great things, but they've also built great institutions that they and we all are incredibly proud of.

J Jim Goenner, Ph.D. 03:32

Jim then turned to Doug Lemov, who is the author of *Teach Like a Champion*, has gone on to be one of the most sought after supporters of teachers in the world.

D Doug Lemov 03:41

First thing I just want to say is that no one in this nation started, supported or facilitated the starting of more grade schools, in more places than Linda Brown. The question is, you know, who started the schools had changed the way a whole city perceived what was possible. It was Linda and the people who she chose and supported foster and mentor, and she did it and help those people over and over and over again in charter schools, she knows a thing or two about great schools, and she was, she was obsessed with great schools. And I try, I think, I think there are three and a half things that she obsessed on. No one obsessed better than Linda. So the first one, I would say that the three and a half things were teaching, curriculum, culture, and then the half thing is leadership, that just obsessed on and focused on those things and got everything else out of the way. So number one, teaching, which I think we all know, is incredibly hard work, gratitude to all the teachers, all but now in future, now and past teachers in the room and future teachers in the room, incredibly hard work and the soul of the school. I'm personally lucky. Like I said. That I get to travel to far away places and talk to people about construction. And when I do that and I showed teachers the video from Memphis Rise, and from Nashville Classical, and from Springfield Prep. People, you know, peoples jaws drop when they see quality instructions, of instructions in the schools that Linda helped found and that resets, their expectations, what's possible in the classroom. Sometimes they are those kids real? are those classrooms, real? Yes, we did not set this up with our cameras. We did not plan this. And so those beautiful those beautiful classrooms, are a reflection of Linda's number one value,

which is teaching. And then I think number two is curriculum, which is what you teach matters. Knowledge matters. This is shockingly overlooked in American schools for the most part. But Well, if you look at a regression of New York City schools, and control for property on the x axis and the Y axis, you look at student achievement, and they look at the schools that are positive outliers. This guy to my right, his schools are constantly above prediction, and it's because he's obsessed with what they teach, and with the knowledge and the curriculum, and that too is part of Linda's this incredible legacy. And the third one is culture, which is the hardest one in many ways, and maybe the one that Linda obsessed on the most. I watched a video last week of parents and students from University Prep in Denver, David Singer school, there's a graduating class reflecting on what it felt like we go to university and how incredibly successful it was. They talked about the academics, what they talked about more than that was how grateful they were for the power of self discipline, self regulation, the ability to delay gratification, the fact the school and set limits for them, and now they love that, and they appreciate it. And this, this principle, came through parents so deeply. And so those three things, teaching, curriculum and culture, that is what we're about. And when we have, when we look at a list of like, where are the excellent schools and positive outlier schools, the ones that changed the equation, one that had went to have them come as they're often fostered and supported by Linda Brown. They're part of the Linda Brown diaspora. And two, they have, they hold those things in common, and they obsess on them, and they have the force of will to continue to obsess on them. And so it's a constant challenge for us to remember what incredibly simple lessons have taught us.

J

Jim Goenner, Ph.D. 07:47

Next to speak on the panel was Mia Howard, who, in addition to founding a school in partnership with Linda Brown and B.E.S, has gone on to become a managing partner of the New Schools Venture Fund.

M

Mia Howord 07:58

Good morning, everyone, and it's really an honor to be here and not be here, but for the life of Linda Brown, I was in law school, misdirected. I'm sure that I did not want to call it a lawyer, sure that I did not want to become a capital markets lawyer, but that is like the last three years training for and was having a quarter life crisis and but I knew I wanted to, impact, the lives of others. I want to work with students, and I wanted that work to matter. And it's a nice real year that I came across an organization, B.E.S, and I admit my graduation activities and everything else, but I still settled off my application to B.E.S, after my organization and seeing Philadelphia, which is was in the city where I attended law school, and it was met with a 5am call from Linda. Many of you know that call, because you received that call, and she expects you to be, firing on all cylinders, and lucid and able to speak coherently about your passion and your vision for students, whats missing in the education system, and how we will play a role in closing those gaps. And after that first early morning conversation, I was fired up. And then she said, So now come to Boston, and here in 24 hours. And so there I went, and I have a chance to then also meet Sue Walsh. And these two women together are really just a force to be working with. And they saw something in me that I did not get seen myself, which was the ability to build an excellent school. And I did that without prior teaching experience like the hubris, is to think I could match with their motto, which is to say that they teach me everything I needed to know. And that's exactly what happened in the B.E.S fellowship. And in fellowship, I got not just

the wisdom of those two dynamic women, but cohort leaders that were learning together, sharing together, pushing each other. And that's ultimately the feeling of my career has been being in networks, learning communities, where we're pushing each other to do more faster, better, especially in this moment, but it's so deeply needed for students and for adults. And I just, I'm really just humbled to know me on the same stage with leaders whose schools I went to in the fellowship. Many, many years ago, I was involved in school for a month at Freedom Prep. I spent summers learning from Shantelle's team, like learning how to infuse every day with joy. But also in rigor, was in Lester Long's war room data war room, learning how to really like split the details of what data can tell us about us working and not working in our schools. And then the moment in my career where Doug Lemov approved Intrepret College Prep. I texted my parents that day . . . and so, and all of the things in between. And so what the gift of this room is that we are better together, and we have a lot more work to do. And so it's so great to see some of the people that I learned from, and who are now learning and beginning their boundary journey. So just the whole continuum. And so how can we stay in better communication, communicating what's needed, what's missing. Because Linda was always, always going to ask, what next.

J

Jim Goenner, Ph.D. 11:17

Shantelle Wright spoke next. Shantelle was the founder of achievement prep in DC, and has gone on to become the regional vice president for Teach for America and to serve on the DC Public Charter School Board.

S

Shantelle Wright 11:29

Good morning, everyone. This is very difficult for me, given who Linda and Sue are and work in my life, but I'm gonna, I'm gonna stay focused. So funny to hear them. Of course, you talk about x and y axis on the panel. Um, because that was actually the day that I wanted to quit the fellowship. It was the day that Doug Lemov came and he was talking about the X axis and the Y axis and the scatter plots and the non reference in the upper right quadrant. And I was like, What the hell? And I got up and I went into the office, and Linda and Sue were sitting there, and I was like, This is crazy. I don't know what this is. This is not what I was called to do. And I started crying. And you know, if you have been in Linda or Sue's office, they look at you. And Linda said, Are you finished? And I was like, Yes, I'm finished. And she was like, Okay, go back in the room. And I was like, but I'm telling you, I don't understand what he is saying. And she said, if you will, and you'll do it and you'll do it well. And that was it. And I went back in the room. And from that day on, I love Doug Lemov but I appreciate and know what it means to do it and do it well, we are all here because Linda has touched our lives in some way. Who would have thought a five foot white woman followed by a five foot two white woman could come into Southeast DC and tell us all what to do. And so I literally sent my my essays in I prayed, pressed in, that night at like five o'clock because I was in a law firm working and at 5am at 6am my phone rang, and I pick up the phone like you're trying to sound as if I was away, because it's also July, and who was up at like that early, ready to go, and Linda, is this Shantelle Wright? I was like, yes, did it? Did you write these essays? I was like, Yo, like, Yes, ma'am, I did. And she's like, well, I want to talk to you, and so does Sue, we're going to call you right back. Literally hangs up the phone. 10 minutes later, Sue and sit and live the call. And they said, How far do you live from the airport? I was like, 30 minutes. Well, we booked a flight for you at 9am for Boston. Like, literally, that is how she came into my life, but that was my entry into building

excellent schools with a great cohort of people, some of which are here schools that I also had the opportunity to visit. But I think more than anything, working with two women, and we have to say too, because they were peas in a pod and literally, literally change the trajectory of my life, so many lives, and impact so many children across this country.

J Jim Goenner, Ph.D. 11:34

The final panelist was Lester Long who, after having built a successful career on Wall Street, became a bes fellow and opened classical academies in New York, where he continues to serve to this very day,

L Lester Long 14:43

I'm the founder of Classical Charter Schools. We just finished our 18th year doing the same work. My story. Me with Linda. The first thing I think is, oh, she's not tall. And she somehow was looking through me, like she sees my soul. It's like, wait, she sees into me. She sees my thoughts before I've spoken my thoughts, and she's a truth teller. And we're going to talk about excellence. We're gonna talk about urgency. And she embodied those. She taught them to me, and I keep those first and foremost in my mind. She was a mentor. She's the well I go to whenever I'm feeling down, whenever I'm feeling stressed or questioning anything I just wanted to also share, you know, I had the opportunity to have her to visit our schools over the last 10 years, and it was just like with Sue and such a pleasure to show her what we have done. And she also, yeah, she, looks in the bathrooms. She's looking for the little thing. So it's attention that attention to detail she had was incredible. What an interesting person, right? She's so tough. She's such a tough person, so strong. Isn't it neat to think that you can believe in something so much that you realize you, yourself are almost going to be a casualty and war for that thing, right? It's almost very zen. It's this concept of like I see the truth, and no matter what it does, whether it takes my whole life or takes my life, I'm going to go toward that truth, you know, almost like a Martin Luther King type way of thinking. And I saw that occur, and I feel it too. I feel like this work is worth giving my life to, and that's how I'm able to get through it. But I just wanted to share my story and my just deep appreciation for all of you for being here, being a part of Classical, and being a part of my life. I actually am okay with Doug's charts, but we've all done great things for kids. We are building a convergent sense of best practice and what works in schools. I was always really appreciative that Linda brought us to all those other schools, got us on those busses, or us to see this is possible. You know, it's so hard to unring the bell, right? So hard to unsee. And for those of us at a certain age, you didn't hear about great schools in the black part of town. You just didn't hear about it didn't exist. And then you see it, and that's when you click. So you say, Okay, I'm going to give the next, the second half of my life to this work, and just seeing it, she continuously motivated to this day.

J Jim Goenner, Ph.D. 17:47

Sue Walsh, Linda's key partner at B.E.S. closed the festivities, offering her own tribute to Linda, and announcing the six schools that were awarded the first grants coming from the Linda Brown Legacy Fund.

S

Sue Walsh 17:59

She loved life. Her spirit was intense, her will was fierce, and her heart was huge. And Linda loved to boss us around. She loved to get to the point. And for Linda, point of schools was student achievement, she would notify the excuses swirling around us, telling us follow the reasons students could not achieve. She didn't buy it. She knew what was possible, and she never, ever let go. Linda begrudgingly accepted that she was no longer able to help people start charter schools, but she wasn't done. She wanted to do more. With a few dollars, she could help students, and there is a QR code on every table. With a few extra dollars, should help students through college, helping them with all the small problems that only money can solve along the road. So we're here this morning in Linda's name, to recognize charter schools that share Linda's values, that demonstrate excellence, urgency and fellowship and to donate in Linda's name, \$20,000 to each of those schools over a two year period to help their graduates on the road ahead

J

Jim Goenner, Ph.D. 19:36

Many other people were on hand who wanted to share additional thoughts about Linda we caught up with Robin Webb, the CEO at Freedom Prep, at an event hosted later that day by the National Charter Schools Institute.

R

Roblin Webb 19:49

Linda Brown's special to say the least, and I no longer am afraid of the seven eight, but I felt like I could get there when I wanted to. So it's been 17 years since the fellowship you. Go on 23 as well. So, yeah, I was an attorney. I started out my career as an attorney because I, my passion has always been civil rights. So I want to be a civil rights attorney. I actually ended up working. I was an attorney for the law firm that was the firm for the Memphis City School District. When I realized I was actually on the wrong side, that I was actually hurting the people I was set out to help. And so the way that I got into this work, Linda Brown again, I coached a mock trial team at a local high school. Fell in love with the kids. Kids fell in love with me. But then I started to realize, particularly in Memphis, that our kids were nowhere near prepared to go to college or to have the choice to go to college. They were doing really well in the state assessment, and their ACT scores were too little to get them college and so a friend of mine sent an email about Building Excellent Schools. And at the time, I had loved practicing law. Isn't the email said, This sounds like you, and my response was absolutely not like I did in the video. Why would I ever I'm like, I see what principals go through. I want to do that. I don't want to run school. I don't want to raise money. We have to do all those things nowadays. But I applied that week. And Linda, she didn't give me the 6am call, but she did say it was maybe Wednesday, and she said, can you be in Boston this weekend? Now, my view Memphis has, like, negative 10 direct flights to anywhere in the country, and so she flew me up to Boston. Right she flew me up to Boston Saturday morning. Linda and Sue Walsh put all these scenarios, something about kids kissing on the back of the bus like that's all I remember, and what would you do? And they pretty much gave me the fellowship on a spot, and I accepted, not knowing what I was getting into. But it was, I mean, it was, it was life changing to say the least. It put me on a trajectory where I have been able to graduate seven, eight classes at Freedom, where 100% of our kids, every single year are accepted to four year college and university. And this is, these are some

of accomplishments, because of Linda Brown, because of Sue Walsh, and they have and there was some crazy moments to say the least. They're the reason why I've been able to affect kids in Memphis, and now soon to be Birmingham, Alabama,

J Jim Goenner, Ph.D. 22:20

Others we caught up with later via zoom. Shara Hegde, the founder of Cornerstone Prep and now CEO at Alpha Public Schools, offered her thoughts from San Jose, California.

S Shara Hegde 22:30

I'm really excited to share what Linda has meant to me. I joined the B.E.S. fellowship in 2008 after a grueling interview process, just like many other fellows had, I was put on a red eye flight from California and landed in Boston at 7:30 and I was in the B.E.S. office at 9am for an interview, and I walked out at 3pm with an offer in hand, and had to make a decision about whether I was going to start a school in the Bay Area, and it was a tough decision, but Linda convinced me to sign up and to start a school in San Jose. And little did I know that 16 years later, I would still be here in San Jose, and I would still be deeply entrenched in the community, still be leading schools and doing this work. And when I think about the impact specifically of Linda on my life, had she not said yes to me, I wonder where my life would be at this moment, because, because she said yes to me, like I have this amazing life in San Jose. I met my partner, I have my son, I have these four amazing schools that I have the privilege of leading and a community that has supported me for the last 16 years. Linda's impact on the national landscape is so great. I mean, she saw potential in so many of us to start schools that really had quality to them and the quality that we brought to each of our respective cities, I think is so important, because people were starting schools left and right across the country, but Linda's hallmark was starting quality schools.

J Jim Goenner, Ph.D. 24:11

Sarah Tantillo, the founder of the New Jersey Charter School Resource Center and the author of Hit the Drum, shared how Linda helped her spark in New Jersey, the same energy that Linda had released in Massachusetts.

S Sarah Tantillo 24:23

Well, Linda was a dear, dear friend of mine, and I met her before I started the New Jersey Charter School Resource Center, and she was really instrumental in supporting me in doing that. She was incredibly generous with her time and her resources. I called her out of the blue, said, You know John Schnarr and Ted Kolderie said, I should call you. And she spoke with me for an hour and basically taught me how to start a resource center. So she was running, one of the earliest resources. Resource centers in the country and in Massachusetts and in New Jersey, our law came after theirs. And, you know, I was interested in trying to get something off the ground, and she was really beyond helpful. About a month after I met her on the phone, I met her in person in Minneapolis, there was a little conference in the early days of other people who were working in the charter space, it was really only about 60 people coming from various

states at that point. And she she arrived, and the pretty much I saw her, this is true. I saw her at the front desk, standing next, you know, Linda was very short. She was standing next to Scott Hamilton, who was very tall. They looked like Mutt and Jeff and I had never met her in person. I didn't know what she looked like, but I just had a feeling like, I bet that's Linda. But I was, like, a little nervous, because, like, she was kind of a rock star, and I was a little bit nervous to approach her. So I was just like, you know, I just kind of like, checked in and went to my room, and then there's this banging on the door, like, five minutes later, and it's Linda holding a stack of, like, 10 pounds of paper. I'm not even exaggerating, like, just 10, like, probably five reams of paper worth of stuff. And she's like, I brought you some things and, you know? And she's like, Here you go. And it was like, everything from like, how to run an event to her budget. I mean, she didn't need to share all of these things, right? And it was just really generous of her, and I really appreciated it and enabled me to hit the ground running. A couple other things about Linda, I really, she really was visionary. You know, she said to me early on, it's really important that people see what's possible. And that made me think about how we were doing the work in a way to not only for people who want wanted to start charter schools, but also for the broader public to understand what charters were. She she was just a really, you know, thoughtful person, in addition to being a fantastic, you know, educational visionary. And when you think about the 1000s and 1000s and 1000s of of people whose lives have been affected, you know, it really says a lot about how any individual can make a difference. And I think that's a really important message for everyone to hear. You know, we all, we all can make a difference, right? And Linda certainly did, and I'm really grateful to her for that.

J

Jim Goenner, Ph.D. 27:29

Howard Fuller, of course, needs no introduction, but we will add that we heard that Linda had shared that if any Tribute Event was going to be held for her, one voice she would want included would be that of Howard fuller. He shared thoughts as only he can.

D

Dr. Howard Fuller 27:43

When you think about Linda Brown and you hear this term, a force of nature from now on, that's how force of nature should be defined Linda Brown, because Linda Brown was the fiercest, the most dedicated, the most relentless human being I've ever known. I mean, let me, let me put it this way, if you had a conversation with Linda Brown and you had problems with people being straightforward, then you're going to be in a very difficult period of time, because Linda Brown was one of the most straight forward people I have ever met. And I know how people always talk about there's certain people who don't suffer fools easily. Linda Brown, and so we, I mean, we had this, this tremendous friendship, right? And, you know, she would invite me to come and speak to the fellows, and, you know, and talk to them about, you know, education reform, or, you know, whatever I had on my mind, and I love to do it right. But I'd also run into Linda, like, in the airport, like we were, like, I remember one time somehow we ended up being in the LA Airport together. And the interesting thing about Linda is, if you ever did a video of Linda talking to someone, whoever the someone was, was going to be listening, because Linda was going to be talking, and so it didn't make no difference how long it was, 15 minutes, a half hour, hour. Your job was to listen. Your job was to hear what Linda had on her mind. And, you know, she was just a phenomenal soul, you know, and we were just. Fortunate that she was on our side of the movement, because and this is a horrible thing to say, but you know, you can picture a bulldog on your ankles, if Linda Brown got out of sorts with you. She

was like a bulldog on your ankles. You couldn't possibly, like, get away from her. She wasn't. She was not going to allow it. But her, but her love for the kids, her belief in developing young people so that they could be leaders, her belief in the power of people to be able to choose the best learning environment for their children. All of these things were important to Linda, and so I always viewed her as one of my special friends, because there are days when you need to call somebody who's going to tell you the truth, somebody who is not going to like be trying to spend time about what's politically correct, or this or that, because I don't think Linda even knew what that was, but, you know, we would have these conversations. I was like, Linda, I don't know a bout what's... Well, Howard, this is what you need to be doing. This is what you need to be thinking about. And then sometimes, you know, I would do the same thing for her. So, she's just a, just a fantastic human being, and I'm just so grateful that God allowed our paths to cross in this world. Special person, nobody like her. We're going to miss her, but we're going to so benefit from the fact that she walked on this earth.

J Jim Goenner, Ph.D. 32:05

We conclude this tribute to Linda, including a last special piece. As it so happens, the Founders Library was able to have an interview with Linda in July of 2023 it was one of the last recorded interviews Linda gave, and it showed that all the way through her remarkable life, she remained, as Howard Fuller put it, a force of nature for kids and learning.

L Linda Brown 32:28

Here's what B.E.S. suggested. Excellent schools are relentlessly focused on one thing alone, academic performance. This is the whole key to my work, I'm going to number two, now all students can achieve at high levels, and we never make excuses for low student performance by invoking conditions outside the school's walls, including poverty or social deprivation. Within these four walls, we have everything we need to succeed. Number three, we believe in a highly structured learning environment that is more and strict for we embrace without reservation, the Common Core Standards assessment and the use of data to drive instruction. Five great schools are driven by strong leaders who expect excellence in every detail of the school's operation. And number six, character and moral education are central to every strong school.