National Public Radio hosts a weekly radio essay called *This I Believe*. Anyone can submit their reflections on anything from world affairs to life, work, or family, and the project’s curator selects one for the broader listening audience. As I lay awake the other night, I reflected on a question posed to me during a site visit at a CPS School: What is your vision for the Columbia Public Schools? It occurred to me that perhaps, particularly after the current changes to attendance areas, I hadn’t shared what I believe. In August of last year, I set personal goals for the year (for example, be present at school sites and genuinely stand in awe of teachers, promote the important work of SRG, and support the progress toward a multi-tiered system of support at all levels of our system), but never did I state what I believe and how those beliefs guide my work as a leader. Here goes: I believe in the work of Cummins, Rothstein, and Lambert.

Jim Cummins believes that underrepresented groups (he uses the term *minority groups*) are either empowered or disabled by educators. He concludes the achievement gap could be closed if schools were to consider four important elements: cultural/linguistic incorporation, community participation, pedagogy, and assessments. Cummins argues that if educators rethink the way they teach underrepresented groups and move away from a “rhetoric of equality and the reality of domination,” then students from the dominated group would stand a chance in a dominating society. Richard Rothstein urges schools to consider how the achievement gap is directly linked to an enrichment gap. He argues that middle-class children are introduced to far more enrichment activities compared to their poor peers, and as a result, use these experiences to excel in school. These two philosophies have played a large role in my investment of time and resources into supporting our district’s goal to have an enrichment experience at each grade level. In Columbia Public Schools, first graders go to the planetarium and second graders learn about birds through the Audubon. Thanks to James Melton, all third graders go to the symphony, and fourth graders
currently go to the Capitol as well as learn about and go on the Missouri River. We’re working on a nature experience for fifth graders, and 200 fifth graders, thanks to Mike Szydlowski and Ragan Webb, went on the inaugural annual trip to the Great Smokey Mountains this year (not to mention the 800 kids who go to the Tetons each summer). Sixth or seventh graders (depending on their middle school) take an overnight camping trip and we are working on an eighth-grade trip to the Lyceum Theatre. Ninth graders, thanks to Jill Villasana’s advocacy and Lindsey Troutman’s leadership, go to the Truman Library’s Decision Center for an amazing Project Based Learning experience. All tenth graders go to True/False and eleventh graders… well, we pay for your ACT. You’re welcome! But seriously, it could be the difference between a child going or not going to college. Additionally, the creation of a STEAM school at Jefferson Middle School and the Geometry In Construction course at Battle High School moves CPS away from a “rhetoric of equality” and instead towards an enriched education.

Linda Lambert writes that schools are “business as usual” environments where reflection and analysis of experience are seen as luxuries, and therefore, play a very small role in schools. I believe that schools need to seek out ways to promote “participation and reflection” and the creation of community. The community Lambert writes about is defined as “the reciprocal processes that enable participants in an educational community to construct meanings that lead toward a common purpose of schooling.” And that is achieved by moving “outside of oneself, to differentiate one’s perceptions from those of another, to practice empathy, to move out of the self and observe the responses and thoughts of another.” This is the goal of our equity work in our school district. I believe this to be one of the more difficult challenges at any school site or in any district. Building consensus among different perspectives, values, and experiences is not easy. In my experience, people are willing to bend in a new direction once their values are identified and
given credence. So how do you become the high achieving school district that everyone genuinely wants to become? Create opportunities for authentic collaboration. Lambert’s work is the driving force for our vision for standards referenced grading (SRG) and a three-tiered model of support (RtI).

My belief in the aforementioned individuals is unwavering. Cummins reminds me that courageous conversations about how the system can support all children are essential. Rothstein reminds me that when we enhance the learning opportunities for every child, we’ll see the true development of the whole child. Lambert reminds me that we must learn together, listen to each other, and trust one another if we’re going to be successful in our mission of providing an excellent education for all students. That brings me to recent questions about resources and the allocation of resources in our school district.

Last month, Heather McArthur, our Chief Financial Officer, led a session with our district leaders around prioritizing our upcoming budget. We harvested the collective wisdom of the more than 100 participants to help us see that instructional supports and mental health supports were highly valued. As we make decisions for our district’s children, we will do it with our two district goals in mind: Helping schools give children the best chance at academic learning and helping them build systems of support when it comes to the very real mental health issues of our children. If that means more resources at one school than another, I am comfortable doing that as long as the decision is made with these two goals in mind and according to the values of our school district: transparency, trust, integrity, empathy, collaboration, and grace.

Thank you for listening/reading this. It is what I believe.