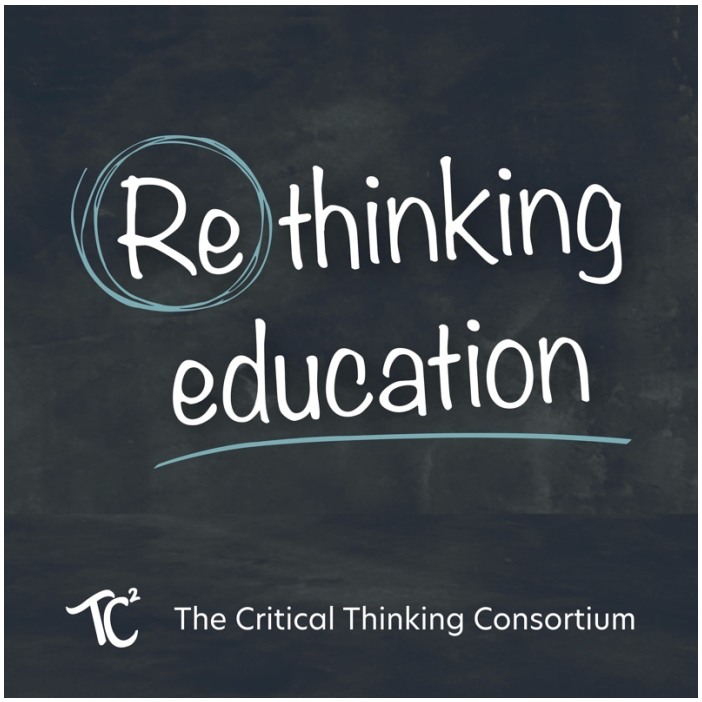

Transcript

Welcome Back to School Message 2025 from Usha James

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Usha James, Executive Director of The Critical Thinking Consortium

Welcome back to school, everyone. I'm Usha James, the Executive Director of The Critical Thinking Consortium, and I'm super excited for the school year.

One of the reasons I'm feeling energized is that we spent last year getting really clear on our mission at the Consortium, our why. I think when we start the school year grounded in why we came into this profession, what we are trying to achieve, and who we are serving, it helps us start the year in a good way, and it keeps us grounded when things get busy and challenging as the year progresses.

What's our why?

Our Mission

Our mission is clear. We are in it to nurture quality thinking that inspires action for a flourishing world.

I'll unpack that a little bit, and I would like to invite you to think about your mission. What's your Why? What parts of our Why resonate with yours?

First, we want to nurture quality thinking, as we know you do too. The research has been very clear for a long time. If we want learning to be meaningful, if we want it to stick, if we don't want to simply have the learning evaporate out of learners' minds, they need to think deeply about what they are learning. They need to grapple with it. They need to think critically and creatively, and collaboratively about what they are learning.

The second part of our mission, I hope, also aligns with yours. That is, we want to nurture quality thinking that inspires action.

Whether our learners are younger students or older students or adults, we want to make sure that the learning opportunities we are designing don't simply end as intellectual exercises or make work projects, but that the thinking that learners engage in helps them make decisions about how they want to engage with the world and with each other and with themselves, inspiring concrete and positive action.

And finally, to what end?

We hope that all learning inspires action that leads to our individual and collective flourishing. We work towards a flourishing world. We don't see academic achievement and well-being in silos. Robin Wall Kimmerer, in her book *Serviceberry*, reminds us that all flourishing is mutual, and that means so many things to me.

It means that we need to see the link between academic achievement and well-being. When one flourishes, so does the other. It means that learners won't flourish unless their peers are as well. And I think it also means that educator and student flourishing is mutual.

As teachers, we thrive when we see our students thrive. And when we feel steady and regulated and have clarity about who we are and what we are trying to achieve and how to achieve it, our students also feel steady and more regulated. And they trust that they can be themselves and take risks and make mistakes, and it will be OK.

Putting the Mission into Practice

So how do we achieve that mission? What kinds of practical things can we do in our classrooms and in our schools and across the district to nurture quality thinking that inspires action for a flourishing world?

Our framework sets out four dimensions or categories of practice. I'm just going to talk about one today, and I think that it's an important one for the beginning of the school year and throughout the year.

That is, we have to grow communities of thinkers in our classroom, in our schools, and across various members of the educational community. As a senior team, as a leadership team, with parents, with families, with trustees. If we are going to think together and act together in a good way, we are going to need to grow those communities of thinkers with care and love and attention.

Growing a community of thinkers has many elements. I'm going to focus on three elements today.

1. Start with Ourselves

First, if we're going to grow a community of thinkers, we have to start with ourselves. Understanding yourself and who you are, and your identity, and how they are likely to impact the community. We invite you to stay reflexive.

From the moment students walk into your classroom, your beliefs and experiences, and identities influence how you engage with them and how you interpret their actions. Take a moment before they walk through the door this September to think about students in the past that you've really managed to develop a good relationship with, and also those whom you haven't been able to connect with or reach. What do you notice about how your beliefs or experiences shaped or influenced those relationships?

I know that for myself, someone who came from a very stable home and was privileged to have access to what I needed to learn and was financially secure enough that I didn't have to take away time from my studies to work, that I likely, as a teacher, had a harder time remembering that not everybody had my experience. Perhaps my former students would say that I didn't

really understand their circumstances. I'm grateful that I've learned to be reflexive, but gosh, I wish I was a little bit more when I started teaching.

Meaningful and impactful reflection that results in changes or refinements to our practice takes time. How will we plan our days and our weeks to carve out that time and to protect it in order to create the space to be reflexive, to think about the impact of our practices on the learner, especially on those learners who we are having a hard time supporting, those for whom our current practices are clearly not working.

2. Build High-Trust Relationships

Second, if we are going to grow a community of thinkers, we need to build high trust relationships from the get-go. Everyone talks about relationship building and how essential it is to learning. That's nothing new.

But what kind of relationships are you going to build?

Students flourish in a school when they trust that the teachers and leaders in the school will care about them, will have their back when they make a mistake, will pay attention to how they're doing, will support them when they're having a difficult time.

This is not just about having a caring adult in the school, although that's important of course. Students see our care and support through our instructional choices. How we set up the classroom, how we ask questions, and how we assess learning. Our daily routines can build trust or undermine trust.

3. Learn About Our Learners

Third, if we are going to grow a community of thinkers, we need to learn about our learners early and in an ongoing way.

Think of all the things you try to learn about your learners in the first week of school. Of course, it's lovely to know about their interests and hobbies and of course learning about them in that way will not only help you build a rapport, but could shape some of your assessment and instruction decisions.

We also know how easy it is for the things that learners tell us about their summer or what they do in their spare time to fall by the wayside when things get busy.

What else is crucial to learn about learners at the beginning of the school year? The first day of school, that first week, is one of the first opportunities to meaningfully invite and respond to student voice.

Here are some activities that I love:

- You could show four pictures to students that have nothing to do with school, but show different types of experiences that they might be familiar with. For example, maybe one picture of a person struggling to walk in a snowstorm, one with someone on a peaceful bike ride through the country, one with someone on a crowded bus, and one with a couple of people enjoying riding the rapids in a canoe. Ask them, “Which image best represents what school feels like for you?” Invite them to talk to a partner and listen as they share their perspectives or offer an alternative image that resonates with them.

- Here's another idea I love doing. I would ask students to take out a piece of paper and fold it in half lengthwise and then in thirds in the other direction. When they opened it back up, they would have a six-panel storyboard. In the first panel, I asked them to draw me as the teacher giving them a task or assignment to complete. Stick figures are fine. In the last panel, I asked them to show themselves, submitting the task back to me. And in the four panels in between, I asked them to draw what typically happens for them. Some students show themselves starting right away. Others show themselves playing basketball, playing video games, and generally putting off the task until the last minute. Some don't even draw themselves, handing it in at the end. I learn so much from students through this fun, accessible activity.

- Okay, one more. What if we ask students early on in the year, “What helps and hinders their learning at school?” Maybe a two-column chart that the class constructs collectively: *What has helped you learn in the past? And what has gotten in the way of your learning in the past?* We could then co-construct criteria for a learning environment and even for instructional and assessment practices that support their learning. It might be something that we come back to regularly and invite them to assess how well we as a class, how well I am as an educator, are meeting those criteria.

Closing Thoughts

What are you thinking now about some practical approaches to growing a community of thinkers in the first days of school?

Whether you are a classroom educator, a school leader, or a district leader, how will you start the year in a good way and then build in the time and space to think critically and creatively and collaboratively about your practices?

All flourishing is mutual. That breathing room to think is essential to your flourishing as an educator and also essential to students' flourishing. Ask for that time, protect it, and use it to re-center and remember your why.

We're always here for you if you would like a thinking partner. We are part of your community of thinkers, and you are part of ours. We are in it with you every step of the way.

Have a great start to the school year.