

A. B. Herr Award 2021

Laurie Elish-Piper



Laurie Elish-Piper traces her decision to being a teacher back to when she was in sixth grade. She frequently finished her work early, so her teacher sent her to a first-grade classroom every afternoon to read with Nicky, who was struggling to learn to read. Seeing his eyes light up when she arrived and tracking his progress reading words and eventually short books, she reports being hooked on the goal of becoming a teacher. Following in the footsteps of her father, Laurie entered the teaching profession and taught at the middle school and elementary levels as well as in an acute care psychiatric hospital working with children in grades 4-8.

After earning her Ph.D. in 1995, she joined the faculty at Northern Illinois University (NIU) as an assistant professor. She described being blessed to work with amazing colleagues and students and to be mentored by two giants in the field of reading/literacy education – Norman A. Stahl and Jerry L. Johns. They supported her involvement in professional associations including the College Reading Association (now Association of Literacy Educators and Researchers). It is through CRA/ALER that Laurie had her first leadership opportunities, built professional relationships that supported her career progression, and led to her service as President of ALER in 2009-2010.

At NIU, Laurie progressed through the faculty ranks and was awarded the titles of Presidential Teaching Professor (2009) and Presidential Engagement Professor (2013), the highest teaching and engagement honors at NIU. During her tenure at NIU, she has served in a variety of leadership roles including Co-Director of a school-university partnership, Director of the Jerry L. Johns Literacy Clinic, Co-Director of the Center for the Interdisciplinary Study of Language and Literacy, Interim Chair of the Department of Literacy Education, Presidential Advisor on College and Career Readiness, and most recently Dean of the College of Education. During her time as dean, she reports being most proud of enhancing the climate of the college; emphasizing equity in all aspects of the college's operations; increasing enrollments; developing and implementing innovative teacher preparation program models to meet the needs of the region; and expanding engaged learning opportunities for students locally, nationally, and globally.

Laurie's scholarship focuses on the areas of literacy coaching, literacy teacher education, literacy assessment, and family engagement in literacy. She has over 100 publications (books, articles, and chapters) and over 200 presentations at professional conferences. She has served on the Board of Directors of the International Literacy Association, Association of Literacy Educators and Researchers, American Reading Forum, and Illinois Reading Council. She is an elected Member Dean of Deans for Impact for her leadership on innovation in literacy teacher education. She has served on the editorial boards of eight literacy journals and professional yearbooks. She approaches her work through a lens of collaboration, and she was honored to receive the Diane Lapp and James Flood Professional Collaborator Award from the International Literacy Association in 2020 (with Jerry L. Johns and Susan Lenski). In the past five years, she has received over \$6.5 million dollars in external funding to implement literacy education initiatives and research. She has directed dissertations for over 25 doctoral students who have secured positions in higher education and leadership positions in school districts.

When reflecting on her career, Laurie explains, “Teaching has given me the gift of touching the future and changing the world, one learner at a time. I may help a student understand a theory, conduct research, or apply an instructional strategy, and that process affects the learning of countless children and adolescents now and in the future. I can’t imagine a more rewarding profession, and I’m so grateful for all I’ve been able to do as an educator.”

As she ponders issues in education today, she is concerned about attempts to de-professionalize teaching, to vilify teachers, and to constrain what and how they teach. With the twin pandemics of COVID-19 and systemic racism, she believes education is the single more important tool for change, progress, equity, and the future of our democracy. In her role as Dean, she has been engaged with policy makers and legislators to address the teacher shortage, diversify the educator workforce, leverage teacher candidates as paid tutors, remove barriers to entering the teaching profession, and ensure that the “Science of Reading” does not narrow the reading curriculum or limit students’ access to the power of literacy. After several very difficult years, she notes that educators are exhausted and overwhelmed, and she fears we are losing great educators in PK-12 and higher education. She urges us to advocate for investing in, supporting, and lifting up educators who are truly the backbone of our democratic society as they support their students, families, communities, and our nation.

Biography written by Jerry Johns