



Recognize. Empower. Connect.  
Honoring emerging leaders who are redefining education.

Quarter 2 / 2026  
Reflecting + Connecting

### CONTRIBUTE & CONNECT

- Are you interested in contributing an article for the [NexGen newsletter](#)?
- Are you attending an event in the upcoming months? [Let us know](#) and we will share in upcoming newsletters.
- [Have a new idea?](#) We would love to hear from you.

### CONTACT A NEXGEN LEADER

- [Katelyn Focucci](#)
- [Victoria Veneziano](#)
- [Drew Wodarski](#)
- [Heather Tuley](#)

Nominate a 2026 NexGen!

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## Reflection Keeps Your Goals in Front of You

Michael Ralph, PhD | MULTISTUDIO | Vice President, Director of Research



My days feel busier now than ever. I feel exhilarated moving swiftly from one task to the next – solving problems for educators is what gets me out of bed in the morning! However, the urgent demands of each day should never distract from the important work that gets us closer to our vision for education. That is why it is essential to take deliberate time for reflection. Even when we are busy. *Especially* when we are busy.

Reflection is a personal, emotional activity. While we can reflect alone, building a trusting relationship with someone who can share your thinking adds another layer of value. Talking with someone adds the “rubber ducky effect” popularized in programming – being forced to say something out loud pushes us to clarify our thinking and examine details we might otherwise overlook. Hearing another perspective can also help us test our assumptions. If we can ask questions of one another, there is intellectual accountability that helps us avoid rumination and move toward growth.

Schedule time for regular reflection. I have chosen to turn my reflection into a podcast: [Two Pint PLC](#). On the show we read and discuss research over a couple of beers. Good reflection is like breathing; we take information in and share thinking out. The papers expand our thinking. In the discussion we challenge each other to apply the lessons. Our monthly cadence ensures we protect the reflection time. Some months I'm looking forward to recording, and others I am cursing 'losing' a whole day I'd rather spend on something else. However, not once in almost 10 years of doing the show have I ever regretted the time spent when we were done.

Make reflection a habit. Push yourself to do something with it. Write in a personal journal or talk with a trusted colleague. The regular deep thinking will ensure your daily hustle is getting you where you want to be going.

## Finding Your People: Why Community Matters More Than I Expected

Matt Rogers | KAY-TWELVE | Director of Marketing



For a long time, I assumed professional development was mostly individual. Get better at your craft, read the right things, lead great work. That's still true. What I underweighted was how much growth comes from the relationships you build along the way. When you spend enough time alongside people thinking carefully about the same

problems in slightly different roles, the connections you make start to do as much for your growth as the work itself.

That kind of community can look different for everyone. For me, three have stood out.

The Association for Learning Environments put me in rooms with incredible industry leaders all asking better versions of the same question: how do we build environments that actually serve learners? Stepping into a chapter leadership role changed how I heard those conversations, and more importantly, it gave me a reason to keep showing up with the same

The Society for Marketing Professional Services (SMPS) was one that caught me off guard. It's a community of marketers in professional services firms, mostly outside education. I joined expecting to pick up some marketing tactics. What I actually got was a group of peers in adjacent industries who think about positioning, growth, and storytelling for a living, and who are happy to swap ideas with someone solving similar problems in a different context. Sometimes the most useful conversations happen one industry over.

What gets me most excited about this NexGen cohort is that we already have everything we need to be that kind of community for each other. We come from manufacturers, A&D firms, school districts, and other key contributing aspects of education, all bringing different vantage points to the same questions about how learning environments serve students. That kind of mix is rare, and it's the same foundation the other communities I've been part of have given me over time.

If we lean on each other as a collective, share what we're learning, and stay curious about each other's work, we'll grow faster than we would on

group of people year after year. The relationships I built there are ones I lean on now, regularly.

The [Better Learning Podcast](#) became a different kind of community for me. Every episode is really just a conversation with educators, researchers, and practitioners who care deeply about how learning environments shape students and teachers. What surprised me was how often those recordings turned into ongoing relationships. People I interviewed once are now those I'll text when I'm working through something or want to talk an idea out loud before committing to it.

our own. As the "NexGen" of industry leaders, the relationships we start building here will become the network we carry with us throughout our careers. And the opportunity doesn't stop with this cohort. Whether it's industry organizations, peer groups, podcasts, local chapters, or simply staying connected with people doing meaningful work in adjacent spaces, there are communities all around us waiting to be leaned into.

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## Mentorship Feedback

*"Connecting a NexGen professional in the industry with a seasoned educator is extremely beneficial to both participants and the EDmarket organization! Both gain exceptional insight into each other's world of work and the synergy created through this Mentor Program is off the charts!"*

**Jay Drag**, VP of Operations, Charter School Associations, Inc.  
(NexGen Mentor)

*"One of the most valuable parts of NexGen Rising Stars is the mentor program. Having a mentee has reminded me that growth in this industry happens through connection, shared learning, and support from one another. The willingness of people to pour into others, open doors, share experiences, and collaborate is what makes this community so impactful. Positive connections like these not only support individual leadership development, but they help strengthen the future of the education marketplace."*

**Dr. Kimberly Robertson**, Executive Director of Choice Schools and Programs, Guilford County Schools (NexGen Mentor)

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*"What I've liked most so far is simply having access to someone outside of my immediate circle - someone from a different industry who can offer a fresh, unbiased perspective. It's valuable to have that additional viewpoint from someone who isn't close to my situation, and just knowing that resource is there is reassuring in itself."*

**Emily Head**, Customer Marketing Specialist, Steelcase Learning (NexGen Mentee)

(Click [HERE](#) to view the updated mentorship guidelines.)

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## NexGen Call To Action - Reflective Toolkit

Try at least 2 different reflective practices in the upcoming months.

This [downloadable toolkit](#) is designed to help education leaders, designers, and school furniture manufacturers build intentional, collaborative, reflective practices into their work. Use these tools during meetings, projects, and events to improve outcomes and strengthen partnerships.



### Tools include:

- What? So What? Now What?
- User-Centered Reflection Loop
- Co-Design Reflection (For Joint Teams)
- Prototype → Test → Reflect → Iterate Cycle
- Reflection Activity: 3 Lens Reflection Wall
- Weekly Reflection Prompts

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## NexGen Virtual Zoom Sessions

(All Cohorts Invited)

June 18, 2026, 3:00 pm EST | September 17, 2026, 3:00 pm EST

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## 2026 On-Site Events

Will you be there? Let's connect!

[Click here to visit A4LE Events Page](#)

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