

Returning to Their Roots: Reflections from Illinois's Partnership for Resilience Leadership and Staff

By Sara Kumar and Michelle Sedaca

Case Study | May 2022

Introduction

When Donzell Franklin lost his father at the age of twelve, he plummeted from being a straight-A student to being expelled in the space of two years. Franklin's school, in the region outside Chicago known as the Southland, lacked the coordinated support and overall capacity necessary to effectively intervene. Despite attending three different high schools, he eventually graduated and went on to attend Tuskegee University in Alabama, earning an undergraduate degree in political science and, later, his graduate degree in Educational Leadership. With his new knowledge and leadership skills, Franklin returned to the region where he grew up and served as the dean of



Mental Health Screening/Egg Hunt in the Southland hosted by Partnership for Resilience Project Organizer Donzell Franklin in University Park, IL.

students for the same middle school from which he had been expelled. "I was put in a position to change lives in the community I grew up in and this allows me to strategically have an impact on the entire Southland," he explained. Now as project organizer at the [Partnership for Resilience](#), a statewide nonprofit that brings together cross-sector partners to foster trauma-responsive schools in Illinois, Franklin continues to make a positive difference in his community. Similarly, the Partnership for Resilience's Executive Director Kristine Argue-Mason and Lead

Parent Mentor Organizer Ashley Zamot each grew up in the Southland and have intentionally chosen to live and work in the area. Their shared passion for contributing to their community drives their work to build trauma-responsive systems of care for all children living in the region.

Established in 2016, the Partnership for Resilience emerged from an earlier cross-sector effort called the Southland Education and Health Initiative, which was located in the southern suburbs of Chicago's Cook County. The Partnership for Resilience joined the [EdRedesign Lab's](#) (EdRedesign) By All Means (BAM) initiative, a national network of local communities that are implementing cross-sector approaches to improve outcomes for children, in 2017. Unlike other BAM communities that

are helmed by a children’s cabinet convened by a mayor, the Partnership for Resilience is led by a steering team. Over time, the organization has continued to grow, launching similar work in rural southern Illinois. In 2018, the Partnership for Resilience formed Resilient Southern Illinois (RSI), which serves as an advisory committee that guides the work in southern Illinois.

Currently, the Partnership for Resilience is partnering with nine school districts in the Southland and 16 small school districts in rural southern Illinois. These districts organize school-based “resilience teams” of teachers, administrators, union leaders, and school support staff who receive ongoing training, coaching, and resources from the Partnership for Resilience as well as create action plans for integrating trauma-responsive practices. The Partnership for Resilience is also partnering with primary care providers in the Southland to facilitate children’s access to mobile and clinic-based health services, including vision, dental, asthma, and immunization care. Most recently, the organization has initiated new partnerships in Springfield, the state’s capital.

This case study chronicles the individual experiences of the Partnership for Resilience’s leadership and staff, drawing from interviews conducted in the fall of 2021. Collectively, the case illustrates how each person’s connection to the Southland has shaped their career trajectory and motivates their ongoing work. The piece first profiles Argue-Mason, Franklin, and Zamot, and then concludes with a set of key takeaways.

"Talent, Potential, Hope": Executive Director Kristine Argue-Mason

Growing up in the Southland, Kristine Argue-Mason was immersed in a strong sense of neighborhood pride. Feeling safe within what she called a “community of peers,” her town was a place where every resident could grow and thrive. Throughout the summer, children often played together while their parents were working. Her neighborhood’s shared sense of responsibility for one another created a space in which every child felt secure. After graduating high school, Argue-Mason attended Hampton University, an HBCU (Historically Black College and University) in Hampton, Virginia, excited to use this as an opportunity to not only further her education but also to experience a different part of the country. After finishing college, she returned to her community to teach at the high school she graduated from.



Executive Director Kristine Argue-Mason

After nearly 16 years in education, the last five of which were spent teaching at the alternative high school in her district, she found herself burned out and suffering from what we now know as compassion fatigue. Exhausted, but still hopeful that she could have a positive impact in some way, Argue-Mason walked out of the classroom and into the profession of education labor relations. This career transition involved moving from the southern suburbs to the northern suburbs. Argue-Mason found living in the northern suburbs to be eye-opening, as the disparities between two

regions less than 35 miles apart were stark. For example, instead of the 20-minute drive to the grocery store in the southern suburbs, the northern suburbs had four well-stocked markets within walking distance. When driving back south on Sundays for church, she also noticed deep inequities between the communities. The closer to her former community that she got, the more prevalent the decline in the quality of housing, type of businesses, and available resources. This weekly experience led Argue-Mason to return to the Southland in order to contribute to her community.

“[My] motivation comes from an obligation to give back all that was given to me. There’s something about being able to do good work where you live for people who are your neighbors.”

- Kristine Argue-Mason, Executive Director

Once back in the Southland, she paid closer attention to the changes that had occurred in her community and those closely surrounding areas. The thriving community she remembered now faces systemic challenges such as neighborhood blight and insufficient investment. Yet, Argue-Mason is hopeful, recognizing the Southland’s strengths, talent, and potential. Continuing as a labor relations consultant and then a director of instructional resource and professional development with the Illinois Education Association (IEA), a state affiliate of the National Education Association (NEA), she had the opportunity to serve on the steering committee with the Partnership for Resilience. Argue-Mason saw close alignment between her passion for ensuring that families and children have the resources they need to grow and thrive and the organization’s mission. When an opportunity arose in 2021 to apply for the position of the Partnership for Resilience’s first executive director, she seized it. “[My] motivation comes from an obligation to give back all that was given to me,” Argue-Mason said, reflecting on how her community played a significant role in her own growth and development. “There’s something about being able to do good work where you live for people who are your neighbors,” she added.

As executive director, Argue-Mason oversees all aspects of the organization. Her work stems from her desire to impact communities like where she grew up and where she currently lives. “Living where you work and working where you live is a huge responsibility,” she described. Meaningfully partnering with schools, families, and students is central to her work. According to Argue-Mason, it’s vital for organizations like the Partnership for Resilience to be intentional with its programming, ensuring they ask families, students, and schools what resources they feel are important. “[It’s a] powerful feeling to know that as an organization we’ve asked school districts, parents, [and others] what they need and then work with them to help them get it,” she expressed. Authentic community engagement is ongoing work, and the Partnership for Resilience continues to make a concerted effort to partner with school districts to identify their needs and build their capacity to provide trauma-responsive supports and essential health services for students.

Reflecting on her early experience as executive director, Argue-Mason emphasized that she is building on progress that was already underway. By raising awareness about the impact of toxic

stress and trauma in the lives of children and sharing strategies to mitigate its effects, she believes that the Partnership for Resilience is helping to support the community’s healing. She is also proud to participate in larger policy conversations focused on child wellbeing. For instance, the Partnership for Resilience is a member of the statewide Whole Child Task Force and is partnering with the Center for Childhood Resilience at Lurie Children’s Hospital, the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE), and the state department of public health in a joint effort to establish a trauma-responsive designation for schools and community-based organizations across Illinois. In addition, the Partnership for Resilience is working to help develop the state’s new Children’s Mental Health Plan. Looking ahead, Argue-Mason is optimistic about the future and is in the midst of spearheading the development of the Partnership for Resilience’s new strategic plan. She intends for the Partnership for Resilience to continue to grow and become a leading backbone organization in the Southland and beyond, serving as a blueprint for other nonprofits working to strengthen child outcomes across Illinois.

“A Diamond in the Rough”: Project Organizer Donzell Franklin

Donzell Franklin’s family settled in the Southland before he was born, seeking to move away from the challenges of crime, drugs, poverty, and gun violence that were facing Chicago. Losing his father



Project Organizer Donzell Franklin

during childhood, a crushing experience that his school was unequipped to address, helped him realize the deficits of the broader education system. He eventually decided to pursue a career in education, focusing on trauma-informed work. After graduating from college, Franklin worked for Chicago Public Schools (CPS) as an administrator for 13 years, serving in a several roles, including dean of students, director of social-emotional learning, and assistant principal. Franklin also routinely volunteered as a coach and mentor during his tenure at CPS. Franklin always wanted to serve and give back to his native Southland community, therefore, when an opportunity arose to do just that, he seized it. “[I] decided to come back to the community to be the change that I and my wife wanted to see,” he described.

Returning to his hometown, Franklin observed the urban challenges his family had sought to avoid become prevalent, making trauma-responsive practices even more crucial. Becoming the dean of students at the same middle school from which he was once expelled, he focused on changing the school’s disciplinary policies to employ restorative practices. Franklin found alternatives to suspension and eliminated student expulsions. Instead, he created safe spaces such as “peace circles” to heal trauma, enabling him to form trusting relationships with the youth.

In 2019, Franklin joined the Partnership for Resilience as project organizer where he has continued to pursue his vision of trauma-informed care for students. Through his position, he is collaborating with nine school districts in the Southland, supporting their efforts to implement trauma-responsive practices. Franklin has delivered trainings to partner school districts’ resilience teams

on topics such as vicarious trauma, multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS), restorative justice, and approaching discipline through a restorative lens. Additionally, he coordinates physical and mental health services by partnering with mobile health organizations such as Chicago Mobile Care and Advocates and the Ronald McDonald Care Mobile to provide physicals, immunizations, and dental services for students. He also ensures that schools are in compliance with federal vaccination mandates. As part of his role, Franklin is also the project coordinator for Project LAUNCH, a federal program funded through Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services (SAMHSA), which focuses on improving the overall wellbeing for children ages 0 to 8 in the Southland. According to Franklin, the Partnership for Resilience’s work is vital in order to address the challenges facing the Southland, including the heightened mental health crisis caused by the pandemic and the ongoing need to connect families and students to wraparound supports and health services. He perceives the Partnership for Resilience’s relationships with the nine school districts, reaching thousands of students, Governor State University, and health partners as key opportunities for strengthening the overall region.

In addition to his collaborative work with the Partnership for Resilience’s partner districts, Franklin is extremely active outside of the school setting. He considers athletics a constructive activity for stress management and a healthy socioemotional outlet. Franklin manages a football and cheer program, started a wrestling program, and is currently providing positive extracurricular activities



Partnership for Resilience Project Organizer Donzell Franklin meets with retired NBA Champion Bill Cartwright to discuss ways to use athletes’ “star power” and influence to address mental health stigma in communities of color in the Southland.

for over 300 youth in the Southland. Wrestling is especially meaningful to Franklin because the same year he was expelled from school, he also became a state champion in wrestling. He sees wrestling as an opportunity for positive anger expression and wants to foster a similar space for the next generation. Over time, the number of wrestlers grew from initially four to now 25, 17 of which have placed at state competitions. In addition to leveraging sports to support students’ mental health, Franklin uses sports as a vehicle for civic engagement, taking his teams to feed the homeless and to participate in cleaning up neighborhoods.

Looking ahead, Franklin is optimistic about the Southland’s growing potential, calling the region “challenging” but “a diamond in the rough.” He wants to see the Partnership for Resilience expand its work in the area, using the organization’s opportunities and resources to continue to address barriers facing children and families. Increasing and maximizing partnerships is one way that he envisions such progress. In addition to promoting trauma-informed approaches to supporting young people and families through his work at the Partnership for Resilience, Franklin recognizes

the importance of policy change to make long-lasting impact. Currently, Franklin is a council member entering his third year of service and plans to run for mayor of a town in the Southland in 2023. Franklin is both prepared and excited for this potential leadership role, which will enable him to contribute to his community in new ways.

“Every Town is Like a Family”: Lead Parent Mentor Organizer Ashley Zamot

Moving to the Southland from California just before entering the sixth grade, Ashley Zamot immediately experienced a strong sense of community within her new town, Park Forest. From



*Lead Parent Mentor
Organizer Ashley Zamot*

neighborhood gatherings such as tree lighting services and summer concerts, to simple acts of kindness like helping someone with a flat tire, Park Forest emulated a large family. According to Zamot, every parent knew every child and would often watch groups of kids as they played in the streets or walked the sidewalks. However, Zamot also experienced challenges, such as racism. Reflecting on how the Southland has changed over time, Zamot observed that the region has grown significantly, increasing its population and diversity. The convivial spirit that she experienced growing up has remained the same. While Zamot moved away from the Southland for a few years, the region’s deep ties led her to return. “I wanted my kids to have the same sense of community I had when I was growing up,” she explained.

Zamot’s close connection to the Southland led her to join the Partnership for Resilience in 2018. She manages the Parent Mentor program, a statewide initiative that trains caregivers to support students and builds their professional skills. Zamot oversees all aspects of the program—from executing contracts to disseminating information to delivering trainings. She previously served in a similar role at the Southwest Organizing Project (SWOP), an organization that works with local schools and institutions in Southwest Chicago to engage and unite community members. SWOP, in partnership with the Logan Square Neighborhood Association, operates the Parent Mentor program. Currently, the Partnership for Resilience is implementing the Parent Mentor program in eight schools in the Southland and three schools in southern Illinois. Before mentors start working in the classroom, they must participate in 15 hours of training. They work in the classroom eight hours, four days per week as well as participate in a two-hour weekly training. Mentors serve a total of 100 hours, and once they reach this number, receive a \$1,000 stipend.

“I wanted my kids to have the same sense of community
I had when I was growing up.”
- Ashley Zamot, Lead Parent Mentor Organizer

In the classroom, mentors often serve as teacher assistants and provide support in several ways, including helping with lesson plans, assisting students with school work, cleaning up after events like science fairs, or accompanying younger students to the nurse or bathroom. The program also offers professional development opportunities to mentors, such as Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and job application assistance, mock job interviews, and wellness checks.

Zamot strives to increase parent engagement by mitigating barriers such as negative perceptions of schools. While many people are “afraid of the unknown,” Zamot helps address parents’ concerns by simply getting them in the door of the school and helping them see the positive work that is being done. The program helps the school meet its parent engagement goal, in addition to serving as a bridge from schools to their respective communities. According to Zamot, the program enables parents to play a more active role in schools and have a greater voice in the education system.

In addition to working to increase parent engagement, Zamot seeks to raise awareness about essential services that are available for families and students, including social services, healthcare, adult education programs, and community classes. She plans sessions for mentors and the broader community to share information about local resources as well as federally-sponsored supports. Despite these efforts, Zamot recognizes that these sessions only reach a small percentage of residents, and therefore, additional outreach is necessary.

As Zamot reflects on her work, she points to multiple experiences that remind her why she has chosen to dedicate her career to her community. She has witnessed the organization’s growth and impact over the last several years. Zamot is especially proud of the recognition the Parent Mentor



Parent Mentors proudly showcase the program at a partner district school in the Southland.

program has gained, including by the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) and state legislators. Teachers, students, and families have also shared that they find the program beneficial. Parents have expressed the difference mentors make when they are in their child’s classroom, while students have described developing caring relationships with their mentors. Zamot attributes this relationship building to the rigorous application process that aims to identify mentors who are passionate about

the work. In addition to these impacts, mentors have helped address the challenge of inaccurate data and misinformation during the pandemic. To help rectify this problem, mentors broadly disseminated accurate information about COVID-19 and the benefits of the vaccine. “[It was] great

to see people with correct information. Information is the most powerful thing and with power you can make change,” commented Zamot.

Mentors also benefit from the program, gaining professional skills and experience. Many mentors have pursued further educational and career opportunities after participating in the program. According to Zamot, the program helps those who “wouldn’t get help before.” “Aha moments make me happy and feel proud of what I’m doing,” she described.

Looking forward, Zamot is hopeful and confident that the Southland’s close-knit community will continue to strengthen the region and expand opportunities for residents. “Although communities are small and not far from the city, the Southland [is] completely different from Chicago. Every town is run like a family,” she said.



Partnership for Resilience Lead Parent Mentor Organizer Ashley Zamot and staff go “door-to-door” sharing information and resources with residents.

Key Takeaways

While the Southland faces systemic challenges, the Partnership for Resilience’s Argue-Mason, Franklin, and Zamot all highlight the region’s strengths, which drive positive change for families and children. Their collective stories reveal insights that can inform other cross-sector efforts seeking to meaningfully engage community members in their work. These key takeaways include:

- 1. Dedication to a specific community or sector often stems from personal experiences.** While Argue-Mason, Franklin, and Zamot have different perspectives on growing up in the Southland, each described their personal connections to the region as motivation for

deciding to work in their local community and join the Partnership for Resilience. Argue-Mason's motivation is tied to her formative experiences as a child when she observed a vibrant, caring community. Franklin's passion for addressing childhood trauma and supporting youth in the region is rooted in his own struggles as an adolescent. Zamot's positive experience in her neighborhood encouraged her to raise her family in the Southland and ultimately work to improve its conditions.

- 2. It is critical for cross-sector initiatives to work directly with the community they serve.** Meaningful engaging families, students, and community members to understand their goals, interests, and needs is crucial for all collaborative efforts. At the Partnership for Resilience, Argue-Mason, Franklin, and Zamot each seek to establish strong connections with the communities they serve, gathering input on their specific needs. By doing so, the organization is cultivating and maintaining trusting relationships with schools, families, and students.
- 3. The allure of home often comes after leaving.** While Argue-Mason and Franklin's reasons for leaving the Southland were different, each wanted to return home after experiencing other parts of the country. Their desire to improve their hometown grew from the new perspectives they gained from living in other communities.
- 4. The Partnership for Resilience's work in the Southland and across Illinois is more important than ever since many communities lack access to essential resources, which has been exacerbated due to the pandemic.** Argue-Mason, Franklin, and Zamot each see a need for the Partnership for Resilience's ongoing work in the Southland and are committed to continuing to support students and families in the region. In particular, they perceive opportunities to further expand trauma-responsive practices across schools and community-based organizations, engage a greater number of families, and increase awareness about vital resources that can enable all residents to thrive.

Together, these stories illuminate the power of local residents leading efforts to foster healthy, flourishing communities. Identifying strategies to both retain individuals as well as promote careers in public service can further enhance cross-sector efforts. National service programs such as [Lead for America](#) provide one way to civically engage community members. Leveraging these types of programs and identifying other promising approaches to encourage residents to positively contribute to their cities, towns, and neighborhoods is critical for bolstering efforts to expand opportunities for all young people and families to thrive.

Appendix

Interview List

Name	Role	Interview Date
Kristine Argue-Mason	Executive Director, Partnership for Resilience	10/6/21
Ashley Zamot	Lead Parent Mentor Organizer, Partnership for Resilience	10/13/21 & 11/17/21
Donzell Franklin	Project Organizer, Partnership for Resilience	10/20/21

About The EdRedesign Lab

The EdRedesign Lab (EdRedesign) EdRedesign champions a broad, holistic model of developmental and educational opportunity for all children and youth, especially those affected by racism and poverty. We serve as a catalyst, through research, advocacy, and collaborative action, advancing the cradle-to-career field by promoting cross-sector community-based systems of support and opportunity to provide all children clear and accessible pathways to well-being, educational attainment, and upward mobility. We strive for a society characterized by racial, economic, and social justice.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the staff members of the Partnership for Resilience for contributing their time and insights to the development of this case. In particular, the authors would like to extend additional appreciation to Kristine Argue-Mason, as well as EdRedesign's Lynne Sacks.

Suggested Citation

Sara Kumar and Michelle Sedaca. *Returning to Their Roots: Reflections from Illinois's Partnership for Resilience Leadership and Staff*. Cambridge, MA: Education Redesign Lab, May 2022.

@2022 The President and Fellows of Harvard College