



**Leigh’s dedication to the Madison school community will be felt for generations.**

Leigh Vierstra was an essential and inspirational figure in MMSD’s community, beginning as a curious and energetic West High school student, and then as a highly regarded teacher and innovative leader in its central office. Leigh was a persistent and passionate educator and influenced many important programs for schools that continue to shape MMSD. On September 29th, 2024, Leigh passed away from complications due to a rare form of genetic ALS and then a serious fall. Despite living with an uncertain and sometimes terrifying trajectory, Leigh dedicated her entire life to her students, colleagues and community within Madison and its schools.

Leigh started her career at MMSD in 2007, as a student teacher in the Social Studies department at East High School. She was hired to that department the following year and quickly became a beloved teacher amongst students and fellow staff. Her colleagues remembered an “unflappable confidence, humor, originality and insistence on always improving her practice for the sake of student learning.” According to those who Leigh impacted, she “naturally connected with diverse groups of students, met them where they were at



and made them feel seen and loved.” Leigh believed that school was a crucial community for staff, students and families, and she was a born community builder. Leigh was involved in student congress, planning committees for numerous annual events like prom and homecoming, became department chair for the ESL/Bilingual department and eventually started the PaMoja program in Madison, bringing East high school students to Kenya for a truly life-changing experience.

In 2013, after traveling to Tanzania to climb Mt Kilimanjaro, Leigh joined the educational exchange non-profit, [PA-MOJA](#). Leigh wanted her students to have the powerful experience of travel and cultural exchange, particularly for students in need of financial assistance and organizational help to get there.



Through tenacity and dedication, Leigh successfully fundraised throughout the year, bringing select high school students and educators to Kenya for five incredible summers which

included mountain biking, rock climbing, cliff jumping, wildlife safaris, and campfires under the Kenyan night sky. East High school students developed friendships with teenagers at their Kenya-based sister school, forming lifelong connections and new understandings about themselves and the world around them. As she did in her classroom, Leigh made the world come alive through learning and community. Many of the students who accompanied her on these trips stayed close to her and saw her as a mentor and friend for the remainder of her life.

After a decade in the classroom, Leigh longed to utilize an aptitude for leadership and innovative ways to make change. In 2018, Leigh was chosen by Superintendent Jennifer Cheatham, to spearhead an experimental MicroSchool program designed to give high-needs students targeted communal and individualized support within their school. Leigh [reflected](#)

[greatly](#) on the successes and challenges of this short-lived but impactful undertaking, and it catapulted her into the next career phase working to bring innovation capacity and change to MMSD.

Leigh started her central office innovation work in 2018 as an Innovation Extern within the Research, Assessment and Data Use department, progressively moving to an Innovation Strategist then the Innovation & Improvement Supervisor. It was here that Leigh combined so many of her skills and passions. While she was adept at relationship-building at the local level, Leigh had a true gift of big-picture thinking and partnerships, as well as the doggedness to remove barriers and make things happen. Leigh always focused on bringing in the people closest to the problem - especially teachers, principals, students and families - and pushed for new ideas and ways to do the work, drawing on sources like agile, lean, [liberatory design](#) and human-centered design. In her six years working in innovation for MMSD, Leigh and the team facilitated 33 design challenges, 10 consultations, and 8 professional development opportunities for staff. Approximately 12,000 students and 1,500 staff across MMSD were served through prototype and pilot testing. In addition, she worked closely with key partners like American Family Insurance to bring innovative tools and practices from the corporate, tech and design worlds to seemingly intractable problems within schools and systems

As Innovation & Improvement Supervisor, she helped develop, create, support and manage many incredible projects for the district. In 2021, she oversaw the [BIG Ideas campaign](#), one of the ways MMSD used ESSER II federal funds from the second round of COVID-19 relief. Leigh and her team supported 14 locally developed and led projects , including a [barbershop training program at East High School](#), [robots for special education students unable to physically attend class](#), and a recording studio at Toki Middle School. In addition to Big Ideas, Leigh partnered with University of Wisconsin-Madison's School of Human Ecology to bring an [innovative scratch kitchen project to Nuestro Mundo](#) Charter School, and with the [Education First organization](#) to design and test a prototype that would alleviate middle school chronic absenteeism. Currently, a group of MMSD elementary schools are implementing an innovation Leigh helped to scale called "Collab Labs", designed by schools to give staff time to connect with each other during the school day. Leigh managed to do all of this while dealing with the effects of a

rare form of genetic ALS which took her mother and sister and had started to show signs in her own body during the last year of her life.

Leigh's dedication to the Madison school community will be felt for generations, within the programs she helped bring to the district and also in the hearts and minds of her students and colleagues. In Leigh's all too short life, she built bridges, believed in the power of teachers and students to change the world, and persevered in the face of adversity. As one of her close colleagues said, "Leigh never failed at anything. Because anything she did- good or bad- was an opportunity for reflection, collaboration and growth. She always showed up and asked others to show up to make an impact, to make things better, to reflect and be better." She will be missed.