Upper Arlington Progressive Education Report
September 2025

Upper Arlington Progressive Education Report

I. Overview – Recentering the Program

The Upper Arlington Progressive Education Program has served as a pioneering educational initiative for over fifty years, balancing parental choice, program independence, student ownership of learning, and community expectations of excellence in an ever-changing educational landscape. The program's ten foundational principles support strong engagement from families, students, and educators who value the program's distinctive approach to learning and teaching (see APPENDIX A).

Despite its long-standing success, the program faces several challenges and opportunities (e.g., clearer program identity, better coordination between Wickliffe and Barrington schools, and effective integration of the literacy curriculum and the Profile of an Engaged Learner with progressive principles/practices). This report is designed to help clarify, strengthen, and coordinate the UA Progressive Education program with specific recommendations emerging from a six-month collaborative inquiry process completed during the 2024-2025 academic year.

II. How the Report Was Created

This report emerges from a comprehensive process facilitated by Dr. Brad Mitchell and designed to gather stakeholder perspectives, observe daily practices, and review program history to inform the future direction of the UA Progressive Education Program. The inquiry was guided by the 10 foundational principles that define progressive education at Barrington and Wickliffe schools. This report was informed by

- 80 hours of direct engagement with stakeholders (e.g., meetings, focus groups, and interviews)
- 80 hours of data collection and analysis (e.g., review of standard student performance metrics such as test scores, progressive program historical documents such as program design, newsletters and evaluation reports, and AI augmented content analysis of school culture artifacts such as teacher written testimonials on the value of progressive education posted around both Barrington and Wickliffe)
- 40 hours of planning and logistical meetings to support the process (e.g., getting staff feedback on the design of focus group questions, review of report drafts).

The inquiry and report preparation process followed a few simple rules.

- **Transparency**: All community members were repeatedly and consistently informed about the report's purpose and process

- **Authenticity**: Findings reflect a broad range of community voices rather than predetermined conclusions of report author

- **Collaboration**: Community members participated as fellow inquirers rather than research subjects

- **Real World Checks**: Preliminary findings and/or report drafts were shared and vetted with leadership and staff teams from Barrington and Wickliffe

- **Respect**: All participation was voluntary and confidential where appropriate

School-Based Observations and Conversations Approximately 12 hours were spent in each building (Wickliffe and Barrington) conducting systematic visits that allowed for classroom and school neighborhood observations, and informal conversations with family volunteers, students, and staff. These observations provided insight into daily practices, student engagement patterns, physical learning environments, and the implementation of progressive principles across different settings and age groups. Building visits were complemented by structured interviews that explored opportunities and challenges for progressive program improvement.

Progressive Education Network Conference Three days at the PEN National Conference (October 2024) provided opportunities for sessions and conversations with progressive education practitioners from across the country. This engagement included an all-day Wickliffe site visit for PEN participants that featured meetings with parents and staff, offering comparative perspective on UA's approaches while identifying emerging trends and challenges facing progressive education nationally. Post-conference feedback sessions captured key insights and implications for the future of the UA progressive education program (November 2024).

Interviews and Focus Groups Individual interviews were conducted with middle school administrators and counselors to understand how progressive education elementary students transition to and perform in subsequent grade levels. Alumni interviews with UA high school graduates provided valuable perspective on the long-term impact of progressive education experiences on academic preparation, social development, personal success, and lifelong learning habits. Focus groups (two for each school) with Barrington and Wickliffe parents explored their perspectives on

program effectiveness, communication needs, and potential future directions of the program.

Staff Meetings Gatherings were held at individual buildings as well as combined sessions bringing together educators from both Wickliffe and Barrington. These meetings facilitated conversations about guiding progressive principles, program identity, organizational challenges, action priorities, and shared vision for the future. Staff members were engaged through appreciative inquiry and design thinking protocols, contributing both individual perspectives and collective understanding about progressive education principles, practices, and outcomes.

Student Performance and Experience Data Review Systematic review of student performance, experience, and perspective data sets provided quantitative and qualitative evidence of program impact. This analysis included examination of academic outcomes, engagement indicators, and student survey data that informed understanding of progressive education effectiveness and identified areas for improvement.

Research and Literature Review Analysis of national research on progressive education effectiveness and impact provided insight on common needs, challenges, and opportunities for improvement. Review of the current national landscape on the status of progressive education positioned UA's work within a broader perspective of the status of progressive education particularly in public school settings.

Report Review Team Collaboration Regular meetings with combined review teams composed of Barrington and Wickliffe staff ensured ongoing feedback, verification of findings, and collaborative refinement of report recommendations. Combined meetings included March 25 at Barrington, April 9 at Wickliffe, with final report review in early June. The review team process promoted transparency and authenticity while building shared understanding of report recommendations.

Documentation Analysis Comprehensive review of relevant historical documents included analysis of petitions and letters from staff and parents supporting continued parental choice options from March 2000, school newsletters spanning multiple decades, information night handouts, program descriptions, and program design documents. Analysis provided essential context for understanding the evolution of program identity, principles, values, beliefs, and practices.

The inquiry process employed analysis methods consistent with progressive education values of deep inquiry, reflection, and collaboration. Data from observations, interviews,

focus groups, and document analysis were systematically reviewed to identify common themes, community priorities, and organizational challenges.

This process provided the foundation for the five priorities and related recommendations identified in section VI of this report. The report strives to both honor and learn from the program's history while also charting a trusted way to recenter the program.

III. Program History

The UA progressive education program began in 1972 as an educational experiment engaging parents, educators, and university researchers in the work of educational philosophers like Montessori, Dewey, Piaget, and Vygotsky. It started with designing and offering a parental choice informal classroom. That "solve for one" experiment grew into multiple "informal" classrooms at Barrington, Greensview, Windermere, and the two middle schools. In 1988, Wickliffe Elementary became the first district school to house solely informal classrooms. Wickliffe worked with Harvard University faculty for seven years resulting in the publication of a book, *The Ohio Visible Learning Project,* and a video, *Learning to Document, Documenting to Learn.* Barrington has worked very hard to demonstrate how one school can offer informal and contemporary choice options under one roof while positively promoting school wide cooperation and community.

The adaptable but steady nature of the program is evident in the development of critical thinking skills, independence, and creativity for lifelong success. The program's commitment to documentation, reflection, and revision has earned respect and recognition as a vital UA educational offering and a model for progressive public school programs for the region, state, and nation.

IV. Stakeholder Perspectives

A. Family

Families consistently value the progressive program's emphasis on student independence, multi-age learning experiences, and personalized approaches to education. Parents report that the program's flexibility and focus on the whole child creates meaningful learning experiences. Parents note that their children demonstrate strong engagement and ownership of their learning, particularly through student-led conferences, project-based work, and collaborative decision-making processes.

However, challenges exist around clarity of program identity and outcomes in a changing educational landscape where progressive education practices are spreading even in the context of standards-based education and standardized testing. Some

families express concerns about how new district initiatives like the literacy curriculum and the Profile of an Engaged Learner will impact the program's distinctive characteristics. Parents seek greater transparency about how progressive principles and practices align with these new requirements and want assurance that student-centered learning will remain central to the program experience. They also recognize the value and challenges of effective literacy learning and helping their children successfully transition to the middle grades and beyond.

Wickliffe and Barrington held family meetings in May 2025. Approximately 100 parents attended the Wickliffe and Barrington meetings combined. While there was some discussion on the pending transition to the new literacy curriculum, both meetings focused largely on the decision made by both buildings to move back to single grade levels and no looping option to best manage the effective implementation of the new literacy curriculum. The primary organizational issue at both meetings concerned the potential impact of not offering a single grade, and/or a multi-grade looping format on progressive principles, practices, outcomes, and program identity.

B. Educator

UA progressive educators are deeply committed to the program's principles and generally feel supported in their pedagogical philosophy. The program's emphasis on professional reflection, collaboration, and student-centered approaches enables them to work authentically and effectively within their own classrooms. They value independence to develop thematic studies, integrate arts, and honor developmental variation among learners. They are concerned about how daily school scheduling dynamics impact the realization of progressive principles, practices, and identity. Instructional time and school schedule management have been an enduring organizational challenge.

Staff from both buildings see a critical need for greater and more intentional collaboration between Wickliffe and Barrington programs on issues such as program clarity, coordination, and professional development related to implementing the new literacy curriculum and the Profile of an Engaged Learner within a progressive context.

School administrators and teachers recognize the value of progressive education principles in developing engaged learners and appreciate the program's focus on authentic assessment and learner agency. They affirm that progressive principles and practices align well with research on effective teaching and learning, particularly in developing critical thinking, creativity, confidence, and autonomy.

There is a commonly expressed need for better coordination between Barrington. Wickliffe and the district related to the alignment with system-wide initiatives and the continuous development of program identity, coherence, and efficacy.

C. District

District leadership consistently expresses strong support for the progressive education program, viewing it as a valuable and distinctive parental choice option that enhances UA's educational offerings. Leadership recognizes the program's enduring focus on developing engaged, creative, and agentic learners and appreciates its contribution to the district's reputation for educational excellence and innovation. Like any program there is an expectation that outcomes align with expectations supported by evidence. Leadership sees the need for greater coordination as essential for program identity and coherence.

D. Student

Walking through Barrington and Wickliffe and talking to students across all grade levels is a profoundly uplifting experience. One clearly gets the sense of classrooms, neighborhoods, and hallways full of trust, positivity, and respect where teachers and children journey together in pursuit of joy, wonder, and meaning. When asked in random conversation about their daily experience, many students express both an appreciation of and a responsibility for classroom spaces that are safe and stimulating.

Wickliffe has the highest percentage of elementary students in the district on IEPs, and their rate is significantly higher than Barrington's. The related organizational dynamics of specialists and tutors with classroom teachers can create scheduling and classroom continuity challenges.

There is a convergence of family, educator, district, and student perspectives around a common set of opportunities and actions to help guide the recentering of the UA progressive program (see APPENDIX B). The combined perspective is straight forward – recenter a clear progressive program identity and related set of principles, practices, and outcomes for all stakeholders. Recentering involves a clear and coordinated way to create and sustain successful progressive education learning communities.

V. Program Identity

The progressive program's unique identity is amplified by its ability to integrate progressive learning experiences with standards-based education through innovative approaches like open inquiry, thematic studies, and authentic assessment. A primary

historical aim of the UA Progressive Education Program has been to maintain flexibility while ensuring rigor, adapt to individual student needs while building community, and honor developmental variation while meeting common academic standards.

Key program distinctions include:

Flexibility: Progressive practices can be applied across various curricula and learning requirements while maintaining core principles.

Authenticity: The program develops genuine engagement and ownership of learning that fosters lifelong learning.

Community: Strong relationships among students, families, and educators promote a safe and supportive learning environment.

Agency: Students develop self-direction, critical thinking, and decision-making skills that are becoming even more critical with the evolving emergence of AI technology.

As noted in APPENDIX B, there is a convergence of learning opportunities and instructional design challenges that must be addressed if the UA Progressive Education Program is to recenter itself.

VI. Recentering Priorities and Recommendations

Five priorities emerged from the report development process. The **question** driving each priority emerged as a consistent query across conversations and facilitated meetings. The **rationale** for each priority came directly from interviews, focus groups, and/or facilitated meetings. All content identified in the **recommendation** section for each priority came from common stakeholder perspectives vetted by the combined report review team composed of both principals and 4 staff representatives from each building. See APPENDIX C for a graphic that recommends an integrated planning approach to recentering the progressive program around the following five priorities.

1. Clarify Program Identity

Question: What is the program's identity and where is it going?

Priority: UA Progressive Education will strengthen its distinctive identity by clarifying how progressive principles integrate with new district initiatives while maintaining program independence and effectiveness. The program will develop clear articulation of what sets progressive education apart.

Rationale: Educators and families expressed clear concerns that the program may be losing its distinctiveness as new systemwide initiatives are implemented and

progressive education best practices continue to spread across all schools and grade levels in the district. Parents worry about diminished emphasis on flexible curriculum, adaptive scheduling, and multi-age classrooms that have been seen as hallmarks of the progressive experience. Staff struggle with questions about how to maintain progressive principles while implementing required curricula with fidelity. There are ongoing concerns about potential conflicts between progressive education approaches and federal and state policy requirements.

Educators report that progressive principles (see APPENDIX A) related to acting upon complex issues, respecting developmental variation, engaging in thematic studies, guiding child choice, engaging parents as co-educators, and integrating the arts need to be aligned with the implementation of the new literacy curriculum and the Profile of an Engaged Learner. Staff members need time and support for reflection and revision work related to recentering program identity.

Recommendation: Hold a comprehensive reflection and revision process with Wickliffe and Barrington progressive education staff in fall 2025 to address program identity, coordination needs, family engagement strategies, and alignment of progressive principles with the Profile of an Engaged Learner and literacy curriculum implementation. Process facilitation should be designed to support the full engagement of all participants to help clarify essential progressive education principles in relationship to development of learner agency, literacy learning, emerging technology use, and Profile skills/characteristics; and define grade-level alignment that demonstrates how progressive principles and Profile characteristics align.

2. Enhance Program Coherence and Coordination

Question: What type of progressive program coordination support is needed?

Priority: The program will strengthen collaboration and coherence between sites while respecting parental choice integrity and progressive practice autonomy. Coordination efforts will focus initially on recentering program identity, coherence, and capability while also supporting the implementation of a new literacy curriculum and the Profile of an Engaged Learner within a progressive context.

Rationale: Educators express uncertainty about nature, scope, and sequence of foundational, experiential, and student-directed learning within the progressive framework. Building principals need clearer understanding of their role in fostering community, collaboration, and continuous improvement while supporting program identity. Parents require regular communication and engagement opportunities,

particularly related to understanding literacy curriculum and Profile implementation within progressive contexts.

Staff consistently recognize principles related to developmental variation, thematic studies, and child choice as core program strengths that need protection and enhancement through coordination efforts (see APPENDIX A).

Recommendation: Provide dedicated program coordination support focused on implementing the five identified priorities while ensuring that coordination strategies and efforts strengthen program identity, coherence, and effectiveness. Focus coordination efforts on facilitating the reflection and revision process, developing learning documentation systems and practices, supporting professional learning, conducting literacy curriculum action research, aligning with Profile competencies, integrating specialized services, enhancing learner and family engagement, guiding appropriate technology use, supporting transition to middle school, and preparing for PEN national conference participation.

3. Conduct Meaningful Action Research

Question: How do we ensure that the implementation of a new literacy curriculum and the Profile of an Engaged Learner in a progressive context produces desired outcomes in desired ways?

Priority: Coordination support will include management of timely and relevant action research support to document, assess, and inform the implementation of the new literacy curriculum and the Profile of an Engaged Learner. Data on user experience (students, families, and teachers) will be particularly relevant.

Rationale: Educators face difficult questions about balancing progressive program approaches with literacy lesson fidelity requirements that may seem contradictory to student-centered practices. Educators need clarity about how the Profile of an Engaged Learner impacts progressive identity and principles, seeking understanding of alignment and enhancement opportunities within and across grade levels.

Staff express concerns about the nature, value, burden, and feasibility of conducting action research while managing daily teaching responsibilities and program implementation demands. There is recognition that action research should address implementation dynamics of new literacy curriculum and related professional learning within progressive education contexts.

Recommendation: Coordinate and support systematic action and user experience research related to literacy curriculum and Profile implementation that aligns with progressive principles, focusing on cognitive, behavioral, and social development, family communication, cross-disciplinary thematic learning, and learner agency (see APPENDIX C).

4. Strengthen Role of Parents as Co-Educators

Question: How do we engage parents particularly over the next three years as we recenter the progressive education program?

Priority: The program will enhance opportunities for meaningful parental participation in each phase of the process through established (e.g., town meetings) and new engagement mechanisms (e.g., family advisory group), and action research learning experiences (see APPENDIX C).

Rationale: Parents express a need for clearer understanding of progressive education value beyond simply being an alternative education option. Families worry about the potential loss of what makes progressive programs distinctive and seek reassurance about program identity and direction. There are widespread questions about what the Profile of an Engaged Learner really means and how it will be implemented authentically within a progressive education context.

Parents seek guidance about appropriate uses of artificial intelligence in progressive education experiences while maintaining emphasis on student-centered learning. Some families express concerns about diminished focus on child independence and authentic assessment as new district initiatives are implemented.

Recommendation: Establish a family advisory group composed of representatives from both progressive programs to provide regular and meaningful feedback through facilitated meetings focused on the implementation of the five priorities and related action research findings. The advisory group will help clarify how the Profile of an Engaged Learner contributes to and enhances progressive education principles and practices at all grade levels (see APPENDIX C).

5. Amplify Program Identity and Recognition

Question: How can UA's relationship with the national Progressive Education Network augment program recentering efforts?

Priority: The program will leverage engagement with PEN and participation in the 2026 PEN national conference to strengthen its identity, share innovations, and learn from

other progressive education leaders. This will help solidify the position of UA as a public-school leader in progressive education while strengthening related local, regional, state, and national progressive education networks for ongoing collaboration and improvement.

Rationale: Staff recognize the need to differentiate UA progressive education on national, state, and local stages while maintaining program authenticity and effectiveness. There is excitement about engaging students and parents in conference preparation and participation but uncertainty about how to coordinate these efforts effectively.

UA Educators want to tell their progressive education stories with transparency, criticality, and appreciation while demonstrating how the approach successfully integrates progressive principles with contemporary educational needs and opportunities.

Recommendation: Create and support a progressive education program identity community of practice involving PEN, UA educators across K-12, and other central Ohio educators focused on progressive education in today's world. Support a program identity professional learning community that uses action research findings to inform PEN and other presentations and creates clear messaging about what differentiates UA progressive education (see APPENDIX B and C).

VII. Outcomes and Measures

The program will determine and deploy key measures to both understand and inform the implementation of the five identified priorities. Here is a sample of potential measures that may be used.

Learner Agency: Documentation of student-initiated projects, self-directed learning choices, voice in classroom rules and school governance, and meeting grade-level Profile of an Engaged Learner expectations.

Family Engagement: Participation rates and quality of family involvement in program coordination goals and activities (see APPENDIX B).

Program Coherence: Alignment of progressive principles with Profile competencies and new literacy curriculum implementation within and across schools and grade levels.

Educator Efficacy: Staff participation in and satisfaction with coordination efforts and related professional learning to recenter program principles and practices.

Literacy Development: Student demonstration of literacy learning through action research, documentation, and formal assessment.

Clarification of outcomes and measures will be integral to strengthening the program's identity and culture, informing strategic decisions, and fostering collaborative improvement.

VIII. Proposed Timeline

The proposed timeline recognizes that Barrington and Wickliffe leadership and staff already have significant responsibilities in shifting to single grade configuration and implementing the new literacy curriculum. The timeline centers on a small set of integrated actions and supports that strive to avoid additional burdens while also ensuring necessary staff engagement and feedback on program coordination work over the next three years (see APPENDIX B).

First Phase (Fall 2025 - Spring 2026)

- Establish Progressive Program Coordination Team

- Conduct comprehensive reflection and revision process with Wickliffe and Barrington progressive education staff to clarify program identity, determine action research and user experience questions, and inform program coordination aims and processes

- Establish a family advisory group to provide ongoing communication and feedback

- Launch action research initiatives focused on new literacy curriculum and Profile of an Engaged Learner implementation within progressive context

- Establish Progressive Program Identity Professional Learning Community

Second Phase (2026-2027 School Year)

- Share a program identity document informed by action research and feedback from the family advisory group, the PLC, and the Program Coordination Team

- Present at PEN national conference, showcasing UA's recentering program identity and coordination story

- Align literacy curriculum and Profile of an Engaged Learner implementation as needed

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Third Phase (2027-2028 School Year)

- Demonstrate measurable impact on student engagement, agency, literacy development, and Profile skills/characteristics at every grade level

- Improve and/or innovate progressive principles and practices identified through reflection of action and user experience research documentation

- Improve strong family and community support through ongoing reflection and revision conversations with the family program advisory group

IX. Summary

The UA progressive education story continues. Barrington and Wickliffe move forward through coordinated action informed by over a half century history of innovation, adaptation, and commitment to progressive education principles. Over the next three years, program identity will be recentered, progressive education efficacy will be reinforced, learner agency will grow, and literacy learning will improve.
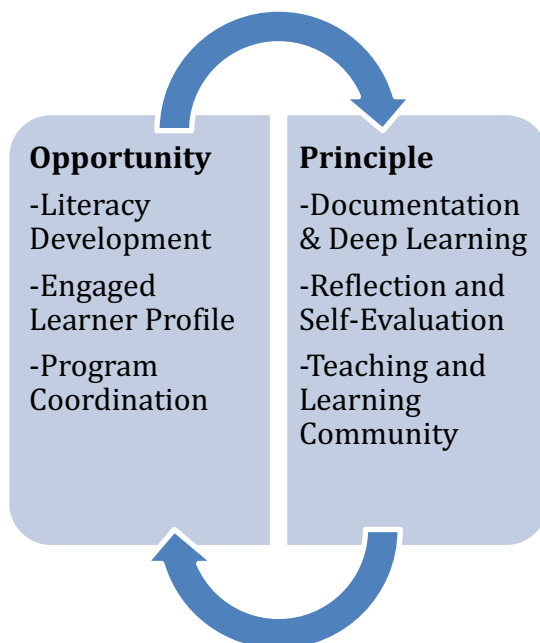
X. A Springboard Story

Nine-year-old Maya is one of the first students participating in the literacy curriculum recently adopted by the school district. Her parents placed her in the district's long-established progressive education program. It was a key reason when they bought their house several years ago. One morning, Maya traces her finger along a passage about ancient Greek democracy, her decoding skills now strong enough to tackle complex vocabulary like "citizenship" and "participation." As she reads, her eyes light up—something relates to her classroom experience. "Wait," she says to her table group, "this is like when we create and vote on our classroom rules." Her epiphany sparks an impromptu conversation across the school that develops into a month-long project, where Maya's class researches the school district's Profile of an Engaged Learner, interviews parents and teachers, and presents solutions for greater student agency at a subsequent school Chautauqua meeting. By Spring, Maya confidently explains to her parents during student-led conferences how reading difficult texts (Solution Seeker), understanding a range of perspectives (Open Minded and Empathetic), and being a good learner (Responsible and Resilient), all connect with the Profile of an Engaged Learner. This is a powerful defining moment for Maya, her family, and her teachers. It elevates, inspires, and connects everybody involved. Maya is not just becoming a better reader; she's becoming the writer of her own story.

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APPENDIX A – Progressive Program Principles

1. **We create a community for teaching and learning for all ages.**
2. **We raise social consciousness by encouraging the school community to examine and act upon complex issues within a democratic society.**
3. **We respect diversity among children and variation in their development.**
4. **We collaborate with colleagues and parents as co-educators to meet children's needs.**
5. **We engage in thematic studies and foster authentic and emergent learning experiences.**
6. **We structure experiences that actively engage children in the process of learning and guide child choice and decision-making.**
7. **We design opportunities to integrate the arts in curriculum as an essential way to acquire and express knowledge.**
8. **We use time and space in a flexible manner.**
9. **We facilitate ongoing reflection and self-evaluation by children and adults.**
10. **We use learning groups and documentation to support and deepen learning.**

APPENDIX B – Recentering Progressive Program Identity

Opportunity	**Principle**
-Literacy Development	-Documentation & Deep Learning
-Engaged Learner Profile	-Reflection and Self-Evaluation
-Program Coordination	-Teaching and Learning Community

APPENDIX C – Proposed Program Coordination Plan

Priorities Focus on the Now

- Clarify program identity
- Enhance program coherence and coordination
- Conduct meaningful action research
- Strengthen role of parents as co-educators
- Amplify program identity and recognition

Process Learn and Work Together

- Program Coordination Team
- Reflection and Revision Session
- Program Identity Professional Learning Community
- Family Advisory Group

Outcomes Recenter Program Identity

- Align Progressive Principles/Practices with Literacy Development
- Align Grade Level Progressive Learning Expectations/Experiences with Profile of an Engaged Learner
- Align Progressive Program Identity with Coordination and Communication Supports