Vanessa Levin: Hey, everybody. Welcome to the Soar to Success Summit. I'm Vanessa Levin, your host, and joining us here on the stage today is one of my good friends, Melissa Leach. Welcome, Melissa.

Melissa Leach: Hey!

Vanessa Levin: In case you're not familiar with Melissa, let me tell you a little bit about her. You're in for a real treat. Leach’s Literacy Training (LLC) provides unique and dynamic professional development for teachers across the U.S. and Canada.

Melissa Leach is the owner and president of Leach’s Literacy Training and she's a highly sought after literacy specialist for her knowledge of the Balanced Literacy Framework. I know this to be true because it's really hard to get her pinned down for a date to do this summit. She's known for her ability to make success in each and every component feel achievable to every participant. In addition to work on campuses for school districts, Melissa presents at events for organizations such as ASCD, TESPA, and the TEKS Resource System. Some of those are in Texas for all of you Texas folks.

Vanessa Levin: Her company has built especially strong relationships with teachers, administrators and district leaders throughout Texas. You can check out how you can support her work through District Literacy Initiatives by visiting her website, leachliteracytraining.com and share her blog with your teachers at leachteach.blogspot.com. Alright. I am so excited that you are here.

Melissa Leach: Thank you. I'm excited as well.

Vanessa Levin: One of the reasons that I wanted to chat with you this year, as you know, we've known each other for quite a while now and one of the things that you and I
realized right away is that we are very much on the same page - Same page. Get it? - when it comes to writing...

Melissa Leach: Well done.

Vanessa Levin: I know. These things just come naturally to me. You have dedicated a good portion of your career to this Balanced Literacy approach - the reading and the writing. You have become really, like your bio said, very sought after on this topic. So, I thought it would be a really good idea to bring you on and talk with us about writing at the Pre-K level, the preschool level, the early childhood level. Because, you let me know if I'm on the right track here, but I feel like teachers are feeling more pressure than ever before to get their kids writing because there have been some increased demands in kindergarten. Would you agree with that?

Melissa Leach: Kindergarten is a different beast these days. Yeah, there's pressure. There's pressure at all grade levels and then that just filters down.

Vanessa Levin: Yes. I agree and as somebody who trains teachers in all grades, I think that you have-- All over the country... You can tell us a little bit about where this pressure is coming from as far as like the standards or the guidelines are concerned. And, maybe some skills that our kids need to have in order to be able to meet these new standards. What do you think?

Melissa Leach: Absolutely. One of the things that I try very hard to do when I'm asked to go out and present is to make sure that we get the right grade levels together, Pre-K and kindergarten are really not the same. You can't treat 3 and 4 year olds the way that you would run your kindergarten classroom with the different standards, et cetera. One of the biggest things to keep in mind, I believe, is like everything else in education and in preschool, writing is developmental.

So, developmental and there are what we call precursor skills. In kindergarten, we have the state standards and in Pre-K we have our Pre-K guidelines. We're doing important work but that work looks very different than writing in kindergarten, if you will.

One of the, I think, first things that we can impress upon the children that we work with - our youngest, 3 and 4 year olds - I think what we can impress upon them is just an understanding of story. What's a story? How do books work? Because what people put in books is a story and if somebody can write it in a book, I can write it too. Just kind of what is a story? How do we tell a story? We do that work when we're in our reading mind of having kids look at pictures and make things up.

One thing I want to say that's not in my professional bio but that's really important about who I am in my life is I am an education specialist. I do staff development, but I'm also a mom. Right now, I have a 3 year old who's in preschool and I have-- Oh my gosh. I can't believe I have to say this, but he's now 15 months old, 2 days ago. Fifteen month old. I have two very young children, both boys. Right now, I'm very much living preschool like after hours, if you

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will. I am experiencing... Wyatt-- Wyatt's my 3 year old. You'll probably hear some stories about him.

Melissa Leach: He's learning right now in reading books, what a story is. He was reading some Berenstain Bear book - it was mine from when I was little - about baseball. He was like... You could tell that Papa Bear was mad and he was like, "Ooh, Papa Bear is yelling." And I asked him, "How do you know that?" And he said, "He looks mad." And I said, "Oh, maybe he is yelling." That's story-ness. The same way that he can do that in a book, he can then go and write his story. That's kind of the first thing. We do that work in another realm, if you will, but it's building into writing.

First, we have to have kids understanding what story is. Narrative we call it in kindergarten. Then, this next thing that we have to help them with this is notion of, "Well, if I could say a story, if I could read somebody's story by looking at the pictures, then what I say could be written down." So, what I say then can become a story as well.

Melissa Leach: I'm going to talk to you about some ways that we can achieve that. But first, what is a story? What we say, we can write down. Therefore, we can tell our own stories. Then, this big notion of, and I'm going to be very basic about it when I'm explaining it here, but marks on a page represent thoughts and ideas. I don't care what those marks look like with 3 and 4 year olds, but when they put a mark on a page, they can then have the power to say, "That's me. I'm at the park. I went down the slide." Boom, you just wrote a story. Marks - whatever those marks look like - as we start developmentally with kids, that's their story.

Then, we look at what the kindergarten standards say and when you go into kindergarten, we start to realize that certain marks need to be used so that when you use those certain marks, somebody else can read your story. Now, I'm coming to conventional writing, the right letters.

Melissa Leach: Someone else could say, "Oh, that says park because I see a P and I see a K." Some of your 3 and 4 year olds, probably more your 4 year olds, some kids will get to that place in your land. But if we can send kids, my opinion, looking at the Pre-K guidelines in the state of Texas, looking at what's developmental for writing and looking at what the expectation is for what kindergarten teachers will teach. If we can send kids to kindergarten with those three things, understanding what story is, understanding that they have thoughts and ideas that could be written down and understanding that if they put marks on the page, that's their thoughts and their ideas. Because then, we actually kind of hand over with that. Like, "Here's your marks on the page." But, those marks represent something and every time you see those marks, you'll tell that same story.

Here's a Wyatt story with that. Wyatt is coming on 3 and a half and I would say about 4 months ago, maybe 5 months ago. He was just 3. One of the things that I like to have available to him are writing materials everywhere. When he's in his booster seat at dinner, he might need to write something. There are crayons and markers on the table. The other
place that this story originates is in the bathtub. I got so excited when they have a bathtub crayons. I was like, “Yes!” And we have subway tiles.

**Melissa Leach:** I had the bathroom crayons in there and he was doing just a lot of the developmentally the scribbling, the circles. He would do a lot of that. He would just kind of make marks. Nothing really... Whatever. I never really even talked about it with him. Then, one day on one of the subway tiles-- I have a picture of this by the way. Haven't gotten it framed yet but that's on the list of things to do. On one of the subway tiles, he makes this, I don't know, mark. I was like, “Oh, hey. What's that?” And he said, “That's my kite.” We had just started flying kites. He said, “That's my kite.” And I said, “Oh, yeah. That does look like a kite.” Then, he proceeds to draw more and he puts a circle and I said, “What's that?” And he said, “That's my friend.”

My best friend in the whole world has twin girls named Brin and Nora and he said, “That's my friend Brin.” He proceeded to draw another circle because now he needed Nora. I said, “Oh wow!” And he said, “I'm flying a kite with Brin and Nora.” Then, I said, “Where are you?” Then, add one more circle. Perfect. Those marks, to him, represented his story, “I'm flying a kite with Brin and Nora.” I obviously did not clean that subway tile. That stayed there for quite some time until my husband was like, “You probably should clean that or it might never come clean.” I was like, “Alright.” Everytime we got into the bath, I would ask him again, “Tell me about that story.” “I'm flying a kite with Brin and Nora.”

**Melissa Leach:** The marks held meaning. Those marks stayed the same, right? Again, we have a job that we do. Kindergarten has a job that they do. But, right there, coming as a former kindergarten teacher at one point in my career, you send me kids that understand those three things, I'll teach them the letters. I got that. I will get those letters in them. They've got it. But, those three things are... As Katie Wood Ray would call it, we're helping them believe themselves into being. Think about what young children do. They play. They play hard. They play so good. They play. They pretend they're firefighters. They play and they pretend that they're cooking and baking and doing all these different dinosaur fossil people. They believe themselves into being all those things when they play. In our classrooms, they believe themselves into being writers. Why it's a writer? Why should he believe anything different?

**Vanessa Levin:** Right. Exactly. That's what I love about you is we're both students of Katie Wood Ray. I love her philosophy of kids being-- They're already writers. We just have to recognize it. And, what I hear you saying is that some of the stress and the pressure that we might feel, as early childhood educators, is created by our own selves.

**Melissa Leach:** Right.

**Vanessa Levin:** Because we know that these-- Everyone else is being pressured so therefore we should feel pressured and so forth and so on. I think that maybe releasing our self, giving ourselves a little bit of grace.
Melissa Leach: Yeah. And, just kind of reexamining like-- You know what, I don't think we're going to avoid the pressure. I think we're always going to feel... Because if you're here at this conference, you're feeling like you want to be the best you that you can be for the kids that you teach. I don't think we're ever going to avoid that pressure, but I think it comes back to kind of reevaluating what that then looks like.

You are going to have to have pressure every day to help kids believe themselves into being writers. What does that look like? How does that manifest? Is it on a worksheet? Nope. My kids never done a worksheet for writing, but we're right. You know what I mean? Just how's that going to manifest itself? I think it manifests itself in the opportunities that you're going to provide for kids in the classroom to believe themselves into being writers. It's going to manifest itself in the way that you talk with children who put marks on a page that they didn't realize could be a story about flying a kite until you give them that permission to be like, "Oh, yeah. That is my story about flying a kite with Brin and Nora. I told you that yesterday and you remembered and you're still talking about it with me." It's in what we value and how we encourage kids, I think.

Vanessa Levin: I think so. And that brings me to the next thing that I wanted to talk with you about. We're talking about writing. We're talking about making marks and these marks have meaning. That brings me to the thought of how do we get kids writing in preschool? Because I think the word writing can have a lot of different meanings to different people. I find that there's a lot of confusion out there between what writing means - the real meaning of writing and handwriting.

Melissa Leach: Yes, ma'am.

Vanessa Levin: Can you talk to us about the difference between these two things and why we should care?

Melissa Leach: Right. Think about it... I think handwriting, it's a thing we need to teach it. Kids need to learn how to form these letters. But I think handwriting is almost like table manners to eating. We teach kids eating like, "Oh, my gosh. Could my son please eat every night." It's a battle. I hold my breath every time I put the plate in front of him like, "Are you going to eat anything that might be on it?" But, right now, I'm not so concerned that he's got his elbows on the table as long as he's got food going in his mouth. I'm not so much concerned his feet end up places they're not supposed to go. It's table manners. We're working on it. Right now, I'm way more concerned that the kid get some nourishment like some apple sauce. Please, just some apple sauce and I'll call it a win.

The same is going to be true when we think about writing. Remember we're going back to what we just talked about writing. I understand story. I can say a story and I can put marks on a paper to represent that thinking or those original thoughts. That's writing. Handwriting, we're going to go back to the proper formation of letters and we just said you've got 3 and 4 year olds that are writing don't even know any letters or know a handful of letters. Don't know any sounds that these letters make. Have no understanding of what it really is to have those letters on the page. Those are, right now, two very different things.

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Melissa Leach: We're going to go, again, the definition of writing, putting marks on paper that communicate thoughts and ideas. And, when we define handwriting, we're talking about the physical formation. We've got official strokes that we use starting at the top, directionality like those. Then, you think about handwriting and I can't even do it without something in my hand. You think about the actual way that you need to hold the writing utensil. All of that is handwriting.

In some classrooms, they really operate simultaneously. In a lot of kindergarten classrooms, we have something that we do called Writer's Workshop. Then, we have under word study the actual instruction in handwriting. They're separate entities. When I teach teachers, I actually ask them to write. We just free write about our experiences with writing and then I have them stop and I have them look at their handwriting and give themselves a grade. Because when you're actually writing, you're not thinking about proper legibility formation.

I've also encouraged teachers during writing time in your classroom, I don't believe that kids should be writing on handwriting paper because they're not paying any attention to those lines. A 3 year old that you provide those lines for, they're humoring us. Those ones that are just trying to do what teacher wants. They're like, "Okay, I'll do this." But it doesn't have any real connection. They're not there yet. There's lots of things that we can be doing in our 3 and 4 year old classrooms to prepare for handwriting instruction in kindergarten but I don't think it looks like handwriting instruction in kindergarten. Does that make sense? When we think about handwriting instruction for 3 and 4 year olds, it's fine motor.

Vanessa Levin: Right.

Melissa Leach: It's fine motor skills. So, yes, there are strokes involved and, yes, I think that kids should be thinking about how... This is the first way. Right now, Wyatt's still grabbing like that. He's doing some other kind of way thing but he's still... We work on stuff like that but, honestly, there's so many other muscles involved in being able to get your hand into that position. This is what you're doing in all of your center work for kids. Yes, Play Doh is fun. Yes, kids love Play Doh as soon as they stop eating it. That was my son. Now, we don't eat it anymore. When you're manipulating those tools that you provide with the Play Doh, that's the small motor development that's happening. When you're having kids manipulate Play Doh, that's the small motor muscles.

That's why we give the-- What am I doing right here? What's this motion? Those punch or things like three hole punches. Simple as tearing paper. What else do we do for our kiddos with that? Tweezers. All that pinching. I bought eye droppers for my son for the bathtub because that's the muscle that we're working on. I found those kind of works like a puncher wood, but it's these, I don't know what they are little things you open up this way. I give him as much as I can. Safe tools from the kitchen to use. Because it's all of that stuff that we need kids to be doing. It doesn't look like anything that's coming home in a backpack for kids that looks like we practiced handwriting today but they are. They absolutely are.
Melissa Leach: We may actually get utensils enhanced and practice strokes. We maybe doing some of that but, again, I'm not doing it on the handwriting paper. The other thing that I think of when I think about handwriting preparation for formal handwriting instruction that comes when you know what a P is, then it might make sense to me trying to practice formally writing a P on that paper. But that, developmentally, is more of a 5 year old thing. I also think with our preschool, we can be using fine motor and large motor together. As much as possible, practicing those strokes and those movements, perhaps, but with our whole body. So, crossing... There's all the brain research kind of crossing that line, as you're doing that. And, the other thing that I do sometimes with kids is we put words to the strokes that we're making. Now, we're practicing language and speaking which is part of our guidelines that we have in Texas making the sounds of English language.

So, to make an A and, again, thinking how we might do it, we might be making an A and it's down, down, across. Do it bigger. Down, down, across. Here's the around, up and down. We might be doing that. We might be writing it on the floor. Not necessarily, again, this handwriting on paper. We're doing handwriting. We could be doing a lot of things but it's not what it looks like with 5 year olds. It's just-- I'm actually... I'm a mom first but my background is obviously education and I try really hard to let teachers do what teachers do and to be mom and to provide great experiences at home. But, let teachers do what teachers do.

Melissa Leach: I have a couple other friends who are in that boat with me right now. They have young children. They do what I do and their children are in school. A couple of them... Two of them right now, we've got a little Facebook chat going on in Messenger and a handwriting page came home in our 3 year olds' backpack and it was like, “Okay, okay. Breathe. It's not the end of the world. That is not the hill that we need to die on.” Are there other things going on in the classroom? Does your kid love to go to school? But, I think sometimes teachers feel pressure that parents expect these things to go home like we did handwriting because… Again, pressure and stress. Where's it coming from? How's it going to manifest? So, sometimes...

Vanessa Levin: I think a lot of our teachers got some affirmation out of this because I know that a lot of teachers practice those fine and gross motor skills in their classrooms daily. Just the peace of mind knowing that they're on the right track. Then, for those who might be using the handwriting worksheets, I challenge those folks to think outside the box and think, “Well, what could I do with that time that we spend on that handwriting sheet? What can I do instead that would be more motivating and engaging for my kids and get them really into this rather than the paper?” That was one thing that came to mind.

I really think that's an important distinction that you made because there's very little time that we feel we have with our students. Every teacher, no matter what grade you teach says, "If only we have them a little bit longer." Especially in preschool because some of the children will attend 2 days a week or 3 days a week for just a few hours. Those teachers really see their kids very little. Some of that pressure is there to fit in what some of us are doing in a full day, 5 day a week program. Then, that's where we don't have time to practice handwriting maybe we'll send this home. But there is a big distinction between handwriting and writing.

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Melissa Leach: Yeah. They are different. They are very different. We teach the both of them, but both of them have to be in existence. Having kids just sit and do just fine motor. Even if I've got the best fine motor... Everywhere you look in my classroom, my kids practicing those precursor skills for handwriting. Great. But, then where's that spot where you're teaching them?

Vanessa Levin: Yes.

Melissa Leach: The understanding of story and what I say, I can write down and I can make marks on paper that are not letters but marks on paper that can communicate thought. They really have to find a little bit of that space for both. I will be honest. Again, Melissa Leach, personal opinion. I'd rather see those worksheets to practice handwriting go out the door. If you don't have enough time for everything, which nobody does, I'd rather see those go and original thoughts, marks on paper that communicate ideas, we put the time and invest it in there.

Vanessa Levin: Absolutely. I think that's a perfect segue into our next question. Now, we know that-- We know about some of these expectations that are being placed on kindergarten teachers and we have some clarity about the difference between writing and handwriting. Now, how do we get our kids to see themselves as writers like you said? How do we get them to really come to this way of thinking? Because I can say to a kid as often as I want, "You're a writer. You're a writer. Good job!" But, how do we actually get to that place? Because that's not going to work.

Melissa Leach: Absolutely. Absolutely. The other thing, too, that we have to keep in mind is not all of our kids come into our classrooms with the same experiences. Wyatt’s going to go into... He's already in preschool. He's going to go into kindergarten. He believes himself into being in it just in simple conversations that we've had. The other day... Anyway, he's got a new favorite something that his grandfather introduced him to. It's called chocolate milk. I was trying to hold off chocolate milk for a little longer, but his grandfather showed him chocolate milk. Anyway, he likes chocolate milk and he asked for it with dinner or something. And, I said, "No, buddy. We don't have any chocolate milk. That's just with grandpa or something." He looked at me and he said, "Well, you need to write it on the list."

It's kind of good and bad. I've got a writer but now this writer is telling me that I need to make marks on a page called the shopping list. "You need to write it down," he says. How do we do this? We'll have those conversations. We'll have our materials available for them to make these marks on paper. Hopefully, think about the marks that a kid might need to make in the block center. You've got paper and blocks. They want to write, “This is Wyatt's farm.” or “This is the Titanic.” Or whatever it is that they're doing. They label their different structures. We've obviously got it over in the home center because I guarantee you Wyatt’s going to a start shopping list and it's going to say chocolate milk.

Melissa Leach: In addition to all of that, there's instruction that happens. One of the first things that kids need in our Pre-K classrooms, preschool classrooms - they need experiences. We don't know what experiences they're getting at home, so, we have to have...
some experiences in our classrooms. In the Balanced Literacy Framework, we talk about that in what we call “To, With and By.” That's going to involve what we call modeled writing in our classrooms, shared writing in our classrooms and then, my favorite, which I'm going to talk about, which is called interactive writing in our classrooms. Right now, what I'd like you to think about is what kind of writing is happening in your classroom last year? What kind of writing did kids do? Or, right now, if you're a full year preschool, what opportunities do kids have for writing?

It might be the writing that they do in centers. But, what else? What I want you to think about is you have what we call modeled writing where kids sit in front of you, with you, and they are watching you do all the writing. Maybe you're making the shopping list because you guys are going to do some kind of cooking the next day. So, you're writing a shopping list.

**Melissa Leach:** You are modeling writing in front of them. They might see it at home, they might not. Are you modeling? Do you ever write a note to the principal because there are fire ants? Fire ants are big in Texas, by the way. There are fire ants out on the playground and you've got to write a note to the principal, “Hey. Just so you know, lots of fire ants. We need to get the spray.” Or whatever they come do. I don't know what they do. Fire ant pest control, right? Write a note to the principal. The kids watch you do that.

Do you write a card for someone who's been out and sick? Do kids have opportunities to watch you write? Because we write for a variety of purposes they need to be able to watch. In the gradual release of responsibility, the “To, With and the By,” that's like the to, “I'm going to write. You're going to watch. It's important. Okay? Perfect.”

**Melissa Leach:** Then, we have this next where we kind of give a little bit more or we need a little bit more help from the kids. Right now in my son's room, they're studying, recycling, reusing, Earth day, all that stuff. I watched them do some shared writing. In shared writing, the teacher said something like, “What are some ways that we use water?” They were talking about conserving water that day. “What are some ways that we use water?” And the kids were like, “We take baths.” Now, their ideas are the thing that they're giving and the teacher is the one doing the writing. Your idea is now, “Oh. If you say it, you can write it down.” I'm going to write that idea because Wyatt said we can take a bath and she writes it down. “How else do we use water?” And she makes the list but it's shared in its creation. Rather than just watching you do it, now we're saying, “Hey, you have ideas and you come write it down.”

Sometimes we make collaborative, we call them predictable charts, that way like, “What do you like to play with outside?” And everyone's ideas start to kind of go in there together. That's important. But, again, in the gradual release we call that the “I do, you help.” They're helping but there's still this next step and almost like a rift in between. “That's just still my teacher doing it. I can't do that. I don't know how to do that.” My favorite thing to do...Imagine you're week or whatever. On Monday, you might do some modeled writing, they're going to watch you, you're going to write it down. On Wednesday, there might be some reason why you do some shared writing. Then, maybe Friday or the next week there's this other thing that we call interactive.
Melissa Leach: Just that word alone, interactive. It's the “I'm doing, you're helping.” Now, kids aren't just sitting and saying, kids are doing. This is truly what we call sharing the pen. I'm going to hand you the marker, you're going to come up and you're going to make the marks. You're going to make the marks. Again, think about where you are in the year developmentally. How many marks kids could make? We think about what we call their ownership letters. Right now, the W is Wyatt's ownership letter. He's a W. Whenever we need a Wuh-wuh. We need Wyatt like, “Come on, Wyatt. We need your Wuh." He does the W. The other one that he's getting a little bit of ownership with right now are the T’s, because he's Wyatt. So, he's like, “Tees.”

A little bit of ownership he has right now with his brother's name, Jack. A “J” is a little bit becoming an ownership letter for him. We think about those letters that they're showing interest in, that they have knowledge about and that have meaning for them. Those are the letters that I need that child to be able to come up and help with.

Vanessa Levin: Yeah.

Melissa Leach: Depending on time of year and what you're studying and what you're doing. One of the first things that we used to make-- And, interactive writing begins with 3 and a half year olds, 4 year olds. They don't do as much and we continue it into kindergarten. But, one of the first things that I did in kindergarten is I wrote a welcome to our classroom sign and it went up first week of school and was there.

We could make that same list but now, turn it into interactive like “How do we use water?” Imagine if I was like, “We take a bath. Ba-ba-ba Bath. That's like Be-be Ben. Ben, come on up here." Ben, it's one of his ownership letters. He works to try to write that letter. In the Pre-K guidelines in Texas, we leave Pre-K being able to write our names. We are working on learning the right letters.

I call up Ben and I hand him a marker. Y'all a marker. Not an erasable marker, a straight up marker and I'm holding my breath and I'm like, “It's going to be okay.” I hand it to him and right there, I've empowered this kid. “Oh, my gosh. She just gave me a marker. She's going to let me write on this big chart that we're making." Like, “Yeah, baby. Come here. Here.” So, he comes up.

The other thing that I'm going to use when I use interactive writing - I use a Magna Doodle. You could use a whiteboard if that's what you have. I just like a Magna Doodle because it's one thing to hold on to versus a whiteboard and a marker and sometimes I have an eraser. Usually, it's just my hand. I just [use] a magna doodle so I can put that B on the Magna Doodle and show it to Ben to remind him what that looks like. Then, I've got all these other kiddos at the carpet. I can't turn and give all my attention to Ben while he gives me a letter B. The Magna Doodle’s trying to help him with that. Then, what can I do with the whole rest of the group?
Melissa Leach: They're at the carpet. If I don't engage them, I've lost them. Now, it could be like, “Everybody, let's make a 'B' on the carpet. Can you do it? Straight line down and around and around. Do it. Straight line down and around and around. Buh-buh-buh. That's what B says. What else makes a Buh sound? Buh-buh Bath and Buh-buh Boat.” There's alliteration. That's one of our Pre-K guidelines that we have in Texas. Just saying things that start the same. I can be doing, Okay. Ben did his 'B. “Thanks Ben.” I take a look at the B. The B is super big. I didn't want it that big. But, you know what? I gave Ben the marker and I said, “Ben, you can do this.” If every time I give a kid a marker and they don't do it the way I really wanted it to look, or too small or too big or what have you...

Vanessa Levin: You froze up on me there.

Melissa Leach: I like, “I wanted you to help, but you can't-- Not good enough. Sorry.” Instead, I'm going to hand that marker. I'm going to just-- It's one of his ownership letters. It says we're working on it. It says, “Hey, this is where I am.” It's developmental. It's okay. There is something that we do use sparingly but we can use it in interactive writing. We call it Boo Boo tape. I just get Avery labels - the ones that you can find at the dollar store. They're just Avery labels. Let's say, the B was literally so minuscule like you can't see it. I'm like, “Wait a minute, Ben. I'm sorry. I forgot to tell you. We need a big B.” I cover it up and I say, “A little bit bigger.” And see what he can do later on. Again, you know your kids. You know what they're capable of.

You know what they could do versus this is what they can do now. Let's say Ben gives me his B and it's got 3 bumps instead of 2. You know what? It's the end-- It's getting towards the end of Pre-K. We're fixing to go into kindergarten. I've seen him write B's with just 2 bumps before. It's a really important letter for him. I might just say, “Oh man, Ben. It got you. Did you see what happened? You have 3 bumps on your B. The B only has 2. Let's just fix it. Super easy, right?” You can use that Boo boo tape to just cover up one of those bumps. “Great job, Ben. Now our B has two bumps. Perfect.” Ben goes and sits back down. In interactive writing, potentially, the only thing that a kid held a marker to do that day was to write the B in bath and you're going to do all the rest of it.

Melissa Leach: In invented spelling, kids help with what kids can help with and you just put all the rest up there spelled correctly and as fast as possible. We're not going to talk about any. We're just going to... “Bath. Perfect. What's that say again? Yeah. Bath. We take baths.” And, you know what? You look at your time and like “We've already been here for 5 minutes. I don't think I can even stretch 30 more seconds out of them so we're done. That's it. That's all the interactive writing we have for today. We'll come back to it.”

Sometimes it takes weeks to complete some of the visions you had for interactive writing. I know, Vanessa, you have some things up on your site about interactive writing. Did you have images and pictures of what some completed projects look like?

Vanessa Levin: Yeah. I'm sure there are. But, I feel interactive writing is a real balancing game as a teacher because... I know you coach teachers and I've coached teachers and I see a lot of teachers really-- Because we want to teach. Right?
Melissa Leach: Yup. Oh, we love teaching. Born to do it. Born to do it.

Vanessa Levin: And, we take too long or we have too many kids come up and they are done, like you said.

Melissa Leach: Then, it loses its enjoyment. If you do that, if you let interactive writing be a 15 or 20 minute part of your day, you're going to hate it. I'm just being real. You're like, "Why did I even try to do this? This was the worst idea ever." When we think interactive writing, 3 and 4 year olds, this is brief. It's still effective when it's 3 or 4 minutes. It's still effective. Three or four minutes for three or four days, creates a product. The longer it goes, the less enjoyable that it becomes.

Vanessa Levin: And, the benefits that the kids get out of doing this - the modeled writing that the teacher does and the back and forth, shared and the interactive - the benefits they get out of that are so great because they're involved in the process compared to printing out some pre-printed words like "can, have and are" cutting them out, gluing them on. That doesn't teach them anything about the writing process.

Melissa Leach: No. Not at all. The other thing, too, I think about is when the sentence is on the board. "I like school," is the sentence on the board. It's a sentence on the worksheet and you're supposed to put it on your handwriting lines. I just think, again, we have a variety of experiences and some kids know that that sentence says I like school and they can write it on your lines. They don't really even need to be doing that if they already know all of that. And, then, we think about the kids who are doing something but they have no idea that it says, I like school. They're doing it for us in school and it has no meaning. Again, we just think about some of the things that we can stop doing so that we can start doing.

And if you wrote, "I like school" interactive writing and a kid came up... Again, you've got a kid that knows I and they come up and give you an I. Another kid gives-- Liam comes up and gives you an L. Then, Sarah gives you an S for school and every time you're re-reading it, that will hold meaning for everyone. And, Sarah's my best friend. So, Sarah... I'm so interested to see what Sarah does up there because she's my-- She's going to come to my birthday party. That's my Sarah, right? I'm excited to see Sarah do something on this piece of paper and all of my other friends that come up. Then, someday I get to come up. Just remember sometimes the other things that we need in interactive writing. We need space holders so everybody can do that.

Melissa Leach: We don't have any ownership of any letters. Baby, you've got a hand and you can come put it right here. There's your space holder person. The other thing, too, is even in interactive writing, we're not going to overly teach it. I did see it in our Pre-K guidelines - awareness of punctuation. I was kind of like, "What? Wyatt doesn't have any awareness of punctuation yet. I need to get on that." But, just an awareness of it. In interactive writing, that's by the end of Pre-K. Our 4 year olds. We need punctuation people. I
guarantee you those kids can come up and give you a big 'ole period at the end. You got space holders, period makers. You got it.

**Vanessa Levin:** You’ll be surprised how quickly little kids pick up on that punctuation though? Because the question mark is very unique looking.

**Melissa Leach:** Okay. I hope so. Because we haven't talked it yet. So, I hope.

**Vanessa Levin:** It happens a lot during that interactive writing process too.

**Melissa Leach:** Exactly.

**Vanessa Levin:** Even the modeled writing because I remember one time we had a custodian that was out or something and I don't-- I know you know public schools, if your custodian is out your whole school could fall apart.

**Melissa Leach:** Oh, yes. “When are you coming back without sounding rude? Like when? I need to know the day and the time.”

**Vanessa Levin:** Because the substitute custodian, they didn't know where anything is and isn't doing anything. We didn't have garbage bags for a week. Everyday the kids were throwing their garbage away in these naked garbage cans and so...

**Melissa Leach:** Not okay.

**Vanessa Levin:** Not okay. No, because the chocolate milk goes in there. We had to write a letter to the custodian asking when he would be back because the custodian's a big part of our school family. When we were writing him a letter like, “When will you be back?” Question Mark. That was very meaningful to them. So, yeah. There's so many ways that they can-- They just love it because then if you're excited, “I am going to Grandpa's house!” Exclamation mark!

**Melissa Leach:** Yup. Absolutely. Excuse me.

**Vanessa Levin:** I think that we have a much better understanding of what types of writing skills...

**Melissa Leach:** Oh, let me throw back. We haven't even gotten to the most important or the best one yet. We've got this model. You're going to watch me as a teacher. I'm going to write in front of you. It's important. You're seeing a lot of things happen. I'm also going to ask you to help me with the ideas in shared writing and oh my goodness, I'm going to provide opportunity to hand the pen or the marker to you or whatever and you're going to contribute. But, that's all leading to the best part, which is called independent where you do it and I'll watch.
We have all three of those kinds of writing - modeled, shared and interactive - are all going to be like carpet time. Kind of group time. Whereas, then we think about the space where we can provide each individual student the opportunity to do their own writing, to put their own marks on the page, to be, “I went to my Grandpa's" is your story but over here is someone else writing about making a cake with their best friend or over here, this one is at the park and this one's fishing and this one-- Every single kid in our class writes their own stories. This might be 5 minutes a day. It might be 10 minutes a day. I don't know what your kids are able to do. But, in Katie Wood Ray's books, she says, kids read books from an early age. They understand this concept of book and turning pages and ideas across pages.

**Melissa Leach:** In her work she says, preschool kid write books. Imagine and again, when I say a book, it's not crazy copying and preparation on your part. A book is literally you could get small little cuts of paper, staple, staple. You have a book - 3 page books, 4 page books. You've got a cover and a back and something on the inside. That's your book. We're helping kids know that whatever marks they put on those pages, when they turn those pages, they tell their story. Again, eventually some kids might label their book. There's a D by the dog and some kids might give you pretend words at the bottom or a whole bunch of letters because this is what you're supposed to have in a book. That all varies but we give them that opportunity to do what they can do.

Again, their own topic. It's not everybody making a book about Spring and everybody making a book about moms, and everybody making their book about fishing. It's everybody making books. What's your story that you have to tell? Again, you go back to you've modeled things like this. They've been doing the shared writing. They understand that their unique ideas are written down.

**Melissa Leach:** Then, here's that one more piece of the puzzle. Just imagine you've got all your kids at their seats. And, again, when I say they're writing, they're drawing pictures. They're drawing pictures in these books and then they're telling this to you. When you sit down next to one of them say, “Oh, talk to me about the book that you're writing.” And they opened up to one of the pages and they tell you, “This is my dinosaur and he ate a hamburger" or something. You're like, “Oh, wow." That's their dictation. They are dictating to you what their story says. And then he said, okay, turn the page. Then what happens? And he's like, “Then, he ate French fries." “Oh. Burger and now French fries. What happened on the next page?” They're dictating.

Here's what we don't do. I think we've been told to do it. I know I was told to do it but education, it's always changing. I remember my preschool teacher and in my undergraduate, I remember thinking or watching teachers when I would go do-- You go watch teachers in their practicum or whatever and the kids would be writing, drawing what have you, and the teacher would then run around and write the story for them.

**Melissa Leach:** That'd be like me saying to him, “Okay. So, tell me about your story.” And, he says, “The dinosaur is eating a hamburger.” Then, I go use conventional writing and write the words “The dinosaur is eating a hamburger" for the kid. Then, I say, “What's on the next page?” And he says, “He's eating French fries.” And I write, “He's eating French fries.”

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Number one, oh my gosh, you could run yourself ragged racing around the classroom trying to write for everybody. And, then, have you ever noticed if you do that the next day sometimes you go ask them what their story says and it has changed. The story doesn't-- It doesn't say the dinosaur is eating a hamburger. It says the dinosaur went to Mcdonald's and got a hamburger. The story has changed. Your conventional writing is not serving any purpose.

We're not going to focus on running around to scribe for kids. We're going to run around to focus on having them say the words that represent their story and doing it across pages. Doing it as much as possible. The more they do that, the more the story sticks. So, you know, we are going-- And then, developmentally, when they're ready to have some kind of letter, it's not going to be a sentence. That is not the first thing that those kids are going to be able to write in their book is a sentence, “The dinosaur went to Mcdonald's.” What's probably going to be most developmental is that they could put a “Duh” by dinosaur, but they're going to be able to put a “Duh” by dinosaur and maybe the big M for Mcdonald's. They'll have that and that's that page. And, what's on the next page? Oh, French fries. Fuh-fuh French fries. You know that letter. That's a F.

In this opportunity that we're going to provide for them to do the writing, they are going to do the writing. And, if the writing is just-- Again, former kindergarten teacher here. If the writing is just pictures but they can tell that story, you've done your work. You've done it. You've done it. They believe themselves into being a writer. You haven't said, “Oh, no. Not really. This is really how we should write it." They believe that's their writing. As soon as they have the letters that go with that writing, they're writers.

**Vanessa Levin:** Yeah. I think this is great information because the teachers that I've worked with who've gone through this process of moving away from the traditional methods of teaching kids how to write on the lines and giving kids what to write about when they've moved to this sort of model that you're talking about, they can really see their kids becoming and believing themselves into being writers. And that's where I feel when they experienced that sweet success, both the teachers and the kids, that's when you realize you're on the right path.

**Melissa Leach:** It breathes life back into... You're in this profession because you feel the same way that Vanessa and I do that kids are awesome.

**Vanessa Levin:** Yes.

**Melissa Leach:** Kids are awesome in what they say, in the way that they think, in the way that they see the world. They're awesome. When you can provide the space for them to put that awesomeness on paper, it just breathes life back into and it's just so fun. It's my favorite part of the day because you never know what you're going to get.

**Vanessa Levin:** Absolutely. Believe me, some of the stories are very interesting.

**Melissa Leach:** Very. Very.
Vanessa Levin: I wonder what stories Wyatt tells at school.

Melissa Leach: I don't want to know. Did my face just get red? I'm just kidding.. I don't want to know about those stories. I'm sure I will, but not yet.

Vanessa Levin: I think that we have a much better understanding now of the writing experience that our kids need to be successful in today's kindergarten classroom and how we can help set the foundation for that future writing success.

Melissa Leach: If you take nothing else away, it's just you are not kindergarten. Praise God. You're not kindergarten. You don't have those same pressures. You don't have those same standards and you don't have kids that are the same age. We're doing the building to get them there, but we can't jump over those steps. You can't take 3 year olds and jump over those steps and make them 5 year olds. I think that we have to be, as early childhood specialists, Vanessa and I, we have to be advocates for that. Three and four year olds are not five year olds. We have the work that we do but it's going to look very different. We have to just know that and educate ourselves what that looks like and educate others for... I'm doing the work, but it doesn't look like the work of a 5 year old because he's 3.

Vanessa Levin: I think that's a great takeaway for everyone to have and I want to remind our kindergarten teachers who might be watching that if you have a kindergartener in your class who comes to you and has had any of these experiences before, that there's going to be some experiences that you're going to need to provide that we just talked about. Because they can't just go from, I've never been to preschool before and now I need to know all the letters and how to write a complete sentence and how to paragraph. You know what I mean?

Melissa Leach: Yup. That is the good thing about Balanced Literacy and the Balanced Literacy Framework. In kindergarten, we're going to do what's called Writer's Workshop. It is having a mini lesson to teach kids about writing everyday. Time for those kids to go do the writing everyday and then what we call closure or the wrap up and the sharing of the writing that happen. We have those opportunities to teach in those mini lessons for kids. But, then, when we give that opportunity for kids to go write in a Writer's Workshop, it's okay that you have kids at all different levels because we just go do what they can do. If you get to do what you can do every single day, I guarantee you you're going to be able to do more the next day and the next week. That's the teacher who just meets them and continues to nudge and gives them the tools to be able to access all of their letters and use the ones that they can and the ones that they know.

Vanessa Levin: Yes. They're more ready at that point to learn some of these things, too, in a more rapid way. You know what I mean? It's not like you're going to teach these things to a 4 year old child. You've got a child who's more mature and so it's appropriate.

Melissa Leach: Yup. Whereas, in the Pre-K guidelines in Texas and probably in many other states as well, we're really more heavy on phonological awareness. Just the sounds and manipulation of those sounds and rhyme and alliteration, all of that. Phonological
awareness is that precursor to phonics. In kindergarten, we have some 5 year olds and 4 year olds that we get that don't yet have phonological awareness. Well, we have to kind of accelerate instruction. We're teaching phonological awareness at the same time that we're teaching letters and the letter sounds, which is phonics. We have to do those two things together, to kind of makeup that space. But, our job with 3 and 4 year olds is less letters, sounds, phonetics spelling and more believe yourself into being marks on paper, communicate thoughts and ideas. What are your thoughts? What are your ideas? Let's show the world.

Vanessa Levin: I love it. Everyone has their own takeaway from every session that we have. We give you one that you can think about, but you're-- I just want to share my takeaway with you, Melissa.

Melissa Leach: Okay.

Vanessa Levin: Because you and I, we're simpatico and we're on the same page. But this is a great takeaway. I love how you compared, table manners to eating versus the handwriting to writing -- that! Girl, I might have to license that from you. That's good.

Melissa Leach: I will be-- Okay. Alright. Yeah. Table manners. Right. It is! Wyatt needs nourishment. Our kids need to be writers. I mean, I'm still probably working on some of my table manners when it comes to writing and I'm a grown adult. You know that semicolon, hyphen. I don't really know.

Vanessa Levin: It's just so funny that story was resonating with me personally because my brother has a child that's almost the same age as Wyatt and he also struggles with the dinner thing. They just basically get down on their knees and pray that he will eat something like apple sauce. Just anything, please.

Melissa Leach: I have hid in the pantry watching so that he doesn't know that I'm watching. Because if he sees me watching him eat, he won't.

Vanessa Levin: The struggle is real. Right? That was my takeaway. Thank you so much for that. I love, love, love... I'm all about the analogies. Thank you so much.

I want to thank you, Melissa Leach, for joining us today and thank you to all of you who tuned in. I want to remind you that if you want to hear more from Melissa or learn more from her, you can find her website leachliteracytraining.com, if you'd like to bring her to your school or district. Then, she also has a blog for teachers leachteach.blogspot.com. Just know that she's a very busy lady so you might have to wait in line.

Melissa Leach: It's definitely busy professional but remember those kids I was telling you about being run ragged?

Vanessa Levin: You were a busy lady before kids. I don't know how you do it.
Melissa Leach: I don't either. I didn't think it through.

Vanessa Levin: You're good. If you would like to spend a little more time with any of the ideas and suggestions we discussed in this session or any of the others, don't forget, you can bring all the sessions home with you along with some amazing bonuses. Just click on the link below the video. Don't forget prices go up the day after the conference ends. Thanks a lot for watching. I am Vanessa Levin, your host, and this is Melissa Leach.

Melissa Leach: Thank you guys.