

Katharine O. Strunk '99

Gladwyne, PA

At-Large Alumni Trustee Candidate

Katharine Strunk realized she wanted to dedicate her career to education after teaching math and music to fourth graders the summer before her senior year in high school. One of those fourth graders grew up just miles from her home, but his life and educational experience were jarringly different than her own. “Realizing that the zip code you’re born in can make such a huge difference in your trajectory in life was just fundamentally life altering for me,” she said. This experience, among others, led her to her current role as dean of the Graduate School of Education and the George and Diane Weiss Professor of Education at the University of Pennsylvania.

At Princeton, Strunk majored in the School of Public and International Affairs, with a focus on education policy. She credits her thesis adviser, Jameson Doig '58, former professor of politics and public affairs, for showing her how to think creatively about educational actors and organizations, and how she could impact education policy and practice through research.

After Princeton, Strunk studied at Stanford University, where she received an M.A. in economics and a Ph.D. in education administration and policy analysis and tackled questions related to K-12 education policy. As a faculty member at the University of California-Davis, the University of Southern California and Michigan State University, she conducted what she calls “research with consequence” — research done in partnership with policymakers and education leaders.

In California, she worked closely with the California Department of Education and the Los Angeles Unified School District to understand the implementation and impact of turnaround interventions that were intended to improve outcomes for students in the lowest-performing schools and districts. In California and Michigan, she partnered with policymakers and district leaders to ensure that good teachers are hired, supported, valued and retained. “Being a K-12 teacher is the most difficult job in the world,” she said. “We’re in the midst of one of the most intense teacher shortages — and also school leader shortages — in the history of the United States. If we don’t start figuring out a way to solve that problem, all society will suffer for it.”

Strunk was at Michigan State, partnering with the state’s Department of Education on two statewide studies when the COVID-19 pandemic began. They quickly pivoted, reworking their survey instruments to study the impacts of COVID on schools, educators and students. As a result, they were able to report results in real time to the government, showing how and when COVID spread in schools, and enabling the governor’s office and the Department of Health and Human Services to make evidence-informed decisions about when to shut down in-person schooling and when to open it.

After Strunk was named dean at Penn in 2023, she spent the first year speaking to every Graduate School of Education faculty member, every staff member and as many students as she could in order to devise a strategic vision that could meet the moment in public education for the next decade. “We’re really focused on the importance of the School of Education as elevating the fundamental role of education in a functioning democracy,” she said. “And how we are taking the rigorous ivory tower research that my faculty produces and thinking about how it’s applied

and consequential in real world context. How are we meeting our communities where they are and addressing the questions they have, as opposed to us telling them what's best for them.”

While at Princeton, Strunk was a member of Katzenjammers and the Chapel Choir and the president of Tower Club. “I recognize the critical ways in which people’s undergraduate experiences impact the rest of their lives,” she said. “I owe so much to Princeton.”