

Season 2, Episode 1. “Self-Directed Learning”

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GREG MULLEN: Welcome to the Exploring the Core Podcast. I’m your host Greg Mullen. In this first episode, I’ll be talking about the phrase, *Self-Directed Schooling*, which integrates contrasting ideas which, I argue, are two sides of the same coin.

On one side we have conventional Schooling. In its most traditional sense, this environment places in the hands of a school’s leadership and teachers the authority and responsibility for *what, how, and when* learning happens. This means *what* students learn is decided ahead of time before the learners ever enter their classroom, and planning for *how* students learn is written out in a pre-designed lesson plan that teachers and students follow, and reporting of how much students learn is based on school-wide time-based academic learning calendars.

Now flip that coin over and we find the more Self-Directed Learning side where all of the authority and responsibility for learning is placed solely in the hands of the learner. This means that the child isn’t taught as much as they find opportunities to learn, so that *What* they want to learn - *How* they want to learn - and *When* they want to learn - it’s all up to the learner. This idea may sound more familiar to parents and teachers who’ve been part of the unschooling movement or have had experience with a Montessori or Waldorf setting, where some mild influence exists but there is little to no *coercive* influence on age-based academic proficiency, so that, in its most strictest sense, there would be absolutely no coercion - on this side of the coin where the learner directs their own learning.

The trouble with describing Schooling and Self-Directed Learning as two sides of a coin is it leaves us with a polarizing ‘this-or-that’ perspective toward education. Either we trust learners with 100% authority and responsibility over their own learning - or we don’t; and this dualistic perspective just doesn’t reflect the wide range of learning environments that do exist, and I want to begin this season highlighting two of them in hopes of inspiring educators, facilitators, parents, and school leaders to see the benefits of incorporating traditional *and* self-directed learning environments into the larger system for education, or better yet, how the larger education system might be reconfigured into more personalized self-directed schooling environments. So stay with me as I share a conversation I had with the principal of Meraki High School, a *self-directed* public school with the San Juan Unified School District in Sacramento California.

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GREG MULLEN: Meraki High School is one of three unique campuses in the San Juan Unified School District in Northern California. These campuses lean more toward the self-directed side of the coin, and I had the privilege of speaking with David Levis, the Principal of Meraki High School, who was able to describe what kind of school Meraki is, and his response was really interesting.

DAVID LEVIS: “It’s interesting because it is one of the most difficult processes in explaining Meraki, because the largest box you could put us in is that we’re Independent Study, so we have an independent study structure. How we account for credits, and how we account for a student’s time, it originally was based off the idea of “unschool” and so originally the crux is we want kids to learn by doing. Because we are a part of a public school system, they do earn credits, but we’re not bound by rigid semester guidelines and dates, so that’s given us flexibility. A lot of our students will earn ten credits at the end of the year because the idea is we’re always working toward mastery and we have these different competencies our students are working towards over the course of the year, which we have backed up with documents that say these competencies equal English credit, because at the end of the day they are looking for a transcript.”

GREG MULLEN: Meraki High School originally opened in 2017 with the school actually called ‘UnSchool’ with the intention that the school would be named at a later date by the students themselves, feeding into the whole student-led self-directed mindset. But it’s this name Meraki that David describes which has its own interesting origin story.

DAVID LEVIS: “So we are Meraki High School. It is a Turkish word that has, its become a Greek word, and it means to do something with so much passion that you leave part of yourself behind. It’s one of the few undefinable words and it breaks ranks with so much of what we are even in our own school district. Part of the by-laws for our district is all of the schools are name with a Spanish name and so we are the only High School that does not have a Spanish name. But was selected by the students. Students had to give a board presentation and to come before the board and present that, go through facilities department to have it named, and over a year process developed their mascot as well; so we are the pheonix, kind of the whole idea of being able to refresh and renew each time and rise above. So it was a really exciting process to see and hear students’ voice be number one throughout this whole entire process.”

GREG MULLEN: In talking with David, I wanted to learn more about how a student could choose what, when, and how to learn in this self-directed, or “Independent Study”, schooling environment, while still receiving credits for a diploma. For instance, the Meraki “competencies” David referred to earlier in our conversation, well they’re listed on their School Accountability Report Card; and while, yes, one competency is the Mastery of Core Academic Content, it’s not the focus since the other competencies include things like - “critical thinking and problem solving skills, collaboration,

communication, student-directed learning, and an academic mindset.” But the part of the document that really piqued my interest was its statement that “student success will not be limited to scores on exams, but by portfolios, presentations, artwork, and written work produced throughout the year.” It sounded like something teachers in traditional schools do already when they collect samples of student work throughout a year but I asked David about how these competencies are met, and he had some great examples.

DAVID LEVIS: “One of the nice things about how we have done this with competencies is that it more explicitly breaks it down and so when you say, part of the competency conversation is ‘communication’ and so they have a whole series of things to show that they are good communicators. And so at the end of each of these learning cycles they have a “presentation of learning” and they get to share with families or friends what they’ve learned and what they’ve done and how they’ve met these different competencies.”

GREG MULLEN: Now I’m a fan of standards-based and proficiency-based learning, so I asked David how he assigns credits to competencies in order to fulfill district requirements for graduation.

DAVID LEVIS: “...usually it’s a senior elective done anywhere from geography, sociology, psychology, lots of different options, so what we’ve done is incorporated into our advisory class different units or elements of psychology and so they will take that all four years to be able to get those five credits of psychology to be able to go on a transcript and have that checked off, so it allows us the flexibility to break things down into smaller pieces or merge things together as these professionals have worked through what these competencies equal and what these content standards they’re going to achieve and what credits then are earned.”

GREG MULLEN: This process of taking the interests of individual students and translating student projects and discussions into district credits seemed at first like it would be a lot more work on the teachers, until I realized that none of this was actually “extra work” because all of the typical, more traditional tasks, like keeping up with seating charts for daily attendance, assigning morning seat work, going over morning seat work, assigning group class work, going over group class work, homework, daily quizzes or exit tickets, weekly tests - all of these grading and reporting procedures associated with this traditional model didn’t seem to part of the daily routine at Meraki. So when I consider this shift in the roles and responsibilities of both the teachers and the students, and I think about the goal of creating students who are being asked, even expected, to take more authority and responsibility over their own learning, within a framework of specific competencies, it gets me wondering what it takes to take a student from a more traditional schooling environment and transition to Meraki’s more self-directed schooling environment.

DAVID LEVIS: “Over the last year or so, we’ve developed what it looks like for our 9th graders some of those scaffolds and so we have a few key elements we require in the beginning. One, for example, is ‘presentation zen’ they call it. We make sure all students go through this training so they know what it is to present, the basic skills of what to do and what we’re looking for, what’s appropriate, and to kind of give them some background. Now, what they end up doing and however they end up presenting, there’s still refinement as they go through but they’re given this foundational piece. Our hope is to make sure there are some scaffolds because, as silly as it sounds, we have zero structure in the traditional sense - for example, there’s no lunch time. Literally, for the last nine years they’ve been told when and how and where they’re going to have lunch, and we don’t have a lunch time. For the last couple of years, we’ve used a system called SKED, so if you were to go to a professional event and you’d get this app and use it... [and since covid transitioned to a google docs kind of thing...] where they select what pieces they’ll go to, what area they’ll be at, what groups will participate in...”

GREG MULLEN: This was a fascinating aspect of this self-directed model for a public school because of the amount of trust being placed in students. As we continued our conversation, David described some of the responses he’s received from parents regarding how much more freedom and control students have over their own learning at Meraki High School.

DAVID LEVIS: “One of the nice things is, we get a bit of a pass on this, because we’re open about what this structure is, so, about a month ago we have an 8th grade family come for a tour and find out what it means to be here and that topic came up. I was fortrite about there being an element of trust for their student. We have campus monitors and staff and we can monitor while we’re here on campus but it’s really not a closed campus, to a certain extent, it’s not really that we’re monitoring, but we do have discussions with students and advisors (teachers) and, because we’re Independent Study, the conversation goes something like this: ‘hey, John, I’m going to go run up to the mini-mart and grab something to eat.’ John will say, ‘did you text your parents’, ‘yes, I texted my parents’, ‘alright’. So, it’s that kind of conversation and it is not for everybody. If it’s something you have to struggle with, whether you trust them to do the right things, and we prep our families for that. It’s not free reign and is usually centered on our 9th and 10th graders where they stay a little bit more local, but we have to have it open for our year 3s and 4s because we want them to go out. They’re going to be going out to college campuses, to internships, to work on whatever other piece they need to be able to do.”

GREG MULLEN: To those listening, I think it’s important to point out something David mentions about the kind of freedom and independence students at Meraki experience - not all families are comfortable with this kind of learning environment. In fact, I make a point to ask David about how many students enroll at Meraki who come from the local

public middle schools and how many come from homeschooling, unschooling, or other non-traditional public school environments.

DAVID LEVIS: “One of the nice things about our particular region right now is that there’s a pretty strong Montessori group, the California Montessori Project, and many come from that vein of education which I argue that’s the closest thing to that, where they are able to choose their passion, choose their view, work toward what is engaging them, and I think that’s what my best understanding of what that system is; it allows students to be able to plan. So for students who are coming from that kind of education have the closest connection and understand it best... I would say it would be of great benefit to, however it might be done, for some larger areas, if nothing else but for the sense of community, because of our small school, we’re able to know our kids really well. The difficulty really gets into, because they’ve been trained for so long to look up answers and have been spoon fed all of their life, it makes it difficult for students to transition. I think the sooner they did that, the better off they would be, but it would require us to shift from this industrial model of school that has been around for so long and, for us to really embrace this idea that we are not making widgets - we’re making humans; but it’s not efficient and so that makes it hard. How do you make sure you embrace the student, the whole child - it almost has to be inefficient.”

GREG MULLEN: Before I move on to share my next conversation, I want to connect David’s thought about how embracing the whole child almost has to be inefficient, with a thought from another school leader, Alexis Burgess, co-founder of Alcove, a self-directed learning cooperative in L.A. - In my conversation with Alexis, I bring up this idea of efficiency over effectiveness in health and safety versus academic proficiency - in a school setting.

ALEXIS BURGESS: “I think you’re right in emphasizing that there’s a lot of mainstream conventional schooling has gotten excellent at, and I think there’s potentially too much combativeness between that part of the education space and alternative parts of the education space, and I’m definitely interested in minimizing conflict and controversy and just want to let a thousand flowers bloom, and I wish Alcove had the administrative genius of a long-standing public school... but I think what you’re hitting on is something that Ken Danford really impressed upon me in his writing which is that when it comes to teaching and learning, as facilitators, we shouldn’t be aspiring to make sure that someone learns something because, I think he’s right, there’s probably going to be, if not counterproductive, then ineffective - I don’t think you can make sure that someone learns something in the same way you can make sure they show up to see their parents within two minutes. I think you have to focus on making learning possible and that involves catering to the individual differences among different kids which I know everyone in education is aspiring to do to some degree whenever possible but, I think in a situation like Alcove, it’s really much easier to achieve that dream, to meet each

person as an individual and figure out what combination of, or lack of structures is going to work best for them.”

GREG MULLEN: I share my conversation with Alexis and about Alcove in the following episode, alongside conversations with other leaders of alternative learning spaces; but I'd like to shift now and celebrate another leader in education that has developed a unique balance between Self-Directed Learning and Traditional Schooling.

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GREG MULLEN: Catherine Gobron is the Co-Founder and Executive Director of Lighthouse, a self-directed learning facility in Holyoke, Massachusetts. Unlike Meraki High School in California, Catherine does not run Lighthouse as a school in the public school district. Instead, she co-founded a self-directed learning facility and has been shaping it into a three-track model; The first track is its original founding structure as a self-directed learning environment. The second track is its partnership with Holyoke Public Schools. The third track is an accredited private school setting, but all three tracks follow a self-directed approach to personalized learning, where Catherine is able to meet individual families where they're at, which I'll let her explain in more detail, starting with her background with Self-Directed Learning.

CATHERINE GOBRON: “So North Star was really the program that originated this approach, and I was the Program Director there for 12 years, so it was kind of a natural extension for me to just keep doing it the same way. I think the philosophy at North Star that we share is that this gives kids, you know, they are in charge of their own education so they are not attending school with a curriculum they have to complete, they have to go through whatever X-Y-Z hoops, it's really putting all of the responsibility and all the control in their hands, and we're there to support them as guides and mentors and cheerleaders, but not as task masters or prison guards, or controllers of how and what they learn, so not being a school - and that's really big at North Star - so we've kind of become a black sheep to some degree by embracing the “school”-ness, but at North Star, school is optional is the motto which is just a fact, and it's certainly true that school is optional.”

GREG MULLEN: It's important to note that Lighthouse has become, as Catherine describes it, a black sheep to some degree by embracing this “school”-ness, because the two sides of the *Self-Directed Schooling* coin places both schooling and self-directed learning on either side of the education conversation, so the fact that Catherine maintains her focus on creating a Self-Directed Learning environment, but that her facility, Lighthouse, has evolved into a partnership with the public school system, is something that I find inspiring when I think of the potential for evolving *Self-Directed Schooling* into the mainstream. But Lighthouse didn't start out like this...

CATHERINE GOBRON: “When we first started in 2015, the way we managed it is we registered everyone as a homeschooler; so that’s kind of the legal loophole; they remain enrolled in their home district. There are a lot of benefits to it because they have access to after school sports and other after school activities at their local high school which is a nice advantage for some kids. I mean we’ve had the captain of the baseball team who didn’t go to the school, so it’s a nice way to access the things you want and not the things you don’t want. It’s kind of like going to university and you can become an engineer or an artist - you’re at the same university but pursuing things very differently. It’s not so unusual to have different ways of approaching education within the same framework. All of the students have an adviser, have tons of support to take art classes, tutorials, independent study, outside internships, dual enrollment, whatever online classes, whatever makes sense for them to be accessing as they move forward in their educational path. That’s true whatever track you’re on and then it’s just how we document it, so the accredited graduation has a specific track and so we just keep track of things a little bit differently so we can say, oh ya, you achieved 120 units in these areas.”

GREG MULLEN: One thing I’m glad Catherine also brought up was the socio-economic background of her town Holyoke, because it has a considerable amount of urban poverty and a really divided economic base. I think that’s important because the scalability of a more self-directed learning environment in urban settings where the structure of traditional schooling is more prevalent seems like an important idea to explore, and it does come up in later episodes, but I want to focus this episode on the collaboration of self-directed learning with a traditional school system, specifically, how Catherine at Lighthouse is able to offer students coming from the public school system an opportunity to earn their high school diploma while still offering a more self-directed learning environment.

CATHERINE GOBRON: “It’s amazing. We have so much flexibility around what and how they’re learning. They have to meet these credit requirements but it’s kind of, I’ll use the university example again, I need these credits for Humanities, but they can be maybe the history of the civil war, or maybe it’s anthropology - there’s a whole bunch of ways to meeting that criteria, so it’s similar to us. They need twenty credits of English but how they do that English we have total flexibility. Is that reading the biographies of your favorite rap artists? Great. Is that writing poetry and turning that into some kind of chat book? Great. Is it studying 18th century poetry? Whatever the kid is interested in, great, that counts - everything counts, so now we have all of this flexibility and we’re not trying to stuff what they’re not interested in or have fear around or whatever the block is, we’re not arguing about that. ‘Oh, you don’t want to take the Shakespeare class? Don’t sign up for it then.’ It’s like college in that respect. You don’t have to take anything you don’t want to, we need to find some way to get these English credits or these Math credits, but it doesn’t have to be Geometry, it can be financial literacy. It can be basic Algebra - I have a student studying cryptocurrency, awesome.”

GREG MULLEN: Catherine was very open about the benefits Lighthouse offers both the students and the school district as I continued trying to wrap my head around the idea that Lighthouse is able to remain a private entity while also collaborating with the school district in this unique way.

CATHERINE GOBRON: “The way that we do that is sort of like, they have to do all of the credit requirements for the high school, twenty credits for English, fifteen for Social Studies, fifteen for Science, and a whole bunch of electives, and they have to pass the MCAS, because they actually remain enrolled in Holyoke public schools. They attend Lighthouse but they remain in the district, so it’s a win for the district because they get another graduate, another kid to pass the MCAS, and it’s a win for the student because it’s free for them because it’s still public school, and they are now being served as the individual that they are and whatever reason it wasn’t working before, sometimes they have life circumstances like they’re taking care of their grandmother or younger sibling, they have mayhem and chaos at home, violence or addiction they’re managing which is making school not work, or they didn’t learn well in that environment so they got negative messaging about who they are and what they’re capable of and shut down and gave up on themselves in some ways based on the feedback which is incredibly damaging, so all different kinds of different things happen to them before we get them that made it so school wasn’t working, so it’s a win for them because we meet them right where they are, and it’s all fine.”

GREG MULLEN: When I think about how Lighthouse is benefiting not only the homeschool and unschooling families in the Holyoke community, as a self-directed learning facility, but also public school families, and eventually families seeking an accredited private school setting, and how each one of these tracks are approached with the same Self-Directed Learning mindset as a private entity outside of the school district, and then I think about David Levis at Meraki High School where they’re approaching this balance from within the public school district itself, I get excited imagining how other communities across the country are adapting their own blend of Self-Directed Learning to benefit their public school system in a way that meets the needs of their communities. In fact, I asked Catherine whether she thought Lighthouse could be a model other districts can follow.

CATHERINE GOBRON: “That’s the plan and the goal. There’s no one right way so Lighthouse isn’t going to, you know, I mean, our tagline is “changing what education can be.” So, it’s not like cancelling school. Different students respond to different approaches and this is not the end-all-be-all “everyone must do it this way” but it is proven successful for lots of students and it should be an option, especially, in my opinion, in districts where so many students are falling through the cracks. I hope to collaborate with lots of districts to help them with their own programs, so my hope is to share the core pieces with districts to develop their own version of Lighthouse.”

GREG MULLEN: You can learn more about Catherine at Lighthouse and contact her and her team through their website, [LighthouseHolyoke DOT ORG](http://LighthouseHolyoke.DOT.ORG). David Levis at Meraki High School can be reached through his district's website, [San Juan DOT EDU](http://San.Juan.DOT.EDU).

As I bring this first episode to a close, I want to bring back a visual from this second season's introduction episode, where I talk about capturing a rainbow. As I continue exploring the core of who we are and how we learn, keep in mind that all of the topics and all of the people throughout this second season are all part of the environment responsible for creating that rainbow, but are not the rainbow itself. The question to ask is not how this episode explains who we are and how we learn, but how the ideas presented connect with the ideas in the other episodes to come to such a conclusion. I hope you enjoy this second season and I thank you for listening. Talk to you next time.

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