

Mullen: Welcome to the EXPLORING THE CORE PODCAST, where we delve into the elements that make up our education system and learn more about how that system can improve for the benefit of all students in schools today.

I'm Greg Mullen and in this episode I discuss a particular model for changing a system in a school or organization by focusing on a bottom-up implementation with top-down support.

I'll also be talking to Nikki Roorda out of Iowa, Executive Director of Teaching and Learning at Johnston Community School District, who speaks to the positive changes being made in her state, in her district, and in her schools.

Thank you for listening, I hope you enjoy the show.

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I'd like to start by addressing a big picture idea about MOTIVATION. Motivation fuels the strengths necessary to make important organizational changes. If you're listening to this podcast, you're likely interested in learning about or are currently involved in transitioning to some form of a progressive model for standards-based or social-emotional learning. So let me say this right off the bat: if your school or district has not yet defined the WHY behind your transition, or if that WHY is being shared as a top-down mandate from high-level administration, it's highly recommended by many professionals, including those interviewed in this podcast series, that this "why" be brought up immediately within your organization and discussed from the perspective of all stakeholders involved, and defining what's driving this need to change.

It could be that there are political or regulatory pressures driving this change. Maybe there are financial pressures to collect state or federal funding driving this shift. Perhaps there's a social or demographic shift that is at the root of your school or organization's need for a shift in your system.

What I want to highlight in this episode from my perspective as a teacher is the need for transparent and intentional change to systems that involves more than just my own perspective or that of a particular group of administrators. Change can get pretty complicated and at times quite uncomfortable so an organized framework can be very helpful. The framework I'll be describing in this episode is from 1987 called "The Managing Complex Change Model" by Dr. Mary Lippitt.

Because when it comes to schools adopting a standards-based or social-emotional approach to education, there's a significant number of mechanisms that will need to be explicitly and implicitly adapted to meet specific needs of a community. This adoption will benefit from a Complex Change Model. What I've seen happened in schools in the past is that conversations within a school attempting to make changes begin conflating unique challenges and concerns. The complexity often leaves some to request one vision simply takeover; but I argue that such dismissal of ownership over schools overlooks the importance of a school's impact on a

community. So having a framework for system change can organize conversations and focus concerns and potential solutions.

Now wouldn't it be nice if it were as simple as purchasing a manual, distributing workbooks at seminars, and guarantee successful implementation of a redesigned system. We must remember that changing a system by its very nature is an uncomfortable process and only from within that system's community can a community's needs be addressed and supported. Because every community will have subtle differences that involve subtly different group dynamics and a framework is important for discussing big changes to a system such as adopting Standards-Based Grading or Social-Emotional Learning in a school.

Now as you consider your own community and its needs and you start to get excited for engaging in a system change you may be envisioning, there's a small but important consideration when all stakeholders congregate to discuss a need for a system change. Perspective. A school's hierarchy of roles and responsibilities are often not explicitly defined within the context of that school's typical norms and traditions. What I mean is, when challenges arise from changes to a system, even though a role may be contractually defined by a general set of expectations, boundaries and responsibilities often overlap. Some people like to share their responsibilities with others to help solve problems. I argue that this can inadvertently create confusion or even frustration among different stakeholders as more complex problems are addressed with more creative solutions and instead shared between different stakeholders one problem at a time. At the end of the week, when everybody's emotionally drained and ready to recharge over the weekend, it's easy to forget trends in problems that were solved by sharing roles and responsibilities. And I know how uncomfortable it can get discussing boundaries and expectations with team leaders or administrators. But being up-front and open about your own boundaries and expectations according to your role and responsibilities not only helps you from burning out but also helps your team identify problems that may need to be brainstormed because, honestly, some challenges are too big for one person to handle. Finding solutions to these unique challenges may be better as a whole team effort rather than shifting recurring problems to a different person each time.

With that said, let's dig into this Change Model and reflect on how it can impact our own communities.

#### Step One.

The first aspect of this change model has to do with a school's vision. This can't be one person's vision. You'll want all stakeholders involved in this process. A question to consider brainstorming with all stakeholders could be, "With what kind of humans do we want to share our world?" This kind of big picture question may spark discussion about more specific questions such as, "With what tools will our students need to become the kind of humans that benefits a community?" This can be followed with a discussion about what the desired change might look, sound, and feel like. Now these questions and discussions could involve descriptions as vague or as specific as they need to be, so keep in mind that one person's vision may be subtly different

than another and that has to be okay going in. Also keep in mind that an individual's own expectations for themselves may be hindering successful brainstorming at this stage, so positive facilitation is important here. It's also important to keep in mind that the vision itself is not going to be crystal clear on the outset - it must allow for a little bit of blurriness as you are brainstorming so that, as you address the steps to follow, the vision can come in to focus with reason and intention. So don't worry if one aspect of your own personal vision is an outlier in a brainstorm because it may be an aspect that becomes a clearer element of the vision over time.

Some of you might be thinking about those questions and how general they sound. They sound general because they have to be - communities want and need different things across the country so anything I suggest is going to be hit or miss with any particular school; but if I'm going to suggest anything with regard to creating a vision, for me, it comes down to these three questions: (1) how do you see your own community improving beyond your own family and friends, (2) what will you and your colleagues need to become to model those expectations for students, and (3) are the first two questions sparking a vision for how you want both you and your students to positively impact your community as it exists today?

With a vision in the process, the next steps look at the Skills, Action Plans, and Resources for change. Each must address your vision, so keep that vision visible as you discuss these next steps. Without this vision, confusion and open disagreement may arise in these next steps.

#### Step Two.

When it comes to Skills, you're looking at a single aspect of the *how* behind your vision. What I mean is, if your vision addresses particular language skills for conflict resolution, do you and your parents, teachers, and administrators have those particular language skills and are they trained not only in exercising but also coaching young humans in developing those skills? This is where you get into the challenges in sharing roles and responsibilities within a system change. Instructional leadership and community outreach will be an important aspect of the administrator's role in communicating these necessary skills to staff and parents. Pedagogical knowledge to meet particular student needs in developing these skills will be an important aspect of the teacher's role. Awareness of how skills are intended to be developed is an important aspect of the family and community role to recognize their own development and model the kinds of behaviors we are expecting our students to learn and exercise themselves.

#### Step Three.

This step focuses on the Action Plan, looking at the actions to meet short- and long-term goals of your vision. What you are trying to avoid in addressing this step is a series of false starts that can occur when you fly by the seat of your pants and find yourself starting over because the most probable challenges have not been thought through. Obviously, you can't plan for infinite challenges, but you can *surely* plan for the most likely outcomes given the skills you are addressing and the progress your staff and community are making in developing the skills incorporated in your vision. You'll know an action plan is realistic when the possible outcomes

prove to be accurate foreshadowing of the challenges you face when implementing changes. When schools start to see outcomes that slowly drift further from your vision, it's likely a sign that your action plan might have been somewhat unrealistic. Knowing this is an intentional step in the process can allow all participants to think through how they see the vision being met so that probable outcomes can be discussed. The last thing a school wants is to suddenly experience unforeseen negative outcomes with little plan for how to self-correct. It's not vital that all stakeholders internalize the inner-workings of all possible outcomes and resolutions, but it is important that they be involved in ongoing reflection of changes being made in the context of such Action Plan processes.

#### Step Four.

This step focuses on the Resources and the ever-important question, “with *what?*” When it comes to developing skills and implementing action plans, those of us in the classrooms and on the playgrounds of a school will be wondering *with what* are to be making these changes happen? This step is designed to minimize frustration toward an action plan by openly addressing the planned development (or lack thereof) of necessary resources for a larger vision. Remember how it was okay for a vision to be a little blurry at the start? A school can't always access any resources whenever they want and sometimes it takes time for resources to be acquired, but only until you've sketched out what skills need to be developed and what steps you'll need to take can you objectively define the specific resources for your vision. When teachers or parents are fully aware of limited or unavailable resources, especially when they know a particular resource would make the vision so much clearer or make the whole process work so much more smoothly, at this point in the process, knowing that alternative routes for an action plan to address the skills needed for a shared vision will help minimize frustration. Many of us have witnessed, or experienced, an otherwise unattainable resource become available at a time that would potentially place undue stress on others by suddenly incorporating it into a planned event or program. This is where I stress the importance of the adults in the school to exercise the emotional coping strategies we want our students to develop over time. This means we are able to help our colleagues with appropriate strategies that can de-escalate potential conflicts when it comes to challenges such as changing a plan that may unintentionally impact the efforts of others. For those of you thinking it, yes, communication is the key.

#### Step Five.

This gets me into the final step of this Change Model - Incentives, and it's a big topic. When we first approach a desired change, it's easy to be excited about what we want the change to be. It's important to remember that the process of change by its very nature is uncomfortable and there will be days that are more difficult than others. Designing incentives that access the intrinsic motivation of school staff as well as students and their families will be one of the most challenging steps to discuss. This is because we tend to view rewards as the primary means for changing a person's behavior. In fact, the acronym PBIS literally refers to “Positive Behavior” as a means for behavior intervention, focusing solely on using positive reinforcement for behaviors we want in order to influence the misbehaviors of those nearby. But when we're talking about incentives for such a large systemic change to a school's system, there's a particular

perspective I feel is crucial to this step, and it involves the use of financial incentives, or what I call the carrot-and-stick method. In economic terms, I'll be referring to a principle called Crowding Theory.

Crowding Theory suggests that providing extrinsic incentives for certain kinds of behavior—such as promising monetary rewards for accomplishing some tasks— can *sometimes* undermine intrinsic motivation for performing those specific tasks. Bruno Frey talks about this in his 1997 book *Not Just for the Money* and recently published a study in 2017 titled *Policy consequences of pay-for-performance and crowding-out*. He argues that public agencies, as well as charitable and humanitarian organizations, should be careful to institute pay-for-performance schemes due to the risk of this Crowding Theory, or the crowding-out of intrinsic motivation."

When it comes to intrinsic motivation, there's enough similarity in developing intrinsic motivation for students as there is developing motivation in our own selves, so it's important to remember that the range and intensity for self-motivation is just as wide-ranging for our students as it is for us as adults. The difference is that students have an added layer of early human development which includes developmental stages incorporating physical, emotional, cognitive, psychosocial, and cultural factors. The need to coach students in self-motivation is not always the same as our ability to exercise self-motivation. This is the biggest reason why relying on carrot-and-stick incentives for motivating students that are in need of coaching behaviors is often a poorly thought-out approach for achieving a vision such as Self-Directed Learning.

Now what I hope you take away from this episode is a better idea of how top-down mandates for change have a smaller chance for success than a bottom-up approach with top-down support. We want teachers and parents working alongside our students in shaping the changes to our system of education as they are the ones who are addressing these steps in the Complex Change Model. School and district officials need to be aware of and be in full support of the vision created by all stakeholders. They'll need to provide meaningful instructional leadership as well as engaging family and community outreach while teachers and families engage in each aspect of the Change Model.

I truly believe we are on the cutting edge of developing fantastic opportunities for schools and communities to improve school culture and climate by addressing what many of us adults likely didn't receive in our education - intentional cognitive, psychosocial, and emotional development for us, as well as our parents and teachers. As more schools embark on this evolution of system change of our education system, I am excited to see, hear, and experience school and community improvements, especially as we improve our ability to identify with a developmental mindset the desired changes we want in our communities of students, teachers, administrators, and families.

For this episode, I'd like to share a phone interview I had with a wonderful administrator out of Johnston, Iowa - Nikki Roorda. She is a 10-year classroom teacher and literacy coordinator, a



14-year Regional Director of Iowa's (Heartland Area) Education Agency, and currently the Executive Director of Teaching and Learning at Johnston Community School District.

**[Interview: Nikki Roorda]**

Mullen: Ms Roorda, thank you for taking the time to speak with me today.

Roorda: No problem. Thanks, Greg, for having me.

Mullen: I'd really like to jump in talk to you about the amazing things you're doing with your district, but I thought I'd first ask to clarify for the listeners how your role and responsibilities relate to the schools in your district, especially with the new position that you have. Am I correct in that you have a team of coordinators and facilitators and helping schools receive focused learning for staff.

Roorda: Yes, that is correct. My position, and I also have a partner who is the executive director of student services, and I am the director of teaching and learning. We coincide very well and have a team of approximately twelve people that we work with to ensure that in the district.

Mullen: Oh, that's huge, that's really important because then the guidance you provide for curricula and assessments are likely a large part of your teams' responsibilities.

Roorda: Yes, and then we, as we work through those, we have representatives from our English Language Learners, our Social-Emotional Learning team, our Special Education consultants, et cetera, to make sure we're looking at the whole child when we're developing curriculum.

Mullen: Now the SEL, the social-emotional learning, that you just mentioned is something new in the country and Iowa just released their state standards for SEL - last month kind of new - and because it's so new, and I'm getting more familiar with the fact that because this is so new there's not a lot of information out there yet, but it's such an important distinction that your role with curricula and assessments, and correct me if I'm wrong, it has felt like there's been a recent increase in companies pushing their programs and curricula for social-emotional learning with different companies really making a strong push for getting their work into schools. Is that something you've noticed?

Roorda: Yes, Greg, I'd say that's a very accurate perception. I think Iowa has been very fortunate in the fact that we've had our eye on social-emotional learning for the past several years, and just with the apex of it being this release of our social-emotional learning standard last month, and as a result I think across the country social-emotional learning is becoming more and more prevalent, so I have seen in my current position of companies offering their services to help social-emotional learning not only at the student level but also at the adult level within our district to help support those folks.

Mullen: What have you noticed as far as reactions from schools to these companies' products and services, I mean, how is your district been addressing this recent push from companies for SEL in schools.

Roorda: Well, and I will speak for the Johnston School District, they have made a firm commitment to social-emotional learning well before I was here - I was just hired in the district in August; but they have a dedicated FTE that is dedicated to social-emotional learning both for adults and for students. That person has been on board in the district for I think four years, I might be five years, it's for sure been four years. She, along with my counterpart, the executive director of student services, really work closely to provide a scope and sequence of learning for both adults in the district as well as the students. Through the companies that come through, we have partnered with a few outside groups to provide learning but we do a lot of our own in-house learning based on our scope and sequence of learning within the social-emotional learning domain.

Mullen: You're referencing these domains, and I think it's important to note, that Iowa is one of the states that received a five-year School Climate Transformation Grant that is now coming to an end and our likely going to renew it; but it's likely where those SEL standards were developed from that grant, and I'm actually excited to know what Iowa's going to be doing in the future with the next five-year grant they're likely going to get because of the progress you're making.

Roorda: Ya, Iowa is known for being fairly progressive in their educational practices, including with our new social-emotional learning, so we have been talking about social-emotional learning as a state for several years and really reinforcing, we've spent a lot of time in the state talking about our multi-tiered system of supports and noting that our MTSS system that are not only for academics but they're also for behavior and social-emotional learning. We now as a state have developed a social-emotional pyramid that talks about all sorts of aspects whether it's toxic stress, ACEs, those types of things all the way to very strategies intervention plans for kids we support in their social-emotional health.

Mullen: I've personally found a strong connection between what social-emotional learning has to offer and what we've come to know are benefits for standards-based grading practices, in a standards-based approach, but Johnston Community School District is doing something very specific and unique, and something I really loved looking into, it has an excellent tool called Portrait of a Learner that seems to incorporate much of what SEL is looking to support. With your work supporting standards-based learning in Iowa's schools, what has been your experience now seeing how Johnston's Portrait of a Learner impacts the implementation of standards-based and social-emotional learning practice?

Roorda: Absolutely. The Portrait of a Learner was developed a few years ago and it really tried to identify what are those 21st century skills and executive skills that students need to be successful in a post-secondary endeavour, whether that is college or career, and how we

interact with each other as human beings, and I'm really proud of that work. We've taken a step this year with our secondary, we're rolling it out first in our secondary to separate behavior and academic achievement; and we aren't doing standards-based grading yet - we're calling it our standards-based mindset where we're really working on the practices, the foundational practices of standards-based grading, but we know that one of those pieces is that sometimes behaviors can cloud the rankings and ratings that teachers give students academically. So by using our Portrait of a Learner, we're focusing on "Collaboration" and "Accountability and Productivity", two of our domains within our portrait of a learner and reporting those domains out separately than the academic piece. It's really been some good conversation between teachers and parents and students because kids need to reflectively look at how they are being a collaborative learner and how that then pushes forward into all aspects of their life. Parents are very supportive - we just got back, actually this week, a survey that we gave out to all of our teachers, all of our students in secondary, and all of our secondary parents about our Portrait of a Learner as we report it out on our behavior rubric is what we're calling it for right now, and by and large people are very supportive of separating those pieces because they know that kids behavior can sometimes impede the work that they do academically. Sometimes kids do really well and are in touch with their social-emotional side, and sometimes that isn't the case, and so we can deal with each of those items separately to help support each other.

Mullen: It sounds like Iowa has a very intuitive way of approaching something that's growing in this country - which is social-emotional learning, but you're doing it with such intention and, I don't want to use the word objectivity, but you're really getting in and identifying exactly what's important to Iowa and creating that shared language and I love this idea of developing a Portrait of a Learner specific to your communities - I love that.

Roorda: Ya, I think it was great work and this work was done prior to my position, but something I want to compliment our district on is we spend a lot of time getting input from all different types of stakeholders. So when the Portrait of a Learner was being vetted and developed and really identifying what's important to the stakeholders of the Johnston School District as far as their learning, they talked to teacher, they had student input, they had community input of people that are business owners that may not be parents in the district, and then they also had parents. Then they sifted through all of that data to develop the Portrait of a Learner as it exists now and I'm really proud of it because we have identified and have anchors in what is it that we want for our students as they leave. Now our next step that I'm excited about is that we're now take the concept of Portrait of a Learner and taking it at the district level to say what we want our leaders in our district, our administrators, to look like, so we are just getting started on Portrait of a Leader. So how do we take those same domains and press them out for our leadership within the district, no matter what level of leadership you're at.

Mullen: The thing I love about what it is that you're doing, what it is you just described, is that it sounds like it's a bottom-up implementation with top-down support so it's not being mandated that everybody do what the top levels of the education institution are saying this is what we're going to do; going out into the communities, pulling out exactly what it is that we want for our



students, and then building upward to reflect how we want the students to become adults, and then becoming those adults ourselves so that we can guide them to be that - it's a fantastic approach and it sounds like it's a multi-generational plan that Iowa's taking.

Roorda: Ya, it absolutely is and specifically to our district I can say it is very iterative. We take a lot of things out, we float them for input, we come back to refine and revise; so I feel very solid on our Portrait of a Learner and duplicating that process for Portrait of a Leader which we're in the infancy stages of that, then we can back-map to say, looking at our data, where are our kids shaking out, are we meeting those expectations, are we not meeting those expectations, and then we can build our professional learning plan around our data that sets up where we're really doing well and where we need to bolster up.

Mullen: Now do you feel that other communities, if they were to take the same path that you're taking, as a state, as a school district, with this Portrait of a Learner and a Leader; if other communities were to follow suit, and this is a tough question I realize, but do you feel that they would in turn create something very similar, if not almost the same as far as what types of aspects, what types of word choice, attributes, character traits, that their own Portrait of a Learner would become, or do you think that each community going through this process would end up with a product very unique and different based on their community?

Roorda: I hate to say but I think it depends. I think there are going to be some pieces that are going to be consistent across all, because we're really looking at those 21st century skills, those executive skills and function skills, and once again the state of Iowa has done a great job, we have those 21st century skills identified for us through the Iowa Core curriculum, so I think that probably there would be threads of similarity amongst all the districts but then I think there might be descriptors within those domains that might be unique to a community and a district. I think it's kind of both - that would be my perception of what would happen.

Mullen: I agree because I often consider states like the State of Washington versus the State of California versus the State of Maine, and everyone's taking a similar approach but nobody's saying this is the absolute right way to identify exactly what we want out of our students. But they still seem to have that trim, like you're saying, these 21st century skills are throughout all of these states. It really seems like everyone is getting to the same goal in their own way.

Roorda: Ya, I would agree with that, just because there has been a lot more upsurge in conversations around social-emotional learning that we need to pay attention to that a lot of the similar vocabulary is coming out, but I do still think there's value in getting out and vetting within your local community their values and perceptions and that way it's everybody's document. That's one thing I'm really proud of with our Portrait of a Learner - it's not a school-based document, it's our community-based document and we have folks referring to it out in our community because they were stakeholders within those concessions so I think that's really cool in fact.

Mullen: That is very cool. I love the community aspect of developing those expectations for students as they're becoming our workers, our humans, our citizens, and in fact for states that may be starting that conversation for themselves and may want to look to Johnston School District for advice and support, is there a place where they can go and find this information and more of it?

Roorda: Absolutely! You are welcome to always go to our Johnston Community School website. It's [www.Johnston.k12.ia.us](http://www.Johnston.k12.ia.us) and there's our resources section and it will have for parents the parents section and the students section, the Portrait of a Learner.

Mullen: Fantastic. I have to thank you for speaking with me. This has been really enlightening to hear school districts really putting to task, social-emotional learning being so important, that you taking those steps and making it happen - it's really great to hear and I'm excited to see what Johnston does in the future.

Roorda: Well, Greg, I appreciate you letting us share our story. It's a story in progress, which is true probably with all schools and people across the country, that social-emotional learning is that foundation for our kids. They have to have their social-emotional health in check in order to be ready to be productive learners. So we really take that very seriously in our school district and our state and it's very important so I appreciate you giving us the platform to tell our story.

Mullen: Thank you very much, Ms Roorda, for being on the program.

Roorda: Thank You.

**[End Interview]**

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