

TRANSCRIPT

Learning Unboxed



Bonus Episode

Johnna Noll:

Annalies Corbin:

Welcome to the July edition of Learning Unboxed. Similar to previous years, we typically take the month of July off. However, we know our listeners enjoy engaging with Learning Unboxed during the summer break. This next four weeks, we will explore four featured learning sites, who are part of the Education Reimagined Ecosystem Lab. We will travel to Fab Newport, we will give a listen to Rock Tree Sky, we will experience the Norris School District, and we will have big conversations with Big Thought in Dallas, Texas. Education Reimagined's mission is to make learner-centered education available to every child in the United States, inclusive of race, background and circumstance. Tune in to discover how each learning site uniquely fosters learner-centered experiences for their students.

Johnna Noll:

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Annalies Corbin:

Welcome to Learning Unboxed, a conversation about teaching, learning, and the future of work. I'm your host and Chief Goddess of the PAST Foundation, Annalies Corbin.

We know the current model for education is obsolete. It was designed to create fleets of assembly line workers, not the thinkers and problem solvers needed today. We've seen the innovations that are possible within education, and it's our goal to leave the box behind and reimagine what education can look like in your own backyard.

Welcome to today's episode of Learning Unboxed. As always, I'm excited to talk with another great innovator in the transformative education space. Joining us today is Johnna Noll, who is the Executive Director of the Norris School District, a learner-centered ecosystem in Wisconsin. Johnna, welcome to Learning Unboxed.

Johnna Noll:

Thank you. I'm so excited to be here with you today.

Annalies Corbin:

Excellent. I'm excited for our conversation. Let's set a little bit of context for our listeners as we get started. The Norris School District is committed to changing lives through the power of learning and building leaders at all levels. They are the smallest public school district in the State of Wisconsin and enroll primarily underserved youth. Their mission comes to bear through their unique 5P's Process of Learning, which is Profile, Plan, Pathway, Progress, and Proof, and a unique design process that we are going to talk about today. And together, they create a culture of learning that recognizes the unique hobbies, talents, and interests of each learner, helps each learner develop a deep understanding of self, and uses that understanding to co-design personal plans and pathways that lead them to their next best learning place.

All of which means I already love what's happening at Norris, that approach that emphasizes that they are all learners with adults learning alongside youth, making everybody in the ecosystem a coach that supports each other.

So, Johnna, what an amazing concept and idea that you're really truly creating an ecosystem where everybody learns at the same time. So, let's talk about, first and foremost, what brought this sort of shift in practice and thinking and mindset? What brought this all about and when did it all get started in Norris?

Johnna Noll:

Sure. Actually, I had been working as a consultant in the learner-centered field and Norris contacted me. The Norris School District contacted me back in about 2015 and said, if we were to start over and redesign our entire school district, what could we envision that would really serve the needs of all of our learners? What's unique about Norris - there's that dog I told us about. What's unique about Norris is that, as I said, we are the smallest school district in the State of Wisconsin. And the residential population consists of a treatment center, kids that are coming to us, some adjudicated, but mostly mental health support, kids that have basically not been successful in their prior environments and their schools have so kindly said please go find another place to go to school.

Of course, we embraced those kids with open arms and we really transformed the district at that point. I came to work with the district at that time and we really transformed the district from being a pretty much compliance-

based model to what we would say a learner-centered environment that's really focused on trauma-invested practices. We also use a lens of diversity, equity, inclusion, and the other mindset that we really bring in is that of an iterative mindset. So, no matter what we're doing, we're always growing and changing and iterating because we're always trying to meet the needs of our learners and our learners are constantly changing.

So, the mindset really is that if we're going to be learner-centered and trauma-invested and really understand who our learners are, we have to constantly be evolving what our practices are and how we respond to those to be sure that every learner has what they need as a unique individual to lead a fulfilled life and move into the future equipped with the things that they're really looking forward to.

In the spring of 2015, we interviewed, we brought on some new team members. And when we opened the doors in 2016, we were flying the plane as we were building it. They're our newest students, and we're going to do something all from scratch. During that summer months, we really designed a competency framework that went across four dimensions, so academics, employability, citizenship, and wellness. We wanted to be sure that all of our learners could grow and learn, and that we could think about what it meant to grow and learn across all four of those dimensions. We really started with that.

Part of that was building a profile of a learner. What is it that learners look like? And I know there's a lot of talk about profile of a learner now. Actually, a lot of people call it a profile of a graduate. But for us, it's the profile of a learner because everyone is a learner, including our staff. We all learn and grow with everybody. So, that really became the foundation of what we did.

Our program today starts with an orientation. We talk about the 5P's, you mentioned them in your introduction. And so, the very first thing that happens when a learner joins us and when a new staff person joins us is they build a Profile. And that Profile goes across the four dimensions of academics, employability, citizenship, and wellness. And for our professional staff, it goes across similar dimensions, but they build a profile of who they are and who they really want to become. This process is about two weeks before they actually are introduced into the ecosystem itself.

But this is an introduction to who they are. It's a chance for us to really sit down and have a conversation with them about everything in their profile and why it was important to help, for example, learners to really understand what is my learning style, and what are my hobbies, talents, and interests, and how am I going to use that into

the future. It's really not about the profile itself. It's really about the process and the conversations that each learner has with the adults in the building.

You heard me talk about leaders at all levels - I mentioned that to you earlier - and in terms of leaders at all levels, the profile is one of our through lines. So, every time a new employee comes, they also build their profile and they are sharing that and interacting with other adults in the building. But what's really key is that our learners and our staffs make themselves vulnerable and they share their profiles with each other.

So, in other words, we're really modeling what it means to be a learner. We're reflecting for ourselves on our portrait of a learner as adults, like, how are we dynamic leaders, and how do we build agency in what we do, how do we go about seeking solutions and being socially embedded, how do we use the resources around us. So, we, as adults, model all of those practices for our learners and we openly discuss those from the time that profile is built.

And I'm just going to go down that profile path for a minute. But from the time that profile is built, we also endorse our learners. You talked about resiliency and how this was something you really needed to work on, and, boy, we're going to endorse you because we just saw you being really resilient with that really challenging task. And so, we can endorse each other, we can endorse each other as staff, we can endorse our students, and that all collects and grows on our profile. So, just LinkedIn, you can actually see the endorsements that others give you. It helps build that intrinsic motivation.

Annalies Corbin:

And confidence. I would assume, too, that there's so much confidence that gets built through that process. That's really interesting. I love that.

Johnna Noll:

You'd be amazed how many learners actually come to us and they're, "Are you for real? Tell me what do I have first period or what does English look like for me?" And we're like, "We're really not interested in talking about that right now. We want to learn who you are." That profile, eventually, and for every learner, that entry point into our ecosystem looks a little different. Some are ready to dive in right from the start and during those ten days of orientation, they're already able to start connecting to some of our labs and some of our other experiences. Other kids take a little bit longer, and that's okay. It's a process that every learner has to be comfortable with.

But our goal is really to build agency. We want them to understand who they are and who they want to become so that when they actually sit down with their advisor and they build their pathway to graduation, and then what are my short term plans to get there, they're not being told what it looks like. They're basically having a conversation and we're really trying to have them build agency and what that plan looks like. And if my hobbies and talents and interests are becoming a welder, then let's take a look at when we build your plans and pathways what does that look like, and - we call them pursuits - what kinds of pursuits will you develop, what kinds of Extended Learning Opportunities - we call those ELOs - and those are opportunities to interact with people in the community.

So, if we have a young learner who's interested in being a welder, they may connect with their learning specialist and they may talk about I need to learn to weld. So, in terms of my ELA competencies, I'm going to be really digging into this manual, this welding manual, and I'm going to be able to communicate that back to you. I'm going to be learning how to weld. And so, their advisor might set them up, let's go take a tour, let's go to a shop, let's see some welders in action, let's do some job shadowing with the goal really being to embed that learner in the community as much as possible with what we call Extended Learning Practitioners, people outside of our organization that, honestly, bring a lot more to bear than we as a staff. Like, we don't have the experience of working in that industry and that field, but we can connect with them and we can build that bridge with and for the learner.

So, I guess from that profile, they build that plan and they build a pathway. How am I getting there? That pathway is going to look different for every learner. For some, it's very place-based at our Learning Hub in Norris on our campus. But for others, it has time on campus. It has time in the community. So, sometimes they're connected to the community with the goal being completely embedded in your community, working with community partners that we, as an organization, connect with to see, "Okay. So, you're taking this hip hop chess club class." What kind of academic competencies, what kind of employability, citizenship, and wellness competencies are you learning? And how can we use that to demonstrate evidence and help you earn credit as a high school individual and as an individual before that? How do we document that as part of your learning growth and pathway?

So, it's just very different for every learner, and the same holds true for our staff. Who are you? Who do you want to become? So, what are your professional goals and aspirations? And we, as a leadership team, help coach our staff in the same way that we coach our learners, thus we talk about building leaders at all levels.

Annalies Corbin:

I love that element. I want to just dig in a little bit to make sure that our listeners have a solid understanding. So, this is the smallest district in Wisconsin, so give us a sense of scale. What size are we talking about?

Johnna Noll:

Right. We enroll somewhere between 85 to 100 learners, so very small. Our goal is - actually, let me just talk about those 85 to 100 learners. I mentioned earlier and you also said in your introduction that we do serve learners that have primarily been underserved. So, those kids that are coming through the residential center have really not experienced success in school, oftentimes life in their community. These are kids that are out of their home placed and are coming to our school district.

We also take kids to the public school choice program. So, these are families that have heard of our program and they enroll and they think this is something great for their kids, and they really embrace the idea that learning looks different, that learning can take place there and in the community, and that it's unique for each child. And we also have learners in our district that are out of district placed through the IEP process by neighboring school districts. And just by nature of that, these are kids that haven't met success in their current school district. And, again, their districts are looking for a little bit of support.

So, I think when you are asking for context for our listeners, we have a small number of learners, but these are learners that have not experienced success. And what we're trying to say is that success doesn't mean that you can play the game of school.

Success means that you understand who you are, you have a vision for your future, and you're taking steps to get there.

So, even a learner who has been asked to leave their district, let's say it's because of engagement challenges or dysregulation or something to that effect, those challenges almost always go away when you take away the strict parameter of here's what you must do. You meet my expectation, you turn that in, I'll give you a grade and then we're going to move on. There's no meaning. There's no connection to their life.

But when you sit down to somebody and you say, What are your hobbies, talents, and interests? What do you want to do in the future? What kind of pursuit would you like to have? And you get to build your own pathway and learn about things that interests you. Our learning specialists have the responsibility of making sure that academic competencies get tied back to that. But we're not creating their path, they create it for themselves so these learners become highly engaged.

We have a young man right now who has just really been interested in music. And he has done a lot of things with us. He's connected with some practitioners. But he is

now doing an internship, where every week, he goes to our local cafe and he plays music. He plays music for people that are coming in and getting their coffee in the morning and having their meetings. And he's interacting with the staff there and he is interacting with the community. So, he's learning how to communicate. He's learning how to accept praise. He's learning to be a leader. He's learning to, when his equipment doesn't work, he's becoming a solution seeker. He's working in a real authentic context. And he's building competencies that are needed for graduation and competencies that are needed for life. But he's very interested in it. He has agency in what he's doing. He's not being told what he has to do. And then, learning looks and feels very different.

I think many of our listeners can relate to jobs that they've had where they've just been told what to do and they punch in and they punch out, and what that feels like compared to going to a place where you go somewhere and they say, "Tell me what you would do at this. How would you make that happen? How would you reach this end point?" That's the difference that we're building for our learners.

Annalies Corbin:

Yeah, absolutely. I really love that. I'm really curious, I think it's interesting that you have students that come to you from, it sounds like quite a variety of previous settings, whether they're other school districts or other communities for a whole host of reasons. And the work that's happening without question is great work that is meaningful and impactful and making a difference in the lives of your learners, and obviously that's the big win.

Everybody always wants to know, and I think justifiably, when they see something that is doing amazing things, especially with learners that, as you pointed out, have not seen success in other environments or endeavors, how do you take the best of what's happening at Norris and have it infused in other places or scale it? This is always the quandary, right, with great, innovative, amazing programs or schools that are happening, how do we take that and make that the norm as opposed to the exception for our learners? How do we do this work?

Johnna Noll:

So, you've actually touched something very special to me and something I'm really passionate about. I believe that every child in every community and every zip code across this country should have an opportunity to engage in a learner-centered environment, without a doubt. And I think, how do we scale that? How do we grow that? I believe that the process we have in place can work in the largest of districts. And the district I came from prior to being here at Norris was the tenth largest district in Wisconsin. I went from 10,000 students down to 100, but the process and the

practices are the same. It's really about building a mindset and it's really about breaking it down into small groups.

Here at Norris, we have invited learners, and when I'm speaking of learners from other school districts and other communities and other states to really talk about it, to learn about it, and then to build a plan, our design process, I believe, truly can work in the largest of school districts in order to begin to scale that. And I think it's just one district at a time, one place at a time.

We ourselves are now using our state's public school choice program and the fact that we also operate a virtual charter school, we're beginning to have hubs of learners pop up around the state. We have two hubs now in Milwaukee County, so clusters of learners that have enrolled in our virtual school that have a place based site in that area. And we're working on opening another this fall, it'll be called Learn MKE. And so, kids from a very disadvantaged neighborhood in the area of Milwaukee will be able to enroll in our virtual school. They'll connect with our advisors and our navigators, but we will help create what I just described that community-based learning system in their own community. Therefore, we're able to spread that to other places around the State of Wisconsin. So, we're very excited about that and we think it gives opportunity to kids and other communities.

But the real question is, how do we continue to scale our program and how do we continue to meet the needs of all of our diverse learners? And if I were back in that tenth largest school district in Wisconsin, or if I were over in Iowa or back in California, how do you begin to build a program that is uniquely meeting the needs of learners in that community? Because I think every community is going to be different just like we grow and change and iterate, I would say you need to have a few things in place. Like every district to us, that profile is absolutely key. You have to have a profile. You have to redesign your learning network to think who are the people.

We don't have teachers in classrooms with 25 kids or 30 kids doing project-based learning, but we have navigators who help kids muddle through the mess in their community and their learning. We have advisors that they meet with to plan their futures. And we have specialists that can connect with them and their extended learning practitioners to talk about the learning that should take place when they're experiencing these opportunities.

So, it's really a matter of rethinking and it's a matter of having that mindset that I talked about earlier, like every learner can learn, each learner is unique and different, and what they need to experience fulfillment and a joyful life is different from the next person.

So, we need to just get the word out. We all need to take a stand. We need to be proud. We need to share. We need to enroll everyone else. We need to have a campaign to really demonstrate that. And I think the biggest thing here is really how do you get other districts and communities to buy into that? How do you get larger communities to say this is a thing that we can do and that we should do? And, to me, I think it's about telling the story. How do you tell the story? How do you share the successes that you've had? And, really, it's how do learners tell their story? Because I think those learners, and the more that there are and they go back to their neighboring communities, they're telling a story of success and they're saying, not only to themselves, but to others, I'm confident in who I am. I am a learner and I am successful. I am fulfilled. You can be too. And so, I think it's really about sharing and spreading.

And I think another key piece to this is making sure that once you start, you don't stop and think that you have been there. The other paradigm that we have is that we have to be iterative. And I told you that we're trying to launch a new virtual hub right now called Learn MKE, and we already know that there are people in that community that plan on enrolling and we are not anywhere close to feeling like we're ready and we know and understand the neighborhood, who the partners may be, but we can't wait until we're ready. We have to be there and we have to be there for the learners that need us now. And so, you start with what you can and you continue to iterate, not only for how the community changes, but how the needs of every learner change.

So, the design process that I mentioned earlier is absolutely key because (A) it ensures that we're meeting the needs of our learners and that we're growing and changing and always striving to get to our next best place. But (B) because the design process requires us to use multiple levels of input, it builds agency, everybody that's involved. And so, when you have agency, you have ownership and now people are proud of it and that begins to expand. The fact that you go through this process to understand who everyone is and what their needs are, and then you talk about that and you build a process to support that, what it does is it really internalizes a culture where everybody feels empowered and everybody owns what they're doing. And it can grow and it can spread, and now we have leaders that are going to move into other communities and continue to spread the word and grow the process, grow the practice.

Annalies Corbin:

Critically important ultimately to be able to get to scale. One other question that really comes to mind that I know folks are curious about and we bump up against it all the time is, how does a shift in the way you think about your practice as a professional, so

as an educator, how does that shift of the educator also becoming both a facilitator and a learner,

how does that shift translate into the way that you think about Norris as a district, and then how would you advise other places? Because this gets into questions around contracting, what is my job? Because now my job has shifted pretty drastically and dramatically from the way I was most likely trained from my teacher prep program at a university and all of these other aspects.

And I think that sometimes as we talk about other communities, embracing what they see happening in these ecosystems that are popping up and the innovation, honestly, that's having rampant and pretty, as you said, absolutely iterative in the way that it works, but that that pace is often very accelerated compared to what's going on in traditional educational settings and in the training and the practice and the pedagogy and the process that many educators are used to and certainly the way a district would contract around what's necessary to really get the work done in the way you're talking about.

So, I want to close our conversation - and I know this is a huge issue and a big question, but I get asked this a lot - I'm super curious, Johnna, how you think about this or how you would have conversations with other places around what does it take to change the way we think about the nature of the job as the educator in this scenario?

Johnna Noll:

The first thing we did was, really, we very explicitly redefined what we call the learning network. Here, the roles in the learning network, we rewrote every job description and we very specifically chose language that was nontraditional or nonconventional in nature in terms of that. Because the minute you say I'm a teacher, and it doesn't matter how learner-centered you are, you snap back into a paradigm of what a teacher does. They do lesson plans, they interact, they have classroom management, they provide feedback to kids and assessment, and then they move on.

And we built a learning network that we believed had roles that were different and unique. For example, we hire individuals called IBL navigators. I'm an Interest-Based Learning Navigator, so what is my role? My role is to help kids discover their interests. We have advisors who work with kids that help them advise their pathway to graduation, whether they're in 2nd grade or whether they're in 12th grade. What does it look like for me to be there? And so, they help explore the options. They help dig into things. They helped arrange things for kids and help them co-design.

And our learning specialists - and in our community, people will go a.k.a. the teachers - they have a deep understanding of content knowledge. They know what the competencies are that need to be the priority competencies for each cluster and how kids will move from space to space. But we've redesigned what their job description is. Their job description is to back map community activities and things that learners have done in their natural environments and then have small conversations to fill in the gaps.

So, we have to have all of those roles look different. And from the time that we interview somebody, we talk about that. We talk about the vision. We talk about what it means to be learner-centered. We talk about being iterative. We talk about having professional discourse. We start with a learner profile and they feel what it looks like to change that.

And then, we've modified all of our contracts. All of our contracts look very different. We have conventional 195 day contracts for the school year. But we have people that are working year round. We have people that work 230 days. We've given teachers so much authority, autonomy - and I say teachers, I mean our staff. But in a conventional school, when you talk about contracts, I get one sick day per month, we've eliminated that. You are a professional. You have PTO days. You take the PTO days when you need them. And we compensate and cover for each other so we don't hire substitutes. Because there's not a class to cover, right? It's almost into the doctor.

So, how do we get that? I think it's the way we interact with our staff. It's the structure that we have behind it. And it's the expectation that is set from the very first day. The very first day that we interact with that person on their very first screening interview or face-to-face interview, we are constantly talking about we are constantly as a staff talking about what it takes to get to the next place. We're modeling. We're growing. We measure the growth of our organization. We measure the growth of our learners. We measure the growth of our staff. And we make it all very public and celebrate it.

So, you just have to think differently. You have to set the parameters differently. You build your learning network. You build your profile of what the organization looks like in terms of the adults and the people in it. And then, the key is you keep iterating because it doesn't always work the way that you think it's going to. And staff feel the same way, so you have to give them power. You have to empower them to continue to grow and change.

I would tell you this, most of our staff have come to us from conventional school districts that didn't like or enjoy and were fed up with the bureaucracy, the focus on

academic only achievement, and playing the game. And they're just frustrated and they didn't see kids really learning.

They saw them discouraging learners. I could go on about that forever and I'm not sure if I answered your question.

Annalies Corbin:

No, you absolutely did. And I really appreciate your insights and your candor and your thoughtfulness about that. Because, again, it's a question that I get asked frequently. Johnna, I want to tell you, thank you so much for taking time out of your day to share with us what's happening at the Norris School District and all the creative ways that you clearly are passionate about thinking about our learners. And we really appreciate that so thank you so much for joining us today.

Johnna Noll:

I'm honored to have had the conversation, Annalies, and to interact with you today, so thank you.

Annalies Corbin:

Thank you for joining us for Learning Unboxed, a conversation about teaching, learning, and the future of work. I want to thank my guests and encourage you all to be part of the conversation. Meet me on social media, @annaliescorbin, and join me next time as we stand up, step back, and lean in to reimagine education.