

TRANSCRIPT

Learning Unboxed



Episode #304

Laura Tavares:

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Young people are growing up in a world that demands adaptability and collaboration and a strong sense of self, but we're raising those young people in education systems that largely are still organized around efficiency and compliance.

Annalies Corbin:

Welcome to Learning Unboxed, the 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 We know the current model for education is obsolete.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.

Annalies Corbin:

Welcome to today's episode of Learning Unboxed. As always, I'm excited to talk with another great innovator in the transformative education space. And today, we're going to be talking about one of my favorite topics: ecosystems. And joining us for that conversation is Laura Tavares, Executive Director of the WPS Institute. So, Laura, welcome to Learning Unboxed.

Laura Tavares:

Thank you so much for having me, Annalies.

Annalies Corbin:

I'm so excited, but let's set a little bit of context for our listeners as we get started. The WPS Institute is a Massachusetts-based nonprofit dedicated to building learning ecosystems that expand where, how, and with whom learning happens. They partner with schools, districts, and community organizations to foster educational innovation and opportunity by designing learning experiences that are relevant, relational, and deeply connected to the real world.

Thank you for that, because we need more of this work. And I'm so excited. We were talking just before we went live. I love talking with folks that are deep in the weeds,

literally, on these ecosystems work. So, I wanna start, Laura, help our listeners outside of that brief introduction that I gave you, sort of the why. What's the purpose of the work that's happening?

Laura Tavares:

Absolutely. You know, I think most of the folks who are listening to your podcast and following the incredible work of the PAST Foundation, we all believe that there's a crisis in our education system that's not just about outcomes, but really a crisis of connection and relevance. And we all know, I think, that young people are growing up in a world that demands adaptability and collaboration and a strong sense of self, but we're raising those young people in education systems that, largely, are still organized around efficiency and compliance at a time also when our educators are experiencing burnout, and our communities and families are asking some really deep and provocative questions about the purpose of school overall.

So, our organization comes into this conversation with a belief that we really need to create more opportunities to experiment for students to have real-world learning, for students to, um, gain a boost in their sense of identity, agency, and motivation. And we see a lot of that work happening often either in maybe more elite settings, in independent schools, in some incredible micro schools that have grown up. Sometimes, we see that kind of work happening in more alternative settings that are almost settings of last resort.

But we have been really dedicated, as an organization, to trying to work within comprehensive schools and public systems in urban centers and gateway cities in Massachusetts because we wanna go where the students are and create some of these more relevant relational agentic learning experiences in the systems that are currently serving students. And by doing that, create some proof points that will allow those systems to start to really change.

Annalies Corbin:

And that's the part, to me, that's really exciting. It's the idea that you're creating these microenvironments, if you will, these opportunities not just for the learners to learn, but more importantly for the adults in the system who are managing, transforming, working within, around, over, under, and through these existing systems to figure out what true transformation can and should look like. So, I love that piece of it.

So take us a little bit, Laura, into sort of a day in the life, if you will. So, give us an example of one of these small microenvironments that you're testing. We're super curious really about the what and the why that you're interested in, recognizing that your work is broad enough, and I can see that through my perusing of it all that you're

really asking a lot of different questions. It's not just one thing that you're focused on. You're taking in very lovely, broad, comprehensive approach and stroke to the collective sets of issues that we're talking about here.

Laura Tavares:

Well, maybe I can take you back to the fall of 2022 when we, as an organization, had been investing a lot in professional learning. We had been running a national teacher fellowship. And post-pandemic, we said, "You know what? We really wanna go deep, not just with individuals, but inside a whole community." And so, we had an opportunity to begin working in the City of Salem, Massachusetts, famous for its witch trials, but also it should be in the future famous for some really bold educational moves.

And at Collins Middle School in Salem, if you were to walk into the school at that time, you would see a lot of kids in the hallways. And they were in the hallways because they did not wanna be in the classroom, and they were taking a walk, they were burning off energy, their teachers wanted to do better, and they weren't sure how. And one thing that Salem had going for it was that Collins Middle School is also the site of the superintendent's office. And so, when the superintendent wanted to get a cup of coffee or make some photocopies, he found himself in a middle school hallway, and he saw right in front of him that students were not really experiencing a lot of meaning and engagement in their learning.

And so, he gave us, as partners coming into the school, the opportunity to create a pilot program with a group of about 40 students out of the 200-some odd who were in the class. And we had an incredible design partner in the district. And together, we did start to experiment with exactly what you said, with where, how, and with whom learning happens. And what that superintendent, Dr. Steve Zrike, said to us – and he just became our new Secretary of Education for the State of Massachusetts, so he's a real leader — he said, "I'm not sure what you're gonna do, but don't stay here. Don't stay in the building 'cause the kids obviously do not wanna be here."

And that really was important from a systems perspective because he gave us and our partners and the two teachers who were part of the program permission to do things differently. So, we were able to operate outside of the usual school schedule, outside of the footprint of the school. And so, we started to do a few things that now, three years later, almost four years later, the school is still doing and to build some principles that our other partners are also using.

So, a few of those things are talking with kids about what is your experience of school, what do you like, what do you not like, and what do you want to be different? So, student voice has been a really key feature.

Something that we call learning immersions was really important. The word field trip connotes, I don't know, if you close your eyes and imagine a field trip, you might think of here, the Six Flags, the amusement park. And a learning immersion, as you know, is something different. It's purposeful learning out in the community. So, every week, we were walking out of the doors of the building and into the city where we were visiting the library, we were working with environmental organizations on the coast, we were engaging with some of the arts institutions in the city, we're doing possibility mentoring with college students at the local university.

And so, there came to be a really beautiful school community connection. And those learning immersions also did a couple of really important things. They injected some variety into what can be a pretty deadening school routine. And that variety was energizing for both the teachers and the students.

And they also created space for social and relational development. When you're spending 20 minutes walking down the hill to go into the city, you're having a conversation with someone you may not know. So, student voice, learning immersions, then something that we call studio, design studio, which is a project-based learning approach that incorporates the practices of design thinking. And we did this in collaboration with a wonderful organization called New View and also with the Morningside Academy for Design at MIT.

So, students began to have an opportunity every week – now, it's a full-on class at the school – to do open-ended projects that didn't have one right answer, where their creativity made a big difference. And those projects always have a local context, a local problem that they're trying to solve. For example, ocean pollution in this coastal city of Salem. And then, they also have some partners that students are working with in the community, either where they're doing research or those partners are providing feedback and input and creating that authentic context for learning.

So, all of those factors together with some opportunities for personalized learning. And then, I think, importantly, a lot of relentless attention to storytelling and a weekly assembly where students are telling the story of their own learning. Those things together have created an experience that led, over the course of a few years, to a 50% reduction in chronic absenteeism and a doubling of the number of students who say that most of the time they love school.

Annalies Corbin:

And what a wonderful thing that collectively is. So, bravo for that. You know, I'm super excited about all the pieces and parts of the work that are happening here. But I'm super curious about, sort of, we are now several years out from that 2022 experience. And I love that you had a superintendent. And honest to goodness, I wish all school administration was parked in buildings across their districts, right? And I get why we centralize things. Trust me, I understand. But at the end of the day, it doesn't actually help us move forward. So, I love the fact that this superintendent's office was in a middle school. That's just absolutely brilliant. So, communities, listen up. Brilliant because it does force things to happen differently.

But I'm really curious. So, that far out, you started with these 40 kids and these two teachers and this amazing opportunity to demonstrate to a community what can be really possible. What's the long-term impact at that building? So, what does that look like today? Because 40 students, although lucky for them, is not enough.

Laura Tavares:

Yes. And the leadership in the district from the superintendent to the mayor to the school committee were very clear that this could not be a little boutique program that only served a few. So, we started small so that we could learn and, frankly, make some mistakes. But now, a few years later, a number of things have happened. Year two of the pilot, we doubled the number of students, and we worked with both seventh and eighth graders. So, we got to do some more testing and learning.

In the third year, we started serving the whole eighth grade with this model. So, over two hundred students. And also offering age-appropriate versions of those learning experiences to the rest of the sixth and seventh graders in the school.

And as of this year, the city used to have essentially two middle schools, one of which was much smaller and was within a K to eight school. And on the strength of the success of this program at Collins Middle School, those two middle schools have now merged. So, the city really said, "Okay, we've got a model that works in this one school. And now, we're gonna bring all the students together where they can experience it." So, now, we've got something like, if I'm doing the math correctly, 1200 students in the school, who are all really having learning experiences that are shaped by this vision of connection, agency, and purpose.

And interestingly, I think within the district, the spirit of innovation and the desire to do things differently has really flourished. So, now, we see at the elementary level, principals meeting and collaborating and developing new visions. The district is now

working on everyone. Every district has a strategic plan every few years, but they're also thinking about a 10-year innovation vision.

And the city has become recognized as a UNICEF City of Children, which is very interesting, partly in connection with this work. So, I think we've really seen a really powerful sense of community innovation flourishing there. And interestingly too, at the high school level, the students who participated in this new learning experience, they're now in the high school. And this year in particular, the ninth grade teachers have said, "What are you doing over there at the middle school?" because these kids seem different.

Annalies Corbin:

Yeah. And they want something different. And I bet there's pressure, right? In addition to the joy of, "Hey, what fabulous thing must have happened with these kiddos," there's gonna be a pressure point back to that systems approach because you started in the middle, so you're gonna have a push, that ripple effect up and down.

Laura Tavares:

Yes. And it's very interesting. Salem has also come to serve as a kind of lighthouse for other districts around the state from neighboring Peabody, where we've also started to work with the schools, but also Boston Public Schools. And in general, we've seen in Massachusetts, there's been a ton of investment, as there should be in early education and early literacy. In Massachusetts, we've had a lot of investment at the high school level, I think \$50 million in last year's state budget in early college and career pathways work.

But folks are starting to realize that if we neglect middle school, students are going to arrive in ninth grade without the sense of agency, without the sense of self-knowledge. And we know that engagement drops off pretty much every year, starting in third grade, but the biggest dips are in middle school. So there's a sense that to protect our investments in high school, we actually have to pay attention to those middle grades.

Annalies Corbin:

Yep. No. And I love that very much because, um, middle school is the sweet spot. We see that too, right? And so, a lot of our work is in that middle space because we know that if we can really understand what's going on with students then, then we have so much opportunity because if we don't, your point, it's a good one, it's lost.

I wanna circle back around because I still have some curiosity about the scale element of what happened there because one of the things you said early on was that

that superintendent said, "Don't worry about the school day. You can leave the building. You can do things very, very differently." And that's part of the magic of that initial pilot, no question. I don't even have to ask. I know having lived through that myself. So, that's part of the magic.

So, were you able to maintain those elements as well because the flip side, and I get this often from principals and superintendents that we work with, is like, "This is all fine and great, Annalies," this is one of the things I hear, "but, you know, we're not gonna have the budget for that, you know. And by not doing it the way we've always been, it's gonna cost a lot more. You know, it's gonna be so disruptive. We're not gonna be able to meet X, Y, or Z criteria, that's really important." And I refrain from saying BS, but I really, that thought bubble's going frantically in my head. But those are real concerns. And to be fair, those are the real constraints that our administrators are having to work within because, again, we're back to that sort of systems approach that "This is how we're set up to function."

So, my curiosity was, were you able to take that piece as well of that experiment, and then translate it across that endeavor? And if so, how?

Laura Tavares:

Yes. So, currently, students are having a learning immersion outside the building. We're working with a partner at scale about once every other week. So, the total number of those experiences is a little smaller. However, they're happening across a much larger group of kids.

And there's a few things that have allowed us to keep really, I think, fidelity to the vision, even at that greater scale. One of them is that we've really leveraged community partnerships, and we've found that there are organizations in the community, many of whom have their own funding, who are really eager to work with students. We've done some really creative flexes thinking about, well, the district buses are available between 10:00 and 1:00 when they're not, you know, doing regular school drop-off and pickup. So, those are the hours when we're gonna focus on experiences that require a bus. But we're also just gonna do a lot of walking. And by the way, that settles the wiggles in the middle schoolers in some really wonderful ways.

The district was able... You know, we brought some resources to the initial partnership. But by investing in really strong evaluation and documentation, we were also able to help the district make a case that has allowed them to unlock philanthropic support and investment from other sources as well. And that has allowed them to do things like hire someone in a position that is called an innovation

manager because 270-plus permission slips every other week is a thing to manage. But, also, just really nitty-gritty structural changes like a blanket permission slip that parents sign once a year that will allow students to go on any trip within the city limits.

So, there are certain things like that that have facilitated some of those... you know, just the logistical pieces involved in really shaping where and with whom learning happens. One of the things that has been really powerful with collecting data that students were also outperforming their peers academically even when they were having less "seat time." That really built a constituency for this work. Parents were excited. Parents were saying, "Wow, my eighth grader came home, and when I asked him what he did at school or how it was, he didn't just say fine. He told me a story."

Annalies Corbin:

Exactly. That's one of the things that I love. And I hear the same thing over and over again, you know. It's like, "What did you do to my kid? Because they will not stop telling me stuff." And what a beautiful, beautiful thing to have at that age.

Laura Tavares:

Yeah. And we really see there's a lot – and I know you see this in your work too. There's so much to be gained by really investing in the civic partnership as well. And we're now working in the city of Boston. And Boston Mayor Michelle Wu has been crystal clear when she speaks to the larger business and civic community that she really wants all of them to step up and be engaged in the education of young people.

And I think, often, what that requires is division in schools to embrace that but, also, the kind of intermediary orchestration work that will prepare those partners to engage with students to make sure it's developmentally appropriate and to help it really be meaningful for kids and demonstrate learning. And once we have that ecosystem of partners in place, I think it does become more feasible to have this kind of learning at scale.

Annalies Corbin:

Oh, absolutely. Absolutely. I would agree with that wholeheartedly. And I also appreciate the comment about the fact that the students are outperforming students in a traditional environment. We see the same thing. And it's an interesting piece, right? And I assume that you've had some of those same conversations. We do hear from the community as things like this get started, "Well, it was fine for me. Why do we need to change this? I don't understand. My kids should have gobs and gobs of homework, and they're coming home, and they're doing these projects. I can't really tell that they're working in the same way." Lots and lots of comments like that.

But, ultimately, what we know is that students in these environments and ecosystems that are structured like this that are deeply community-based and fully immersive that they do tend to outperform, not by a little, it tends to be a lot. And part of that is that -- go all the way back to part of the original piece of the conversation -- that engagement, you talk about the fact that those students show up, they want to be there.

Laura Tavares:

Yes, that's right. And I think, even the superintendent said that one of the big learnings for him over the course of this work was really embracing the idea that engagement is an essential precondition for achievement.

And I think about all the neuroscience I learned, Mary Helen Immordino-Yang, who said you literally cannot learn something that you don't care about. It is neurobiologically impossible. And so, I think our work is to translate that insight from neuroscience into on-the-ground practice that creates that investment.

Annalies Corbin:

And yet we're still sending high school kids to school at 7:30 in the morning. So, I wanna say, yay, neuroscience, but could we please pay attention to it? So, I mean, we still have work to do. That part's clear, right?

Laura Tavares:

Yeah. Yeah, that's right.

Annalies Corbin:

Appreciate that, Laura. Thank you for that little segue. I needed that. But once again, I guess I wanna circle back around to one other piece that you mentioned when we talk about sort of scaling and doing things differently, because one of the things that you're talking about was really around this idea of budgeting. And granted, I wanna be really clear with my listeners, you don't represent the district, so maybe this is not, not a fair question to you. But you're watching as the district is making this transformation as a key partner in that work.

So, one of the other things that we typically see is this idea of taking what we have and reallocating it can sometimes be a really big systems stretch, right? We always spend money doing X, and it's wonderful that you've got these external philanthropies or corporate partners that are funding things, so you can do them differently. But the systems change won't really, really have long-term impact unless the system itself also flexes. And some of that flexes from the financial standpoint of saying, "We have X

number of dollars and X number of students, and it requires X number of adults to educate them." But how we deploy those dollars, we could be super flexible in that.

So, I'm curious, as you partner in these external resources with a district that's choosing to be wickedly innovative, are you seeing that piece of the system start to shift as well?

Laura Tavares:

I am. And I don't pretend to be an expert, and as you say, I don't speak for the district but one thing I have noticed is also the power of having a coherent vision. And that's always the starting point in our work with partners. And I think when you have that sense of coherence about what you're trying to create, it allows you to look at line items that are currently in your budget, for example, related to career-connected learning, which is big everywhere and is big in Massachusetts. But look at it through the lens of this isn't just another initiative or another flavor on my plate that I'm going to try to address by buying a product. I'm gonna think about, for example, career-connected learning as a baseline developmental practice that meets the needs of middle grade learners and can be satisfied by doing more of the kind of community-connected learning and partnerships that this innovative work requires.

So, some of it is about connecting up these innovative practices with other priorities and line items and things that are in the state budget and identifying some of those possible throughlines. But I definitely worry in an environment of economic constraint, which many districts are facing, not only here in Massachusetts but everywhere, that some of the kind of work that you and I have just been talking about is seen as extra and something that is a nice-to-have rather than foundational.

And so, I think we really have to do the work of making sure that families and community members understand what we're doing and why it's important, so that they can speak up to protect it.

Annalies Corbin:

Exactly. And because it is not an addition to, right? It is instead of. And it is really those big lever shifts that we're talking about. And I appreciate the call-out for the advocacy from the families in the community because it's absolutely going to take that.

And we are also seeing that the reality is families in many ways, in many states, and not all, but in many states, even despite economic disparities, which are very real, are able to vote with their feet. Ohio, for example, has an incredibly robust charter school option. And currently, from a policy standpoint, the ability to take your state funding and use it to put your kids in a variety of different environments, and that's not what

our conversation is about, the merit of those environments because that's all over the place, but the reality of it is, though, families have the ability to say, "Nope, this is not for my kid. I'm gonna try something else." And sometimes, it's one thing after another after another after another, which is not good for kids. We know that. But the reality is families are saying, "I want something different." And we need to pay attention to the fact that the want is there to begin with.

Laura Tavares:

Absolutely. And I think some of the problems in education is, I always say it's not for a lack of good ideas that schools haven't changed. It's mostly, I think, a lack of capacity, but sometimes it is a lack of demand within the education system. And so, families having the opportunity to take their educational dollars elsewhere can create that demand. And we have seen that even within... You know, we don't have ESAs in Massachusetts, for example, but many school districts and district leaders are very much motivated by wanting to keep students in their system or wanting to keep students within a particular region within a large system. So, that is one of the drivers behind embracing innovation, is wanting to be able to tell a better story about what's on offer in the district.

Annalies Corbin:

Well, it is really interesting because as public schools have more and more, sort of, pushes from the outside right on them, it is a mechanism that there is a certain level of pressure that we're seeing cohesively across the US in particular, but other parts, the developed world reporting very similar pieces. And it is really starting to be a catalyst in ways that we predicted that it would be, but it's taken some time, but it's almost as if the moment has come, right? And for a lot of different reasons, and we don't need to talk about today. Those are also driving that in this particular moment.

But the reality is that people wanna have choice. And to your point earlier, our kids, they learn very different. They want different things. They are trying to wrestle and figure out what does it have to do with them, and they want to be able to be part of their own narrative of their journey rather than just having it spoon-fed to them.

Laura Tavares:

That's right. They want to be the authors of their own story.

Annalies Corbin:

They do.

Laura Tavares:

And you know what we really have seen, and I'm sure you have, too, is that there is a

parallelism between what students need and what educators need and want. And in some ways, it's very hard to create agency and engagement and joy for students when their teachers don't experience those same things in their work. So, I think part of the systems change is with the teachers as well.

Annalies Corbin:

100%. 100%. And that's the space that we just need the system, the administrators, the school boards, the community to understand, right? You're never gonna have happy kiddos if you have unhappy adults.

Laura Tavares:

I could not agree more.

Annalies Corbin:

So, absolutely. Appreciate that very much. I always, as we're starting to wrap up the conversation, recognize people are listening from all over the world. And as you think about the journey that you have been on and the journey that has been happening within WPS Institute, and as folks are looking to get started to do some similar pieces and parts, what would you tell someone saying, "You know what, darling, I want this in my community"?

Laura Tavares:

You know, something that has been a really powerful and beautiful starting point in our work is hosting an event with families and teachers and students, where we invite those families and students to talk about what they believe the purpose of, for example, middle school is, some of their hopes, some of their fears. We sometimes talk about what's your metaphor for the middle school experience, which is very revealing.

And we also invite them to talk about some of... you know, we invite adults to talk about, "Well, what's a memorable or a powerful learning experience in your own life?" And those conversations really unlock something that school leaders and civic leaders and communities can listen to because they hear both that most adults are saying that their powerful learning experiences were out in the world. They were a project. They were making an impact. It was on a mountain somewhere. And they hear students asking for something, often different than what they're currently receiving.

And so, if we can open our ears to hear that, I think that's a really powerful motivator. So, that's the first thing I would suggest.

And the second thing I would suggest is to really begin to have conversations within your community in the way that Ed Reimagined and Remake Learning and PAST and a lot of others are doing about who are your partners and your allies. I have been, as someone who's done civic education work for decades, so heartened by the number of adults in the community who are not in the education space at all, who are so willing and eager and energized by showing up and being a partner in schools. And I think realizing that the teachers and the administrators don't have to do it all by themselves and that they have eager allies is also a really important foundation and spur to begin this work.

Annalies Corbin:

And I agree 100%. So, thank you very much for sharing that. And I also wanna thank you, Laura, for taking time out of your day to join us to have this conversation with us, and we so appreciate it. It's super exciting. We will have links to the work that's happening there in Massachusetts, um, in the show notes. Please reach out to Laura if you have questions. And again, just thank you so much for what you do.

Laura Tavares:

Thanks, Annalies. It was a pleasure.

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.