

TRANSCRIPT

Learning Unboxed



Episode #294

Nathan Gorsch:

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We're talking to our students about what are your passions? What are things that you care about? And then, how can you take responsibility to make sure that that thing you care about is successful, that that thing you care about is impactful?

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 We know the current model for education is obsolete.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.

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 joining us today is Nathan Gorsch, who's the executive director and principal of Colorado Springs School of Technology. So, Nathan, welcome to Learning Unboxed.

Nathan Gorsch:

Great. Yeah, it's so great to be here. And I was just saying it's going to be great to spend time with my good friend, Annalies, again.

Annalies Corbin:

Yeah, I'm super excited. And for our listeners, if you're like, "Hey, I know that name, Nathan Gorsch", that's because he's a repeat offender on Learning Unboxed. And so, we're going to have a new conversation with him today about, what does it mean to be a serial school starter? My term, not his, because Nathan's at it again.

So, just to set a little bit of context for our listeners as we get started, the Colorado Springs School of Technology is a cutting-edge high school designed for innovation, where students engage in hands-on, immersive learning experiences and explore a dynamic, future-focused curriculum. It was launched in the fall of 2025. So, it's brand-spanking new and shiny. Colorado Springs School of Technology is part of a

vibrant ecosystem connecting industry partners, higher education institutions, and K-12 education to prepare students for emerging careers in cybersecurity, aerospace, and entrepreneurship. So, with all of that, Nathan, again, I'm going to go back to my original query, what were you thinking?

Nathan Gorsch:

Yeah. So, yeah. So, maybe to connect a few more dots. So, yeah, I started, as some folks are going to remember, started Village High School about a decade ago, with the idea being we needed to reinvent school to have it be more thoughtful, to have it be more student-led. And so, the model there was really a blended or a hybrid program of part online, part in-person. And over the course of that decade, grew the school from 25 kids to 530 kids, and a pretty substantial waitlist with hundreds of families on that waitlist.

Long story short, kind of at the end, I felt like my work was done. The school was humming, it was really great. And so, part of my work was, honestly, managing the wait list. And so, kept trying to kind of talk to district leaders in that district about like, what's our next step? Do we build a second campus? We have more students on our waitlist than some of our schools have enrollment. Kind of, what's the next step? And there wasn't really a continuation plan there.

Around the same time, I had a group of folks from a neighboring school district, Colorado School District 11, which is kind of the downtown district, kind of, approached me and we started having some conversations. And I had a friend that worked here, and we went to lunch, and I said, "Are you guys doing anything cool?" And he started telling me about this idea of a school of innovation. And I was like, "Hello." And he's like, "Would you be interested?" And I'm like, "Yeah, I'd be interested."

And so, really part of my motivation is to think about great work we did at The Village, the lessons we learned, and then really kind of apply it in a new context and in a new community. And so, there was a group of leaders across industry. So, there were university leaders, the chancellor of the local university and some of her team, some local business leaders, some entrepreneurs and CEOs of some companies. And then, the superintendent of District 11 had, kind of, started dreaming, envisioning this, what would it be like if we were to create an ecosystem where we were all working together, and kind of birthed this idea of Colorado Springs School of Technology.

I kind of think about it as a two-sided problem with a single solution. The two sides are, we know that we need to better prepare workers for these high-tech industries. So, in Colorado Springs, if you think about the economy, it's very aerospace, cybersecurity, defense-driven, along with a lot of startups and companies trying to get their start here.

At the same time, we're graduating students from high school that don't know what they wanna do and don't really have a plan or know what their options. And so, what if we were to create a single solution to both sides of that problem? What if we were to really get our business leaders involved right from the start to help us design the school? And then, what if we were to get students to start thinking about what are some options? When I hear aerospace as a pathway, I'm like, "Okay, astronauts," right?

Annalies Corbin:

It's more than that. Yeah.

Nathan Gorsch:

Yeah. For every person that goes into space, the estimates are there's 500 people on the ground helping to power that. And so, you start to think about satellites, you start to think about drones, you start to think about unmanned aviation in the future. And so, what we're really trying to do is kind of solve both of those problems with one solution, taking the context of what I learned at The Village and applying it in a new situation.

Annalies Corbin:

And that's one of the reasons I love that. And I was super excited to have this conversation with you. My listeners have heard me refer to, and I think you have as well, I think The Village was one of the coolest concepts of, sort of, a modern-day take, if you will, on what we need in the moment right now that is super, super flexible around honoring the learner. The agency of the learner, but also just the learner journey. And it's a true ecosystems approach. So, it was what we needed in that moment.

And I love the idea of taking that work that is thriving now. And I tell folks, anybody who'll listen, "Hey, you wanna see something cool?", that was a really amazing thing. But I really love the idea now of taking this, it's successful, it's doing the thing that it needs to do. And this is the other thing about founders. And one of the reasons I love talking to founders of things is because there seems to be this moment of recognition that says, "That thing is working now. Let's either modify it, let's tweak it, let's go a different direction. Let it thrive and continue to do what it's going to do. But let's figure out what, sort of, the next thing that we need is." And sometimes, that's in the same place or the same community. Sometimes, to your point, it's a slight shift. All of these are good and positive things because at the end of the day, they're better for our communities. They're definitely better for our learners. So, all that to say, yay, I'm super excited for the work that you're doing.

One of the things, though, that anytime we see these, sort of, startup endeavors, they're hard, they're a lot of work, there's a lot of moving parts. And you've been super fortunate and lucky that the community where the Colorado Springs School of

Technology is sitting was ripe for this. They started thinking about this, as you sort of entered into the conversation. So, that's a great space to be.

One of the difficulties, though, that all of these, sort of, new starts, if we will, typically have – and you and I have talked about this over time in different ways – is around the sort of partnerships that are necessary to launch with fidelity, right? Because we can create these great experiences, but if those experiences aren't really meaningful for the students that are gonna have them, then it's never ever going to have the traction that it needs. So because you've done this once, talk to us a little bit about the work and the process that you went in to ensure that the partnership pieces of this endeavor are really what they need to be for the community.

Nathan Gorsch:

Yeah, I think just on a personal level, over 10 years, I forgot what it was like to start a school.

Annalies Corbin:

That was good for the new place, kind of bad for Nathan.

Nathan Gorsch:

Yeah. So, there were so many times I was like, "Okay. So, we made some very strategic decisions 10 years ago. Why did we make them and what were we thinking?" And in some cases, I was able to kind of retrace that, talk to some of the folks that were part of that founding team with me. Some of them are still around. Some of them I actually have been able to bring over to Colorado Springs School of Technology. But some of it is like I've told people there's no way around it. There's no way over it. There's only a way through it. Like you, legit, have to make every single decision about every single thing you do over again. And that is both exhausting, exhilarating, challenging, exciting.

And so, like, we're in a brand new space. We have a really, kind of, cool space that we built out here that feels kind of Village-like with garage doors and open space and things like that. And we're actually on the university campus in a building that, once upon a time, was actually like a missile factory and they built components for mechanisms of war, if you will. And so, we kind of had this blank canvas that we came in and reshaped into a school, but we did it in seven weeks.

Annalies Corbin:

Wow. What were you thinking?

Nathan Gorsch:

Like crazy fast instruction. Fastest project architects and the construction folks had ever done. And so, like, there were just so many decisions that were made very

quickly. But I always go back to, like, what do I believe and envision? And so, we were able to make those decisions pretty quickly because we know what we believe. We know what we're after.

And to your point before, I think the big piece for me is student voice in that. And we can either do this to kids or we can do this with kids. And my philosophy has always been, let's do this with students. They're the end user. Why are we, as adults, having all the conversations about what they need without ever asking them what they need? It's like a software company that designs a new software product and never asks the end user, like, what problem are they trying to solve?

You may create what you think is a great product, you may come up with an okay idea, but it's not going to have the impact or the power that it could if you really go to that end user and say, "How does this work for you and what do you need?" And I think we've done a nice job of turning even this school over to students and saying, like, "Inform us. Here's what we're thinking. What do you guys think?" And giving them a loud voice and a loud say in what this is.

Annalies Corbin:

Yeah. And we know through all of our collective work that when we do this, the students will rise. They will exceed our every expectation almost every single time. And that's part of the joy and the beauty of it, because they have so much to give and they want, desperately, to be seen, to be heard, to be felt, to have meaning, all those things.

So, let's talk about that a little bit because one of the things that's really interesting about the approach that you're taking with this school is really around the idea of emphasizing ethical leadership and social responsibility. So, the school made a specific decision that this was going to be one of those core values or foundational components of this work. So, talk with us a little bit about – I mean, I think that the big why makes sense but on the ground, the practical applications of why this particular thing as, sort of, a cornerstone.

Nathan Gorsch:

Yeah, . I think the most dangerous thing in the world is somebody with a lot of knowledge without the ethics to match. And so, if we start to think about some of the content and some of the ideas that our students are going to explore, we really do feel like we are going to prepare leaders for these high-impact industries. I mean, I don't want to be dramatic in saying that the future of our country, in some ways, really relies on expertise in aerospace and expertise in cyber, and a strong business acumen. And so, as we think about really preparing students for these highly impactful industries, it's equally important to me that they have an ethical framework to which they make those decisions.

And then, one of our pathways is also leadership. What does it mean to lead folks? And I, the other day, heard the most brilliant definition of leadership that we're talking about as a staff, and that's really just taking responsibility for something you care about. And so, we're talking to our students about, what are your passions? What are things that you care about? And then, how can you take responsibility to make sure that that thing you care about is successful, that that thing you care about is impactful? And so, yeah, it was really important for us.

So, we all know that we're about to experience a revolution or maybe in the middle of a revolution around artificial intelligence. Dare I say that if we don't get the ethics part of artificial intelligence correct, we're in trouble. And so, we want to make sure that we're preparing students with knowledge and skills while, at the same time, building their character alongside of that, so that they can make positive change and positive impact.

Annalies Corbin:

Absolutely. I love that. So thank you for that, actually.

Nathan Gorsch:

Yeah.

Annalies Corbin:

So, let's talk a little bit. The school has launched. So, you, crazy seven weeks, again, what were you thinking – that's amazing – to get it all up and open it. And it launched in September, in the fall. And so, talk to us about-

Nathan Gorsch:

August.

Annalies Corbin:

August. Wow. Even more. So, August, off you go. So, share with us then, let's talk about the student experience. So, I'm a student at the school. Tell me, what does it look and feel like? How does it relate to the other things that we've been talking about collectively for the last few years around innovative schools? So, help our listeners who can't walk in and see it understand what you've got going on there.

Nathan Gorsch:

Yeah. So, just quickly. So, our groundbreaking was May 5th and our ribbon cutting was August 7th.

Annalies Corbin:

Wow. Good for you.

Nathan Gorsch:

Yeah, it was a little nuts. But yeah. So, the space, again, was designed like an adult workplace. So, there's kind of a common space in the middle with classrooms around the outside that all have garage doors that can open and be part of the main space or close. I'm a big fan of flexible spaces. There's times that everybody needs to be together. And then, there's times that we need to be able to close off because we're having more intimate conversations or class time.

And then, we also built a student kitchen that has microwaves, fridges. It's an employee break room for high school kids. It's a touchscreen coffee machine in there that they can use. And we really functionally try to treat them like they're adults in the workplace.

Programmatically, we have a schedule Tuesday through Friday where they do their core classes, very hands-on, very experiential, but then they do an elective in each of those four pathways. So, we do an intro. Their first year here, they do an intro to aerospace and engineering, intro to cyber and computer science, intro to entrepreneurship and business, and then intro to leadership and community. It's my belief that no matter what you do occupationally, to have background and experience in those four subjects is not going to hurt you. If anything, it's going to benefit you. We're all going to be using computers for whatever we do. We're all going to be building solutions, which really is the engineering piece. We're all selling something, and then we're all leaders in our own way.

So, students do that intro in each of those four. And then, as they become upperclassmen, they can specialize in one of those pathways, ultimately leading to some sort of apprenticeship, internship by the time they're an upperclassman in one of those industries to start to build their social network, and to get actual experience in those fields.

On Mondays, we have a totally different schedule. On Mondays, what we've started is we do industry sprints. And those are actually – so, we're a school of innovation, which is, I think, somewhat unique in Colorado and maybe across the country. But we're almost like a charter school and a public school or a public district school came together and tried to take advantage of the best of both parts. So, we have waivers like a charter where one of my waivers is, I can hire non-licensed teachers, industry professionals to teach a class but still have the infrastructure of the district for, like, human resources and business services, things like that.

So, we hire industry folks, and they're coming in and doing an immersive three to six-week experience where none of these are teachers. They're coming in and teaching our kids something industry connected, industry adjacent. So, first semester, our sprints were branding and marketing. How do companies brand, but then kind of

getting students to think about their personal brand and what does your personal brand represent? We have an ethics class where they're put in different situations and have to create, there may not be what feels like a right answer here, so how do we decide how we're going to operate and what we're going to do? How do we build our ethical framework?

We have a design thinking and inventions class. A local inventor comes in. How do you take an idea and then how do you get it to market? How do you go through that process of prototyping and visioning it to ultimately get it to market, and talks to students about what he's done, and then is getting them to think about a product or a service that they want to market.

And then, the last one is we have a Challenger Learning Center here that we're very involved with, and they're actually coming in and they did a 3D printing and rocketry with our students. And so, the students designed their own rockets, actually 3D printed their own rockets, and then we take it to the Challenger Learning Center and are launching those. And so, yeah, every three to six weeks, students will transition from one of those to the next.

And so, you think about a traditional high school elective experience, very engaging, very great for the most part, but it's a semester-long commitment.

Annalies Corbin:

Right, right.

Nathan Gorsch:

And so, like, what we're trying to do is take that semester-long commitment and condense it and give students a lot of different options, so that they can have different experiences and play around with different ideas in a shorter burst.

Annalies Corbin:

Yeah, absolutely. And I love that. And kids love that too. We do something similar at PAST in some ways. And we know that kids respond really well to that. And there's some really great examples that we've done a few of Learning Unboxed episodes of some schools out of New York, Portfolio School comes to mind, Design Lab, those pieces and parts that also tap into that same ideologies. They're different. They don't look like what you're doing but same thought process.

So, the student experience then, I guess my last question with the students. So, then, those other days, is all of the coursework now in person? Is it online? Is it hybrid? What is the day structure? Everybody wants to know that.

Nathan Gorsch:

Yeah, sure. Yeah. It's designed to be in person with online tools is the best way to put it.

Annalies Corbin:

Okay.

Nathan Gorsch:

Yeah. So, if you need to be gone, we still have the flexibility. Students have some really cool opportunities and situations to travel, we never want to rob that. And so yeah, they're designed to be done in person, but with some flexibility, with some online learning tools as a piece and part of that.

The Village was really built with the idea being that schools needed to be more flexible. The personalization and flexibility didn't go away. It's just that here, our goal is really around these industry partnerships and connections. And then, how can we – I always tell people, I can't unsee what I saw with the flexibility, but the goal here is really these industry connections. And so, how can we take that flexibility and kind of use it to serve the greater need of this industry connection?

Annalies Corbin:

Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely. Let's talk about the educators, then, in the space, right? Because that's going to be the other big question. So, who are these people? How did you find them? Am I there because I'm the math teacher or I'm the social studies teacher or I'm there because of something else, right? So, help us understand the educators in the mix of all of this.

Nathan Gorsch:

Yeah. If there's anything that I would say is a strength of mine or that I'm really good at, it's putting really great adults with students. Really proud of the staff we had at The Village, and really really proud of the staff we've assembled here. So, some of the folks, three of my staff members actually came from The Village, our admin assistant and then a couple teachers, and really just saw kind of, again, that same opportunity to take what we learned in that setting and put it in a new situation.

And then, I hired some folks that kind of emerged through the interview process. I have a dean of students that actually just retired as a principal of a 1200-kid high school in a local area. And I knew she was retiring, and I was like, "Come on, you're not done."

Annalies Corbin:

You're not finished. You got some more in you.

Nathan Gorsch:

Yeah, you got some more in you. And so, came in, and I had worked with her in the past as well. And she actually brought up to me, I had forgotten, but about 15 years ago, we had a conversation about someday starting a school together, and what we would do differently. And I think it was one of our first meetings in August, she told that story. And I had kind of forgotten that we had had that conversation, but she had not, which was really cool. And she's like, "We're doing that thing."

And then, yeah, kind of some other teachers that were already in the district. And then, the teachers here, so they do have kind of a subject area. They're a math teacher, a science teacher, English, social studies, business. But then, they're also helping with these pathways. And so, my science teacher is also kind of our aerospace lead. Our math teacher actually was an electrical engineer for 15 years in industry. And so, obviously sees the connection there. Our social studies teacher actually went through the Mayor Civic Leadership Fellowship here in Colorado Springs a year ago. And so, he's leading our leadership pathway and trying to connect with resources in the city.

I think a great example of some of our flexibility and creative thinking is, I posted a computer science job and didn't really love the applicant pool, didn't really feel like there was somebody that I felt like could really elevate that. And so, went to Challenger Learning Center. I knew a person on their staff, that's kind of their background and said, "Hey, can we contract with you and have that person come over and teach our computer science class?" And so, they're leading our cyber pathway and computer science pathway, even though they're not a full-time staff member with us through a contract situation.

And then, actually, she was the State Business and Marketing Teacher of the Year a couple years ago for the state of Colorado, who I had some history with. And I was like, "You got to come in and you got to help us with this." She actually is part time with us because the other part of her schedule, she actually leads work across the state for new business and marketing teachers. And then, on the opposite day, comes in and helps us with the industry sprints, and then teaches our marketing classes, and then runs our DECA program, which I know not everybody has DECA, but it's really business competitions. And so, about 60 or 70 percent of our kids are doing DECA already, which is pretty amazing. And so, with this brand new school and she's rolling into these competitions with a bunch of kids already, which is pretty exciting as well.

Annalies Corbin:

Yeah, that's pretty amazing. That's awesome. All right. So, so much going on in Colorado Springs these days. And as always, you're super busy. So, as we sort of wrap up the conversation, I want to close with just sort of thinking about, you haven't

even completed the first year yet but I know from all the conversations you and I have had the privilege of having over the last few years, you're already thinking about what the tweaks are.

And out of fairness, too, for our listeners, you're also one of these folks that doesn't wait until after we've done the thing to say, "We need to fix this thing or we should modify this." So, they're all happening in real time. But I also know that you're probably thinking about things, "Okay. So, for next year, we want to do X, Y or Z," or "I really want to spend more time thinking about..." So, just for the sake of curiosity, what are you thinking about? What's keeping you up at night as you, sort of, think about the next sort of iteration or the next phase of this new school launching?

Nathan Gorsch:

You're on to me. I thought I was-

Annalies Corbin:

I know.

Nathan Gorsch:

I know. I thought I was keeping my secrets. Yeah. I mean, we're going to outgrow this space. I mean, we just built it, and it was kind of our starter space. I mean, we're, as early as next year, going to outgrow it. And so, we've already got to start thinking about, where do we go from here?

There's also, this model is super cool. And so, there's other industry partners and higher ed partners who have approached us. We're actually talking with two different groups about a medical high school that could open in the next couple of years with a similar idea with these Monday sprints, these different pathways within the medical field with, again, higher ed partners.

Like one unique thing that I didn't even say is because we're on the university campus, like we're a bus stop on the campus shuttle system. And so, my kids can jump on a bus here at the school, go up to campus, take a class, shuttle back and, and some of those sorts of things. And so, there's some folks in the medical industry that have said, "Why don't we do something like that in medical?" I've had some really early conversations about a public service high school. What if we were to talk to police, fire, utility, educators, and create a campus really focused around community service and maybe kids that want to go into those industries?

And then, you start to think about, well, if we want to do all these things, we really need to, probably, think about a middle school. And how are we going to create a middle school that would feed into these various high school models? And so, yeah, so lots of conversation. I was hired as the executive director of an innovation zone.

And right now, the zone has one school, which is to start the technology school, but eventually the idea is potentially to have a series or a group of schools in this zone that are all kind of rethinking what we could do for our students.

Annalies Corbin:

I love that so much.

Nathan Gorsch:

I can't help myself, Annalies. You know this, I can't help myself.

Annalies Corbin:

And as you're talking about it-

Nathan Gorsch:

Yeah, it's exciting.

Annalies Corbin:

I just see so many parallels to what we've got going on at PAST and the Innovation Lab. And we were fortunate you got to make a visit to see us not too long ago. And so, it's just really, really fun to see this. , aAnd the conversation where this work you were doing was the last time I actually saw you, which was here at PAST. And so, it's just nice to sort of see what's happened with it and the progress that's been made. And I love the idea of the entire sort of innovation zone and campus with multiple early colleges. I also love that work that's happening rolled into it. So, all of it near and dear to my heart.

So, Nathan, I want to thank you so much for taking time out of your very busy day to chat with us. We will make sure that contact information and links are in the show notes. And I really, really encourage anybody that's listened to this, who's inspired, wants to know more, reach out to Nathan. Nathan and his team are amazing, and you can learn so much. So, again, thank you, Nathan, for being on the program.

Nathan Gorsch:

Yeah. And thank you for the time. It's always great to catch up.

Annalies Corbin:

Absolutely.

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.