TRANSCRIPT

Learning Unboxed

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Episode #298

Reimagining Public Education Through Microschools with ECPPS Microschool

Keith Parker:
If we continue to lose year after year, the number of families, we're losing nationally in our public schools. We will get to a point where we will not have public schools the way we've known them. And I think as a society, we've got to recognize that we just can't let that happen.

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 We know the current model for education is obsolete.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 Learning Unboxed. As always, I'm excited to talk with another great set of innovators, in this case, in the transformative education space. And joining us today are Colina Bartlett, Tiffany Dudley, Kelly Cowell, and Keith Parker from the ECPPS Micro School. So to all of you, welcome to Learning Unboxed.

Tiffany Dudley:
Thank you.

Kelly Cowell:
Thank you.

Keith Parker:
Thank you for having us, Annalies.

Annalies Corbin:
Absolutely. Really excited. And let's set just a couple of things. So before we set context for our listeners, because it's pretty unusual that we get four guests on at a time, and so I would really love each of you to just really quickly share with the audience what your role is within the district, or the school, or the program. So, Keith, can you share with us.

Keith Parker:
Sure will. And thank you again for the invitation. We're just so excited to be with you today and to share some things that might be helpful to others or inspirational or a source of growth for us as well. So, we're super excited about being here.

But I serve as the Superintendent for our school district, and the role that I bring to this space is I was a high school social safety teacher. I had an opportunity to serve as a K through 8 school principal. And came to Elizabeth City in 2022, this in the fourth year of my first superintendency.

And what I've come to find is that Elizabeth City is just a beautiful place. And I think your listeners will see today that the fine folks we have on this call are just incredible educators that are really driven by this spirit of doing something new and different to try and meet the moment that we're in, and that is something that really drives us. And so, we're bringing that into this space today and couldn't be more excited about talking about that.

Annalies Corbin:
Excellent. I love that. Kelly, tell us what Kelly Cowell does.

Kelly Cowell:
So, I'm Kelly Cowell. I am the Executive Director of Talent Development, and my primary job here is to train teachers. But in this space, I was on the Innovation Team and that's how the micro school came about, was the Innovation Team.

Annalies Corbin:
Excellent. Well, we'll talk about that a little bit more later. Colina, share with us about your role.

Colina Bartlett:
Yes. Hi. My name is Colina Bartlett, and I am the Micro School Administrator. And a communications guide, I teach English, Language, Arts, and Social Studies. And I also am a bus driver for our micro school.

Annalies Corbin:
Love it. All the hats. All the hats. Tiffany.

Tiffany Dudley:
Hi. I am Tiffany Dudley. I'm also a guide here at the micro school. I specifically am a guide for Math and Science.

Annalies Corbin:
Excellent. I love all the pieces and parts. And so, let's set a little bit of context for our listeners then as we get started. The ECPPS Micro School is an innovative program that opened in August of 2025, so we're not even a year in on this endeavor yet. As part of the Elizabeth City - okay, I'm going to see if I can get this right - Pasquotank Public Schools' new and innovative programs initiative. Designed to reimagine learning, the micro school provides a personalized student centered environment that promotes engagement, academic growth, and meaningful relationships.

Small class sizes allow for individualized instructions, tailored to each student's strengths and learning needs. Flexible scheduling, and hands-on project-based approaches encourage creativity, critical thinking, and real world problem solving. All the things kids need today to thrive and flourish.

So, I'm going to start with an applause because the district said we need to do something different, and I always really, really love that. I wan to start though with this concept around a micro school.

And so, Colina, I'm going to toss this one to you in that sort of school leadership space, because micro school, that phrase, means lots of things to different people. And in fact, I was on two calls today and part of that conversation was really about what is this thing. And so, what is a micro school as it's embodied and envisioned right now for you within the district? What does that mean?

Colina Bartlett:
What that means is that we provide a space, whether that space be on campus or off campus, because our school environment is not within the walls of the school building. Our community is our classroom also. We have small class sizes so that students can get one-on-one attention as needed, and they have personalized learning. We also give them experiences that help them to use their soft skills that they are using here - learning here and using here at the micro school.

Annalies Corbin:
I love that very much. And, again, it's really interesting how this phrase around this concept with micro schooling has been picked up in so many different places. And it is nuanced, right? Because for it to truly be a successful environment, it has to be about the place as well as about the learners in the community in which it's embedded. So, I really love the fact that you've focused in on that need and that approach.

Keith, I want to talk about from the sort of district perspective. So, why would this district take something like this on? Why not just keep doing the business of school the way you always have been doing? Because this endeavors, they're risky in some respects. They're great for kids. They can be a challenge. You can bump up against so many different constraints that you never even really contemplated, because again, when the community is in fact your classroom, that means your kids are all over the place, and that's a whole nother bucket of stuff.

Keith Parker:
Yeah, absolutely. Well, I think to answer that question, Annelies, what comes to mind first is maybe sharing with our listeners today just a little bit of context about who we are as a community and how that actually led us through some community centered design in this work.

So Elizabeth City, it's nestled in the northeast section of North Carolina. We are about 35 minutes from the outer banks of North Carolina. The Wright Brothers flew the plane in Kitty Hawk just 40 minutes from here. So, the beautiful North Carolina coast is right here at us. And then at about 30 minutes, you can also drive from Elizabeth City to Chesapeake, Virginia and be in some of the urban centers in Virginia there. So we are a rural county, and so while we have access to the coast and Chesapeake, we're in a rural section of North Carolina. And so, for those that may not be as familiar with North Carolina, east of Interstate 95, the entire eastern part of our state is a predominantly rural area.

And one of the things that's happening in our state, and I think is happening in our country, is there's a trend in the eastern part of our state that people are leaving our rural communities and they're moving to urban centers. And while North Carolina is one of the fastest growing states in the nation, the majority of those people that have moved here, I think it's almost 600,000 people since the pandemic, they've moved to our urban centers. And so, we love the fact that our state is growing and we're excited about that. But we also have to recognize that for whichever reason, people are leaving our rural communities.

And so, what that means for us is we have to think about how do we as an institution, in this case, the institution of public schools, how do we rally ourselves to come together. Oftentimes having less resources, having less human capital, having less things, how do we, in spite of that, rally ourselves to do something different so that in spite of all of these things, the young people who are born in our community have the same access to a quality education as the beautiful young people that are born in our urban centers.

And if we're honest with ourselves, we have to admit that for most of our rural communities, our young people don't have the same opportunities and experiences. It should not be that way, but that's how it is. And so, that spirit of recognizing that our young people deserve everything every other child deserves in the United States is what's led us to try something different.

And so for us, our first public schools in Elizabeth City were built in the early 1900s. We have a school right now that was built in 1922, P.W. Moore Elementary School. And so for a hundred years, Elizabeth City has had public schools. But right now the hundred year old institution got to change pretty dramatically to meet the moment, to stay relevant for our kids, and to be here another hundred years. And that means we just have to do school differently. And we have to recognize that the moment has changed.

And you know, probably the way those people felt in the late 1800s when the Industrial Revolution swept the country, I don't know how they felt because they're not alive to necessarily tell us, but it feels like we're sort of in a moment like that now, that we can't predict what five and ten years will be, but we all just know in our heart that

things are changing rapidly, and that what will come will be much different than what has come.

And so, we are in this moment as a district where we're admitting that we can't predict the future, but we're diving into this idea of trying something new, and that's what we're committed to. The micro school is an example of that.

So, I want to end my answer to that question here, but I think it's helpful to try to give some context about where we're coming from, who we are as a community, and why school transformation is so important to us, because it could mean the future of our community rests on the changes in our public school system.

Annalies Corbin:
And I would argue you are spot on, that that future does, in fact, in many ways rests on that work. So again, I just applaud the district for recognizing this. And you're absolutely right, our rural kiddos all over the world, not even just in North Carolina or the U.S., we do see these disparities often between what happens or the opportunities that students get access to, I guess is maybe a better way to really put it, in the rural communities versus sometimes in our urban centers just in terms of the stuff that's there. You don't have the same number density of museums or the ballet, or so on and so forth. And so, how do you then get these kids great, incredible, meaningful experiences without having those established institutions right there next to you.

So, Kelly, I think that's going to bring the conversation full circle to you, because, you know, as a district said, "Hey, let's do this transformation." Then, there becomes this opportunity for an innovation team, a group of people to get together and say, "Okay. Well, what is that innovation going to be? What's this transformation?" Because it could be many different things and oftentimes it is. So, talk to us just a little bit, Kelly, put some context around how and why you landed on a micro school as part of the bigger, broader transformation work that Keith was talking about.

Kelly Cowell:
Okay. I think it starts with working on our strategic plan. I think that was year two that Dr. Parker came, maybe '23, '24. And through that process of listening to the community, listening to our students, our students wanted something different. And so towards the end of that year, we were thinking what could difference be? And reimagining education and that hashtag that we have, reimagining education, came from that work. So then, that led us to what does it look like to reimagine education?

And so then, it's like what's going on in our country right now that is out of the box that our students would enjoy? And the micro school came up, and it's like, what is a micro school? I remember asking Dr. Parker like I don't even know what a micro school is, but we'll research it and figure it out. And so, that led the innovation team to not just look at micro schools, but other innovative practices that's going on throughout the country.

But for the micro school, that led us to Ascent Micro School in Austin, Texas, and Long-View, and so we went to visit both of those schools in Austin, Texas, and we were blown away. We could not believe the things that kids were doing, the way that they were handling themselves. And we were like our students can do this in a public school. And so, we came back and started designing for the '24-'25 school year, and that led us to opening this August 2025.

Annalies Corbin:
Wow. That's pretty fast.

Kelly Cowell:
Well, it was a lot of designing and it was a lot of work for that year. But we worked hard, Colina worked hard on that team as well. And it was fun, actually.

Annalies Corbin:
I think that's a true marker of innovation has got the potential to be super successful. The folks that are involved in the actual thinking about it, the design and development, are jazzed about it. Because if you're not, then it's going to fall flat, that's what I've seen over and over again. So, kudos to all of you for being so excited about the work, because it makes all the difference in the world.

Kelly Cowell:
And to think about all of the possibilities, I think is what excited us. Not just a test score at the end, but how do we help our young people in our community. And I think that's what drove us to what we have today.

Annalies Corbin:
Really exciting.

Keith Parker:
And Kelly and Colina and Tiffany by their nature are very modest and humble people. But one of the things that I'll had here is they worked unbelievably to pull this off, and so I cannot say enough about how they just said we're going to do it no matter what.

And you know, we do have a mindset that we're probably ten years too late to this work, so we don't have three and four and five years to plan. To a certain degree, we just have to go and we have to learn as we build the plane, we also have to fly and learn. And so, that's been what has driven us to move so quickly on this work.

What I will have that might be interesting to the listeners here is, the micro school is a part of everything Kelly said, but we're also really curious about how we transform institutions and organizational structures, because as much as I love our public school systems and I'll go to my grave fighting for them, I also have to recognize that a hundred year old institution can be set in these ways.

And I think President Obama talked about how the aircraft carriers don't turn on a dime. And so, that plays out in our organizational structures. And so, what we've done with the micro school is we're trying to remove bureaucracies from the school as a test pilot on how we do this in the larger organization. And so, for example, we defined everything that the Innovation Team, Colina and Tiffany could not do. And once we did that, they were allowed to do everything else without permission. So, that's one of the reasons why they were able to move pretty much to launch this school in about six to seven months.

We removed the traditional organizational reporting structure. So basically they worked as a team, and then if they needed input or like, "Hey, this might be a landmine, let's flag it," they were coming to me and the other directors. But we removed the reporting structure and basically said just don't do these things, but everything else you can do. And so, we found that removing those layers of bureaucracy really sped up our process. And that's a lesson that we're learning in other departments here. So, our micro school is an experimental school. It's a pressure cooker. You know, we're experimenting with a lot of things there.

The other thing that I'll add, too, is Colina, Tiffany, and Jaysha, they're three guides and they run the school. So, we gave them an activity bus. I mean, Colina, out of her own initiative, got a commercial driver's license in about four months. She drives the bus. They have their own buses parked in the parking lot. They want at 10:00 tomorrow, get on the bus and go downtown or something. They just get on the bus and go. They're not calling the transportation department and getting five levels of approval. We've said here's your blanket permission form, here's the accountability, here's the thing, don't do these things inside of that. Get on the bus and go.

So, those types of things are lessons for us as an organization, because sometimes a lot of our problems, we actually created our problems. And so, that's a lesson for us as an organization about how do we get out of our own way. And I think in addition to all these other things that the team can talk about, I'm very excited about continuing to learn from the micro school about how we remove these bureaucratic barriers that exist widely in organizations like ours.

Annalies Corbin:
Absolutely. And I love that because you're talking about systems change, that's the work you're doing, and it is the hardest work in transformation, because you identified the system as the single biggest barrier that we have. So, I appreciate that so much.

I say all the time, education system, it's not broken at all. It's functioning exactly as it was designed 150 years ago. The problem is it's obsolete, and so we can't keep throwing resources and dollars at it. We can't keep putting a Band-Aid on it to stop the leaking, or whatever, the cracking that's happening because the Band-Aid is getting

bigger and bigger because it's no longer able to be fixed. It's doing what it was supposed to do. So, I love that. Thank you for that.

So, Tiffany, I want to talk a little bit about this term that keeps popping up about being a guide, and you introduced yourself as a guide. And I love that because that's one of those removing of those barriers or those obstacles from an old systems perspective that says that students have to be led by teachers who are doing nothing but teaching. And this idea of being a guide, or an advisor, a facilitator, a mentor, lots of different schools, they identify a different term for it, but essentially it's a different mindset around thinking about the role and the relationship between learner and educator. So, could you talk to us a little bit about why that sort of decision point before we get into the nuts and bolts of what's going on in the micro school?

Tiffany Dudley:
So, being a guide kind of helps me facilitate the learning for the kids, where I'm in a position where I'm doing the coaching or the leading, and the kids are doing the hard work. They're the ones that are doing the thinking. They're the ones that are processing in a meaningful way that they'll remember. Versus kind of the old way of doing things, I'm going to tell you how to do this Math problem and you're going to regurgitate it to me.

Just a quick example of something, and doing this for the first time, you do get a little nervous because you're kind of used to the old way, right? You're used to I'm going to give you a formula for this and you're going to figure this out. Well, our fifth graders were working on volume, and I led them, they discovered the formula for volume and they were able to do that through just their experimentation. So, they had this lesson that they worked through and they did all of the thinking and the processing on their own. And I remember that being like my first aha kind of moment when they got it. I was like, "They got it." And I ran down the hallway and I was like, "Come here, Colina. Listen, they know what the formula for volume is." And so, that was my first kind of real experience with being able to guide the students to the learning.

Annalies Corbin:
And that was pretty exciting for you, not just for them, right? I love that.

Tiffany Dudley:
I might have been more excited than they were.

Annalies Corbin:
That's super, super fair. So, Colina, tell us a little bit then about sort of the learner's journey, that experience. Because again, going back to the design, as you collectively spent those seven to nine months really figuring out what this was going to look like in launching a school, part of that conversation was about really what you wanted for learners or what you heard from your learners within the district saying that they were looking for. So, share with us a little bit about that element and how it influenced the way you ultimately decided to launch the school.

Colina Bartlett:
Okay. Our learners, our scholars here at our micro school, they have a choice. We spend time in the afternoon where they can choose what they want to learn. They can choose Math, they can work on community projects. We have project-based learning projects through Rock by Rock. They choose. And it is not by grade level. You might have a fifth and a sixth grade group working together on a project, and nobody's talking about grade level, and they're choosing to do this because this is what interests them, which is something new to them. They're not used to it.

Annalies Corbin:
It's not. And so, my follow up question then, because they're not, and we know it's really interesting, because I've been in the weeds with this sort of work for a really long time, and as an anthropologist, you know, I put that sort of hat on and really sort of dissecting that sort of human journey piece, and the way that our students or our community wants to navigate itself, and the traditions that come with our communities, we know they play out. I can't tell you how many times I've gone to community as we were getting ready to launch new school transformations or initiatives, and I can guarantee you that at one of those community convenings, you're going to have at least a parent, if not handfuls of parents or families, stand up and say, "Well, you know, this was fine for me. Why do we need to change this?" So, what's the response to that? And I throw that to any of you.

Kelly Cowell:
My response would be the world is changing and our students have to be prepared for that new world. And we did some recruitment meetings with parents that were interested, and we would let them know, think about your job, what you go to every day, that's what we want to prepare our students. So when they come in the morning, we want them to look at their agendas, what they need to get done for today, because that's what you're doing at your job in the morning. That's what I'm doing in the morning. So, things have to change and this is a way that we can do that. We did get that question a lot.

Annalies Corbin:
I know you did. I've lived that question. Absolutely. "It worked for me, well, why is it not good enough anymore?" But it's really interesting, too, because I also appreciate, you know, the thinking around as the learner has that experience, and we know, to Colina's point, we have to scaffold our kiddos because they've never had the opportunity, perhaps, to learn like this, to have this much freedom and autonomy, and oh, my gosh, it's wonderful. But it can be terrifying too, right? And those kids that are type A kids, they love structure, they love the test, they love the sight words or whatever it is that they happen to be. And so, asking them to stretch and move into a project or a problem-based environment, that can be a little bit unsettling across the space of our learners, and our learners that might have struggled in that more traditional sense with the way a testing was set up, they may thrive in this new environment. And yet, ultimately, to be really successful, those students get all mixed together and they teach each other.

And so, I'm also curious - and again, any of you can answer this question - what are you seeing? What are those things that, you know, in addition to the kids can sort of figure out the volume, but what else are you seeing that are making you go, oh, my gosh, we are onto something here?

Keith Parker:
One thing that comes to mind - and I'll cue Colina and Tiffany up for this because they see it in the real world here - one of the many things I love about this school is it is 25 kids that have come from a range of backgrounds. And so, we have students in this school that have spent their school career in homeschool or private schools or other places. And for some kids, this is their first experience in a public school. We have kids that have been in our public school system that just wanted something different. They struggled to find a sense of belonging or they struggled to find something that they were passionate about in some traditional settings. And so, their families were interested in a different type of experience.

So, this school is grounded in recognizing that we have had a lot of families leave the public school system because they believed, rightfully so, I think, in some cases, that they had to leave the public school structure to get some choices they needed. And so, we're saying to families that that's actually not the case. We are going to ensure that the choices you need are in the public school setting. That actually the traditional public school district is the district of choice. You can choose what you need here. You don't have to leave our public school units to get choice.

And so, one thing I love seeing is these 25 kids have become a family. And so, you've got kids who come from all different backgrounds that now have become a family unit. And I think this is a small example of what our entire public school should be.

I heard Killer Mike was on T.V. about a month ago, and he was talking about his experiences growing up in the Atlanta public school system. And he was talking about that he had friends that spent their summer in Europe on vacation, but he also had friends that spent their summer navigating the challenges of extreme poverty. And that the value of the Atlanta Public School system when he went through it in the '80s was that the kid that spent the summer in Europe, was friends with a kid that navigated the challenges of poverty, and they learned from each other. There was an integration of socioeconomic families and the public school became the nucleus of that.

And I do think we're in danger of losing some of that diversity in our public schools, and we just have to recognize that that is too valuable of a space to lose that the public school does public good. And so, our publics got to feel like they belong in our schools.

And so to that point, I think I'd love to hear Colina and Tiffany talk about it. I mean, you guys have some great stories about how your kids are really becoming a family there. And I think that is something that is a beautiful characteristic of your school.

Colina Bartlett:
And I want to speak to that point. We have truly built a community. A couple of examples of that is, in the mornings, everybody greets everybody outside. We call it the front porch.

Annalies Corbin:
I love that.

Colina Bartlett:
And so we open the doors for everyone. The students, they go up and give the bus driver the clipboard, and they're outside saying good morning. And some students will say, "Wait, where mine?" "Oh, we're here. We're here. We're inside. It was cold." So, they look forward to us greeting them in the morning.

I know one day I was in class, and I saw this piece of paper on the floor. And I looked and I said, "Is this an application?" And she said, "Yes." I said, "Well, what is the application for?" She said, "For my Stuffy Club." I said, "Oh. So, what is a Stuffy Club?" She said, "Well, we bring our stuffed animals in. We talk about it during breakfast and lunch and outside at recess. And so, we have an application so we can become a club." I said, "Okay," which made sense as to why I kept seeing all these stuffed animals.

And the students are very respectful. Some of them are kind of big. There's a pig, he's big, and they just put him in the back of the classroom out of the way. The pig is there and we all know it. And you'll see them with little teeny ones, right now we're on Little Dragons, and they're sitting on their desk, they're not playing with them, but they know.

We also have a Rubik's Cube Club. Now, I did not realize the impact of this. I knew it. But today, I had a young lady bring a Hello Kitty Rubik's Cube, and she asked our Rubik's Cube expert to solve it for her. And I just thought that was so great because everybody's able to bring something to the table and they're comfortable asking each other for these things, which is what we wanted to build.

Annalies Corbin:
I love that that kid recognized another kid had an expertise that they didn't have. That's a huge cognitive leap. That's massive. Super cool. Super cool. What about you, Tiffany, what do you see? What do you love?

Tiffany Dudley:
I kind of want to circle back to like the whole type A personality and how we worked really hard with building community. And we have to do it daily and on purpose. And so, one of the things that we're doing is in our science program, Rock By Rock, the kids are assigned individual roles, and they came up with their kind of responsibilities so that everybody has a place to fit in. And so type A personality might be the mission manager, where he's going to make sure everybody's on track. Your person who is

encouraging will be like your love of learning manager and is high fiving everybody and saying good job, did we all get it? You know, someone who's meticulous is the materials manager and will go through. And they all have a role.

So, even your type A personality has a place to fit in. And I think everybody recognizes that within the group. And it's really kind of comforting and it brings a sense of peace, especially to those students who are like that, what you said earlier, the type A personality. And so, they feel right at home with everyone else.

Annalies Corbin:
Yeah. And that can be really difficult transformation projects, if you will, right? That can be really difficult to manage sometimes. And so, it's a testament to the design flexibility that you have that that's working for your scholars, not your learners, your scholars in this case. And so, I really appreciate that because that can be difficult. I have really seen innovative design stumble with that element.

And the other one that I see all the time, and there's more of a family sort of struggle is, well, I don't understand how you assign credit when everybody's working on this thing together. How do you know who's really doing what? And so, ultimately, your scholars or your learners, they sort that out amongst themselves when we give them the space to do so. They'll do that own self-correction. So, I really love that you're all doing that.

You know, as we sort of think about wrapping the conversation, I also want to recognize the fact that you're a semester in what? Two weeks maybe into this endeavor, right? So, this is new. I really want the listeners to understand this is such an epic lift and you are not even at base camp yet on this endeavor, so you've got so much to climb and yet you can hear the excitement, and the enthusiasm, and the joy from all of you.

So I'm super curious, Colina, as you look at what's coming in the next couple of weeks and months to get us through this first year, what are you excited about?

Colina Bartlett:
I'm excited about the possibilities. Like as I sit here and think about everything that we have accomplished this first semester, I sit back in awe. We had our students present to board members and superintendents across the State of North Carolina, at the North Carolina School Boards Associations conference. They presented to the audience, not us. So, our students were able to carry on a conversation, engage.

They also won a middle school video contest at the same place. They designed the video. I didn't know it. They really did not share with me until the day of production that we were getting on the bus. They said, "We have a scene downtown." I said, "Oh, am I driving?" They say, "Yes. We need you to get on the bus and drive downtown." I said, "Okay. I could do this." And to see that they came in first.

And you even had, it was a middle school contest, so we had a fifth grader build a prop for the video from scratch. It was Thor's hammer. Like they had all this done. And I didn't know. I didn't know this, but I found out when this Thor hammer was built that there is a group chat for the micro school scholars. They have a group chat that is going and they talk every day after school. So, I just think it's awesome.

Annalies Corbin:
Yeah, I love that. What about you, Tiffany, what are you excited about?

Tiffany Dudley:
I'm excited about to see how the kids grow over the year. They really have come a long way, and it's really exciting to see them as a community, as a family, helping each other learn, kind of loving on one another, encouraging one another. Like you can hear them in class going, "Okay. Did you understand that? Well, this is what I got." And so, it's just really nice to hear that kind of working out on its own. And I'm really excited to see the growth and I'm really excited to see what next year holds for these kids too.

Annalies Corbin:
Exciting? Yeah. All right. Kelly, what about you, what are you excited about?

Kelly Cowell:
One thing is what's next with the micro school, recruitment for another group of students coming in, and what that will look like for next school year. That's one thing that I'm really excited about. And then, big projects that they can be involved in. I'm really excited about that and just seeing where they go.

Annalies Corbin:
Yeah. And that'll be super interesting to watch, right? Yeah, absolutely. So, Keith, bring us full circle then. So, what are you excited about? But I really am hoping that you should put that superintendent's hat back on for a minute and really help our other leaders that are listening, that are wrestling with should I do this thing. So, what are you excited about? And why should others follow in a similar journey?

Keith Parker:
Yeah, so what I would say to anyone right now that's thinking about doing something radically different, my first invitation to folks would be an invitation to grapple with how you feel about should we improve our current model or should we redesign a completely new model? And I think that's the question for our listeners.

And I think if you move into the space of feeling like the model we have, and you mentioned this, Annalies, the traditional school model, if you feel like it just is not meeting the moment, then I think being able to say that is liberating. It can push you into a whole new space of thinking, then that's not a criticism on ourselves, our educators, or anybody else, because we're performing, as you said, exactly as we're supposed to.

But for folks that may want to do something that's just completely different, you first got to admit that you're just not satisfied with the current model. Then, I think you got to admit that doing anything is hard. And so, you got to give yourself grace and permission to know that you won't solve all the things you want to solve overnight. And you're not going to become the person or the organization you want to be all at one time. You have to grow into the organization you want to be, but you have to start somewhere.

And so, that's my invitation to anybody listening today, is to recognize that in this country, we are losing thousands of families in our public school systems. And I know we have folks that are listening that are doing great work and they're not in the public school units. And for those folks, I applaud you. We want to continue our partnerships with private schools and home schools, and all those are great things. Our focus has been on the public school system, and we just got to acknowledge that if we continue to lose year after year the number of families, we're losing nationally in our public schools. We will get to a point where we will not have public schools the way we've known them.

And I think as a society, we've got to recognize that we just can't let that happen. But if we're going to convince our families that we're the best choice for most of our families, we have to do something different. And who knows what that is, but start somewhere and let's try something.

I think it was Victor Hugo, the French poet, said there's nothing more powerful than an idea whose time has come. I do believe for our country the time has come where we recognize that how we invest in our young people actually says a lot about who we are as a society. And we have to collectively as a society make a commitment that we will be a country that invests in our young people through a public school system. And that's what we're focused on and we're committed to just trying new things and learning from them.

And we'd love to share anything we have with any listeners, so please contact us, please reach out. All that we have is open source, so we would love to share it. And we would also love to learn from anybody, so if anybody is in this work and you've heard something today and you're like this will be great for you to think about or try, please reach out and share that to us, because we believe in networks and partnerships and that's something that we're committed to. So, that would be my charge at the end of the call here.

And thank you so much for inviting us. This has just been fun getting together here. So, love the opportunity to be able to chat today, so thank you for bringing us together, Annalies.

Annalies Corbin:

Oh, absolutely. Thank you all for the time this afternoon to have the conversation. But more importantly, thank you for all that you do. The work that you are collectively doing, it makes a difference and it matters. And the reality is we can all learn from the journey that you are currently actively, deeply, deeply engaged in. So, thank you so much for joining us today.

Colina Bartlett:
Thank you.

Tiffany Dudley:
Thank you.

Kelly Cowell:
Thank you.

Keith Parker:
Thank you so much.

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, @anneliescorbin, and join me next time as we stand up, step back, and lean in to reimagine education.