

TRANSCRIPT

Learning Unboxed



Episode #312

Jess Alfreds:

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Annalies Corbin:

Welcome to Learning Unboxed, a conversation about teaching, learning, and the future of work. I'm your host and chief goddess of the PAST Foundation, Annalies Corbin. We know the current model for education is obsolete. It was designed to create fleets of assembly line workers, not the thinkers and problem solvers needed today. We've seen the innovations that are possible within education, and it's our goal to leave the box behind and reimagine what education can look like in your own backyard.

Annalies Corbin:

Welcome to Learning Unboxed. As always, I'm excited to talk with another great innovator in the transformative education space. And joining us today is Jess Alfreds founder of Carolina Kids Co-op. So, Jess, welcome to Learning Unboxed.

Jess Alfreds:

Thank you so much for having me.

Annalies Corbin:

I'm super excited to have you here. We've been talking a lot about this topic, so let's set some context for our listeners as we get started. Carolina Kids Co-op is a part of a growing movement of parent-led learning communities that are reimaging what education can look like outside traditional classrooms. What began as a small outdoor homeschool co-op in Myrtle Beach has inspired dozens of independently operated programs where families collaborate to create academically rich, nature-connected learning environments.

And today, Carolina Kids Co-op has inspired dozens of these independently operated outdoor academic programs across several states. Each one is started by a parent or

educator who wants to create small community-centered learning environments where kids can learn through curiosity, nature, and meaningful relationships.

And that's why we love this idea. So, Jess, I love when I get founders on this program, and my listeners know I love to ask founders this question right out of the gate because founding things is hard. It's a lot of work. So, what were you thinking?

Jess Alfreds:

Great question. Yeah, I didn't have somebody around to talk me out of it quickly enough.

Annalies Corbin:

And I usually hear that too, "I don't really know what I was thinking. I saw this need," so.

Jess Alfreds:

No, that's it. That's what it is. And that's what I have tried to do multiple times throughout my career in different things. If I see a need and I think that I can fill it and do it well and serve people, then I'm gonna try to do that. And I had no idea if it was gonna be successful, but it worked out well here we are.

Annalies Corbin:

Yeah, here we are. So, let's talk a little bit about the why of this work. So, you saw a need. So, talk to us about that need. Keeping in mind, of course, a lot of our listeners are educators themselves, traditional educators, formal, informal educators, innovative educators, educators who came to the idea of education from non-traditional pathways. We have the full gamut, and lots of families who listen as well. So, what was the need that you saw?

Jess Alfreds:

Well, for me, it started as a personal need. My daughter, this was this sort of tail end or midway through the pandemic. Everything was shut down. There wasn't really anything. She was a first grader, and there was really nothing that she could go to that was academic and in person, which I felt is what she really needed.

My family moved during the pandemic from Connecticut down to South Carolina, and I thought that I would find something outdoors that was able to stay open, and it didn't seem to exist here. But there seemed to be a lot of people when I brought it up that were, like, really into the idea and thought it was exactly what they were looking for, but nobody wanted to have the job of pulling it together, and I really didn't mind doing it.

So, I just really wanted something for my daughter that was gonna meet her needs, and I figured if she needs this, then there's gotta be other kids who need this. I didn't necessarily expect as much of a response as we've gotten, but it was really simple. We wanna be outdoors, we wanna enjoy the beautiful weather, and we want our kids to have academic rigor and enriching, engaging classes, and simple as that.

Annalies Corbin:

Yeah. And oftentimes, when I talk to founders, you will always find the need they were trying to solve was typically one of their own or connected to them in some really deep and meaningful way. It's a child. It's a parent. It's somebody related to them. It's the kid next door that I saw struggling with X, Y, or Z, and I thought, "Hey, maybe I could solve this problem." So, see that trend in founders all the time, so I love to ask that question.

Jess Alfreds:

Absolutely. It's too much work. In the beginning, it takes so much out of you that if it's not for your own family, it's unlikely that you're gonna be able to keep that momentum. But when it's your kid or your family, what are you gonna do? You have to do what you gotta do.

Annalies Corbin:

Exactly. Exactly. All right. So, let's talk about the idea of micro-schooling, right? And so, because there's a lot of misunderstanding of what that means, and there's a lot of ideas that came out of the pandemic, right? We had a lot of these home-based pods that got created. And that's not necessarily what today, in 2026, a micro-school is, right? So, I always like to start by making sure that everybody understands we're talking about a variety of different things here. So, from Carolina Kid Co-op perspective, how do you define the idea of a micro-school?

Jess Alfreds:

I would say that a micro-school is smaller class sizes, more student-led typically. So, I would say, our Myrtle Beach location is on the edge of what may or may not still be considered a micro school. We have 153 kids in our Myrtle Beach location. All of our other locations, I would say, are certainly under that definition of a micro school. So, typically, in the way that I think that most educators think of it, a hundred kids or less is really what we're talking about here.

And so, when you have a community that's that small, as opposed to a typical public school that has, I don't know, anywhere from probably 800 to 3,000 students in it, the director doesn't know every single kid in a close way, doesn't know what everybody's

home life is like, doesn't know everybody's strengths and weaknesses, and that is a really big difference in how you run your school.

If you know that you've got a student who was living with a grandparent who recently passed away, or a student has dyslexia, or a student just has an unusual home life for some reason, you take that into account in every interaction that you have. And if you don't know your kids, it's really hard to give them that sort of personalized, individualized attention.

We have a lot of families that come to us out of public school that have what we call an IP, individualized plan, because of either a learning disability or some reason. What I say all the time is, at Carolina Kids Co-Op, everybody has an IEP. At a micro school, everybody has an IP, not because you have a disability, but because that is our approach. Every child deserves a personalized interaction, and the person who's in charge of their education to take their interests into account. And so, that, to me, is the difference in what a micro school really is.

Annalies Corbin:

Yeah. I appreciate that. So, share with us then. So, let's start with the Myrtle Beach example, right? So, this is where it all started. And so, obviously, it's expanded since your one child, getting that all launched and out the door. So, share with us sort of, how does it work? So, if I'm a parent and I want my child to be part of that experience, what am I seeing? What does it look like? What does it feel like? How do we... all the pieces and parts.

Jess Alfreds:

Yeah. So, at Myrtle Beach, like I said, we have 153 kids, 14 full-time teachers, and it's a big operation. We serve kids all the way from toddlers in our Parent and Me program all the way through high school. So, all of these different age kids are interacting. It's a very family-like atmosphere. We have very high academic standards. We're not a playgroup. We're not a typical nature school in the sense that usually rigorous academics are typically not the primary focus at a nature school, it's more the nature part of the exploration. Whereas for us, being outside is important but secondary to the fact that we're here for academics.

So, our kids certainly do learn about their natural world, but they're doing all of the regular core academics that you might have at a typical public or private school, again, with their personal preferences taken into account. And so, we might do a book club about Minecraft books or a Pokemon class instead of a typical social studies course.

So, we're really taking their opinions and their preferences into account, but still making sure that we're hitting all of those traditional math, reading, writing, social studies, science. And if they ever did choose to go back on a more traditional school path, they're capable and they're still prepared and able to do that.

So, that's what our Myrtle Beach community's like. We really encourage full-family participation. So, that doesn't mean that you have to be at co-op as a parent. You can drop off and go to work if you need to. But we're gonna have lots of events where we're gonna invite the whole family. We're going to talk back and forth. We have an online program where we can communicate with parents, so they know exactly what their kids are studying this week. There's no disconnect when your child leaves for the whole day where you have no clue what they've done, what they've studied. Sometimes, it can be hard to get that information from our kids, as we know, so we really keep a lot of communication open, and it feels very family-like when you're there.

Annalies Corbin:

And I love that very much, right? And we know that micro-learning environments are good for lots of people, right? And they're really, really conducive to a variety of different formats and participants and combinations. And it's one of the reasons why I'm so intrigued by micro-learning environments.

And so, how do you identify or find the educators? So, that's one of the other pieces. So, lots of configurations around the way these different endeavors work. Sometimes, it's grandma, which is awesome. We can learn so much from grandma, right? But sometimes, they're formal educators who find themselves in that space and everything in between. So, what does it look like for Carolina Co-op in terms of how do you find the educators? Who are these people?

Jess Alfreds:

They have almost all found me, found us, so that's amazing. I would say 80% were with me from day one when I initially put out the sort of call to action, "I'm doing this. Who's interested?" The majority of my people that are with me now were with me from... were the people that said "I'm in. What are you doing? This sounds amazing." And so, it is a mix of former public school teachers, private school teachers, college professors, early education experts, and some experienced homeschool parents or an artist or a dancer teaching fine arts, so people that are experts in their field. We really have a pretty wide variety. I would say at this point, probably most of our educators are former teachers in a more traditional setting.

Annalies Corbin:

So, then, is the co-op ... And so, maybe let's talk a little bit about that because you were really deliberate in using that term. So, share with us a little bit about that decision and the sort of why, because I think that sets the stage for my follow-up question, which is a structural one, so.

Jess Alfreds:

Well, I know that the traditional expectation for a homeschool co-op is that the parents are volunteering their time and everybody's chipping in and teaching. I really wanted to make something that was a little more inclusive than that because I feel like that really limits working parents from being able to participate. You have to volunteer, and you have a full-time job, that's really difficult. Or if you have a new baby, or if you, whatever, if you're not an English language speaker originally. There's a million reasons why not everybody can jump right into that role.

So, I didn't want that to be a requirement, but I did want people to have to chip in some way. So, we still wanted to create a co-op, and what we've done instead is to create a million different ways that you can participate in the community, whether it's to help us set up for a party or set up some field trips or tutor. Maybe you have some sort of a specialty or whatever. So, many different ways that you can be part of the community.

And so, I still want that cooperative mindset, even if you're just coming and dropping off your child every day. You're not just dropping off your child, you are in some way still... we're gonna pull you into this community and make you part of it in some way or another.

Annalies Corbin:

So, let's get to the structural piece because I know that my listeners are really trying to sort that out in their own minds, right? And so, from a structural standpoint then, is this a public school, a private school, a charter school? Are these homeschool families in the eyes of whatever state these programs are operating in?

Jess Alfreds:

Yes. So, currently all of our locations are homeschool co-ops And so, the students who attend are whatever makes you a legal homeschooler in your state, different everywhere. Some are ESA recipients of some sort, some are self-pay families, but everybody is technically a homeschooler, even though a very large percentage of our students at this point were pulled directly from public or private school to attend a Carolina Kids Co-op. So, they weren't homeschoolers before, but became homeschoolers in order to join us.

Annalies Corbin:

To participate, yeah, absolutely. And so, then, there are fees, or tuitions, or co-op ... because that's the other question. Folks are like, "Well, how do you fund this thing? How do you have these 14 amazing teachers? And you must have a building, and how does it all work?" Yeah.

Jess Alfreds:

We don't have a building, we meet outdoors, and we have deals with our local cities or counties to be able to meet outdoors. In Myrtle Beach, we are on the hunt for the perfect building that would allow us to have some sort of an indoor space with our outdoor. We wanna stay outdoors for the most part, but we would love to. So, we are on the hunt for that, but yes.

So, these are parks for the most part that people participate in and paid teachers. So, we try to pay our teachers well. They do a wonderful job. And so, our families pay tuition, and like I said, some are self-pay, some are scholarship families, but-

Annalies Corbin:

All the pieces and parts. So, let's talk about the program side of this then. And this is where I really kinda wanna get into the weeds, if you will, because there is so much learning that happens when we're not confined to our traditional set of constraints about where and what learning, (A), should be, what it should look like, where it should be located, who should be involved in it. So, I'm really curious. You're in this work now a few years. What are your big key takeaways that you think are a great value back into a more traditional mindset or setting?

Jess Alfreds:

Well, I think that what I've seen is that almost all kids do better, first of all, when they've got fresh air and sunshine. I don't think there are any students that we've had that have not improved in a lot of ways emotionally, behaviorally and of course academically.

And I think that even more important than the outside piece that when you look at a Carolina Kids Co-op, the part that looks different from the beginning is that kids are doing math and social studies and science outdoors, but I don't think that's really what makes us different. I feel like it is the holistic approach that we take in getting to really know our kids, creating a curriculum that puts them in the center so that they don't feel like they're being taught at, they feel like they are part of their education. They help to choose what classes they're gonna take.

We're in that process right now for the fall where I'm meeting with my students all the time and putting together what they're going to do. And today, for example, one of my students said, "I really wish we had a crochet teacher. I love crochet. I'm really into it. I'm really good at it, and it's a shame we don't have a class." And so, I said to her, "Why don't you make a class? Why don't you lead a crochet class? You're really good at it. You know how to do it. Why can't you teach the class?" And her whole face lit up which it never occurred to her that she could bring this knowledge and that everybody can teach everybody. And when we really care about what they're interested in, no matter what it is, if we can give them that respect and show them that their preferences matter, their opinions matter, I think that is really the difference, even more than the being outside.

Annalies Corbin:

Absolutely. I'm also curious about the curriculum. So, where does the curriculum come from? How did you make the decisions about what the curriculum is or is not?

Jess Alfreds:

Well, we've met with really great educators and put together a lot of really smart, experienced educators to help us develop our curriculum. Everything except math, we developed ourselves, and we've been developing for years now, about five years now. And math, we have been using Core Knowledge Foundation. We're actually making a switch to Math UC. That is a big change for us for our math curriculum, but everything else is created in-house over the years, again, with our students in mind and really trying to not forget that these are kids, and we want them to have fun and be excited to come to school. And so, if they're studying things that are interesting to them, they will be excited to come back.

Annalies Corbin:

Right. And so, then, as your kids then progress through your programming and they get finished, so talk to us a little bit about where your kids go. What are they doing afterwards? You're five years in-ish, right? So, at this point, what are you seeing that your kids are going off to? Because that's one of the other misnomers, right? So, there's a lot of confusion about students that find themselves, for a variety of reasons, families choose. Traditional school works for lots of families. It doesn't work for other families. And that's all fair. We need all different kinds to meet the needs of all different kinds of people. I really love that opportunity.

But there is a lot of misunderstanding about the quality of many of these programs are really, really great. They're incredibly rigorous. The students have incredible growth. So, where do your students find themselves?

Jess Alfreds:

We didn't start with going all the way through high school when we first started. So, next year will be our first year that we are graduating high school students. So, we are in that sort of mentorship process right now. We are tackling it from all different angles. My philosophy is always that it is our job to make sure that our kids have every single opportunity available. The kid who says in eighth grade, "I don't wanna go to college," so it doesn't matter, it is my job to recognize that they are 13 and they do not know what they're gonna want five years from now. And so, I have to make sure that you are college-ready and workforce-ready and emotionally, stable and ready to take on adult life.

We're talking with our kids as they get close to that age. We are setting up internships for them, helping them narrow down that path as they get closer and closer to being high school seniors. And I approach it with them as, "What's the first thing you wanna do in adulthood?" As opposed to what is the thing you're going to be for the whole rest of your life. Most adults aren't following that path anymore.

Annalies Corbin:

They are not, and it doesn't stick. We change our careers, we change our mind, our interests, our aspirations, absolutely. And we should be able to do that, and we need to help our kids be prepared to do that as well. Absolutely.

Jess Alfreds:

Exactly. So, that's how we take it. What's the first thing you'd like to study or to do? We try to be realistic with them. Listen, Mom and Dad might kick you out. You gotta get a job. You gotta be able to pay your rent. So I want you to be able to support yourself, but also, this doesn't have to be the thing that you're gonna do forever. What are you interested in? Let's figure out what your first few years of adulthood are gonna look like. And for many of them, it's going to college. And for some of them, they are clear that they want a different path, and so let's check it out.

Annalies Corbin:

Let's help them get there, absolutely. What do the kids tell you? What do the kids tell you that they want?

Jess Alfreds:

Well, it's funny. It's a wide variety. Just this morning, one of my kiddos said, "I've really narrowed it down now, Mrs. A. I'm locked in. I'm either gonna be a welder or a marine biologist."

Annalies Corbin:

Those are very different things. Yes, absolutely. I love that.

Jess Alfreds:

So, my job is to make sure that we bring a marine biology class to our co-op, which we're doing next year, and to find a welder in the community that this student can go and spend a few hours and hang out. I said, "How much time have you spent around welders?" And she said, "I've never met a welder in my life. I'm not even exactly sure what the job is." I said, "Okay that, I think my job here is-

Annalies Corbin:

Let's work on that. Yeah. Yeah.

Jess Alfreds:

Right. So, we want to expose them to all of the different possibilities. And then as they get their vision more narrow, they wanna be everything. They wanna be everything from a teacher to a YouTube star. So-

Annalies Corbin:

Yeah. Yeah.

Jess Alfreds:

I guess that's a lot, for sure.

Annalies Corbin:

Yeah.

Jess Alfreds:

So, look, it's my job to just make sure that everything is available to you. How can I help you?

Annalies Corbin:

Perfect. What do you think are the next big things that you have to tackle on behalf of your kids?

Jess Alfreds:

Oh, there's so much all the time. We are actually bringing a new program to Carolina Kids' Co-op in the fall called the Literacy Lab, which is an intensive sort of sub-program within CKC helping students with dyslexia. We have just huge numbers of students with dyslexia. The latest that I've been told is it's somewhere around 20%, and I don't think there's enough services, and I don't think it's being caught early

enough. And I think just so many other things, early intervention really seems to be the key to not having your dyslexia be a major obstacle for you.

So, it's things like that. It's really still the same sort of entrepreneurial vision of where is there a need, what's not being filled, and I'm very big on, sort of mission-based work. I wanna make sure that I'm doing something that's contributing something positive to the world, helping kids especially, so it's just looking for, where are those gaps? Where do we have programming that's not meeting their needs, and how do we do that?

Annalies Corbin:

Absolutely. Thank you for that. So, I always like to think about as we're wrapping the program, recognizing that the conversation we're having, people are listening to it coming from a variety of different places, not just geographically around the world, but even from different sort of mindset or head spaces, if you will, right? In terms of the work that they're doing, whatever that work happens to be. And sometimes, it's really, really hard to try and do something that is a little bit outside of what I perceive to be as the norm.

What would you say to that innovative educator who says, "I'm gonna stick with my school, but I'm gonna do something different, even in my own practice and my own classroom." Based on what you've learned through this experience, what would you advise that educator?

Jess Alfreds:

I think that we need great educators in every type of school. We need great educators to stay in public school. We need great educators to step outside of the traditional school and create these unique opportunities. We need to make sure that there is a choice and an option for every type of learner. And I don't think we've really reached that yet. I don't think that there's a great, fantastic option for every single kid, regardless of what their need is.

So, it's really looking at yourself and saying, "What can I give? What is my..." I'm a person that really truly believes that every single person has a thing that only they can contribute to the world. And so, just like I tell the kids, I think we as adults, and certainly as educators, need to just look at ourselves and say, "Where can I make a difference?"

The problems are overwhelming. The problems with education are... if you look at it big picture, it can be pretty overwhelming. So, I think you just have to pick away at: What can you do to help? What's your passion? What's gonna make you jump out of bed in the morning ready to work and to give? 'Cause it takes a lot out of you. And

just follow that. Do what matters to you and what feels important to you. But there's plenty of work to be done.

Annalies Corbin:

There is indeed plenty of work to be done. Absolutely. For you personally on this journey you started this for your daughter, so what's important to you next? For your daughter, for yourself, for the work that you're doing, what do you wanna spend your own personal time and investment in as it relates to your work?

Jess Alfreds:

Well, I'm still really excited to continue to expand Carolina Kids Co-Op to new places. I think there's still a lot of places that don't have a school or a co-op where kids are really seen and really listened to and appreciated. And so, there's a lot of kids suffering. And I have that on my mind every single day, that there are thousands of kids out there who are not wanting to go to school because they're being bullied or because teachers are not treating them well, or it's just not meeting their needs, or whatever it is.

So, it feels like a very critical job to me, where we have to work as hard as we can. We can't take it easy, because kids are suffering right now. And so, just trying to serve as many kids as I can, expand our program. I see that our program works. I see what it does for kids even more than academically, emotionally, and how it helps them to be happier, healthier, and their whole family unit to be happier and healthier. So, just trying to work as fast as I can, make sure that my kids here in Myrtle Beach have a great program, and try to bring the CKC energy just to as many places as we can.

Annalies Corbin:

Absolutely. And thank you so much for the work that you do, and I appreciate very much you taking time out of your day to chat with us and share the story of what you're doing and the big why for you and for all the kiddos that are involved. We will make sure that we have some links in the show notes. So, for our listeners please, I hope that you will take a look at that. Reach out to Jess if you're interested in figuring out how you too can be part of the Carolina Kids Co-op movement. I have no doubt that Jess would love to hear from you. So thank you again for being on the program. We appreciate it.

Jess Alfreds:

Thank you. Thank you so much for having me.

Annalies Corbin:

Absolutely.

Annalies Corbin:

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