

Ep #298: How to Leverage Systems to Become a Better School Leader with Katie Novak and Kristan Rodriguez



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Angela Kelly

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Hello empowered principals. Welcome to episode 298.

Welcome to *The Empowered Principal® Podcast*, a not so typical educational resource that will teach you how to gain control of your career and get emotionally fit to lead your school and your life with joy by refining your most powerful tool, your mind. Here's your host certified life coach Angela Kelly Robeck.

Angela: Well, hello my empowered leaders. Happy Tuesday. Welcome to the podcast. I have very special guests with me today. I have Kristan and Katie, and I'm going to let them introduce themselves. These are new brand new friends of mine. As you guys know, I don't just have anybody on my podcast. I take very special care to curate this podcast to ensure that every single podcast you walk away with something of value to you and your job and to your school.

I met Kristan and Katie via email actually. I was so impressed with their work, so connected to their mission and their vision and the values that they are using to drive their work that I felt compelled to work with them. So I'm going to have Kristan and Katie introduce themselves. We're going to talk about their work and how it will help you be a better school leader. So Katie, welcome to the podcast.

Katie Novak: Hello, I am so happy to be here. Thank you for having me.

Angela: Katie, tell the listeners a little bit about who you are, what you're doing, and how it all relates to school leadership?

Katie: Yes, absolutely. So I am a teacher at heart. Whether I was a teacher in middle school, or high school, or a school or district administrator. I've been in this work for 20 years. I think of all of our work as being really driven by passion for our learners and instructional design.

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So I think that sometimes as we move further and further away from the classroom, we tend to think more about technical challenges and management. It's so important to remember that this work is about people's babies. This work is about elevating and celebrating great teachers and teaching and providing everybody in a district with what they need to be wildly successful.

So I always think of this as we can absolutely transform an organization by thinking about what is it that we want everyone to know and do. This is true for mastery of learning in the classroom, but it's also about the adults who are doing the work, who really benefit from clarity around the vision that we're working towards, and support in working towards that vision. So I have worked as a school teacher and administrator with my amazing colleague, Dr. Kristan Rodriguez, and she'll tell you a little bit herself.

Angela: Great. Kristan, welcome to the podcast.

Kristan Rodriguez: So excited to be here. Thanks for having us.

Angela: Oh, I love it. Just for the listeners to know, I asked before the ladies joined us on the podcast to have a little meet and greet. Katie was traveling, I think, but Kristan was able to meet, and we hit it off. I felt like how did I just get two new best friends in 30 minutes time?

Kristan: We become work besties the three of us right now.

Angela: Yeah, yeah. Then we were talking about we've got West Coast represented, East Coast represented. So here we are. Kristan, sorry, tell the listeners a little bit about who you are and how you are bringing work into the field of education?

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Kristan: Absolutely. So we're really excited to be here to kind of share the work that we've been doing to research how do we think about the systems that we create as leaders in ways that are overt and forward facing for the needs of all of our learners? Really, that's what drives me, what gets me up every morning, what has me work with administrators with a smile on my face, which is we are looking at this work as systems level work.

So that's not easy work. It's challenging and difficult work, but it's exciting to do this. So what kinds of system levers and drivers do we need to tweak and adjust as leaders to meet the needs of all of our learners within our organizations? So that's primarily what I do now. It's my day job. It's really fun is working with teams of leaders to grow their practice, and I'm excited to be here to talk about it today.

Angela: I know, me too. What I love about this is, as you two ladies know, I am a life and leadership coach for school leaders. One of the things that I coach on incessantly is time. I have been recording some podcasts on time. I'm on a little time rant right now. But one of the things I know to be true in order to help school leaders be the most efficient and effective versions of themselves, require systems.

A lot of, especially new school leaders, they feel like they have no idea where to start when it comes to creating those systems. That's what I love about your work is how can a new school leader or even somebody who's been in it for a while who doesn't understand how to set up a system. How can they get started with that, the concept and the idea of leveraging systems in a way that makes them a more valuable and effective school leader?

Katie: You know, I think that in order to build any really, really integrated, coherent system, it really starts with like where are we going? So a lot of our work is really helping people to articulate with shared stakeholders.

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This is not something that a leader can do by themselves in an office. But like what really is it that we want for our students?

I think that articulating this vision for what does it mean to have a deeper learning experience for all students? What does it mean to prepare students for their future? What does it mean to build these future ready skills? I think that we do a pretty good job of talking about things like a portrait of a learner, for example. Many districts have a mission and a vision.

But taking the time to really unpack and operationalize but what does that mean for the experience that every single student has access to? What does that mean for our staff and our shared responsibility in this work? Kristan and I work together all over the world with districts.

We'll often start off and say okay, so have you articulated a vision for where you're going so there's a really clear pathway of where we're headed? Even if that is created in partnership with lots of stakeholders, there's the question of do we interpret this the same way?

So today, I actually worked with an amazing leadership team. We took some time and looked at that district vision. Then said okay let's just do a calibration exercise. Based on that vision, let's look at some classroom practices. Again, this is not an exact science, but think about like does this really meet the vision? Does it exceed what we want for students? Is there a lot more work that we need to do? Then lastly, would you say this is unsatisfactory? Meaning that this is not going to lead us to where we want to go.

The same very committed leadership team with the same vision rated the same practice exemplary, proficient, needs improvement, and unsatisfactory. There was this moment of saying okay, look at this

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opportunity, right? How do we head in the same direction if we're not even clear on where we're going?

So really helping teams to first operationalize what is it that we're trying to build? Do we all understand that? Then you can start that needs assessment process, which is what do we have already that aligns to this vision? What are all of the places that we don't have yet?

There is no one in this world, I'm telling you, there's no one better at the planning piece than Dr. Kristan Rodriguez. So I'm going to throw it over to her. After you're able to really do that work to say like what is it that's important to us? Where are we headed? What does that look like? Then to start that really critical self-analysis of where are our problems of practice? What are the barriers that are preventing us from creating those systematic shifts to get us in that direction?

Angela: Yes. Oh, that's so good.

Kristan: So I'm really excited that Katie started with the concept of instructional vision because one of the things that I was doing a couple of days ago with a leadership team out in the state of New York was very similar to what Katie's talking about, which is beginning with centering this work around our instructional vision which is rooted in deeper learning which is inclusive and accessible for all learners.

Only once we have that understanding of where we want to be, can we do that thoughtful assessment of what systems are working towards that vision and which ones are not. As you alluded to, time is one of the most valuable resources that our administrators have in the work they do.

It's not just time within a schedule because, in a lot of ways, that's low hanging fruit to some degree. Yes, we have to bargain that with our

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associations. Yes, there's sometimes a year-long process to adjust our school schedules in ways that provide blocks within the school day to support what all students need without excluding them from tier one instruction.

But it's more than that. It's the time that they dedicate to looking at the practices that are happening within their schools. It's the time it takes to really get ahead of appropriate staffing, doing a staffing needs assessments. They are the folks that are in front of our schools and our students, the right people to meet that vision.

I always talked about the distinction between an attendance officer and an engagement officer. Both, to some degree, have a very similar end purpose, but they do it very differently. Both want to get kids in. They want to support chronic absenteeism. But one is punitive and one is proactive.

So, again, there's time. It takes time to think about how are we staffing? What are our values within our organization so the time that we have with our students, how we staff them, the conversations. Do we give them embedded time for collaborative planning? Do we give them time for database decision making? Do we give them time to understand the grade level expectations and standards of our students to support things like acceleration versus remediation?

So all of those systems impacts, as you talked about Angela, are time bound. So I think sometimes we say oh time, okay. We're going to throw that into the conversation around scheduling. But it's really prioritizing our time as leaders and what we care about. So I always say there's a simple quote that kind of says what we fund is what we value. I always say those resources go beyond just financial. The funding of time is really important to our values.

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Angela: Yes, because what we spend our time on is what we value. The same is true with our money and our financial resources. The same is true with our human resources, right, and our time and energy, like our energy and our attention and focus. Wherever we're spending that resource is what we value. Aligning those values.

That's one of the first steps I teach my principals is you have to be aligned to your leadership values and know what you value. The way you do that is by looking at how you're currently spending your resources now and how you want to be spending those resources. I loved what you said earlier too, Katie, about having these conversations around the definition.

Because we can be speaking the language, the educational language, but if everybody has a different opinion or a different metric by which they're defining what success is and what achievement looks like and what's the best practice. Like all of those words means something very different. Calibrating that, I think, is essential to creating teams, organizations, and systems.

Katie: Absolutely. I think for me one of the big lenses of how we can really help people to understand what we're looking for is once we create that really clear instructional vision, we want to make sure that all of our professional learning also has those elements of deeper learning. That a lot of people say what is our first step?

If we really want people to think about instructional design. Once we have our vision of what we want students to experience, what is a really great next step? Model it in your meeting structures, model it in professional learning.

When you think about data driven meetings, or professional learning communities, really taking the time to say what is it that everyone has to

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know and do? How can we be really flexible and honor people's voice? Allow them to really deeply, collaboratively get into the work.

It's really easy to adopt kind of a technical protocol for a PLC, but the adaptive underbelly of people really being vulnerable about I am struggling with this. Can someone like please model this for me so I can go in your classroom, or I would love feedback on my own practice. A protocol can't create that, but a culture where we're all really invested in this collective efficacy, where we're recognizing that we collectively have to be involved in really designing a space that works for all learners.

One of the things I know Kristan and I talk about all the time is it's very difficult to be inclusive of students if we're not being inclusive of adults. So as an example, I was a seventh grade English teacher. Kristan and I have worked together for over 15 years. When we met, she was the assistant superintendent of schools, and I was a seventh grade English teacher.

In that capacity, maybe I had time to work with my other seventh grade colleagues in math, in science, in social studies. But Kristan was hugely instrumental in moving our district to one that was much more inclusive. So in my classroom, I have students who previously had not been included with their peers because of linguistic barriers or behavior or students who had previously been in completely separate groups.

I can just imagine if it's me and a bunch of seventh grade teachers being like oh, we have some kids that are facing barriers. How do we address that? How that would be challenging. But the time that we had for PLC is included like the district behavior specialist, the adjustment counselor, a special educator, the ELL support teacher, an instructional coach. It was so much more efficient for us to be inclusive of kids when we were provided with the time and support to plan proactively through that inclusive lens.

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So even that's something where we might go well, they have time to work together. It's like but if none of us have those really, really specialized focus areas of expertise then we're only as strong as our own knowledge. There's so much collective efficacy when we allow people to work together. So really thinking about that as well as when we talk about we want to be inclusive. We want to have deeper learning. That's not just for young learners, that for including our adult learners.

Angela: This is so in alignment with what I teach because I teach them a process for the student journey, like the student experience as a student, but I start with the teacher experience in that school. So as a school leader coach, I will say to them what is the experience that you want your teachers to have as adult learners, as adults professionals? Because they are still on a learning curve trajectory in your career, right?

So what is the experience? What are the thoughts and feelings you want your teachers to have throughout the school year? How do you want them thinking and feeling about themselves as teachers, about the teaching experience, and about their school? That journey, when you can articulate that, you can apply that to the students, but it does need to be modeled in the systems and operations and culture of that school at large.

It's so funny because I think that when we're teachers, we have thoughts about kids and learning. We're like oh of course, they need time, and they're going to fail. Then we get into adults. It's like they should know this. They're adults. It's like if you can transfer your thoughts about kids to big people with learning, it's that makes it so much easier to allow those systems to be in place.

Kristan: One of the things that we talked about in our first book, actually, *Universally Designed Leadership* was the fact that we all have brains. This concept of universal design is actually not developmental. So the things

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that we had applied to our classrooms could be applied to our adult learners.

So thinking about how do we remove barriers for our adult learners? How do we scaffold support for our adult learners? How do we minimize threats and distractions for our adult colleagues? Right? These are the same approaches that will light up the affective network of the brains of children similar they do with our colleagues.

So one of the things that it's really important for us to do, so Katie talks beautifully about the notion of culture and creating a culture that is thoughtful and inclusive. You talked about thinking about this concept of how that applies to adult learners. Very similarly when we meet with administrators, we do not want the conversation to be about what can that educator not do?

A similar question is when we talk about with our students what can we do to create agency within our own leadership to change the systems, the environment, the supports that we're providing to our educators so that they can all be successful.

So that will, in turn, make the experience within the classroom successful for all of our kiddos and for all of the students within our organization. So I think it's really important that we look at tiering support, just as we do for our students, within our staff to make sure that they are successful.

So this concept of culture being important, and then the undergird of that, that scaffold, would be a really clear, articulated, yet flexible meeting protocol so that there's consistency. So if a department or a team needs it, it's available to them, but not being so rigid that if a team has other operational standards or protocols that work for them, that we don't allow

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them to do that. So again, I think it's that concept of flexibility, even within that, but grounding it as Katie talked about, in that culture.

Angela: That is so, so good. Because the way that I see it is that school leaders will ask consultants and coaches what do I need to do? They're focused on their action line of like what is the to do list? If I just check this boxes, will I get the result? The answer is maybe because it depends on what you're thinking and how you're feeling and the fuel that you're using to take those actions.

It's really about like it's not so much that we're giving leaders a this is a to do list, a checkbox of what you have to implement and the actions you have to take as much as it is who do you have to become? What kind of school leader? What is the mindset of the school leader who instills this type of culture, this type of PLC environment, this type of systems and protocols and experiences for their teachers so that their school can benefit?

Who do I have to be as a leader? What do I need to be thinking, which then drives the actions that you take, and it helps you prioritize those values to set that vision into motion.

Kristan: We just had a conversation the other day, and I was having one with another colleague. It was around how do we use tools and resources through means such as artificial intelligence to capture that time back in our own schedule so that we become available for this kind of work, right? To be able to observe what is happening in our classrooms, there's some sacrifice of time that has to occur in ways that do not burn our leaders out so that they're not at 10/11/12 writing their observations up.

How do we ensure that we are using tools and materials and our colleagues and staff within the school to give the leaders that time? I think

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sometimes leaders think it's selfish to ask for that. But we really within our own practice, we would challenge them. I mean do you remember, Katie, we used to have challenges where like okay, you cannot answer your emails. You cannot read or answer the emails for this week after like 4:00, whatever it was. That's super challenging for some of our principals.

But part of that is how do we, we want you around. We don't want you to burn out. So how do we embed time in your day so you're feeling your communicative to your families and your community and your staff, but not in ways that are sacrificing your self-care.

It didn't mean that after that one week exercise, everyone stopped doing it. We allowed, again, them that flexibility. Some people really wanted to be reflective in the evenings and think about things, and they felt like responding during the school day wasn't allowing that. But it also gave them that kind of gift of it's okay for us to build a lot of this work into the school day.

Angela: Yes. It lets you explore what it's like to experience and the emotions that come up with not answering that email. There's a lot of discomfort. There's a lot of urges to get on that email because you have the belief that I've got to respond. I have to be available 24/7 in order for my school to be successful and in order for people to think I'm a great leader. That's such a fun exercise.

Like don't answer your email at night for a week. I should do that with my clients. But to have that experience and then make the decision for yourself. Does this work for me or does it not? Is this something I want to implement? I love that idea with the leaders, but also with the teachers. Like playing around with what would it look like to do it this way or to try it that way, feel that out, and then make decisions about what's best for your team and your students.

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Katie: I love that lens for everything. We talk a lot about technical and adaptive change, which is from the work of Hafez, but I think it's such a powerful lens. I like to think of it as an iceberg. Where a lot of the times when we talk about well what are the barriers we're facing, it's really easy to point your fingers to say we don't have a great process for looking at data. We don't have an evidence based process for looking at PLCs.

A lot of the times those kind of technical pieces are absolutely necessary, but they're not sufficient. So it's not to say that we don't have kind of shared norms for what our meetings look like or how we look at data or things like that. But it's that we really say like if this isn't effective for us and the evidence base suggests that it does have an impact on learners, then we really have to have difficult conversations. Potentially, why is it not working here?

I've been doing a lot of work recently. I love analogies. I'm always talking about analogies. One of my girlfriends was selling this like new lotion, and it was like guaranteed to make my skin glow. She was like you have to try this, Katie, it is amazing. So I'm like heck yeah, I'm all in.

So she sent me a bottle of this lotion, and tells me all of these clinical studies. 100% of people have brighter skin after eight weeks. So I'm like I'm all in, right? So much of our work is the evidence base. Not that it's a guarantee, but it's a really good place to start. We know that it's worked previously if you honor the methodology.

So it's such a great example because she sent me the lotion or that serum, and I'd put it on every day for eight weeks. Then she's like, "So, do you want to buy one for yourself now?" I'm like absolutely not. It didn't work. She's like, "What are you talking about it didn't work?" I said it didn't work. I put it on my face every single day. She goes, "Did you use it like you were supposed to?"

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I'm like backup. I mean, how hard is it to put serum on your face every day. Right? She's like, "Read the bottle." It's like wash your face with cleanser, tone it using a toner, put on your first serum, then put on the brightening serum, then put on the finishing spray, then put on. I was like oh my gosh. I was like I don't have time for this. I splashed a little bit of water, I do a little bit of sunscreen, I put on the serum. She goes, "Then you can't say the serum doesn't work."

I loved that. I've like used it in so many of my presentations recently that a lot of the times, we know that a really, really strong, inclusive, professional learning community that asks those questions about like what do we want from kids? How do we design really, really flexible, deeper learning assessments to measure that mastery? Then what are we going to do differently to target student growth and students' sense of belonging?

Then we're like well, we have the protocol, and the PLCs don't work. It's like, but are we really aligning to that research base? Do we really trust each other to co-plan? Do we have coaches who are willing to address when maybe we're not having the right conversations or the most asset based conversations?

I think that leaders have a tremendous role in helping people understand this is not something that we're going to continue with if it's not leading us towards our vision. But this research base and this evidence base gives us a pretty good idea of where to start. If we don't honor that with some sort of consistency and integrity and accuracy then we can't say whether or not it was effective here. I just love that as a lens for leaders. I found it myself, like let's just try it and see what the impact is before we jump and say I'm not using this lotion anymore, right?

Kristan: So, Katie, I stopped using the F word, fidelity. I started using the I word, which is doing it with integrity. There's been this shift in our thinking.

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This is not an original thought or shift in language of mine, but it's a really important distinction for our staff that fidelity feels very much like accountability. Integrity feels very much like a form of collective agency.

So these are the practices that we think are really important and valuable that should be in all of our classes. We are going to implement those with integrity. What does that look like? Making sure that what would I always say is the rain needs to hit the ground.

So if I walk into any classroom or any instructional space within that organization, that those things that we find precious around access and around quality of instruction exist no matter the room in which I visit. That's when that rain hits the ground. Sometimes it's just stuck on the heads of a small group of folks. It doesn't ever make its way into all of the classrooms.

So I think it's really, it's really fun exercise that that I've started to go through and say okay, what does it mean when we say implement this approach with fidelity versus what does it mean to say implement this approach with integrity?

Angela: That's so good because it sounds like it's an external motivator versus an internal motivator when you shift that language around.

Katie: Kristan just as you're talking, it's making me think too of when we started off with that. We're operationalizing this vision, right? So like if you're going to say one thing that's really important to us is student collaboration, right? What does it look like if students are collaborating, right? Like, how often, what does that look like? What's the integrity?

But certainly, a think, pair, share once a week in one class is not the same as a true community where kids are choosing to work with diverse partners, creating their own norms, creating their group roles, asking teacher

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facilitation. Those are two very, very different things, even though both of them we could say are collaboration techniques.

I think that that idea of saying like what does it look like? Brené Brown says paint done for me. So when there's truly a community in the classroom, what does it look like? What are we doing? Then even like cocreating like this is what we want. This is what we're going to give it a try to determine whether or not that fits with our vision, fits with our community. But again, that takes time to really unpack those things.

Kristan: I always harken back to an image that when we talk about that lens of implementation. So we're all committed to this work. We've done our planning. We are now kind of stepping into implementation. It's not as good as Katie's analogies because she might be one of the best analogy creators in the universe, but it is one that I like. Which is this image of a helicopter, and it's got a leash, and it's walking the dog.

Yes, it can walk the dog, but is it as effective as somebody that's walking beside the dog leading the dog? Is it able to interact in authentic ways? Is it able to guide around certain physical barriers, maybe, that the dog is presenting that when you're up high leading from that distance, you're not able to do. Even though conceptually, they're both maneuvering the dog through the outcomes. One is very much a partner in this work as leaders. I think that that's really important.

I also think that we need to show our vulnerability as leaders, right. So that work is not going to be perfect. We're going to stumble. It's okay to articulate when that happens. So that when they are going through those measures of growth, that they recognize that it's okay to do that. It's just a matter of persevering through and basing that initial work on evidence based practice.

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So we don't want to throw spaghetti at the wall and hope it sticks. We want to really be thoughtful about what are our needs, put those practices into place that are evidence based, and then go through a cycle of integrity to see what we need to adjust along the way.

Angela: That's so good because so many school leaders feel like the only option is to throw the spaghetti onto the wall and just see what sticks because they lack systems. It may be because the district lacks systems. So you get a school leader into a site, and they see the need for systems and to operationalize the functionality of their school. They just either don't know where to start, or the district hasn't given them any direction.

So they're trying to take a district vision and their site vision and align the two. They're trying to like, with integrity, honor that district vision, but without direction aligned to their vision of what they see their school needing and how to systematize that. They feel like sometimes that is in conflict only because they have nothing giving them direction.

Which it sounds like where you come in and what your services offer. So can you just talk a little bit about what you offer? What types of services would a school or a district reach out to you and, Kristan, Katie, for both of you, what do you offer to the schools?

Katie: So we do completely complementary work, but a little bit of different work. I think that kind of speaks to why we were great partners together leading a district as Kristan was the superintendent. I was an assistant superintendent for years.

So generally, my focus is really understanding how instruction is going to shift. So really helping people understand what does the universally designed classroom look like? Helping them really think about what are

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some of the barriers that are preventing really deep instruction, whether that's mindset, skillset, or these systems shifts.

So a lot of the work that I do is really focused on that instructional piece,. How do we model really great universally designed, culturally responsive, trauma informed practices as leaders? How do we really think about what it is that all of our educators really need to know and do? Like a scope and sequence for adults, if you will. So really helping to nail down those firm goals for how do we really articulate what adults need to do in this system? What's preventing them from doing that? Then really listening to them to think about like what is it that you need to be able to move in this direction?

So I think that a lot of the times, we're talking about what needs to happen to teachers and not, as Kristan's saying are we listening to teachers saying you are working really, really hard, and it has to be frustrating to not have better results given how hard you're working. So how do we shift the way that we think about that systems work?

When I work with systems, I'm generally focusing on like what is a multi-tiered system of support? What does it mean to be really inclusive? What is universally designed for Learning? Helping people understand how to do that in a more concrete way.

Because Kristan, I'm telling you, there's no one better with really going through that needs assessment process, that turning it into strategic concrete action steps. If you need an accountability partner, that's her. She's mine. She can be everybody's.

So Kristan, you can talk about the work that you do, which is a little bit more like the planning piece that's just so brilliant that like is really about how do we know what is working? How do we keep moving in that direction? When we are not seeing a demonstration of impact, like we have

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to make those rapid cycles of improvement because this kid only has one year in third grade.

Kristan: Absolutely. I think it is why we have fun together when we work because Katie and her team is so grounded in the instructional core. It's so important that that gets honored in the work that we do in systems. That complements the work that we do, which is around looking at what those systems entail, what levers and drivers do we need to pull around things like schedules and staff and high quality instructional materials and leadership and stakeholder engagement and planning, thoughtful planning that's based around data.

So what kinds of ways do we look at assessments as a means to inform not only the supports and services we provide to our students, but also the efficacy of our systems in meeting the needs of all of those learners. When we talk about data, we're not just talking about academic data indicators that might be normed. Those are huge. Those are important.

But also student voice needs to be participation as a data point within this observations, within those classrooms of what's happening on a daily basis. Those are important data points as well that we consider. So that's what we get to do every day. It's super fun.

Work with school districts and systems and saying what are those evidence based practices around creating tiered systems of support in a coherent way for all leaders and all learners? All educators around multilingual learners, students with disabilities, students of color? So how are we making sure that we're creating systems that work for all.

Katie really getting in there around that concept of instructional core. Which we know when we look at the data on the impact on students, that's where the rubber meets the road, right? Within that classroom, within that

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instructor, effective instruction can overcome any systemic barrier that might be placed in the way of that child.

However, why do we have to make it so challenging? We don't. We can remove those systemic barriers for our students and for our staff. So they don't have to overcome them. That we are proactive in nature so that we do not have to have a teacher or student or parent advocate for support and services by requesting a special education referral because that's the only game in town.

We do not want our kids to fail before we provide support to them. We do not want to be focused on remediation. We want to be focused on grade level support, inclusive instruction, inclusion, acceleration. These are the things that we know are more effective and proactive in nature. So that's the goodies that we get to do on a regular basis with our pals across the globe.

Angela: That sounds like a dream come true. I think for school leaders, actually, I think the three of us what we're doing, I'm doing that mindset work at an individual level. Katie's doing it with teams. You're doing it with entire systems. Like what a dream team coming your way empowered principals out there listening.

So let me ask you one final question. If there was one nugget of valuable information that you could give the listeners like right here, right now, what is one thing, something tangible, something doable, that they could walk away with after listening to this conversation? What's something they could do that would help them start this process or even begin to have conversations around building up systems, such as what we've been talking about today?

Katie: Kristan, you go first.

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Kristan: Sure, thanks. So there's a couple of resources and tools that are available out there that will help them do a self-assessment. One of the materials or resources from our book comes with a correlated self-assessment within that book that looks across three main areas of support. That being around leadership, that being around instructional design, and around systems and structures.

So it creates a landing place for them to look within their organization so it doesn't feel like they're looking at everything in the world. I always say do three things. Do a document review. What does your school schedule show? What does it show that it cares about? What does it show it illustrates? What does your calendar show? What does your policy manual show, right?

That's your document view, your data review. Again, looking at what your student voice is telling you. What is the academic outcomes telling you, what is your community telling you? Really aligning that with the review of evidence based practices. What should we be doing out there to meet the needs of all learners?

That kind of combination will give them a starting point. So what should we be looking at. Then do that internal review first, I think, is really important so that, we talked about that analogy, again, of the spaghetti, right? So we're not just throwing things willy nilly. That we're really thinking about okay, we're doing this well.

Then I always say defend the heck out of it. So if you give yourself a rating as fully implemented, show me. Link things in to that self-assessment that illustrate that you have inclusive policies and practices.

I think more than anything, it's like begin with the mindset that this is not easy work. If it was, we would have done it, all of us perfectly. We are all

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imperfect. So we were all growing. So we have to do it together. Take off your cape, get a good team. You do not have to be a superhero here.

Bring a good group of people within your organization together. Bring in a coach like Angela who's working with you on an ongoing basis so you feel that you are partnered with or within your organization, and start to look at those systems in very concrete ways. Identify things you want to work on and build that into your school improvement plans.

Angela: Yeah. We will add any links or resources that you have available for the listeners, we can add that in the show notes. I just want to say that explicitly. If you're listening, any resources that Kristan and Katie have available, we'll make sure that we put their website, their contact information in the show notes so that you can directly connect up with them and their work. So Katie, I just want to ask you the same question. What would you like to offer? Like, what's something that leaders can walk away with right now?

Katie: So Kristan and I always do this really good zoom in, zoom out kind of lens, right? It's like you have to recognize that you're only as strong as kind of the, I don't want to use the word weakest, but the most compromised part of your system. Like, where are your barriers? Any barrier anywhere kind of impacts us all because there's such an interconnectedness and there's so much coherence in the work.

But zooming in, thinking about leaders coming back to school. I think one thing that can go a really long way. I love the TED Talk by Rita Pierson. It's probably one of the most famous education TED Talks of all time. She basically says like kids don't learn from teachers they don't like.

Just to kind of step and straddle that and say I work a lot harder for leaders who I really liked and respected and who took the time to get to know me,

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just like my teachers. I think that one thing that can really, really make a difference is if you're a leader and you're listening. Have your leadership team divide and conquer every staff member in your building, cafeteria, bus drivers, and custodians, para educators, educators, and give them 15 minutes of undivided attention in the first six weeks of school. Just ask them how their summer was and what motivates them.

One of the greatest talks of all time, which I still remember as a teacher, is I had a principal once, and they had a meeting with all of us. I was like oh, are you interested in my goals? He's like, "No. Just why did you become a teacher? What's the best part about this work? What is kind of a struggle. like anything you struggled with last year? If you had this magic ball and like you could get support from the system, what do you feel like would be really valuable?"

It was just this amazing conversation. It ended with this like really awkward and what's your favorite morning beverage? I'm like what the what? That's what a weird question to end, right? It's like, "No seriously. Specifically, I always asked that question." So I was like whatever. I answered it.

Like four or five months later, after like a very difficult parent meeting that we had. The next morning I came in, and there was like a handwritten card and that exact beverage. I ran down there. I'm like oh my gosh. He's like, "Oh, as soon as everybody left, I always write it down. I commit to if I know that person is struggling or if that person did like a really amazing job, like I always wanted to just go in there."

So I think that taking time to realize that we not only are serving people's babies, but we are expecting people to serve, who also, you know, are somebody's baby. The more that we can find the humanity in that work and just like the reminder of why you're here.

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We usually start off with like here's the nuts and bolts. Here's the locker combination. Here you get your paycheck, but it's like how do you start your morning? What makes you want to stay in education? What do you really wish you could fix? Then use that voice as Kristan said, as a part of your own kind of needs assessment so that you have a better idea of where to start.

Angela: Exactly. What a beautiful way to end. I think that is so, both of your ideas were so tangible. I think a leader could go out tomorrow and have those conversations and be thinking about and looking, just walking the campus. What systems are working? What's not? What do I think's the one next best step versus thinking they need to like be the helicopter walking the dog, right?

Like, they don't need to be up here trying to solve all of the problems. They can come down, meet with the individual on an individual level, and take things one day at a time, one step at a time. That is how systems are created.

I think it sounds like your approach just feels so authentic, and it feels so approachable. It just seems like what all school leaders out there need to ground themselves to know that they're not alone. They're not having to solve the world's problems in education. That there are resources available to you that can help you.

It's okay to ask for the help. It's okay to not know everything. That bringing in whether it's a coach or mentors or consultants, or, and I'm assuming you guys do some level of PD. It sounds like that is a part of your work and repertoire. Which I do as well, but I focus on the individual. Bringing somebody in who can help you can be a game changer for your school, and it's okay to ask for that help.

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Kristan: One of the things that I think we both pride ourselves on because, again, we collaborate on many, many projects is having a menu of professional learning options and opportunities. So whether it's Katie's coursework, which are self-directed or guided or directed or graduate courses, or on-site technical assistance, or curriculum design and development, facilitated PLCs, graduate courses, workshop series, book studies. We do all of these things.

The reason we do is because we want to offer options and choices for our staff similar that we offer and ask them to offer within their classrooms for students. So I think it's really important that we, as an organization or set of organizations, model that practice along with the kinds of coaching that you're doing individually with them or department wise that we will do.

Again, coming in and going in and doing the beginning needs assessment and writing a report of findings is the start to the work. It doesn't end the work. I think that's really important to us that our organizations are not just there to identify where we want to work, but to be partners along that continuum of work.

I think I get most excited when we're working with clients that we've had for a couple of years. They're seeing those systems have significant impacts. They've started to put the staff into place that need to go where they need to put in place. We just celebrate. We laugh sometimes.

I had an administrator tell me the day, "Remember the first day we met, I cried." I was like I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry you cried. She's like, "I was so overwhelmed." She was so proud. She was crying with tears of joy this time, right? So no, I don't want to have a tears of sadness. But sometimes it's hard. It can feel overwhelming to do systems change.

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So that's what I love about our organizations is that we don't just like drop and leave. Like, oh sorry, here it is. We really get to go on that journey with them, I think similar to what you do. It's exciting stuff.

Angela: Yeah, it's great stuff. I always tell people like your success is compounded. So it's one step at a time. That day one, there are tears of overwhelm and frustration and confusion. We come in and help you dismantle the overwhelm one step at a time. You don't have to create change.

You don't create a system overnight. You just put in the building blocks foundationally one system step at a time until you have this result. It happens over the course of time. So you don't even realize sometimes that it's up and functioning until you come in and do those checkpoints and say like look where we were and look where we're at now. Look what we were thinking back then and how we were feeling, and look at how we're thinking and feeling now. Two totally different spaces. Then how do we leverage that momentum for the next step?

Katie: I love it. What I was going to say what I was going to say is we are like a very powerful trifecta. That is a little horse racing term. Just because, again, like Kristan and I generally work together because she is an amazing partner in that. Like that strategy work, that planning, that like really like trying to get to root causes, logic models. I often go in and do more of the leadership, professional learning, ongoing professional learning, and maybe classroom observations. Then you go in as like oh, like the follow up from individual perspectives of coaching.

It's just like almost 20 years ago, I was very early on the online dating. So my husband and I had been together for almost 20 years. We met on Match.com. Which 20 years ago, you didn't admit that, but now it's totally

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cool. But like we met via email 20 years ago, and it was a match made in heaven. We met via email, and look at this. Just a match in heaven. Yeah.

Angela: Exactly.

Katie: More acceptable now than it was 20 years ago, but still as powerful.

Angela: Digital's the way, right. That's so good. No, I think you'll be hearing more of us empowered principals. I am so happy that Kristan and Katie took the time out of their busy schedules to join us. I look forward to more conversations about how we can help school leaders.

Because really, at the end of the day, all of our hearts are in the right space, which is how do we help leaders help teachers help students help communities? That's what this works about. That's the ripple effect. We all have our take on how that works, but I think together in combination is where the sweet spot is. So thank you guys for taking time to be on the podcast.

Katie: Thanks for having us.

Kristan: So excited to have a new work bestie along with us. Thanks, Angela, for having us.

Angela: Yeah, you're so welcome. Thank you guys. To my empowered principals out there, take good care. Have an amazing week, and we'll talk to you guys next week. Bye.

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