



Ep. 11: The Relationship Between Teachers and Administrators

Transcript

Angie: Welcome to another episode of *aka Teacher*! Daniel, Joanna, It's supposed to be spring break, but there's like 10 inches of snow on the ground right now.
[laughs]

Joanna: Yeah. But we made it, you know, my teaching partner and I kept saying like, "Dang, we made it this far." And we've actually got the calendar on the wall for the rest of the year. We have these huge calendars and we really just have April, May, and then we wrote in a little bit of June. So there's just two.

Angie: I enjoy it when you can physically really quantify things with a calendar on the board. Like there there is spring break, like there's the next PD day that's off. Like there's just something satisfying about being able to see the calendar.
[laughs]

Daniel: Yeah. And I have two young kids and so we're embracing winter again. We were really excited about the spring, but it's just so easy. Get the snow pants back out and, and get out in the snow. But I find myself earlier this year, much earlier this year, just being ready to be done with the snow, just ready to, to move on. And it's too early. So I need to, to somehow get over that because otherwise the next month, month and a half is, might be kind of miserable.

Angie: Yeah. This, I really feel March is a long month for I think educators in general, especially because things like section numbers for next year are coming out and planning is starting to shift away from like the end of the school year to

maybe summer, but yet we're still here in this present moment. And so it's kind of tricky to live in two spaces at the same time.

Angie: Yeah. Yeah. Daniel, how are things going in your neck of the woods?

Daniel: I had a really, it was a treat opportunity. I was part of an event called the Madison Citywide Project Soapbox Event.

Joanna: Oh! I read about that!

Daniel: More students from all over, all over Madison wrote and, and delivered speeches around issues that they cared about. And it was, I was just on a high from listening to students, seeing these students who didn't know each other come together. And it was such a supportive atmosphere. This was supported through the Mikva challenge, as the organization who does these soapbox project soapboxes around the country. And they just helped to create a very supportive, inclusive space. These students were having lunch together, like they had known each other for years, and they're hoot, hooting and hollering for each other's speeches. And it was just the energy all day was incredible. And the speeches were amazing. And it was just a moment to stop and listen to students and be inspired.

Joanna: Isn't it beautiful what they can, what they can teach us. They're telling us Absolutely. They're telling us what is important to them and what they need. Let's get serious about delivering.

[music and Daniel makes a call for questions/stories]

Daniel: And so maybe we can transition and start talking about, you know, what,

how do we build trusting relationships between teachers and administrators and what are some of the pain points in, in developing that trust? Joanna, you were starting to talk about this earlier, so let's open it up.

Joanna: Well, as I was preparing for this show, I was, of course, I'm always thinking about this. So it's weird cuz I kinda run in two worlds, right? It's the world of my day-to-day and, and what I'm doing. But then I do actually do some podcasting and publishing on my own about this issue in terms of how can teachers be better supported. And so when I think about our topic about teachers and admin. I mean, I can go big, but I'll also bring some details. I think it is really, what has been challenging and has become more challenging is to have a healthy relationship in an unhealthy setup.

Joanna: When you think of a hierarchy, it's an unhealthy setup, especially in something like education, where we all are professionals, we all play an important role. And I don't think one is above the other, right? Like, we do need what Daniel's doing and what you're doing, Angie, and we, and the principal, and the superintendent. And I think we have all these equitable roles, but then it's put into a system that's not. And so some of the work that I do, and when I think about that is about how do we change it? How do we make that more circular?

Angie: Yeah. I think when, when we go to the beginning of kind of the relationship building, it is establishing opportunities for trust building as well. Because sometimes I feel as though you, as a teacher, we really have to go out of our way to build relationships with our administrators that go beyond maybe just a very linear professional relationship. I've gotta make a point to ask you about how your weekend's going. I'm gonna make a point to share with you about my kids. I'm, I'm going to swing by and say good morning. And those actions for me always are the groundwork for positive relationships with my administrators. But I have to be really intentional about that work.

Joanna: I was just saying, "Who has time for that?" Where you got this time? Yeah, I don't got time to be friendly with people.

Angie: Right? [laughs] I mean, I intentionally set time to do that. And it's mainly because I'm an extrovert who feeds off those interactions. Like I, yeah, it energizes me to do that. But I know that's not true for a lot of my colleagues and so I empathize with them who are like, "Oh yeah, cool. Must be fun to make, get early, you know, to find time to say hi to every principal." or "Oh, must be nice to enjoy being like that outgoing" you know?

Joanna: Well, and what I've found is that over the years as the job has gotten more intense, I literally don't have the time. I'm, I'm not kidding. You know, being like, there is a certain part where when you, when you have some more time and some more freedom where you can go establish relationships or politic, whatever you wanna call it. And as things in my program just kept getting taken away, I can only prioritize my students. Like that is what I'm there for. And so, and then, you know, you and I both work in high schools. I think too, I actually feel bad for the principal in terms of like, you have a large staff, how can they be responsible for like, knowing everybody?

Daniel: Yeah. And it's when you have something that large, I'm even thinking of the district, when you have a large district, and that's kind of what I see right now too. It's just how do you just even know anybody you know you need. Something taken care of and oh, who does, what's, what process does this go to? Who needs to sign this? Who needs to approve it? And when there's just so many people, it's just focused on that. We just have the time to get those done.

Angie: And especially with turnaround too, like with staff turnaround—

Daniel: I was just thinking the same, the same thing and how hard it is at all levels.

I mean, one reason teachers are strapped for time is cuz they're covering left and right some, like on a daily basis. And so forget about preps, you know, having limited time before and now you literally have no time in the day. And I know at least, you know, it's happening at the district level as well. People are being called in to sub in schools because not just of staffing shortages, but of sub shortages as well. And then there's no coverage. so there's this, this hierarchy, this structure, Joanna, that you talked about, right. That is used, this unhealthy, this unhealthy setup that isn't even working because people are being called in to cover. And so teachers can't fully do their jobs. I know principals are coming in to cover, you know, SEAs like everybody's covering for everybody. And people also at the district level are being called into schools for that coverage as well. And it's blocking up those systems. So however backwards or unhealthy you think it is, like, I mean it's, it's not even well, and so the question, it's not even functioning.

Joanna: Right? How, the question then is how do we create a healthy setup? Like we can acknowledge.

Daniel: That and then maybe now's the time if it's not even working properly and it's unhealthy ways, it's the perfect opportunity to change it up. Yeah. Right?

Joanna: Yep.

Angie: For me though, if I was going to give an administrator, a new administrator advice, as a teacher who's been teaching for just 15 years, I would say it's making themselves available too. And not only available, but visible because we spend a lot of time wondering, "Well what is, what is going on at the district office or what is going on at the administrative, like corner of the building?" And when they make themselves visible, you just learn more. And that learning allows for that relationship building opportunity that I just think when we're in our own corners of the district or of a building, we lose each other and then we don't, we can't

connect like the way we need to.

Joanna: Well, and those overarching, you know, kind of the, the federal, the federal changes is what, like in the history of my teaching, I saw really change things. So when I first started teaching teachers were autonomous and I remember ha enjoying really positive relationships with my principals and them really having a mindset of what can I do to, what can I do to help you? You know, I do remember that like popping in the door and being like, "Hey, how's it going in here? Is there anything you need? Is there any way I can support you? Your chairs look old, do you think I should order you some new ones?" So that's how it started. Then NCLB came on the scene and that really was when we got test-centered and test-centric. And then, and I noticed this, and I may have mentioned this before in here, I can't remember, then I noticed it was no longer from leadership being like, "What can I do for you?" It became, "Here's what I need you to do for me. Here's what I need from you."

Angie: Yeah.

Joanna: And that has really changed things, especially then now when as a teacher, I know myself and my colleagues, cuz we've just been through all this, we can't imagine someone needing more from us. Our kids need a ton. And so, um, I've, I've just watched that and so I hope we can cycle back into this real service, you know, and, and, and leaders as serving us and supporting us instead of looking to us to like serve the data points that they need.

Daniel: Do you think school administrators primarily in that servant leader role serve teachers? I'm also thinking students, families, you know, of course there's, there's a piece of of serving the whole school community, but is, and maybe that that's, that's not even the right thing to try to prioritize it, but if you, if it seems like you were going to teachers as the primary group that a school administrator is

there to serve, I'm curious, curious what you think.

Joanna: Well...

Angie: Well there's definitely a hierarchy. I mean, we've got a principal and then we have associate principals and then we have deans. And so these different groups kind of for us fall into different support roles. Our principal, she's kind of like the liaison to the parents and she's living in all the worlds, but our associate principals really are, you know, supervising the teachers. So I would say that their role is more of service to teachers in that middle group. And then we have deans who are more of a service to our students. So we, maybe it depends on the hierarchy of the district.

Joanna: Well, and I was talking too that I, I think it, it changed when it was like what we measure changes, you know? And so I watched it shift from—

Angie: Yeah. yeah.

Joanna: Them, you know, where, where it was clear that their role was supporting the work of the professionals in school to then their work became something, you know, different in terms of the data they had to collect and how things were measured. I would like to see more, less turnover in administration where I've been, there's, there has been high turnover in administration. So, that's something...

Angie: That's hard because then you have to like reprove yourself, reprove your program...

Joanna: Yeah. That's why I'm in the battle every day.

Angie: ... establish yourself. And you never, I feel like then you never, you have trouble getting closer to your authentic self because you're still trying to establish like a really good, I am really good at this and I do work really hard. I'm also just kind of goofy some, you know, sometimes trying to find this balance.

Joanna: I remember—

Daniel: Yeah, that's a good point. I think Go ahead, Joanna.

Joanna: I was just gonna say, I remember years ago when I was getting my administrative license, you know, so I did the coursework or whatever and was in classes actually in Middleton over there by you. And I just remember always thinking, "Okay, so what it takes to be a good administrator is the same thing it takes to be a good teacher." Like, that was just so clear to me, you know what I mean? Where it was like, you have to have good relationships, you have to have good rapport. You've gotta be able to like adapt and flex for who you're talking with. You've gotta be able to adapt and flex every school year. And so I have hope in that, that if we all get back to that, like why we're all here, it, it is very much the same and rooted in the same things. Yeah. I think it's the same skillset you need to be a strong teacher.

Angie: Yeah.

Daniel: Yeah. We started talking about policy a little bit earlier and policy change. And so I wanna come back to policy and kind of talk about, you know, where, who and what drives policy. Whether like what currently happens now or what would we hope, what would be, what would the ideal state be and what does teacher agency look like within that, driving policy change?

Joanna: It's driven by corporate interests right now and has been, you know, so

it's hard. And that's back to the admin that was part of that is part of my resentments of being like, okay, all this bad stuff came down the pike and nobody questioned it. I can remember being in professional development and this is the type of stuff I do. And then looking at whatever was being presented to us and then looking up that company and then looking up who's on their board of directors and often finding that the board of directors on many of these companies were people who are actually interested in privatization of education. And I'm like, okay. And so here we are as a public entity giving, cuz I, trust me, me and my union, we do open records requests. These contracts are not small. And I'm like, we give large amounts of our money to, to interests that actually aren't like supporting us. And, and I don't think that's known, but here I am, little teacher in the crowd being like, "What? Why? Why?" And so when I think about your bigger question, Daniel, about policy, you know, the uncomfortable truth is that, you know, when we're talking again really at the federal level, you know where some of that comes from, And we see that in many things right now that it really is political in nature. And, and I don't like to have a political bent to my work. Like I don't think teaching, I, you know, teaching is teaching [laughs].

And so I think about that and I think about how it varies from state to state, you know, what the profession looks like, what funding for students looks like. so those bigger pieces, you know, are very far away from us.

Angie: Well, I, for, for my personal scenarios and experiences, it's been all over the board. There have been opportunities where we as a staff have had autonomy about what we teach, how we teach it. We've, we have a ton of autonomy when it came to, "Hey, we gotta make up some school days." "Okay, these are, these are the days we're gonna lose our PD days for the rest of the year." "Okay. What are, what are those days gonna look like?" And so we do get a say in some of those things, um, but they're very day to day.

Daniel: Yeah. Yeah. Well, earlier we were talking about, well, how do we change it? You know, it sounds like a similar shift if being an administrator, what it takes to be an effective administrator is the same thing it takes to be an effective teacher. And it comes down to these relationships and trusting relationships that maybe there's a similar shift in, in what's happening in classrooms where teachers did feel like they had to make all of the decisions and show up completely prepared and not involve students, you know, and not to have a say of how the desks were set up or what the room looked like or what the curriculum looked like, and not to respond to their needs or their interests or anything like that. And, you know, a shift over time towards student-centered classrooms and responsive teaching and you know, co-creating curriculum with students and experiences and asking for their feedback and being open to changing your practices as a teacher. and I'm sure you've heard of, you know, teacher, so what does it, the teacher-centered school look like? And you've probably heard of "Teacher-Powered Schools." Yeah, I'm sure it has different names. But maybe the shift is there and there are places who, that are making that shift to saying, you know, it's not saying we don't need administrators, you know, but we can work together, and really create more flat, more democratic structures, um, and really make sure that we are involving teachers in these school-wide decisions.

Joanna: Yeah. It's time to, to develop true partnerships and to, to look at everything differently to right size. You know, people talk about, you know, again, with this budget cut process, it was kind of, there was talk about like, "How do we right size the district?" And I thought, "Yeah, how do we right size our work as well?" You know what I mean? Because again, it's always looked at very externally, but I'm like, let's rightsize our work as well. And the only way that can really be done is in partnership with us. It always say like, I was talking with my superintendent, I'm like, "Aren't you guys curious about what we're out here discovering?" Cuz I feel like I'm discovering stuff. This is a new situation and yeah. "Are you guys curious about what we're discovering?" Because I'm making a lot of

great discoveries about how to combat chronic absenteeism, how to reduce and eliminate office intervention that's coming. You know, that's, that's coming from the ground because we're, we're here, we're doing it, we're noticing. And so yeah, it sure would be a beautiful time to kind of like pause and, we've been running, we've been dog tired, let's stop and be like, okay, what are we discovering and how can we use that to work in partnership and really help one another and really get this thing into a healthy place, you know, to do what, what we're all really here to do and, and what is so needed.

Daniel: What do you think some of the elements of that true partnership look like?

Angie: Uhhhh

Daniel: I can, I mean, I can give an example. Yeah. It's something that comes to mind for me is in my last year as a school administrator, we couldn't hire a tech teacher. And so I stepped in to fill the role and couldn't fill it across the whole school because of scheduling and time commitments and, and having a role as the education director. But I did maintain being the tech teacher for our middle school program throughout the entire year. And it was a huge, huge sacrifice. Basically one of my full days was dedicated towards teaching.

And of course as a former teacher, I loved it. I got to know the kids and interact with them, and we had a great time. And at the same time, it took away from my other job. So it felt like it was in tension the whole time and in conflict with my primary role. But to think if that were the setup to begin with, if it was part administrator, part teacher, you have that relationship with students, you have that perspective in the classroom, there were a ton of positives to that structure. And had it only been the expectation from the beginning and I wouldn't have felt a tension with it because oh, that just would've been the way it was. So that could be something where, you know, um, the, the roles could actually shift to, to, to

blend a little bit more to say, we share this load together.

Joanna: I like it. For me, it's just I hear that from other teachers

Angie: Yeah, for me it's just intentional relationship building that does have to happen from a proximity standpoint. It's making yourself available. It's making yourself visible. It's checking in to see what is going on in our classroom spaces, what is making this a magical space to learn. And with that intentionality of connection, I think that then comes the trust. And so being available, being, being seen, I think that's what makes it doable in a school.

Angie: Today's "Pass the Mic" is from Janelle from Racine. "I know it's important to communicate with parents, but I'm wondering what things you're doing to help create positive connections with parents and families. Are there any methods in particular where you've seen a positive impact on the student and their learning?" What do you guys think?

Joanna: Well, I have just vivid memories of how working with parents has changed again over my career. You know, at the beginning of my career I found it more difficult, you know, and I think just my own insecurities led me to believe that parents were like, questioning me, you know, or I didn't feel as confident. Whereas I always say it takes about 10 years. After 10 years, then I felt really confident about like, "Oh my gosh, I'm just gonna pick up the phone." And kind of, yeah, worked from the mentality of like, "If this was my child, what would I wanna know?" to now where I just really trust parents and I, I ask them to trust me and I trust them. And I think saying that has really helped me have a good relationship with parents. I like to ask them about their child, you know, more than me tell them about their own child. I like to ask them, [laughs], what, what I might know about, you know, what's important for me to know about their child. And so my relationship with parents, again, we keep talking about it, is very, is very relational.

I just think it's important to be open and to always assume good intent. I believe that my parents are doing the best they can with the understanding and knowledge that they have. And I go into it assuming that they really are my equal partner.

Daniel: Yeah. I really appreciated Janelle's question because of the connection she's making between parent engagement and student learning. It made me reflect on the fact that I've always thought about parent engagement for the sake of parent engagement. How can we, you know, increase the amount of attendees at a certain event? You know, how can this communication home better serve the parent, right? And inform them. So for the goal of informing parents, how can we get better at that? And so parent engagement strategies for the sake of improving parent engagement. But of course, everything, you know, comes back to student learning. And so I actually came up empty when I was thinking about have I ever intentionally thought about those strategies of bringing in parents and trying to find the connections between an improvement in student learning. And I, I haven't.

And so I started googling stuff, I turned to research. You know, literally just, you know, parent engagement strategies that boost student learning. And, found myself not necessarily coming across a bunch of strategies, but, but research that, that did back this connection and say, to say that parent engagement does have a huge impact on student learning, but not necessarily what you might think are certainly different from, from what I thought. And it's not necessarily more students or more parents or caregivers at an event or showing up to school more, or engaging in more opportunities. But things like how they talk about school at home, right? So they could show up to every event they want, but if they're badmouthing the school at home or in, you know, emphasizing fixed mindset at home or you know, reinforcing things or maybe counter to what the school is, is trying to do, then that's mixed messages for the student and it can impact their learning.

And so, I ended up kind of finding this, this research, it came from communities and schools and it was talking about a couple of things and I had to write it down. Cause again, it's not coming from me. I needed to turn to research to find this connection. And of course it comes down to focusing on relationships. That was number one, that for families, for parents to talk positively about school at home, they need to feel like they belong in the school. They need to feel like they belong in every conversation you have with them. And so, focusing on the strategy here would be focus on the quality, not quantity of interactions and engagement with parents. And so even if it's email, even if it's an informal conversation before or after school, like, be as present as you can to, to really focus on the quality of that interaction, to build trust, to build a sense of belonging.

And then the other one that stood out for me was to, the research suggested to encourage parent child interaction at home and within the community. And so keep an eye on like community organizations or events to get involved with activities and send those out, whether it's through like a school newsletter or even through maybe a classroom newsletter to encourage parents or caregivers and their children to engage in community events, not even school events. But just to go out, that, that has also improved student outcomes within the school. So things that, you know, that second one isn't even about engaging parents in the school, but when you start to make this connection between what actually improves student learning, it comes up through research. So it was a great rabbit hole to go down. And, and so Janelle, I'm appreciative of the question.

Angie: Yeah. You know, I think that you're hitting the nail on the head for this whole episode, which is relationships. And every time we have a relationship opportunity, we get to have more like energy around assuming positive intentions. We all want the students to succeed. We all agree that this child deserves an education. How are we gonna make this learning environment the best it can be for that kid? The parents deserve to be in on that. And when we make it feel to

them like we want to hear their opinion, I think it makes them want to encourage it further. And so for me, it's as simple as the emails home to the families. But I'm just making sure some families get to celebrate their kid. I think it makes everybody feel good. It makes me feel good, especially if I'm having a crummy week.

Daniel: Thank you everyone for tuning in to today's episode. As always, pre-service and early career teachers, we'd love to hear your questions about any aspect of working in education. Veteran teachers: We'd love to hear from you too. Stories from your experiences in education and questions are always welcome. Record a voice memo or type it up and send it to education@pbswisconsin.org. And make sure you put "aka Teacher" in the subject line. We also invite you to visit the [aka Teacher podcast website](#) to find helpful resources and all of our podcast episodes. See you next time.