Schools On The Move Podcast: Episode 1 Transcript

Episode 1: Student Learning Communities: Building Student Voice and Agency for Students with Disabilities

Matt Navo (00:01):

Welcome to "Schools On The Move" podcast brought to you by the National Center for Systemic Improvement at WestEd and the Fresno County Superintendent of Schools, "Schools On The Move" podcast highlights innovative and promising school practices across the country. That enhance outcomes for students with disabilities and create teaching and learning opportunities for educators. Your host for today's podcast are Matt Navo, director of system transformation with west ed and Dr. Andy sharp director of differentiated assistance with the Fresno county superintendent of schools. Today we're in California in the Sanger Unified school district at Fairmont elementary with principal, Mr. Jared Savage. Our topic today is student learning communities, building student voice and agency for students with disabilities. Jared it's great to have you with us today.

Jared Savage (00:53):

Thank you for having me,

Matt Navo (00:54):

Jared, you've been a principal Fairmont for 11 years. You and I go way back tell our listeners a little bit about Fairmont elementary school as we dive into this topic.

Jared Savage (01:05):

Sure, So first of all, a little bit on my background, I grew up on the west side of the central valley and in California, a small town in Avenal, a as an athlete all my life and had great coaches along the way. And my dad was the most influence influential coach along the way, and, and continues to be that today, you know, growing up my friends and teammates always look to my parents for advice and guidance. And so that was always a really cool thing to sort of witness growing up. So I've always taken that sort of guidance piece with me along my journey. AF after high school, I went on to play football at Fresno state as a safety for Fresno state, got my degree in psychology and then my master's degree in educational leadership. And then at the end of my college career, I actually went back to Avenal and was a head football coach and a track coach and did my best to build an impact those programs out there.

And as soon after I left avenue to pursue an administrative role in Sanger Unified, I started out as a guidance learning specialist and then moved into an assistant principal role. And then to, to be quite honest, I never even had considered an elementary position before. Really didn't think I was built for the elementary administrative life now, but I took a chance and I've been at Fairmont as a principal there since 2010. And I've been trying to find, trying to find a unique ways to infuse sort of coaching and teaming concepts into the system. The Fairmont it's a TK through eighth grade school, we have about almost 700 students to date. We are on the outskirts of Sanger and we've been doing our best to infuse these team instructors into not only our, our classrooms, but we really try to involve our stakeholders in the community. And it's really had a tremendous impact over the course of the last decade.

Matt Navo (03:11):

Yeah, you've had a really rich experience at Fairmont and your background in athletics has really served you well as a leader for sure. But this topic about student learning communities, I know that our listeners will be interested in understanding a little bit more about what does that mean and you know, how did they develop at Fairmont elementary school? Where, where did you come up with the idea and what kinds of benefits does it have for really elevating student voice in, in their own learning journey? So if you could share a little bit about that,

Jared Savage (03:49):

I would have to say that any coaches that are out there regardless of the level you S you see the world through a coaching lens. And when, when I became principal at, at Fairmont and dealing with more on the moral students on the elementary side, I began to see a tremendous need for the infusion of some of these sort of teaming concepts. So what does a student learning community? It is a, it's a version of PLCs. There are a lot of similarities, but there are some differences and through a coaching lens, part of being a coach, regardless of the sport or level, you're always trying to bring about unity within a team. And you're always trying to bring about sort of building this capacity and connections amongst your team, amongst your coaches, to make sure that everybody's focused on the same goal. So that sort of has evolved over the last decade.

But before I get into really quick, what the sort of the framework is of student learning communities, this whole journey actually began in, in 2004. When I got into Sanger Unified, the district was completely 100% invested in and training the entire fleet of teachers in the PLC model. So the district was sending sort of droves of teachers down year after year to the DuFour conferences down in Southern California. And so my first year in Sanger Unified, I was introduced to what it actually truly meant to be a professional learning community. And, you know, our big takeaways obviously were the sort of three big ideas that had to do with the focus on learning a collaborative culture and then a tremendous focus on results. And then the, the, obviously the four questions and then the power of interdependencies was definitely our takeaway. But the, all the training and investment that the district did, it really transformed the Sangers or Sanger Unified's journey over the last 20 years. So when I got back to work, went back, went to work and really tried to refine our PLC practices and then found ourselves back down at the DuFour conferences down south the following year. And I

remember sitting in a huge audience of probably a thousand educators and thinking through a coaching lens who is going to tell the students of all this work that is taking place behind the scenes, are the students aware of what sort of the expectations and the goals and targets and what the focus and intentions are of PLCs? Because if we are not, in my opinion, we're doing a tremendous disservice to the system as a whole. So that type of thinking, I, I never let that type of thinking go. So went back and started to infuse that type of concept into sort of our, some of our early adopters at, at Fairmont.

So what is an SLC, obviously this has evolved over the last 10 years we've been working on this and working on refining our practices, but it's really in a nutshell is sort of these four, four domains, if you will, that are really sort of working collectively together. One of the first domains has to do with structures that are in place. So the focus is on student engagement and how students collaborate. So we have sort of, in order to honor the student learning community concept, we have strengths assessments that we actually give to kids. We have them, we give them voice and actually how teams are actually designed. They have different roles and responsibilities within the classroom. That's sort of one domain. The other domain has to do with sort of processes and systems. And so what we did, we actually infused goal-setting students actually do data analysis.

They actually help construct some of the assessments. So they actually have a voice in that, which has been very, very powerful. And then they actually measured their, both their individual growth and they actually measure their team growth. That's sort of the second domain. Another domain is actually has to do with enabling conditions. So when you think of school districts or even states, and then you go back into a school district, the classroom classrooms actually out of sort of micro-climates, we've referred to these as microclimates because depending on who the teacher is, they can actually influence what that climate looks like. So within a classroom, there's what we call enabling conditions have to do with things like trust and expectations mindsets, you know, how do we infuse relevancy into these teams and structures? So that's the third domain. Fourth domain is probably the most powerful and it has to do with student-led learning. Student led learning is where students are part of the decision-making process when it comes to what they're learning, how they're learning, how they provide feedback, they're involved in actually assessment development, things of that sort. So these four domains, if you will, are really collectively pressing on this concept of SLCs and it has dramatically transformed our school culture over the last decade.

Dr. Annie Sharp (09:28):

It's really interesting to me, Jared. So your school goes all the way down to kindergarten. So you have kindergarten kids that are involved in the student, led learning and helping make decisions. What does that look like with a six-year-old?

Jared Savage (09:42):

Sure. So we actually have a TK class at Fairmont, which is a four and five-year-olds. And just to give you an idea of how powerful this is, we've had visitors from not only the state of California, but outside the state who have come to Sanger Unified to view some of these practices at work. And we have taken some of these teams that have shown up to Fairmont adults, obviously teachers, school,

administrators, and district officials, and are pushing this PLC concept, how they can get better at PLCs. Cause obviously they have shown up to see how they can improve their practices. And when we take them in to a TK classroom and you have four and five-year-olds that have identified roles, they know exactly what their expectations are, how to function when you have four and five-year-olds that are giving kids feedback on how they communicate, whether they use academic vocabulary, whether they're using technology correctly, they have collective commitments, believe it or not. So the kids actually decide on what their most important norms are to operate as a team. When you have adults that are seeking feedback on how to operate as adults, and they show up to a TK classroom and they see four and five-year-olds that are deliberately going about their business as an SLC, it really, really gets their attention and like forces some self-assessment and some team assessment on their part.

Dr. Annie Sharp (11:23):

Yeah. I can only imagine, like when I think of your four domain, so you said structures, processes and systems, enabling conditions and student led learning. And I just think of the, the, the skills that you're teaching your kids at such a young age and the critical thinking and just their ability to work with others. That's huge. And I just think that that's really, really neat. I wonder what outcomes have you seen from, for your school because of this work that you've engaged in for the last 10 years?

Jared Savage (11:55):

Sure. The, the starting with outcomes, the outcomes have been absolutely phenomenal. And I think we are doing a disservice to kids. If, if we measure only academics in isolation and in content, I think we're doing an absolute disservice to kids. When we look at the whole child and we look at outcomes, we're talking about not only academic outcomes, talking about behavioral positive outcomes. And then you're talking about a cultural transformation within a classroom and throughout a school and possibly throughout a school district.

Dr. Annie Sharp (13:14):

That's awesome.

Jared Savage (13:15)

To sort of sum all these different things, all these components up. And I know we have limited time, but at Fairmont we have really pushed an identity that has, that is centered in this culture of oneness. So if you think of sort of the hierarchy of needs, and you think at the bottom level, you know, Maslow's hierarchy of needs at the bottom level, you're actually talking about sort of meeting the physical needs, moving up through safety all the way up. And then at the top, you're talking about an element of SAC self-actualization. And then at the very top of the pyramid, actually in his research, he talks about the connection to something greater than the self. And he actually refers to this as oneness. So when you talk about outcomes, we're talking about kids who show up on a daily basis who are not on an island where that they are connected to others within the classroom and across the school. You're talking about kids that show up who have a direct investment, where

their voice is actually respected in the sort of exchange in the learning process over the course of a day, been very, very powerful for us. So that whole culture of one we really feel like is a gateway for students to access learning on a lot of different fronts.

Matt Navo (14:11):

I love the culture of one and the identity. And I think a lot of people in listening to you will be incredibly energized at the possibilities of what SLCs can do, especially as you describe what your TK students are able to do. One of the questions that comes to mind is, and that may be on the minds of others as they, as they hear you speak about this is how do groups of students who are sometimes marginalized interact with this process. So I'm thinking of students with disabilities, your ELL's, you're homeless, your foster youth. How have you seen this model work for them? Sure.

Jared Savage (14:54):

No, that's a, that's a great question. When we started this process 10 years ago and we began to dive into the work, we really felt that if we could break through some of the psychological barriers of the adults and the kids, that that was the biggest barrier preventing this concept to actually be put into practice. So real quick, before I get into this, the equity piece and maybe our, even our English language development, English, English learners, and our SPED populations, probably the, one of the biggest barriers that we had to work through was teacher's fears of what might happen if they gave up control in the classroom. So, we actually had to go through multiple coaching cycles to actually give teachers permission, not all, but some permission to let go of that control and be able to be confident in their ability to improvise to coach kids up.

Kids need to be coached up when it comes to communication, how they collaborate their creative spirit what's what's inside of them infusing relevancy. So that was the first barrier. Once we were able to overcome that and some of our early adopters in terms of teachers, we were able to use them as examples to take other teachers in to address exactly what you're saying. So let me, let me just address that real quick. When it comes to equity, educators can talk about equity all day long and what typically comes down to most versions. The talk sounds much better than the actual practice in the classroom. So equity in talk, right? In theory, best practices goes far beyond just giving kids access. Access doesn't do anything for anybody unless the adult in the classroom create systems that give and coach that kid up, whether it's opportunities to share academic vocabulary, whether you're infusing relevancy, how did teachers actually provide opportunities for those kids to be successful and experienced success in the classroom?

I mean, if you look at a ton of research, when it comes to our English learners, if there's been tons of research, that's out there that says our English learners and our SPED populations need more opportunities, more repetition, more feedback that is of high quality in order to make change. But then when you go into classrooms, students are still being talked at and they jumped through this sort of scripted, scripted lesson. And then kids go to independent practice. That's the biggest disservice. When we're talking about equity, our SPED populations are English learners. Kids need to be coached up. Cultures in classrooms need to be

such that if I'm an English learner and I struggle with my language, I trust that the culture in the classroom is not going to be disrespectful. If I miss-speak, our SPED populations need to have the confidence to speak up where there's a culture of nourishment, that we're all part of this together. We're all going to give each other feedback and your voice matters. So I can't emphasize enough when we start talking about equity. I'm very passionate about this, but we start talking about equity. It is, has to be beyond just giving kids access. We're talking about quality opportunities to learn. We're talking about consistency on a daily basis. We're talking about the deliberate infusion of relevancy and creating these experiences that actually are going to promote these kids to get excited and more invested in the learning process.

Dr. Annie Sharp (19:12):

I love this and your passion. Jared is definitely coming through on this topic. I mean, I wrote down that you said equity does not mean equal access. Equity is so much more than that. It's giving students what they need and different students need different things. And when they go back to again, those four domains you've really set up those enabling conditions of trust, right? Like you said, without trust, then this doesn't happen. Then students aren't going to be comfortable stating what they need. And I think that, that, that's huge. So that leads me to, to, to really think about if I am a principal or if I am somebody who's running a school or a school district, and I want to start some SLCs in my organization. What, where do I start?

Jared Savage (19:59):

Sure. I think the, the initial starting point is actually having a conversation about what the expectations are for students and what their expectations are for adults. If you look at all the different state and national structures that are in place from the ESSA, which actually really emphasizes upholding sort of these critical protections for disadvantaged students, show me where that actually shows up in a classroom on a daily basis, right? When you talk about no child left behind and achievement gaps, what they've been previous times gaps, show me how we've been deliberate about closing those achievement gaps. If it's not through student collaboration and sort of changing students' beliefs about how, how to go about their business. So when you think about MTSS models, social-emotional learning, when you think about universal design for learning all of these pieces point to student learning communities. So when you talk about being a principal and wanting to start SLCs, you have to go in with the mindset that all of these, all of this language and state and national expectations, all of them are pointing towards it.

All of them are pointing in the direction of SLCs. So any hesitation or reservation that administrators might have, they need to get over that. And they need to be able to communicate that with confidence to their teachers and help their teachers overcome those initial fears of giving up that control in the classroom in education, we should be done, absolutely done talking at students. It needs to be done. It needs to be over. They need to have voice and need to be agents for their own learning. One of the things that really comes to mind just because it's on my, on my mind, the national championship was played. Yesterday. Call is football and Nick Saban. I'm a big fan of him. He's arguably the one of the best coaches, if not the best coach, one of the best coaches of all time. And they asked him in an interview

prior to the championship, what it, what does him as a coach? What does he think is the best quality of his quarterback? Who's gotten their team to that point, broken all these different records and all these different things. He said, "it's his ability to self-assess, take criticism and make the changes necessary to get better results." So that when he said that yesterday, and it was in some of the highlights, I took that. And I said, that is a great way to sum up what we as educators need to provide for our students on a daily basis. So going back to your administrator, if your administrator, how do you start this process? You start with doing self-assessment, self as a leader on campus. Self-assessment when it comes to the systems that are in place, getting feedback from your team, and then actually discussing what the schools and the school district's identity is when it comes to student collaboration and engagement, that is the sort of the gateway. If you will, that's going to open up a whole flue of possibilities, but starting past that and sort of jumping ship and starting in another place, I think would be a disservice to kids. You've got to have your "why" in place. People need to fully understand what their purpose, what their why is. And I think that'll give leaders an opportunity to do that.

Dr. Annie Sharp (24:15):

So, it sounds like you had to do a lot of work in the beginning on building trust with your staff, so that then they could really replicate and build that trust into their classroom. And one of the things I heard you say that to me, I think sometimes leaders have a hard time with, because they think it might break trust. When really, I think it helps to build trust is that clarity of expectations. You know, you had said, there's gotta be clear expectations for students, staff for everybody on campus. Why is that so important to building trust and to getting SLCs started?

Jared Savage (24:49):

One of the biggest things that we have really tried to infuse and use as a, a model. And we got the EFG model, we, we made this up, but E is for expectation. So if teachers or teams do not know what the expectations are when it comes to behaviors and actions, I think we're lost. I think we're lost. If, if expectations aren't clear enough, I think people will continue to fail. I think if expectations are really clear for teams, both for students and adults, it makes it much easier for teams to actually meet those expectations. The F actually stands for feedback. So when you have to have some feedback cycles in order to improve quality, and then the G is actually the growth piece, which if these learning progressions or continuums, or these growth models, if they aren't in place with clear cut targets and constant evaluation over time, then I think it's very easy to drift as a school, as a school district.

Matt Navo (26:05):

Jared, that makes complete sense. And I love the, the iteration of self-assessment criticism and being able to make the changes necessary. And your passion comes across when it comes to this, the equity and access conversation, and this, the SLCs being more than that. And I guess where, what I would ask what is on my mind is in relationship to just student agency and voice, and SLCs are giving you the ability to elevate student voice and agency in their educational outcomes and their educational goals. What would you say to national or state, or even local

leaders about how you do the work of cultivating student voice in the educational equation?

Jared Savage (27:01):

No, I think that's a very, a very powerful, powerful question. I think for starters, I think I'd have to say that as educators, regardless of what level, whether we're in the classroom or support staff or superintendents or sitting on state boards, I think our hearts are in the right place that we want to do. What's best for kids. No doubt about it. No doubt about it. But in my opinion, what's been lacking has been a vehicle that educators can use that embraces and honors all the different systems that have been essentially saying somewhat of the same thing we believe in the whole child, or more than academics, behaviors matter. SLCs really embraces, like I said before, the ESSA, the MTSS, the UDL models, all those things, and actually helps, can help rethink and remap and reimagine what a classroom can actually look like when you create a classroom culture that is able to cultivate student ownership, where they feel competent enough to provide feedback to other students and vice versa, where they engage in these different dialogues that are sort of produced these rich and deep and meaningful experiences.

That's where change happens. So I would say to national and state leaders, I would propose that we look at vehicles like student learning communities that really truly can honor students for all that they bring to the table, their strengths, their weaknesses, their insight, their experience, really bring these things together to really create these rich, deep learning experiences for kids. And we're talking about not only one select group of kids, we're talking about all kids earlier. We mentioned, you know, equity, what about our sped students? What about our English learners SLCs and the culture, this culture of one really create these micro climates that really allow kids to feel connected. And within that connection is elements of trust where all these systems align. And one of my teachers early on was a non sort of a non-believer that this could happen. And over time, he began to see them work and work and work. And we took him up to a conference in Sacramento to present at a state conference. And he told the group, I was, I didn't believe in the beginning, but now I believe SLCs are our true magic for kids. Absolutely. So I would say in a nutshell, please consider putting some of these concepts like SLCs as a vehicle for change in the education system. I totally agree.

Matt Navo (30:18):

And after, you know, Jared, it's been a while since we've had an opportunity to really engage in again, around the work that you're doing and your energy and your passion, I for it's so infectious, it, it makes me want to get the message out about SLCs as a mechanism to improving outcomes for kids. So I want to thank you, Jared, for your leadership in this work and in the endeavor of pushing innovative thinking, particularly around and lifting student voice and agency and I, and the ideas that you brought to the conversations today for leaders and education practitioners to consider when it comes to student learning communities. So with that, Annie, do you have any final thoughts or questions for Jared as we and our, our segment for today?

Dr. Annie Sharp (31:13):

I mean, I have a lot of thoughts and questions Jared, but my biggest spot is I've got an almost four year old kid, and I want to know what I need to do to get him to your school as I want him to learn these skills, and I want him to be able to advocate for himself. And I just think what you're doing for students by putting them at the center of their learning is so amazing. So really that's the biggest thought that I have in my head right now, Matt, is I just I'm. I want my kid to come to your school next year.

Matt Navo (31:45):

Well, Jared, thank you for being part of the podcast today and thank you to our listeners for listening to schools on the move, please be on the lookout for our next podcast, where we go to Arkansas to speak to an innovative leader. Who's really pushing the needle for improved student outcomes. Thank you, Jared again for your time and energy. Until next time.

Thank you for listening to "Schools On The Move". This production is brought to you by the National Center for Systemic Improvement and funded by the Office of Special Education Programs in the U.S. Department of Education, special thanks to all the production team. And we'll see you next time on schools on the move.