

## **Education Exchange**

**The full transcript of a conversation between  
Jeanne Whynot-Vickers, LearningWorks' Director of Educational Excellence  
& former interim superintendent of Portland Public Schools  
and  
Jim Morse, Superintendent of Portland Public Schools  
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**JWV: I know how busy you are – thank you for coming. You and I have both have such strong commitments to the kids we are serving – both of us having a history like them. We appreciate how supportive you've been of us publicly.**

**One of the things that troubled me as superintendent was that there were some kids we just weren't getting to – no matter what, we just weren't getting to them. And so looking at an organization like this where we can - we can - get to some kids, still not 100% - we are having enough success so that we know that for some of these kids, it is it. In the future we are going to get even more of them. This is a drive we both have – we're positioned in a place to be able give that kind individualized attention and can turn around a learning organization faster than you can a whole high school.**

**You've talked about your own high school experience – we both had an interesting one – what advice can you give to the students at LearningWorks who have dropped out, walked away, let it go?**

**JM: I think it's the advice that at some point we somehow came to on our own. It's: Be tenacious, be persistent. Don't give up. Don't let the system shut you down. Don't let an individual tell you aren't smart enough. Stay with it. Utilize every opportunity in front of you. Even if it comes in bits and pieces. Don't stop. At some point that happened to us – some how we figured it out.**

**Some kids don't figure it out and that's where LearningWorks comes in and that's where the alternative high school at Portland High comes in. You take what I saw when I first came in and talked to Ethan, I saw someone who is committed to the same kids we were committed to. It's the "whatever it takes" personality to help these kids. We need to help these kids. So many of these kids have no external support structure. We are creating the exoskeleton help them survive to help them survive whatever it is that they are going through. It's really unimaginable by most middle class families to imagine what these youngsters have to go through. There's this mentality out there that they have to pull themselves up by their boot straps and they'll do it themselves.**

**To have a LearningWorks or a Portland High School Alternative Ed Program, working on behalf of these youngsters - it's just so important.**

**JWV: In Portland Public schools you do a lot of preventive work – for example, reading recovery in the 1<sup>st</sup> grade. We at LearningWorks were fortunate to get the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learning grant to conduct the afterschool program at Reiche and at the East End Community School. What do you tell those youngsters? The little ones?**

JM: Sometimes they haven't figured out they are poor yet. Sometimes they haven't figured out that they don't fit in yet. At some point in their youth, they are going to realize that when people talk about poor people, they realize "they are talking about me." When they are talking about kids who come from single-parent homes they realize "they are talking about me." It happens somewhere in the 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup> grade age level where we start seeing the stratification before our own eyes. The little people – the K, 1, 2 – it doesn't make any difference. It doesn't make any difference whether you're rich or poor. "these are my friends!" But, through the media, through life's experiences, they start to realize that some people have and some people have not, it happens at that age group – it's really the primary grades.

The secret to keeping kids in school is pre-school. It's kindergarten. It's first grade, second grade. It's giving them the gift of being able to read. It's giving them the courage to make independent decisions. It's providing them with life's lessons before they get beat up by life.

For me, when we talk about 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learning grant and Afterschool programming, again, it fits back into filling a void in these youngsters lives that you and I provided our children. We provided our children the life that we never had.

**JWV: We were lucky that we could.**

JM: As a result, our grandchildren are being provided the life that you and I never had. So, LearningWorks, 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learning, all these interventions – the earlier we can get to these youngsters, the greater the success we will have. You know as well as I do that that is what the research shows. It's showing that the sooner we can identify a child at risk and the sooner we can put those interventions in place, the more likely it is that we will be more successful with them. In the old days, when you and I were in high school – first of all, there weren't any fixes – you and I both know that we had many friends who didn't make it. In the 70s people started to figure out alternative programs – their heart was in the right place, but their location was in the wrong place. They kept on thinking we've got to fix the high schools, we've got to fix the high schools, the latest research is saying that it is NOT in the high schools – yes, we've got to put some band-aids on at the high schools and keep these kids' heads above water because they are going to drown, but the real effective programming is primary.

**JWV: It's exciting, because when you think about this, you say, the idea of pre-school – we are spending a lot of money on building background knowledge for our older kids – for our immigrant children, for whom English is their second language, because they are coming to school already so behind and so pre-school for those**

**folks – it’s so successful in leveling the playing field so that they are not starting way behind.**

JM: Plus, it gives us another 13 years to work on it and not wait until they are in high school!

**JWV: Exactly! When they are not listening real well by then! So, what do you think made it possible that you were able to change your circumstances? We both did that. But what were the key ingredients?**

JM: Quitting, being on the street. One of the things that was so interesting at the Portland drop out summit this summer with the Portland High School crowd... from the kids’ perspective today as they were sharing – they don’t see themselves as quitting school and they are done with school– they see themselves as taking a break. When I quit school, I had every intention of not returning. It appears that today’s dropouts quit school as if they need to take a break from school because life’s pressures have become more important than learning. Then, in their minds – they think they will get back to that. The scary thing is that they may never get back to that. A program like LearningWorks gives them the opportunity to get back.

What I see at LearningWorks is the intimacy piece. The one revealing question – “Tell me why you’re here and not at Portland High – because they notice me when I walk out the door. Now, is that a condemnation of Portland High?” No, I don’t think so – because Portland High has something like 36 doors! The door to get out of this place goes right by Ethan’s office. It’s pretty obvious when one of those 22 kids gets up and walks out the door.

And then what’s the response you give? “See you tomorrow” – and not in a sarcastic way – but a genuine “see you tomorrow” – in other words, we’ve registered that this is too much for them today – that’s not how it happened when I walked out of Portland High in my junior year. When I said, this is it, I walked out and nobody called me the next day and said “I understand you had a bad day yesterday, why don’t you come back in?” – God bless ‘em, they called me six months later – but that was the exception at that time. Somebody cared. That’s what turned me around. Somebody cared. Somebody noticed. It was the hook. By that time, I saw my dad die of cirrhoses of the liver, in the Oxford Street neighborhood, there were more bars than common stores. There were more people with brown bag drinks than they were people coming out of stores with a bag of groceries – you’d see the intoxicated, 60-year old pervert, you’d see the woman who just got beat last night by her drunken husband, those were the things you saw. No leave-it-to-beaver, mom & dad, puppy dog, 2.5 kids in Bayside in the 70s. What you saw was abject poverty and you thought that was normal. Now most of those places are parking lots.

**JWV: The same problems persist, unfortunately.**

JM: Well, I looked at the data a few weeks ago. The largest group of children we’re failing with are not children of color. The largest group are the same kids we failed with

35 years ago. White, poor, youngsters – generationally poor. The children in Ethan’s program today are the grandchildren of my classmates.

**JWV: There’s an opportunity here to break the cycle if we can help these ones make it right. On more general level, what do you think the most critical aspect is of creating a positive learning environment? Particularly for adolescents?**

JM: I think the most important thing is that the adolescents realize that you care. I think kids will do anything for anyone anytime to the nth degree if they think they’ve found an adult who cares.

I’ve been over several times and seen Ethan outside with his cup of coffee and saying good morning to youngsters – by name. How was your day yesterday? How was last night. One of the things we did when we opened school this year at Portland High was – what is one thing you could do on Thursday that could make a child know you care. Invariably it was – greet them – greet them by name. You drive by Portland High is those first few days and the three administrators were out front greeting kids by name.

But you can’t stop there. The issue is – so you care – you love the kids. We all do. That’s not enough. The next step in the process is to have high expectations of these kids. What is it you’re going to do – training kids to do Weatherization in LearningWorks – there were expectations – a certain level of capacity in order to get certifications – the youngster connects it to a paycheck – a high expectation – they get the training, the supervision. So, they understand the quality and the reward. That’s one way of doing it.

Other way to do it – eliminate stupid courses from the high school schedule. I listen to our NAACP folks a week and a half ago – they never said Portland High School is racist and the kids reporting out said they have never experienced overt racism – what they’ve experienced is a lack of opportunity. They get out of our ELL programming, pass the ACCESS – and what are they placed into? They are placed into general courses! General courses should be stripped out of the high school curriculum immediately. They have nothing to do with aspirations – it’s a holding tank. Youngsters leaving the ACCESS – I don’t care if they are second grade or third grade readers, they should be put in a college-track program. – high expectations. Particularly our immigrant population. They are new to poverty in terms of how the United States sees it – so if we move them from the ELL program to a college-bound program, immediately it says, we have high expectations of you.

The third piece is teacher delivery. We can’t be teaching the way we went to school – kids in rows, teacher in front of the room, lecturing – boring these kids to tears. These kids are so multi-faceted, so talented – their minds are going in 3, 4, 5 different directions – these youngsters today are so much smarter than you and I were – and we don’t recognize it. We don’t recognize what they bring to the table. We have this mentality that school needs to be “chalk and talk” – we’ve got to get away from that. We’ve got to engage kids. Those are the three pieces I think. They are all happening here.

**JWV: We're working on it.**

JM: And many times they are happening in Portland, and Deering – but not all the time.

**JWV: We recently got a large grant and we're still working on it – to get technology into the hands of our students. (Let's order together!) We might be able to train some of our staff along with yours. As we move forward, what do you recommend?**

JM: After basic training – rid ourselves of the idea of having textbooks. You can download templates and create textbooks – social studies – you walk into a Portland High School classroom and you look at a map on the wall and you still see the USSR – it's a 25 year old map – it should be taken off the wall. Once we have netbooks, we can look up Russia – it's not the Soviet Union anymore – these are different countries. Ethan might be interested in this. Look at political geography – politics is as much a part of the geography you are surrounded by as it is political theory. Do mountain ranges in Europe dictate political action? I think they have...they are not part of it, rebel from political construct different part of political associations- in Russia, Pakistan, Spain – we never talk about this. Mountains dictate politics. Water – oceans – dictate politics. We never touch it in high school We are so bent on getting kids to know the name of the country. The capital. When were they created – you know –it's all stuff you can look up. It's not thought provoking. There's a whole way of looking at social sciences where you could be thinking – not memorizing by rote – technology opens that up.

Technology opens up individual instruction. When I left my previous job, all of our middle schools were on a technology-driven math program given to us by Stanford University. By the time we had youngsters going to the high school they had earned high school algebra credit, high school geometry credit and we even had a half-dozen kids going into high school this year with Algebra II completed.

By using technology, the theory of differentiating instruction, where everyone can work at their own pace – they actually can. We use the classroom teacher to guide them when they get stuck. We use the classroom teacher in a whole different way – as a coach, a facilitator, a pusher, a pleader, whatever it takes to help that youngster make the next leap. It gets away from teaching to the middle – you know, it's October – so we must be on page 36 because we have a timeline to complete rather than learning standards to complete. That's what technology does. Technology can engage kids in groups. Cooperative learning, group problem solving, team work.

I can see that working very nicely in the weatherization program. It's not about putting up a bunch of goop because they are going to lose warm air, it's serious math. Too much goop – does it help? Too little – probably hurt? What's the right amount of time and money to put into a building like this – it would be an enormous investment – so it's prioritizing – where would LearningWorks put that investment to get the biggest bang for the buck? Kids can go through that in the learning process using computers, and then leaving and doing the actual application. It's a powerful learning tool – all of a sudden, learning is not abstract. You are not teaching algebra as a subject. You are teaching

mathematics for life – when’s the last time we did any trig? But, I’ll bet you we all use a form of statistics every day – but it’s not critical to our math program. It doesn’t make any sense to me.

**JWV: Except for that rare person who just loves math – and technology would allow them to take it to the next level.**

**English Language Learners – the adult learners – we have a growing number coming here to LearningWorks – and they are at the very basic level of English and language development. You are in the midst of this enormous budget crunch. Some of the same sources that you are funded with are also funding our programs. And we don’t know what will happen with those in the future. Adult Ed seems to have a long waiting list – there are some things we could do.**

JM: That goes back to partnerships – another pet theme. What is the implementation strategy? I honestly believe that Portland Public School system doesn’t have to have all the answers. You have a program that is mission friendly like LearningWorks – having adult learners – it’s not just money, it’s space. The West School is just packed during the day and the evening with adult learners. The ELL population from the East End and West End are trying to get to that school, if you host one of our adult ed programs, yeah, there’s a money component to it, but you know it’s not overwhelmingly expensive, so if we could put some of that here –

Riverton and Sagamore village sites – why we can’t put educators there? It doesn’t all have to happen at Portland High and Deering High –it can happen through community policing. Build relationships with kids – what he’s trying to promote. Rec program – more than willing to try anything we want to try. Just need to make it actionable. Yes, yes, yes – next step. That’s where partnerships come in. With LearningWorks. With Boys & Girls Club, - can we work in partnership on a grant? Absolutely. We’re all serving the same city population – where we are in parallel, let’s work together. When we’re not, we got our separate ways. Our missions are overlapping. In desperate financial times those are the kind of partnerships that will bring money into the city to service these youngsters and these adults.

**JWV: Services we might have to cut otherwise....**

**One of the things I’m looking at it – it seemed like when I got here the focus in YBA was to get them to the GED as if it’s the end post. I am working with them to show them that it’s no end post - it’s just an opening to a gate. Some have had a couple of years of success in the high school, but life just took over, they fell out, and they found their way here – I am really looking at is there a way we might re-connect them to the existing high schools? In many ways, but the most important way – by the way, the people that work for you are fabulous – I contacted them and he was here the next day to talk about how we can include our kids in the fair – and we’re looking at how we can begin - some are so phobic about going back – yet some are ready.**

JM: You know we could do it? In the weatherization program - We could create a satellite PATHS program where they kids are earning 3 credits while those kids are doing the weatherization program.

That would be fabulous! The satellite would be right here. Put an application together for Laura Downing – the person in charge of locational educational in the state – she used to work for me, was a school board member, I know her extremely well. – you put a proposal together. The thing about a satellite program has to be open to any kid – not just LearningWorks kids. You go through the bureaucratic stuff, we make weatherization a satellite program of the tech center, it's self-sufficient, kids can get 3 credits.

Do you have kids from outside the city? Westbrook?

**KWV: 55% are from outside Portland.**

JM: I didn't realize you were serving kids from outside Portland!? I would have assumed it's 75% Portland and 25% other.

**JWV: If they can get here, we can help them, we just can't transport them unless they are coming from the Youth Center, then we pick them up. Because we don't have the capacity to do it, that's all.**

JM: Regional alternative Education might be another vehicle where we could count kids under the funding formula. The whole issue on charter schools would be really so slick. We don't have charter schools, but still are ways of doing clever things – I wonder if that's not something we could pursue in terms of student count – generating capital. Portland would be the worst school system to use because we only get \$.20 on the dollar. But if we could create LearningWorks as a satellite program of Westbrook - they must be a 40% - 50% receiver. Might be a way of generating EPS dollars into LearningWorks – or selling slots as an income from other school districts

I think we have to be a special-purpose school and we considered that at one point, but you have to be certified and there are so many hoops to jump through – and so many requirements that kill you.

Just do it as a satellite – just throwing this out there – maintain LearningWorks as its own self-sufficient identity as you have now – but for that 45% of Portland kids, we could make LearningWorks an alternative site for Portland school system. With you here, certified, that might work

**JWV: Certifiable, anyway!**

JM: It might work.

**JWV: Is there a way shorter term that we could get our students to take a class at PATHS?**

JM: Yes.

**JWV: So, would the vehicle be that we get them enrolled at Portland High? I am actually meeting with Mike Johnson Thursday about how to get some kids back over who already have credits there and he's always been open to that. In order for that – we'd still have them for half a day – we would get them out there – you could then count them.**

JM: We wouldn't get \$.20 on the dollar – maybe in two years get \$.00 on the dollar the way I see the funding formula working right now – we'll lose \$10 million within two years at which point we'll only be getting bonding and special ed cost, so we'll be a minimal receiver just like Cape Elizabeth and Yarmouth and who cares what the state does with their money because we're not getting any.

**JWV: I agree. So, what are the downsides for us to register them? Because they are more than willing to take them. We would still be responsible for their overall education, but –**

JM: The downside is that if they don't complete high school in four years, they are counted as a drop out for Portland High, I think that's immaterial because that's a bureaucratic problem and not a kid problem and one of the things we've been talking about as we report out to the city – will it count....

They define everything by geographic boundaries. I am talking to South Portland and Westbrook. I am talking to Ethan. It's not about that. You need to work together to get the best results for the kid. As long as they share the same mission.

**JWV: Well, it's a way of creating our village again.**

JM: Exactly.

**JWV: So, we're all looking out for each other.**

JM: You know – I really think that's the truth.

**JWV: When Bea McGarvey lived in this community – she tells the story that her parents were fighting, her dad had been fighting – and the girls were scared. So, she called the priest. The priest wandered on down. Told dad to go out and walk it off. Sat with mom and talked her down. Got dad back in here. Took care of that. That was it. Resolved the whole issue. What she said about that - There were so many people next door, down the street who could help us. But, now – we've become disassociated and yet we're all working for the same thing. This is the way we can re-connect some of that synergy again. I think for someone like you that's leading**

**job that is really difficult and Ethan, too, always out there trying to find the funding to support – and really differentiate our services so that what we’re providing is a little bit different that might be one of the alternative pathways for your students.**

JM: You know, I desperately want to have that Portland High School relationship for LearningWorks. That was one of the first things we talked about – this is stupid. We’re overlapping and yet we’re not integrated. At any point, a student, each unit – we can back out if it’s not working for each kid and don’t let it become a disaster. I’ve been trying to figure out how to do Preble Street. There are a lot of kids just hanging out...

And for the last 10 years the thought has been evolving in my mind that we should never suspend or expel a kid. What is it kids get suspended for all the time? Insubordination. Ok – so they are insubordinate. They swore at you, your feelings are hurt. Have the youngster go see Sophie – have them dump whatever they need to dump and if it’s not that afternoon or the next morning, let the youngster back into class. It’s not about you. It’s not about your personal feelings. It’s about the kid and who knows what this kid has gone through before they blew up in your classroom. It had nothing to do with you in the first place.

So, I’m at this point where I’m saying very publicly that I think suspensions and expulsions are 1950s solutions that didn’t work then and certainly don’t work now. So, what are the solutions? You are soft on kids! Restorative justice. Have programs in place so you can address students’ needs and walk through those needs and the next day, be back in class. Don’t use the word “expulsion.” If you need to teach the kid off-site. Put them on administrative leave – that’s what you would do with an adult. If you had an adult who swore at you – would you fire them? No, because you have all these constitutional and contractual rights to their job. OK – what would you do – you’d put them on administrative leave. You wouldn’t fire them. Suspension and expulsion are just other words for firing you from your education. I don’t think we have a right to fire a kid from their education.

**JWV: One of the real beauties of this is that we have a very small staff and don’t have unions to deal with. We just say this is the right thing to do and we do it. I don’t have to go through 20 layers to get something done.**