

This is a transcript of the T/TAC William and Mary podcast *David Ferguson's Story: My Past Made Me the Educator I Am Today*, features an interview with David Ferguson, Principal of Rappahannock High School in Richmond County, Virginia.

[MUSIC: T/TAC William and Mary Podcast Intro]

Lee Anne: So I'm excited to be sitting here with Dave Ferguson who is Principal of Rappahannock High School in Richmond County and talking a little bit about how his growing up and his experiences with school really have impacted the work you do today. So I'm really curious kind of tell me what it is, how you grew up and how that really impacts what you do as a principal today.

Dave: I grew up in a family with a single mother, little brother and we were below the poverty line. We lived in my grandmother's floor and right away I knew it was different when I went to school. We had times where I had two shirts, two pair of pants and everyone else had different clothes and different things going on. As you start to go through school and you start to notice you are treated a little differently sometimes by folks, but the one nice thing is that my family supported the education I was getting. As soon as I got home it was instant help with homework. It was ... I had a young mother so she was home and she was able to work with me. My grandmother loved to read and we were encouraged by books. There were books around all the time and the public library was about three or four miles away, but we would walk to the library. We had no car. We had no way to get there so Mom and Nanny would say hey lets to the library and that was a great trip for us. I loved the Richard Scary books. That's how it started. Just kind of seeing those words with the pictures by it made a big difference for me. The library was a great tool for us and at the school library, once I found out about when I went through kindergarten and first grade I just remember Ms. LaVenice said, "you love books" and my Nanny said "I want to read". My family pushed education and my grandfather as a very young man before he died he would always said "use your mind not your back" because I watched him die from working in the coal mines. He dropped out of school at age 8 and was working in the coal mines. He always said, "Use your mind, not your back". You know when you are a young child you don't really like think of that, but it reflects on me today to use my mind as much as possible. So Ms. LeVenice, my school librarian would give me extra books. You know you are only aloud to check out one, but I would go and she would be like here take this one and get extra. I would go home and my family would just read and that reading and writing practice that I would do at home with my Mom and Nanny helped to start put me ahead with my peers and the teachers started to treat me a little differently when they saw I was taking it serious with my school work.

Lee Anne: That's interesting. Is there a story that you can think of that stands out in your mind in school where a teacher looked beyond and though "Wow he really has this sort of light inside of him".

Dave: Yes, fifth grade is becoming a changing time for all men as we start to go through things. I was trying to find myself and Mrs. Webster who is my favorite teacher of all time. My fifth grade teacher. She had. I had been taking things to try to supplement and she had come up to me and had seen what I was doing and said hey and I was scared to be turned in because I knew if I got turned in I was in trouble at home. You were fearful about what would happen at home because the message was you don't mess up at school because that is your one opportunity for you to have a better life. In fifth grade was also when my Mom was going back and getting training. And now seeing my Mom go back to school and further herself so she can help do more things for the family. Mrs. Webster said I caught you doing this and we are going to make it right and you are going go ahead and show up at

my house and here is where I live. So now this teacher has invited me to her house and I'm scared to go there because you think teachers just lived at the school and I go to her house and she has me start cutting grass for her and she starts paying me and you are going to use this money to help my family. So now she is teaching me a lesson on work, family and your education and she is the person that said you are going to be something someday. She was that first teacher who really saw my behaviors because I used to act up. Second grade I remember we had a field trip to Penn State University and you had to pay \$20 to go and you think \$20 oh. I remember going home with a permission slip and my Mom's eyes start swelling up because the money was not there. She couldn't afford the \$20 so I picked up on that. I went into the school and that day decided to break a tray in the cafeteria, I got the X on my behavior chart, it was a major violation as a second grader and because I misbehaved I had to stay in school that day so then I took the stress of my Mom having to pay the \$20. So than for me kind of like anytime something was going to cost money for school, I would just get in trouble so I didn't have to ask my Mom. There were so many opportunities that went by that my Mom never know about because I didn't want to hurt my Mom. Because I saw the hurt in her eyes when she couldn't do it for me. You know my Mom was trying to be involved as much as possible, but there was a pride thing too. She didn't want to come in and say my son can't afford to do this and how can you help us because she was trying to do everything she could do to help my brother and I and my family. We lost my grandfather in second grade so there was all these bills and there were so many things going on and there was no one to talk to. My peers would be like Dave's in trouble again. But I had straight A's which was the funny part. Somethings were tolerated because academically I was doing everything I needed to.

Lee Anne: So did you know at the time what you were doing at the time?

Dave: Yes.

Lee Anne: That's fascinating.

Dave: Like my Mom would cry. Every time I would take these papers home for field trips my Mom would cry and be upset. One of my second grade teachers would see again the reading piece which was so huge. All I wanted to do was discover dinosaurs. She let me one time make a project and she brought in all the pieces I needed because I did all the readings so when we got in trouble one day the teacher is still giving me the opportunity to present to the class so than I created different biomes where all the different dinosaurs lived with construction paper and she brought me plastic dinosaurs and I walked my fellow second graders around that and that was my field trip.

Lee Anne: It sounds like you had some really perceptive teachers.

Dave: Yes, if they wouldn't have seen those things and given me the opportunity than I wouldn't be where I am today. It all comes back to the importance what my family took in education. I respected my teachers and when I acted out I would never do anything to hurt anyone. It was really just a way so I wouldn't be able to go do something and because I was doing everything academically they put up with it.

Lee Anne: So are there things that you kind of pay attention to or you are very intentional about when you are working with students or how does that kind of color the work that you do?

Dave: Everyone has a story. We all have skeletons in the closet. No matter what is going on.

Sometimes when you bring your students in you just have to talk with them and get to know them. Even though you are angry maybe with the actions they have taken, it makes me reflect back to myself. Why are you really doing this? You know if I have a student that has stolen something, I would say why did you do it? It might be "I just wanted" or my parents lost a job. I know I can't have this. Maybe I can sell it and get some extra money. It doesn't change their actions, but at least it changes how you look at them and if they are honest with you, I can make a difference with them. I always try to ask my students and I always point it out to other administrators and teachers. Are you getting the whole story? Because we only see our students 7 to 8 hours a day if we are lucky. The other 16 hours of the day are out of our control. Why does students sleep a lot? My wife has been very open with these things knowing my history. Where she had a student that slept in her class and she said she was so angry coming in. Why is this student sleeping all the time? I say "honey well maybe something aren't right at home. She's like what do you mean? I point back to nights when we didn't have heat in the house and you would be up all night shivering to stay warm and you would doze off and you get to school and it's a nice warm place, you get some food, and you fall asleep. She went to the student and asked why and he said "because I feel safe with you". So now I'm able to help others now look at that same side and really listen to the student to get that feeling of yeah there is more. You are not just a teacher to give content. We want to help our students learn about life and that people are there for them. Even how we walk around the school can be scary for some of the students. I notice that some students get very nervous when you want with your hands behind your back. I used to be that way because before my father would hit us, his hands were behind his back and then once the hand came up, it was out of nowhere so people become very guarded just in how you walk. So I always try to be with an open approach to students because this is where I am. I don't like to sit behind my desk when I meet with students just because what kind of tone, there is a barrier. Hey were are right here. We will space each other between a table, but we are at the same spot.

Lee Anne: Are there any, without using names. Are there any students that really stand out in your mind that you feel like you were really able to have a positive influence on or have a deeper understanding of?

Dave: Yes, I have some students hear with similar situations that I have been in and they are still struggling or has just recently happened and they have come for more advice on things. It's always amazing when we start off the school year with faculty meeting I read some of my past history out to some of the staff and I said "who would want this student in their class and who would react certain ways and some teachers would be their hands up and some teachers wouldn't put their hands up that they would be open to taking that student. I want you to know that that student is now the principal of your school. For some of them it was like wow. And they would come in and talk to me and they would go to students and say Mr. Ferguson does understand where you are coming from when they hear the story. So if the students confide in them, the teachers are like I know someone you can go talk to or someone that has been able to overcome this is Mr. Ferguson and I have had some students come up and say, "Do you mind if I ask you something?" Sure. Were you poor? I'd say "Yes". Poor in money, yes. Poor in love and education, no. And they are like what do you mean by that? I'm mean, "My family always loved me and I always had the opportunity to get an education". And they are like oh. I didn't have the nice shoes. I didn't have the nice clothes. I might have smelled funny sometimes when I would go to school, but I knew my family loved me and was giving me everything I needed and I knew my teachers in the school were there to get me everything I need. I

think that is what we need to do in schools. I think it is hard too for high school sometimes just because of the changes that our students go through and how our teachers feel that were trying to prepare the students for college. I think we can have some of that elementary love. You know in a way. It's all about relationships at the end of the day. If we can develop our relationships with our students I think it's going to make it that much more and students are going to take more from it.

Lee Anne: Are there certain relationship building activities or things that you felt were particularly successful? Especially with high school students.

Dave: Right now with this being so early. It's kind of a recon mission. We are trying to see where our strengths and weakness are as a staff and how we do that. Our staff has go through the previous principal Dr. Boyd who left us and they are getting used to a whole new administrative team. So we are trying to do everything we can to transition with them. I know that our teachers are doing a lot of things in the classes. There is nothing specific where someone goes "this best thing yet". So I think it's getting everyone to buy in. Because you know by departments it's hard some times. You might do that in math, but that won't work for history, but again when it's about relationships it's going to work anyway. So I think it's trying to get folks to buy in and maybe say these are some of the things I have done. Some of my teachers have done some self-reflection and that has been very good because they said once I realized it's about relationships, it changed my whole class. And some of it just self-reflection of having those conversations that aren't always easy with one of your team members. When I'm with a teacher, I will say here is what I am seeing. You know when you yell and raise your voice, you are losing them. There like "no", "no", "no". I say "just think about it". If I yelled at you how are you going to feel? Make it fun. Make those things that aren't fun, fun. In our faculty meetings, 25 minute faculty meetings. I don't like long faculty meetings. I'm not going to make them go through long meetings. We are going to get the information. We are going to have a little fun and laugh and we are done. You know in 25 to 30 minutes that the meeting is done. And once you know I'm going to do that you are going to give me the attention because I have given you the facts before and tell you it's going to be a 25-30 minute meeting and it's not going to be a waste of our time and we are good. I think that some of some teachers have gone and modeled that to. Ok here is what we are going to do. You know that we are going to do this. You can trust me. The self-reflection has been the biggest thing for our teachers this year. Just having those conversations saying "I've notice as an outsider, brand new this is some things I would feel and then ask yourself. Would you want to be in this class? My Assistant Principal, Dr. Washington, he had put that up on his door the other day. If you were a student in your class, would you want to be a student in your class?"

Lee Anne: That's powerful.

Dave: And that's right in the main hallway where everyone goes through. So that makes you stop, look, and reflect. I just think that reflection sometimes is the best thing and if we are honest with each other I think it's one of those great things for us.

Lee Anne: Do you have or if you had three wishes for what a positive high school experience would be like for your students? What would those wishes be?

Dave: I wish each student could get what they wanted to go forward with their future would be one. If you want to be an auto mechanic, than you can go through high school to set you up to be a successful auto mechanic. Some of our students and just so stressed by passing tests that they lose

the experience and that's been very hard to see. We have students that can't take certain classes because they have to get this taken care of. Wish one would for students to pick a track they want to go on and we have the way to put them on that track because then they would come to school. I think we lose attendance that we have in high school because students would have more of a buy in of this is why I want to be here and so I'm going to be here and go through school and get the training that I want and it's about me. My second wish is an unlimited budget. Money doesn't give you everything, but I think just because than we could provide for some of those things our students that just can't get. You know the senior trips, we got you. A junior trip, we have you.

Lee Anne: So they could have that full experience.

Dave: So they have that experience to be able to go. One of the great things our department of technology is working with next year is going to one on one initiative. So every student is going to have that ability to work with the computer, with the internet. I don't want out teachers to think "Oh this one to one, learning management system is going to replace me", because you can't replace the relationship side. That's the one thing I hope they realize. This won't replace the teacher every day, but we are going to give our students access to 21st Century jobs. Just to give them the opportunity. It's another tool they can use to go that they may not get at home because 30% of our students do not have internet access here so if we had the funds to say "here you go we will take care of your internet". Those are the type of funds I'd love to be able to say. Wish one would be pick the path you want to go. Two would be funds to provide for the student experiences so again it doesn't become a have and have nots. I think our school board, our superintendent, our central office is really supporting us in trying making sure we have what we need, but you know we are limited and our students don't have outside experiences because of where we are located sometimes being here in the Northern Neck. It's a beautiful place, but some students have difficulty ordering off a menu because it's not the dollar value meal. You take them up to Fredericksburg and you go somewhere like that and they say "What do you mean this is a five course meal?" How do I go through this? So just to give our students money to give our students experiences would be fantastic and my third wish is the one I go for everyday that we can guarantee it's a safe school. I want students to know that as soon as they walk in the doors, I'm at Rappahannock High School and I don't have a worry in the world no matter what is going on at home. What's going on in the world. I know I am safe there and I know that the teachers and staff are going to make sure I am safe. Those would be my biggest wishes. I think we do a good job of meeting number three. I think we do provide a safe environment and if there are concerns, our students are open to go to their teachers and to the administration and say "Here's what worries me". But to be able to completely have students not worry about if a Mom or Dad or some family member who is out of their life is going to show up in their life and make something happen.

Lee Anne: Are there any experiences, I heard the library story when you were growing up was a real positive experience and your 5th grade teacher. Is there anything that stands out beyond elementary school as a repositive that help you?

Dave: The middle school years were very good. That is where you have to make your decision in 8th grade which track because in Pennsylvania back then there was a academic diploma or general diploma. Well my idea was I was going to get a general diploma and than go to work so I could help my family. My Mom had started to do very well. She was working full time. I sat down with the

guidance counselor and I was like ok I only want to take general math and general this and I want to be able to go and be done. They were like no this is not where you need to go and I had been involved in drama. I liked that. I was then able to get experiences in middle school where some of the teachers were like I did get to do the plays and I didn't have to worry a thing because it was all covered. The big thing for me in middle school was that I tried to go and experience things because I wasn't so worried about the money because my mom was working as well. So again we were in no way shape or form better because we still go free lunch and things like that, but if I would say Mom I need \$5 for this it was like ok here you go and it wasn't like a breakdown. But the guidance counselor sat with me and said no in high school you need to start taking these classes because you are going to do something and I was kind of like ok, yeah. My grades were good. I was an A, B student at the time. A little harder than elementary, but of course you are like ok I can deal with this. Then I went to high school as a freshman I become the varsity goal keeper for the soccer team. Which was a big deal to be able to do and that exposed me because then I started seeing the seniors that were looking to go to college and then you are hanging out with them. Then you would have teachers come up to you and say "hey you are the guy that's playing varsity. You are doing pretty good this year. Man you keep this up you may go to college and I'm thinking college. Why are these people taking about college? Here I am in Phillipsburg, PA. My mom is not going to be able to make it and so I can go to college. You just keep doing what you are doing and you are going to me fine and I'm like ok, yeah teachers are suppose to say that. They are suppose to make me feel good and I just kept going through it and the academic studies. My mom was always ask me where is your homework and I'm like it's done or I don't have any because I would just go into class and I'd sit there and listen, do my homework and it was done. By my junior year my soccer coach said you need to start to think about this. At the same time I wanted to go to the Naval Academy. So now I'm thinking I'm going big because you don't have to pay to go to the Naval Academy. So I'm thinking anything I can do to alleviate any stress from my mom is what I want to do. Take my SATs and blow them out of the water. You feel great about yourself and you seeing the schools you can go to and all of a sudden your getting things from schools. Then you see the price and I'm going oh my goodness. Then I go back to my elementary school days where I start hiding these things from my mom. Because no one in my family has gone to college so no one knows what the process is going to be like and I start going to guidance counselors saying hey can you help me. Yeah, we can help you let us see. Yeah you have the grades. You have this, but financially do you think you are going to be able to do x, y, z. And I'm going I don't know. I was working as well and there was another family that started to help us. The Jenna's I started to work with them and they started to may a push. They said hey there are grants. They just really spoke everything to me. Here's what you want to do. We don't want you working in the ice house for us, we know you have a future. My best friend in high school, Jason, his mom was like come on. I went to school. I was a nurse. Jason's going to go to school. You can go to college and she started to talk with my mom and my mom's like hey were are open to it, but what do we need to go through. So the senior year going to some of the different FASA and those things and you are hearing numbers and grants and you are just like what is going on. I remember getting accepted to 30 different schools. I kept getting things and I went to the guidance counselor and it says I can fill out this waiver and they are like yes you can fill out the waiver to get the free admission packet, because again financially we were where we were. It's not like mom was making the money that we could be paying the \$25 fee and now they are like \$50 and \$75 and I see our students and I'm going wow I'm getting older because I remember when it was a third or half of that. I got accepted and I decided where I was going to go which was called at the

time College of Misericordia. I had gone up and was recruited to play soccer. The Naval Academy had fallen through due to medical reasons. I was on my heels looking at what I was going to do. Felt a little lost and Mrs. Webster came back and said so kid what are you doing? You are going to college right. Originally I wanted to go in the Navy and be a weapon's systems engineer and I'm thinking you know what the response has been in front of me my whole life. I want to make the difference that I've had through an educator. I would be a teacher and I want to be an elementary school teacher because there was no man there in elementary school that could really step up and help me so let me be that young man who didn't have a dad through elementary school. Now I will be that figure for someone. So my goal was I'm going to Misericordia and get an elementary education degree and everyone said get special ed too. You'll be more marketable and you'll be able to get a job. This would be great. So I go there. I'm all set to go there and I get my first tuition bill and it is like you have \$2,000 is what you have left to pay. I walk to my mom and start crying and say I'm not going to college. My Mom is like we can do that. I'll see what I can do, but right now we can't send your tuition in and again Mrs. Webster said did you sign up for this and this. Here is a teacher I had in 5th grade that comes back to say have you thought of x, y, and z. Just call and tell them what your situation is. I called and I am talking to them and because of her supporting me even though I was her student 7 years prior she is now pushing me and I'm able to go to school there. I go up and for my Mom and step dad were both crying when they left me at college and I'm like wow I'm ready for this. This is a whole new experience because this is something we never experienced. I am two hours from home and I've never been away for more than 30, 40 minutes and now I'm 2 and half hours away. You get on board and become a teacher and I stayed in contact Mrs. Webster and she helped me through some of those hard times. Do I really do this and of course college is harder than high school was, but that support was still there and I never lost it. So the day of graduation you get three tickets and I met my future wife the year before and I was kind of like Mom, Dad and Mrs. Webster get a ticket and I felt awful, but I had to have Mrs. Webster as part of that day. Because without her being there to help push me from 5th grade on, I wouldn't have been able to walk across that stage. So she came with my mom and step dad and there and they are balling and afterwards it was great let's get pictures with them holding my diploma know that a teacher is why I'm going to be a teacher.

Lee Anne: So she was a real champion it sounds like for you.

Dave: She was. She would work with my Mom or grandma in any way shape or form. My Mom and Step Dad and my Nanny at the time were like it's all about education and that's what they pushed for me.

Donni: One thing that struck me when I first heard your story was that you were describing this family life that was committed your education and very loving and committed to you, but as a teacher in the classroom, my prejudice I realize it might have been to think you were neglected. You know you are not wearing plain clothes or you are not wearing lots of clothes and your parents are not coming to all the activities after school, they are not coming to meetings, they don't have cars, but what you described really was that they walked two or three miles to make sure you went to the library. That is commitment, but that's not what we see sometimes when we are in the classroom.

Dave: Right and it was very hard because there were times when the bath water was only hot so long and they you had to wash the clothes in there and you would go to school and I remember there

were different people to come visit and I didn't know if it was a social service visit. If maybe someone thought that, but everything that was possible was being done. I think the hard part is if I sit back and I think of nights my mom didn't eat dinner because she would push the food to my brother and I. It wasn't much, but she was doing the best she could and there were days I did go to school hungry and it did affect me. Sometimes yeah the teacher would look and not give me the opportunity, but as my family continued to give me a push to do the best I could and finding that one teacher that did believe in me. At first it was very hard. I know it was hard on my mom and she wouldn't go to open houses. She would go to most things. She would try to go, but she was always embarrassed to go because what are we doing. How do we make this? But she would support. Some of the teachers would be like "well he misbehaves", but he gets good grades. That was hard for my mom, because she's like "why do you misbehave"? I don't know Mom, I was just bored. Things like that. Part of it was I didn't want to let my mom know I was misbehaving because I didn't want to hurt you. Like I said Mrs. Webster was a champion for me and she was the one who really pushed. I think that it has made me more empathetic towards everyone. You get more just by treating people the way you want to be treated. I think if we did that more it would be more helpful for our schools. I'm not a yeller unless it is absolutely necessary. I've had discipline issues where I walk down the hall with a student and they are yelling and screaming and I'm talking like this and they come into the office and are still yelling. I say I'm going to give you five minutes in here. Please don't break this or this because it means a lot to me and I'll walk out and come in and they will say "why didn't you yell at me"? I'm use to be yelled at. I'm like what good does that do you or me. Are my ears red? No. That means my blood pressure is not up. It would be no good to have my ears red because that means I'm not feeling well. You've probably already been yelled at. Than we have conversation and build that relationship and it will make a difference because I've been able to walk into a room where that student is again and something is going and it is instantly well he believes in me and I believe in him. I can't act this way. I can't thank the educators enough who believed in me and the fact that my family just brought in so much to education even though it was limited in our household. My have me in high school. I was a high school baby. She had me going into her senior year of high school, but my grandmother believed enough in education that she kept me with her and my mom had to go and finish. My mom didn't have any opportunity after that to go. My nanny said education is where it needs to be, books are always a plenty. That was the only thing. Education was pushed and pushed. My Nanny saw it from the gecko because she went through a life where she grew up in a single family home in Philadelphia. My great grandmother was a waitress and Nanny couldn't go to college. This was right after WWII. She wasn't going to school and she always wanted to see and one of her proudest moments was me graduating from college. She was like you are the one who go to do it. I knew you would do it. So just having that family understanding and the importance of education and trust in educators is really what made the difference so we really need to do that and continue to give families the trust what we are doing with their children. My family believed. Like you said there was some educators thinking that everything was not being taken care of, but at the same time if I came home with a report of something not going well in school, I was more worried about my mom and nanny. They were going to take books away. My punishment was "you can't have this book right now" and when you think of it as an educators your like no you don't want to take away something away someone enjoys per say. Especially reading, but I was more afraid of them than I was of my principal, Mr. Peterson. It was like I'll go see him that's fine, but I want my books.

Lee Anne: Don't take my books.

Dave: It was very hard, but I am happy for it. I would never change a thing about it because I think it has made me obviously a better human being and better father, better husband and a better educator.

Lee Anne: I'm curious, how do students respond? You said sometimes they come in and say "Mr. Ferguson, were you really poor?" How do kids respond when you share some of your stories with them.

Dave: I think they are kind of taken back and I think sometimes it becomes a trust and developing of is he telling me the story or not. Because I have had students tell me you drive a nice truck, you have nice clothes, you have nice memorabilia here in your office. Yeah, but I have worked for these things. My wife will always laugh at me because I buy shoes because you got one pair of shoes a year. That's all my mom could do. One pair of shoes. I have 25 or 30 pairs of shoes. Rachel's like really this is what you need shoes and shirts because those are things I couldn't have and my brother is the same way. He always buys shoes. We both buy these things. So it's hard for the students to come in, but if you bring up something you know they are going through. Like when you say this is what I ate and they are kind of like. Oh, yeah. I'm familiar with this so..

Lee Anne: You can't make that stuff up.

Dave: No, I mean. I remember in the grocery stores when my Mom would have to go use wick to welfare checks to pay. She would save a quarter and send me over to the gumball machine with my quarter so I would buy something so I wouldn't be around when she was using them. Now it's like a credit card for folks so the difference that some of our students may not even know it is occurring now. Some of the parents I think hide these things from students so they may not be aware what their situations are. It's just building that trust. Once students hear that consistent story of oh year. The fact that my teachers know it because I've know they prior and they may know the story. They will tell the students and I think hearing from those teachers they believe them too. No, it is like you dress nice you have this you have a nice vehicle. You can't be hurting that bad. No, because you learn what you want and you work to get those things.

Lee Anne: A fascinating story. Is there anything else that you would like to share or the understanding of the influence you would like to have or how you feel now about being able to work with students?

Dave: I just want every student to be treated the same way regardless. My background was teaching special education and there are certain bias towards students with disabilities unfortunately and I think there is sometimes bias towards our students living in poverty. As you said you would think that there would be neglect when there was really nothing but love and doing the best we could. I think sometimes we just think that with their situation they are not going to be able to do this. When sometimes it's like let's give them the opportunity to do this. I think that's what we need to do in schools. Make it as level as possible, get to know your students. That's the biggest thing as educators we need to do. We need to get to know our students better. And part of that is my job as a principal of the school is to work with my staff, my teachers and everyone to really get to know our students because I've told some of my teachers about some of the students in the class and they say I was not aware of that. I'm kind of like why are we not aware of that when it is common knowledge or something that's going on, but that changes how I look at a student now and I wish we didn't have

those biases towards our students. That is the one thing I wish we could really change as educators is to just give the kids a chance regardless of how they look or how they might be perceived because if that were the case, I wouldn't be a principal right now. Again someone just saw me, took my story and found out more about me, listen to me, even as a fifth grader and then gave me the opportunity to shine. I have moved up quickly and I've had people comment on my age being in a position. Why do I work so hard? Because I don't want to go back to where I came from and my wife has a hard time with that sometimes. You put in long hours. You're constantly trying and always stressing yourself out, but in the end I don't want to go back. I'm proud of where I came from because it made me who I am, but I don't want my children to experience it. I don't want my wife to experience it and I don't want my mother to experience it again. So I'm going to do everything possible to continue to work and be successful and grow professionally just so I can have the ability to make a difference in others' lives.

Lee Anne: I feel just so honored to be able to sit here and hear your story and get to learn a little bit about you and really how lucky the students and staff are in this community to have you as a champion for them. I really appreciate that and it's been a pleasure hearing what you have to offer. It's just been so expiring. Everybody needs to have their story told and heard.

Dave: Thanks.