

This transcript of the T/TAC William & Mary podcast **Janelle Spitz, Principal at Mary Passage Middle School in Newport News, VA.**

Intro Music.

Donni Davis-Perry: Hello. How are you?

Janelle Spitz: I'm great. How are you?

Donni: Great! Well today we are meeting Janelle Spitz and she has been at Mary Passage Middle School in Newport News, Virginia for the last eleven years. Eight of which she has been principal and prior to that three years as assistant principal. Correct?

Janelle: Correct.

Donni: All right so today we are going to be learning about her schools journey and how data plays a role in improving learning outcomes for students. So I want to thank you for taking your time. I know how busy you are. Thank you for your time today.

Janelle: My pleasure. It's an honor.

Donni: There is so many things I want to ask, but I would like to know how do you help to alleviate the fears that some general education teachers may have about being held accountable for student data in their inclusive classrooms?

Janelle: I love that you are starting off with that question because having been a teacher in an inclusive classroom I know that fear that those teachers have and I always try to focus on growth. Where did your students start? Where are they now and where are they going to finish? So it's never about comparing classrooms to classrooms or teachers to teachers and I think as long as I'm not doing that and the teachers trust that I'm not doing that they feel comfortable in sharing their data and they feel proud in showing me the growth that students have. I'm also very good at looking at the data my-self and pointing out to them successes that they have had that maybe they didn't notice. And when they see that I'm doing that, I think that's the uh huh that "Yes, I did get that" and so that is really good. Again when I was a teacher one time I was compared to one of some of my inclusive classes where compared to a tag classroom and I thought I will never do that to my teachers and I have tried very hard not to have that same standards so I really try to focus on apples to apples and make it about that growth model instead of we all have to be at the same place at the same time. That's just not realistic.

Donni: Ok. So what data do you find that has been most helpful you to collect and analyze to support student learning?

Janelle: The unit test and the quarterly benchmarks were very fortunate in our district that the district prepares those for us so I don't have to think about we are making tests that we created based on what we've taught. Therefore I know we are working towards a general curriculum that the district has prepared based on the state framework and that is what we are aiming for so I know when I am looking at the data it's going to be looking at the same thing that the state is looking for when it comes time for those SOLs. Also I love to look at student work because that tells me a lot more than a data point so looking at a student's writing from the first paper they have done to say the third paper they've done and see how they have improved with say an introduction or thesis or on their elaboration or maybe they weren't showing their work in math problems, but now they are showing their work. That just tells you so much about a student is doing.

Donni: Ok. How frequently do your content grade level teams incorporate data specific to students with disabilities into their planning discussion?

Janelle: Weekly but it's a work in progress. So I say weekly you could go into one content team meeting and you would see it consistently all year. And you could go into another one and unless I'm sitting there or another administrator is sitting there you may not see it and that is the work in progress. That comes from a new team of teachers working together that aren't use to that process we have in place in the school and realizing ok I guess we will just start with the data first because they keep asking us about the data, but than once the teachers get on board the teachers realize oh the data is what I'm using to plan my instruction and how much easier it is to go by that and see the results from that it just becomes part of that natural conversation they have around students and that is not just for our sped students it's for all of our students who we are looking for growth in everybody.

Donni: So how have you found about a shared ownership of student data like all teachers, all students?

Janelle: So when I came here eight years ago, well eleven years ago, but eight as the administrator, as the principal and would be doing data talks with teachers, I had more than one person tell me when looking at the data all the data wouldn't be complete and I would say where is the rest of the class? Where are these students? Oh those are the sped students so the sped teacher will come in and talk to you about those students. No, those are your students and they belong to everybody. You are just as responsible for that data. Just like the sped teacher that was in your class at that time. If another student needs help just because they are not sped, I expect that sped teacher to go over there and help that student as well. So really getting people to understand that the

data belongs to all of us and you are responsible for all of that data. It didn't take long though because the conversation was a real quick conversation and the next time we had data talks all the data was there and everybody was presenting together. I also realized that having the data talks combined. It was a bit of a pain for the sped teachers who had maybe multiple classes they were going to if they were collaborative with two different English teachers because they had to come to two different data talks, but it helped everybody to get onboard with the data being for everyone and not just these are my kids, these are your kids. I couldn't tolerate that.

Donni: So are your data talks individual with teachers and pairs or is it team wide?

Janelle: All of the above. We've had group data talks as vertical teams. We've had content level data talks and individual data talks and pair data talks. It just depends on what the need is. I don't ever want to embarrass people and I'd like to think I am in tune with what embarrasses people. So if I feel it is something that is going to embarrass somebody, I want to have the talk personally, individually before having the group meeting so they understand where the conversation is coming from. Because even though I might be coming from a place of, "hey lets just all talk about this so we can learn from each other, they are stilling there saying "I'm so embarrassed that my data doesn't look like everyone else's. Than we are not going to get anywhere with it. So it just depends what the need is for the school and for the teachers at that time.

Donni: Okay. Good point. So is there any specific software applications that's helped you with that.

Janelle: Well immediately what comes to mind is our school division uses Power School. It used to be known as Interactive Achievements so our testing is done on that and the amount of data that is available in reports is fabulous. Because what I think about what I use to do I would spend so much time collecting data, there was no time to decide what to do with it. Because by the time I was finished collecting it, we have moved on a month later to something else. Where now between that I have a lead teachers whose focus is collecting any data I want so I just tell him "hey can you get me this, this and this and he is very good with spreadsheets and doing all of that for me. We also district person who collects the data for us and disperses it to the schools. I have it all now I can spend time looking at how to I plan interventions. How can we address instruction? And the teachers also can do that. They don't have to go around collecting the data. It's already there for them. So as soon as the student takes the test, boom they know how the student did. They know what their weak in, they know what they are strong in. I can remediate the very next day.

Donni: Ok. Perfect. Your school has been partnering with us at T/TAC at the College of William and Mary for several years and you have implemented an inclusive practices

leadership team. The team that is comprised of the administrators, co-teachers, specialists leads, representatives from the divisions Office of Special Ed. How has keeping the finger on the pulse of your students with disabilities and their teachers celebrations and needs supported your vision of creating this culture of success here?

Janelle: Coming together and working with TTAC and creating the leadership team really help me focus and I don't want to say we didn't have plans in place before because of course we did, but they were almost a follow up idea or add-on where now we start with scheduling first with our sped students and everything is based around that and then the meetings with TTAC and having the teachers in there and getting their perspective and having you all as an outside consultant services coming in and giving us feedback on what you see and then from an administrative perspective and having the district personnel in there. It's just nice to hear all the perspectives in some ways to hear all the celebrations of course, but then also to get the different ideas. T/TAC for example works in several different schools. Much to my dismay because I want you guys only working with me and so we can here "this is how another school does it. Would that work for you?" Okay we didn't think about that. That's great. So we can do different things like that. I think it just help fine tune things. Focus.

Donni: What professional development and support has been provided to teachers to facilitate their use of data?

Janelle: What hasn't and I know that is such a generic answer, but you know I want to back track on that for a second because when I say what hasn't. Immediately what comes to my mind is that we have new teachers and I'm thinking what has been given to them. So I need to make a note to myself to go check on my new teachers to see what they know of. In terms of just reading the data and looking at the reports that are available to them, knowing how to use the reports to pull small groups. Very big in using our time effectively to pull small groups and doing the right things with the right kids at the right time at the right level. Before teachers would say I'm pulling small groups, but it was just what they thought they needed to pull. There was no rhythm or reason to it and now we can actually say I'm pulling these students, we are reviewing this and when test again we can see that particular data point has improved and that is exciting to see and the teachers can say well maybe they didn't pass the test but I retaught them prewriting and my gosh look at the prewriting score. Okay that's great and the kids get excited about that to and it gives them a little bit more buy in when they are pulled for a small group. Our students don't give us any trouble about being pulled for small groups. They like it because they see the efforts. I know I got off on a tangent there.

Donni: No, they do you are right. I've noticed that to.

Janelle: They love it. They love the extra attention.

Donni: So is there any differences for general ed and special education teachers in terms of data collection or data analysis?

Janelle: Well of course for our special education teachers they have to collect for their IEP and progress reports so legally they have to keep a certain amount of data and be able to use that data to support the IEP Goals. Were general education teachers have to do that they need to be able to support the grades that go into their grade books, but let's be honest it's a totally different degree of data collection that they need to do so in that respect it is different. However in terms of this school and what they to give to me, I would say it is the same because they are both responsible for intervening with those students when they are not given the material the first time. So collect your data and how you are going to make sure they get it the second time, or the third time, or forth time.

Donni: Ok. So how is your data collection or your even your student thinking about data analysis evolved over time in the last eleven years since you have been at this school?

Janelle: It's funny I have a spreadsheet that I created when I was a teacher. I don't know if I can easily lay my hands on it, but I did save it and I show it to the teachers sometimes that I hand created that I use to pull students into groups and it is the same thing now that I can get at the touch of a button. So I think my mind was always on the idea of breaking things into chunks and pulling students based on that data, but being able to take it whole school there is no way I can do that without the resources and without the support of the district providing the programs, the district providing the people, the teachers being open and will to think about how to pull small groups when I still have all of these other students over there what am I doing with the other students while I have this group so really getting everyone on board with that has been how I have changed in looking at data and using data is getting other people on board with doing it. Seeing teachers that were not excited about pulling small groups and I think you would be surprised if I told you some of the names of the people who have turned into master small group teachers where I actually send people into their room to say "can you need to see so and so and how that person manages a group and they can effectively do it in a matter of minutes while the other students are working on something else and it is still worthy of what the other children are working on. It's really been a turn around and it's obviously has been eight years. It didn't happen overnight. Although in some cases it does seem like it happened overnight because I'm getting old I guess.

Donni: Well it sounds like you have been thinking about disaggregating student data for a long time.

Janelle: Yes.

Donni: But now it's so much easier.

Janelle: It is.

Donni: So that's good news. Right? Many principals that I work with struggle with helping teachers establish high expectations for students with disabilities. Have you had any success with challenging low expectations and if so what have you found to be effective?

Janelle: Yes, we have put all of our students in eighth grade in Algebra that's a concept that is a hot topic I guess. A lot of people are in favor for it and some don't think it is right for middle students in eighth grade. They are not ready for it and I'm not just talking about students with disabilities just eighth grade middle school students overall. So when we approached the teachers about putting all of our students into Algebra, the question came up but what about our special education students. Well what about them? Just like our general education students some of them are ready for it and some of them aren't, but we are going to push. We are going to scaffold. We are going to put the resources in place for them. We are going to meet with parents and explain what this means for their child. Don't be surprised if your child doesn't do well. It's okay if they don't do well because they are going to high school and they will get it again and at least they are seeing it for two years in a row and having that better foundation if we just sent them right onto high school without it. This didn't happen overnight. It was as struggle, but it happened a lot faster than I thought it would and to see the number of students that we have sent, particularly special education students to high school with that Algebra credit under their belt and to see the teachers both the gen teachers and special education teachers celebrating with those students. When they know they are that close to it, they put everything into that child. They are meeting with that child after school. They are calling parents. They are just like "you got this, you can do this". There was one child that did it and they brought him in cakes and had a little party for him and I don't know what would have happened in high school if he would have received the credit or not, but I do know that when they get to high school or I shouldn't say I know, I've been to high school so I don't know. That in high school Algebra is every other day here in middle school it is every day for 80 minutes, 90 minutes so I just giving them that is a better exposure to it and gives them a better shot at it. Obviously they do it in high school to that goes without saying but I was really proud of the teachers and our efforts in doing that to get them with that high school credit starting off.

Donni: So that's a real victory that you are sharing with us.

Janelle: Yes.

Donni: And it sounds like your teachers kind of caught on when they began to realize and experienced for themselves that kids were exceeding their expectation maybe.

Janelle: Yes, exactly. The teachers could do it. They could teach it to them. Very exciting.

Donni: Have you shared with your teams what the impact of the new standards of accreditations in student growth will have and what it means for students with disabilities?

Janelle: Yes, we have but not to the point where they truly understand it. If they are only going by what I have shared with them. Simply because I want them always focused on teaching and I don't want them getting too hung up on. I am going to be penalized. For some reason they always feel like they are going to be penalized for something when it comes to the standards so I don't want them thinking that because it's not going to turn out that way for them. It's going to be based on a growth model and we always show growth so it's going to be a benefit to them.

Donni: Yes.

Janelle: What's very exciting is I got an email just today that we are going to get our numbers. If they did this model last year what would are numbers have looked like based on this model. So I'm excited to see what it would have looked like for us and I hope it's good.

Donni: Right and then when you share that with the teachers they will have a better understanding.

Janelle: And for the past few years we have talked about it anyway because whenever the discussion of merit based pay which is not something we are going to do here, but it's one of those topics that comes out every few years and people get nervous that they are going to be judged based on the students in their class and I always say think about growth and so look at if you can show growth in those widths, the bandwidths. So they have all that data and at the beginning of the year we talk a lot about it, but then school starts and we get into the teaching and I think it is something that is forgotten about until the end of the year when we talk about the student and how did your students' progress.

Donni: Do you have any additional tips to provide for new administrators hoping to increase student achievement?

Janelle: What I'm about to say might sound contradictory. It doesn't happen overnight, but it also doesn't have to take eight years. I was a new principal starting out and there are things I would do now that I would do much faster than I did starting as a new principal, but I was a new principal and so I didn't know what I didn't know and definitely don't be afraid to push that limit and to reach out to the district to other resources like TTAC. It's hard to believe that such a great group can come into your school and be so supportive and let other people help you with that.

Donni: Thank you.

Janelle: You are not in it alone even though you are the head of the school, you cannot do it alone and you have to be willing to let other people come in and support you with that.

Donni: Thank you for your time today.

Janelle: Thank you.

Donni: And the information that you provided us will support other principals and other administrators.

Janelle: I hope so.

Donni: I'm sure it will.

Janelle: Thank you.