

This is a transcript of the T/TAC William and Mary podcast “Journey to Inclusive Practice”. Post Oak Middle School, Principal Keith Wolf and Special Education Chair Bonnie Bach.

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

Fritz GEISLER: Welcome today we're joined by Keith Wolff the Principal of Post Oak middle school and Bonnie Bach the Special Education Chair here at the school. Thank you all for joining us today.

Keith WOLFF and Bonnie BACH: Thanks for having us.

GEISLER: And what we want to talk about today is your school has taken a journey towards inclusive practices and certainly to be commended what you all have done. And we wanted to have you all sort of walk us through the journey, what you've done where you started what sorts of challenges you faced and will go from there to where we are today.

WOLFF: Well you used a very good word in journey, because it has been a journey. Post Oak Middle School, this is its fourth year that we've been open. We are replacement school for John Jay Wright Middle School which is in the county. I have been Principal Post Oak Middle School for three years and Bonnie has been department chair I believe for four years. Am I correct. Out here. So, I came in the final three weeks that the first year that it was open and saw some changes that needed to be made. And it was trying to get in the collaborative push and looking at the inclusive model that they were currently using and realizing that we could make some changes there. So, but that history that has to be provided, I guess, up front, is you know my experience with inclusion my experience with collaboration. I was in earth science teacher in high school and taught environmental science as well, 9 through 12. And worked with different special educators throughout the year, but also collaborating with other science teachers to you know put forth our best lessons. So, I've had good experiences with good teachers and not so good experiences with other teachers. And you sort of take the good and discard the bad and move on from there. So, I sort of brought that notion with myself, to Post Oak, I should say. I've always sort of carried the notion of trying to do things better. So, they were already doing some powerful things out here so the buy in wasn't an issue. Would you say that Bonnie?

BACH: Yes, I mean I think where we were from where... I mean I think the buy in... the important... I mean the teachers some of the teachers were starting to buy in. But I think our administration was key in embracing collaboration and inclusive practices because that kind of turned us I think around in the direction that we needed to go to school.

GEISLER: Sure, and so a lot of things that were hitting on Keith for bringing in your own personal experiences and beliefs and the power of collaboration and inclusive practices. And Bonnie, I think you're saying earlier, just having an administration that provided those beliefs and a model those.

BACH: Right just having that really allowed the school I think to embrace... when they accept you know that this is the standard this is what everybody should be doing. And it really got everybody on board even the few that were hesitant at first.

WOLFF: And to tail on to that, I think with the collaborative push you have to take it ... First off we have to take a look at our schedule, but I had to be put in touch with T/TAC. And until I got to Post Oak I was unaware of T/TAC and the services they had provided. And it has been such a positive working relationship and these ladies have been tremendous in the growth of Post Oak in what we do. And that has been a collaborative effort. So, you know the keyword there is collaborative. It's working together as a team for the betterment of not only your faculty, but your students. So, we've grown that way and you look at different models of team teaching or one-teach-one-observe, or one-teach-one-assist, or you know just different models that come across, but really it's trying to get that comfort level for teachers.

GEISSLER: Sure, sure. And so, you are starting to talk about things that you did here at the schools since you came, and you were starting to hit on some of the scheduling and things like that. So, from when you came in, what were some of the things that you all saw as needing to change and how did you go about making those changes and deciding which changes were... where to start and how to continue?

BACH: I'll say, one of the things that I've seen is a need is the relationship of the general education and in a special education teacher in the classroom. It was usually looked on as you know that special education teacher was that helper and you know pretty much one-teach-one-assist was the norm. I would say in all of our... most of our collaborative relationships. And the general education teachers, and even special education teachers, not knowing their roles. Not being, you know, comfortable with how they would interact with each other and what their limits or lack of limits were.

GEISSLER: So how did you get people talking around that? What sorts of activities or things did you do?

WOLFF: Well, I think, that first full year in 2007-2008 school year. It was in November. I think it was November 3rd, that we had T/TAC come out here and do an all-day in-service for us. To present to our staff about collaboration, and it's been a wonderful teaming ever since. I'm not saying it because you all are all here, I truthfully feel that. You know when you look at scheduling, one of the things drawing from my own personal experience, if you have a different team every year it's hard to develop a relationship, a bond, a seamless transition. So, I think one of the first things we did is that I sat down with Bonnie, and let me say this first, you have to have trust in your department chair and them in you. And I would say there's a lot of that that happens with every department, but when it comes down to your special education department chair, and again I'm not saying because Bonnie is here, because I tell her this all the time. She's strong at what she does. She has a buy in and she believes it's important. And when you're both heading in the same direction that ship can sail a lot easier. So,

you look at your model, you look at what your teams are. The teachers were asking for you know certain teams to be set-up. Could they be the same person the second year? Could they be you know with that individual who was instrumental in their class before? And on the flip side of that, sometimes some teams you saw did not work and they would say I can't work with that person again. So, you can't dismiss it. So, once you dismiss it there's no buy-in. So, you look at those teams at work. You put them in classes to be successful. And when those when those teachers are clicking, those students are moving. But we've been able to sort of move this collaboration, not just a as a special education teacher and regular education teacher, but two regular education teachers working together collaborative environment and we had many more classes and structures that are set up this year as a catalyst, I believe, that was provided by the special education department and regular education department teachers working together. So, we're moving in the right direction because of the buy-in.

GEISSLER: And I hear he's talking about communication too and excepting both the good and the bad feedback and making decisions based upon what was best for everyone. So, having the teams be able to stay together, structuring the teams for positive outcome, sounds like that was very important. And then also getting awareness of some of the different co-teaching models. And how did the teachers work? Where did they start once they could get past one-teach-one-assist or one-teach-one-email. What were sort of the way you went about that.

BACH: Well you know, we have... common planning time is, I say, is key as well and communication with the teacher that you're working with. And we...

WOLFF: We have common planning that... let's just say this: You can get a lot of teachers together and sometimes you just have to... just like students inside a PE, students and on the playground, they just have to learn to play together. You provide them the opportunity to do that. And we had a staff that was hungry to play together. You know you just need to provide them the ball so to speak. You know, here you go here's the game. So common planning was instrumental. And it was just like... just as we would not dismiss the criticisms or even the praise, it was when a special education teacher comes to a core teacher area meeting, it's not dismissing them as though "You don't know your content. I'm the content specialist". You don't dismiss anybody. When we all come to a table, and this is one thing that we have tried to create, is that even me, as a principal, I've told my department chairs I've told anybody that listen you can come to me with anything. I'm not going to bite your head off. You know it really hurts. Let's listen. We've worked together on a level playing. I don't want to be above you or below you. I just want to work with you hand in hand. Let's go together it's a lot easier that way. And the buy in is there on some part, but to some you know it's coming along. I think it's a lot more comfortable so far. You know as experience grows with one another.

BACH: I agree. And I think they're more accepting. I think when we sit down for common planning I think we're more accepting of each other's ideas. I think they had

the training now these past couple of years that they're feeling comfortable to really expand.

WOLFF: Our special education teachers are just as important in the core content area as our core content areas specialist. And so, the wealth of knowledge and expertise that a special education teacher can bring, in regard to differentiation as how to reach the struggling learner, you can't dismiss any of that. And not just help a special education teacher, but every student. And that's it's not your students or my students. They're our students and we're going to take them together.

GEISLER: And then that planning time to work some of that out and structure the lessons. What are some of the..., you draw on some of what you are seeing, what are some of the neat variations that you've seen take place in some of these co-teaching classrooms?

BACH: Well you know some parallel teaching is going on. Some team teaching. This year we are hoping to incorporate a lot of stations throughout. Not just teacher stations with the kids, but the interactive and doing their own and we are just facilitating and the students are doing the majority of the work. With opening up the classrooms to two general education collaborating together for a classroom it really is... that special education teacher becomes that third person in that environment and you really can do a lot of really neat things this year.

WOLFF: We have opened up. When we say opened up some classrooms, we literally mean opening up some classrooms. We have a luxury that not all schools have, but I would encourage them to look at the dynamic of their building to see where they can make changes. We have some curtains or wall structures that you can move in between a couple of classrooms so we threw open the wall. I'll tell you the art teachers are nailing it right now. I've been out to observe these past six days that were in so far. And you can't tell that we're in six days. They're hitting content left and right. And if one doesn't throw in the information, the other one does. And they just are really clicking off one another, but that's also having faith in the partner that you are teaching. So those are some of the things that we're seeing right now.

GEISLER: I'm just sitting here thinking know you're talking about things that you've done and that you're looking to do this year and things that you're seeing. Then going back to what you said at the beginning, is getting those teams right and giving people time to grow together as partners. The longer they are together the more variations they can try, and I'm assuming that the planning becomes a little easier as well?

BACH: Yes, yes it does. I think when that trust, I mean it does take time to build that trusting relationship with it with your colleague. But I think that as time and growth happens.

WOLFF: We've also opened up environments. Our goal with the station teaching is... you know we've opened up a math lab, we've opened up an English lab to provide

opportunities. If there's two teachers that go up there, regardless of if they are able to open up a wall between their room or not. Two teachers go into these open rooms that are really double classrooms that we've converted into these labs is that you can have two people in their two core content areas, or special education and a regular education teacher to put them in there. And while students are moving from station to station there's a teacher who can do small group instruction at the same time it just and the technology is key. I mean we are, I don't know how loud I want to say this, but we're loaded for bear when it comes down to technology to you know. So, our county has made a push for technology and it has it has paid off over and over again for our students. And whether they're using... we have smart boards in all the five classrooms. And whether it's the students using a smart board, or the teacher showing that, or the clicker system, or you know storyboard, anything you know alpha smart for some of those kids who need it. You know there's just a wide variety of technology available for these teachers and students.

GEISSLER: It's fantastic. It sounds that the teachers are very intentional about what they're using in terms of meeting the needs of each student. And I'm sure that also goes back to the planning right. Doing some of that. It sounds fantastic. I have to come and hang out for a while. Now the other things I wanted to ask about was the scheduling, if that was something that had to be addressed or changed or if that was something that was already in place?

WOLFF: I would say that that's a work in progress, to be honest with you. I know that some schools when they schedule they start with special education first. Although that was a goal that we had talked about, even after we went to our in-services down in Newport News with T/TAC, it was one of the goals, but it still is a goal and I don't want to say it's not achievable because it certainly is. It's just that as you begin your planning phase, you look at what teams will best reflect the success on a student. So, I can't say that you know because I honestly did look through some schedules and say this isn't a good placement for the student. They need to be here. But I think there's thing we do as well. I trust Bonnie's judgment when it comes down to them and her coming up to me and saying, "I think the students should go here or this would be a better place". Okay, Okay. You know you do what you need to do. And that's just having faith in her decision making. And she's very good at it. So that's what we did. So that's a goal of ours. And we still have some ways to go. And I think that's more of a comfort level. You know truthfully of where start there.

BACH: But I do think that we tried. You know we really... I think this past year, as opposed to the others in the past, I think we were trying to reach that goal.

GEISSLER: Yeah sure. And so, one of the things I really like is that you're addressing this is not a completed journey by any means. It's an ever-ongoing journey. And so, one of the goals for this year is... well one of the goals period, as you move through is to always be trying to work more and to be better in the scheduling. Are there's some other things that you're looking at for this year or moving forward areas that are being addressed?

WOLFF: I think it's exposing... we have a lot of collaborative teams now. And even when we speak collaboration to our teachers, it's important that we put a new twist on it because they're so used to hearing it and this is just second nature to them and their job. But I'm sure at some point they're going "Oh, another collaboration". Okay, you know how can we sort of spice it up? But there really... we have teams that are firing on all cylinders and it's trying to expose other teachers who whether it's exploratory were we've had some teachers work together to create projects or work on projects as a large group structure. But it's trying to get other teachers to work together and show them... they know the power in it. But sometimes there's the autonomy inside of a classroom. It's hard to let go sometimes. And we believe they will. So, it's just a matter of exposure. They've been exposed, they just need to take that next step and that's where we come in to encourage that.

BACH: And I think that... I mean we're not perfect by any means. I think we are we're perfecting what we have, but it's an ongoing process. I mean we do have some new teams working together this year for the first time, so you have that, you know, to work through that trust. But you know, I just think like you said it's a work... you know we're always striving to be better.

GEISSLER: All right, well I have to say, I mean it sounds fantastic. And the instruction and it just seems like very dynamic and fun for the students. Talking about moving and clicking on along, and you all are certainly to be commended for the work that you've done and. And as you continue to move forward. Thank you so much for your time today.

WOLFF and BACH: Thank you.

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