Podcast: Plan for Playfulness, Connection, and Flow

Planning for the start of a new school year, we should intentionally design for playfulness, connection, and flow—the elements that are core to fun and joy. It's not just about better lessons – but better experiences. Experiences that students will remember, that teachers will find energizing, and that build both engagement and joy. Whether it's a surprise horse outside a classroom window or a red-carpet moment for staff, fun has the power to transform not just how we feel—but how we learn, connect, and grow.

Watch Catherine Price's TED talk here.

Hear the entire podcast with George Philhower here.

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Podcast Transcript:

[00:00:00.000] – Steve [Intro]
Welcome to the Steve Barkley Ponders Out Loud podcast. As instructional coaches and school leaders, you are tasked with guiding continuous teacher growth to create student success. This podcast looks to support you with strategies from experienced guests, as well as my own insights that I've gathered over the years. I'm thrilled to have you with us. Thanks for tuning in.

[00:00:32.340] – Steve
Plan for playfulness, connection, and flow. Katherine Price, the author of, "The Power of Fun: How to Feel Alive Again," describes the intersection of playfulness, connection, and flow as the spot where fun is found. Now, the question is, do we need more fun at school? Eric Jensen, the author of, "Teaching with the Brain in Mind," explores neuroscience in teaching practices. He highlights how emotions, environment, and engagement affect learning. He constantly argues that fun isn't a distraction, but a critical element of effective teaching. Jensen points out that fun activates the brain's reward system. You see, the brain is wired seek out pleasure and to avoid pain. Fun in the classroom releases dopamine, which helps cement learning. When students have fun while learning, their attention improves, memory consolidates, and engagement deepens. Jensen adds, fun builds positive emotional states such as curiosity, laughter, and joy, and it boosts cognition.

[00:02:01.340] – Steve
Negative states inhibit cognition. Jensen adds that fun creates a safe emotional climate, thus reducing stress hormones like cortisol. In contrast, fear or boredom blocks access to higher-order thinking like problem solving and creativity. Jensen also suggests that fun improves memory through emotion. Emotionally charged events get stored more deeply in long term memory. Fun, like surprise or humor, makes

learning experiences more memorable. It also boosts recall, especially for abstract and challenging content. It’s important to note that Jensen explains the difference between fun for entertainment versus fun for engagement. He describes fun as a way to connect emotionally with content, and he warns against fun for the sake of fun. Instead, he advocates for purposeful fun that’s embedded in instruction like games, movement, humor, storytelling, or playful challenges. Those create buy-in and curiosity, which helps students take ownership of their learning. Here’s a thought from Jensen: If students aren’t laughing and learning in your class, you’re working too hard. Let’s listen in as Katherine Price explains the role now of playfulness, connection, and flow in feeling fun. Note, she also adds additional benefits to experiencing fun.

[00:03:55.900] – Katherine
What is this feeling that we call fun? Well, when people tell me their stories, It’s about fun, it’s really interesting because the details are all different and often quite mundane, but the energy running through them is the same. And there are three factors that are consistently present to the point that I believe they constitute a new definition, one that is a lot more accurate than what’s in the dictionary. And those three factors are playfulness, connection and flow. So by playfulness, I do not mean you have to play games or, God forbid, make believe. I just mean having a light-hearted attitude of doing things for the sake of doing them and not caring too much about the outcome, letting go of perfectionism. When we have fun, our guard is down and we’re not taking ourselves too seriously. Connection refers to the feeling of having a special shared experience, and I do think it’s possible in some circumstances to have fun alone and for this feeling of connection to be with yourself or the surroundings or the activity. But in the majority of stories that people tell me about their peak fun memories, another person is involved.

[00:04:58.660] – Katherine
And that's true even for introverts. And then flow is the state where we are so engaged and focused on whatever we're doing that we can even lose track of time. You can think about an athlete in the middle of a game or like a musician playing a piece of music. It's when we're in the zone. It's possible to be in flow and not have fun, like if you're arguing, but you cannot have fun if you are not in flow. So playfulness, connection, and flow all feel great on their own. But when we experience all three at once, something magical happens. We have fun. And that doesn't just feel good. It is good for us. In fact, fun does so many amazingly good things for us that I personally believe that fun is not just the result of human thriving. It's a cause. So, for example, fun is energizing. When people tell me their stories about fun, they glow. It is like a fire has been lit inside of them and the energy and the warmth that they give off is contagious. So much of life drains us, but fun fills us up. Fun also makes us present.

[00:06:02.380] – Katherine
A lot of us put a lot of work into trying to be more present. We do yoga classes, we meditate, and that is all great. But the fact that fun is a flow state means that when we are having fun, we simply are present. There's no other way for it to happen. Fun also unites us. We live in a really polarized world, and as we all know, there's a lot of very serious problems. But when we have fun with people, we don't see them as different political parties or nationalities or religions. We connect with them as human beings. And it's worth noting that that is the first step in being able to work together to solve those problems. Fun also makes us healthier. Now, being lonely and stressed out, as many of us have been for the past two years, causes hormonal changes in our bodies that increase our risks for disease. But when we have fun, we're relaxed and we're more socially connected, both of which have the opposite effect. So it blows my mind every time I It's not that we're thinking about it this way, but having fun is a health

intervention.

[00:07:04.340] – Katherine
And then lastly, fun is joyful. We all so desperately want to be happy. We read books about happiness, we download apps about happiness. But when we are in a moment of having fun, we are happy. So it makes me think that perhaps the secret to long term happiness is just to have more everyday moments of fun.

[00:07:23.380] – Steve
As I listened to Price describe the combination of playfulness, connection, and flow, I was thinking about the desired outcomes of teachers and school leaders as they're planning the beginning of the school year. School administrators and teacher leaders should be considering how they energize a staff to tackle the hard work that lies ahead. Often work with new programs and changes, as well as meeting new learners. What should you be planning? It's certainly not some of the openings that I've witnessed when I was asked to provide a motivational opening day keynote. At one school, before I was introduced, someone reviewed the new requirements for teacher duties and meetings. But perhaps even worse was the school that reviewed teacher retirement qualifications prior to my introduction. He's surprised that many of those teachers might go back to their classrooms and plan an opening day with students where they're handing out rules skills and the syllabus. Compare those experiences to those of a staff in a school in Florida who on opening day for the teachers, approached school and found a long red carpet on the walkway from the parking lot to the school entrance. As they neared the entrance, they found braided velvet rope barriers on brass poles, guiding them to the door, just like the Academy Awards.

[00:09:03.020] – Steve
Behind the braided rope barriers were parents and students dressed as gaudy tourists who reacted as if the teachers were celebrities. They clicked cameras like paparazzi, and they

asked for autographs along with screams and swoons. Inside, the staff debriefed the impact of the experience and then spent time collaborating on the design of wow experiences for the opening day with their students. One of the teachers described the event to me as being a real morale booster for the entire staff. She said, “We began validating each other’s attempts to do something in the classroom that was different.” “It was fun,” she said, “and we kept saying wow to each other.” I’m seeing playfulness, connection, connection and flow as being present in these teachers’ experience. What a great example for an administrative team to provide. I found strong connections between Planning for Fun at School and the strategic plan at Eastern Hancock Schools in Indiana. Their strategic plan is built around four promises: joy, connection, growth, and success. I went looking for a definition of joy, and I found this: Joy might be defined as a deeper, more enduring emotion, often arising from a sense of meaning, connection, or fulfillment.

[00:10:48.840] – Steve
It’s often internal, reflective, and not always tied necessarily to a specific event or activity. I think that definition aligns with Katherine Price’s description of fun. Dr. George Philhower, the superintendent of Eastern Hancock Schools, described the district’s commitment to joy on an earlier podcast with me.

[00:11:18.740] – George
So we put those promises in order, and we think it’s the order that we need to think about them. So the first thing we want our people to think about is, how do we make kids look forward to being at And for us, we call that joy. And sometimes joy comes from whimsical experiences. The article that you were mentioning, we talked about a fifth-grade class that learned about Paul Revere, and they invited someone with a horse to come past. And while the kids were reading about Paul Revere in their textbooks, a horse and a rider rode past their

classroom screaming, “The British are coming!” So we try to give kids experiences that they will remember so that when they’re sitting around their table at night with their friends and their families ask them, what did you learn at school today? They have something to talk about. We really believe that just like you and I, when we drive, and have you ever arrived at your destination and you’re there and you’re like, how did I get there? And it’s because that most often happens during the drives that you do every single day. And so your brain has this agreement with the rest of you to say, hey, I’m going to put this thing on autopilot while you think about lesson plans and think about whatever else you’re doing.

[00:12:39.660] – George
And I think school sometimes happens that way for kids, that they do it 180 times per year, and their brains go on autopilot. So I’ve got a friend named Kevin Honeycutt that talks about the idea of driving like we talked about. And he says, if a deer jumps out in front of you as you’re driving, you’re going to come right back to that moment, and you’re going to remember that. And so if somebody ask you, how was your drive home? That’s what you’re going to talk about. So what we’re trying to do is figure out how do we make deer jump out in front of kids in their learning experiences as much as possible so that they have an emotional experience to anchor their learning to. And then our other three promises, we think that there are levels of joy. So the first level is just that whimsicle fun. I’m looking forward to go into the amusement park, balloons, sprinkles, that fun stuff. But real joy comes from discovering those other three promises. So we talk about connection as the idea that every person that comes Eastern Hancock feels known by name, strength, interests, future hopes and dreams and needs.

[00:13:51.480] – George
And we feel like if we’re creating a space where people feel known that deeply, then that’s a pretty special spot. Promise

number three for us is growth. We want our kids to learn new things every day that they will remember. And that sounds really simple. But we know that 60% of the time that kids are spending in school, they're learning about stuff that they already know, which means that kids are showing up to school not to learn new stuff, but to show the stuff they already know. But we also know that joy comes from learning. And I love learning, but I don't know if I loved learning when I was in school. So we're trying to make sure that our kids are learning new things that they will remember. And we I think that that whole that they will remember part is anchored in joy. Those kids are going to remember Paul Revere for the rest of their lives because he rode past their classroom when they were in fifth grade. Then promise number four for us is what we call success. That's just our reminder that producing academically proficient kids is not the end goal for us, that we want to produce kids that are ready and confident for that Monday after graduation.

[00:14:54.830] – George
And we think that has a direct connection to joy as well, because kids, when they have a experience at school that they see as relevant, there's lots of joy that can be found in that.

[00:15:06.780] – Steve
Some time should be set aside for reflection about joy and fun as you plan for the new school year. Fun isn't a break from learning, it's a bridge to it. When we intentionally design for playfulness, connection, and flow, we don't just create better lessons, we create better experiences. Experiences that students will remember. Experiences that teachers will find energizing. Experiences that build both engagement and joy. Whether it's a surprise horse outside a classroom window or a red carpet moment for staff, fun has the power to transform not not just how we feel, but how we learn, connect, and grow. What moments will make your learners, teachers, leaders, and

yourself say, wow, this year? How you make a little more space for fun, not just as an add-on, but as a pathway to a purpose. Here’s wishing you a joyful and fun-filled year. Thanks for listening.

[00:16:34.560] – Steve [Outro]
Thanks for listening, folks. I’d love to hear what you’re pondering. You can find me on Twitter or LinkedIn at Steve Barkley, or send me your questions and find my videos and blogs at barkleypd.com.