Podcast: Educators Learning With Partners

In this week's episode of the Steve Barkley Ponders Out Loud podcast, Steve is joined by members of the Learning Forward Foundation, Audrey Hobbs, Amy Colton and Ed Tobia to discuss the "touchpoint" process they use with recipients of grants and scholarships from their organization.

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Steve [Intro]: 00:18 Hello and welcome to the Steve Barkley

Ponders Out Loud podcast. For over three decades, I've had the opportunity to learn with educators at all levels, both nationally and internationally. I invite you to listen as I explore my thoughts and learning on a variety of topics connected to teaching, learning and leading with some of the best and brightest educators from around the globe. Thanks for listening in.

Steve: 00:46 Educators learning with partners. In the past several years, I've had the opportunity to work with the Learning Forward Foundation and I have three of the members of the foundation on the call with us today to talk about a process that they use called touch points. And it's the process that they use with people who have been given a grant or a scholarship from the organization and they're finding it to be very successful. And I wanted to explore with them today what is it that's causing the process to to be successful and powerful and how might we take some of the learnings that they're finding and apply them in other situations and scenarios. So Audrey, I'm wondering if you would would kick us off doing a quick introduction to yourself and a little introduction to the Learning Forward Foundation.

Audrey: 01:47 Great. I'm Audrey Hobbs Johnson and I'm an educational consultant and work in British Columbia in Canada. And the Learning Forward Foundation is a key partner with the Learning Forward irganization. And our foundation leverages money, time and relationships through coaching so that we can transform beliefs that will meet learners in the 21st century. We work primarily with adult learners through coaching and we also work with our donors and our donors are really important because that's how we leverage the donation. We are very tightly tied to the belief system of Learning Forward. The standards as a Canadian, Learning Forward has come into Canada and we have our own system, all the dimensions and it's still standards and dimensions that are backed by research that help us connect to reflect with our awardees. Our awardees span

from being superintendents in districts to being teachers in schools. And I should say span from being teachers in schools to superintendents rather than the other way around.

Steve: 03:10 I note Audrey, that you also give some awards that go to groups as well as individuals – as a team?

Audrey: 03:19 Yes, we do. We encourage teams to apply. We have changed over the last few years and now our major donations, our major awardees go to people attending the Learning Forward Academy. And as an Academy, they attend as a individual, but many times we pick up three or four people who were attending an Academy and that provides a team. The other place we have awards is we – there are affiliates in most States and a couple of provinces in B.C. and we work with those affiliates with the Learning Forward beliefs and work.

Steve: 04:00 Thank you. Thank you. Ed, how about introducing yourself and describing a little bit about what the touchpoint process is?

Ed: 04:09 Certainly. Well, I'm a retired educator, I have 43 years in education and had been looking for a way to give back to the profession that has been so good to me and I found an opportunity through the Learning Forward Foundation. And specifically, the part of the foundation that I belong to is the research and support committee. And the research and support committee really has two main functions. One, we want to learn how people are using these scholarships and grants are forwarding our work – how are they, helping to really advance the whole idea of professional learning throughout the country. So what we want to do is to learn how they are using their resources, how they are taking the opportunity to really think about professional learning in a deeper way.

Ed: 05:26 We can then take that information and provide it back to the organization so the organization can learn from what's going on in the field as we are providing support to

people to advance professional learning. Our other function is to provide support and what that means is that we get on the phone with the awardees for about an hour at a time, a couple of times a year and just have a conversation with them, really. We have some prepared questions and we've really been very thoughtful about how we phrase these questions so that they're not a matter of asking people, oh, how are you doing it, how you're spending your money or things like that. It's much more about helping them think through the problem of practice that they are addressing so that they can think about it more deeply. And we frequently get responses from individuals after the phone call is over saying, you know, I hadn't thought about things that way. That's our whole point. We want to help people think about the work that they're doing a little bit more deeply.

Steve: 06:45 So when you broke there to ask if I had a question, I was hearing you describe how you're learning in the process while you're supporting them in learning in the process and it just rings to me how often people who are working in coaching roles in schools find when they walk away from having worked with a teacher, that the question is in their head as to who learned more, the coach or the teacher in the process. Amy, I'm wondering if you'd do a quick introduction to yourself and talk a little bit about some of the things that the organization is finding as results of the of the touchpoint calls.

Amy: 07:35 Sure. I'm Amy Colton and I'm executive director of Learning Forward Michigan, which is the state affiliate for Learning Forward. And I, like Ed, am on the research and support committee so we're currently very busy doing our touchpoint calls. There's several things that we've been learning. We really pay attention to people understanding the standards for professional learning at a deep level and we listen for shifts in their language from moving from training, to providing training, to professional learning, to actually

understanding the elements within the standards. And we find that that evolved over a couple year period. So in the beginning, even when we ask them what standards are guiding your work, they usually pick one or two and they name it and they have limited understanding of what is involved in that standard. And then by the end of year two, two and a half, we started hearing them talking about the standards in great depth, conceptually as well as practically and they don't have to give it a label anymore. So that's one thing.

Amy: 08:59 We've also learned that in the very beginning, year one, that people struggle even to identify what their problem of practice is. And specifically, what are the outcomes they wish to accomplish. Usually they come in with very broad goals. And to have them narrow in to an area where they can actually measure that they've reached that outcome is usually a challenge for folks. They start out by telling us what activities they want to engage with, but they don't often understand what it is they actually hope to see at the end of their time with Learning Forward Foundation. The other thing that we're learning is that when it comes to – when we ask them what evidence are you able to collect to show that you're having progress towards your outcome, it often goes from what I am doing with adults and professional learning to I'm measuring student outcome.

Audrey: 10:10 I'm measuring student achievement. And we have to back them up to have them think about what is the evidence that adult behaviors are changing, which gives us an opportunity to really talk to them about the theory of action and how you have to have evidence not only of what they are doing when providing the professional learning and engaging people in it, what changes in practice and knowledge are you seeing in those educators that are involved in the professional learning? Without that, it's really hard to make any – come up with any conclusions about what's impacted the student learning. And I think the bottom line, the other thing

we're learning, and I think Ed would agree that, as the people who facilitate the call, the touchpoint call, we're learning how it is we can engage people in reflection. How we ask the questions, when we ask the questions, how we develop relationships with individuals who we only speak with two times a year and we're finding that think aloud for our awardee is – they see as great benefit to their own learning.

Steve: 11:33 Wow. You've put out a bunch of pieces there that I'd like to touch on. The one I'm hearing is focus. And it's interesting, I'm working with several groups now that are looking at professional growth plans. In one system, it's how do instructional coaches and administrators support teachers' individual personal growth plans. And in another, I'm looking at the principals having professional growth plans for themselves that are connected to, but different from what the school improvement goal or plan might be. And just last week, a superintendent had me coach him on his plan in front of the entire administrative team of the school. And he was blown away by the necessity to focus it, which he hadn't done up to that point. And as soon as we were finished, I got a message from one of the principals in the audience asking me to do it the next day for him back at his school staff. And they were both making the connection that very often, teachers were working on what they were developing as professional growth plans, but not getting focused at enough to really drive the learning. So I'm wondering to what extent are you finding that people – is change the focus the right word or modify the focus as they begin to work with you across the time of the grant?

Audrey: 13:17 Well, I think the focus evolves. They narrow the focus through the evolution, especially when they're in the Learning Forward Academy. That, part of the goal of those who facilitate the academy is to narrow their focus to something that's manageable and that they can measure. And I think the struggle, the challenge for many of our awardees is their job

is huge and they feel a sense of urgency to accomplish everything at once. And so we talk to them about picking a part of the bigger picture and really thinking about defining that outcome in a measurable way so that they can then direct their action. And Ed, you might have some additional pieces you'd like to contribute to that.

Ed: 14:12 Well, as Amy said, we're not the only ones who are working with the awardees, especially those who were in the academy. In the
academy, they have a coach. And the coaches really help them as a group, really think about how to narrow their focus. One of the things that we've been able to do, not being part of what's going on within the academy, is to ask some kind of innocent questions. Tell us more about this. What can you say about how teacher practice is changing? And as we're asking some of these questions, we find that they are beginning to think a little differently about their approach. We're not, like I said, not the only ones, but at the same time, I think that we have an opportunity given our role to help them explore the challenges that are there that they may be facing about implementation or how they go about gathering data about what changes are actually taking place as a result of the work that they're doing.

Steve: 15:38 Audrey, I know that you've been involved with this for a good number of years and I'm wondering if you might touch on the changes that were implemented in this process and I'm guessing those changes came from things you were learning along the way.

Audrey: 15:58 It's a really good question. As I'm listening to my colleagues, I'm thinking of that age old piece, how do we focus on what it is we really want to talk about? And in the beginning, this process was really started on an evaluation assessment piece. That was the original piece that Shirley Hord, bless her, started upon and gave us some very good guidelines as we went through that. As we worked with a number

of people involved with our awardees, we realized our job was not evaluation or was not even an assessment. Our job was a coaching job. So the evolution from an assessment to coaching has been really a key piece. And I invite Amy and Ed to jump in. But from my point of view, when I was chair of the foundation, that was a key piece that we worked on in those two years.

Audrey: 17:00 It isn't always easy for us to change the outside perception of that piece. It was probably easier for us as as the coaches or as the mentors or as thought partners to actually change our practice, but to change the perception was more difficult. And so the kinds of things that Ed was just talking about are bang on. How do you find that focus question that will actually focus the participant. But the other piece I think that has evolved is our work with the other coaches. We didn't always have the coach of the Academy on with us. We didn't always have – we used to have a principal award who had an outside coach as well and we didn't always have that coach with us. And so I think we learn that collaboration and co-design of our pieces was a real key to, one, a successful session – the successful sessions and outcomes for our awardees and two, for changing the public perception, the educator perception of what we were doing.

Audrey: 18:13 I would invite Amy or Ed to add to that because they're on the inside of this process. I'm a person – I'm what you call a lead. And my job is to develop a relationship with each of the awardees. So I am on the calls, but I also have that relationship with the awardees.

Amy: 18:32 Well, I would just add that one of the challenges we have with the initial touch points we have with our awardees, is the traditional image of they're calling us because they gave us a grant and they want to make sure we're doing what we said we were going to do. And we say in every call that we're learning partners. That, our goal is to learn as much from them as well as to support them. And so also in

addition to the coaches from the academy, we have folks like Audrey who are from the scholarship and grants. The ones who are specifically working on the grants themselves are on the call. And so this person is getting, at the minimum, three different individuals who are there with different experiences and different expertise that they can bring to the awardee to help them at wherever they are in their development along a continuum in the process.

Steve: 19:48 I just have to make the connection here of all the places that I'm working with teachers with a with a professional growth plan and the desire to find out how many boxes there are in the form and how they have to get each box checked off versus the idea that they may learn partly through that this was a terrible idea. And and I want to go back and change or modify it. It's a slow change process. Ed, was there something you wanted to add on that note yet?

Ed: 20:28 Well, I was just thinking, I was gonna add to what Amy was saying, that our approach is really very different. In the course of my career, I've been a recipient of a number of different grants and every one of them had some sort of feedback process where you're had to share some evidence of what was going on and so forth and it was always seen to be an evaluation. One of the things we have done over the last few years specifically, is our research and support committee gets together on a regular basis and we not only learn from the recipients or the recipients, but we've also learned from each other as we talked to each other about the experiences that we've had on these touchpoint calls. So we use these as opportunities for ourselves to grow and learn how to best support people and how to help take people to the next level. One of the things, for example, that I had never used before came from [inaudible]. Someone said that would be interesting to ask what people are curious about. And so that became a question that we use on a regular basis at this point and that opens up – those kinds of open ended questions really open up

people’s thinking.

Audrey: 22:00 I’m actually on the Learning Forward website as we’re talking and one of our awardees has this quote and I think it really talks about what we’ve just been saying. It says, “The Learning Forward Foundation Grant has given us an opportunity to collaborate, reflect and define a clearer path for full scale implementation of our ‘Personalized Learning’ innovation work. The team has a better idea where to go slow before we can go fast.” And I think, as I’m on the touch points as a listener and a learner and a thought partner, it’s that piece at the end, a better idea of where to go slow and how to focus before you can go fast and do a million things. That to me is where the touch points are now. After a couple of touch points in the last few days, I’m thinking that’s a really a piece that resonates with me.

Steve: 22:56 There’s a sentence I’d like to read to you that was said to me describing touchpoint. And it’s got lots of pieces in it. So when I’m finished, pull whatever piece from here you want to respond to, but I’d like the listeners on the podcast to think about whatever your role as a school administrator, an instructional coach, an individual member of a PLC, listen to things in this statement and consider how we can make more of this happen for educators across the board because our team is sharing here with us, the value that the people that they’re that they’re working with are finding in the process. So here’s the statement and guys pull any piece of this that you want to respond to. But so many of the words were just – hit me as important thinking points for us. Here’s the quote. “The touch point has become a type of learning design, allowing professionals a conversational space to reflect in a community of practice, maintain momentum for implementation, create reciprocal accountability, address challenges of implementation, and celebrate the progress.” I’m glad that’s the one that got stuck on the end there. But man, there’s lots of stuff there. So you want to pick a piece of

that and respond to it?

Amy: 24:31 Well, I'll pick the conversational space. And I really think of that as dialogue. When people have an opportunity to really problem solve, think aloud, hear different perspectives, consider both perspectives in a safe way, I know Dewey used to say that teachers need to reflect in and on their practice and I think that's what the conversational space allows people to do – is they can reflect on their ideas before they actually go and do them and get some feedback from the people who are on the call. And that actually, ultimately, increases implementation or makes it more effective because they've actually been able to think through some of the challenges and the barriers that they might encounter.

Steve: 25:31 Thanks.

Ed: 25:32 I think it's more than just thinking through. Because the other thing, going back to the research and support commiteem our support function also gives us the opportunity to provide some suggestions and provide some resources for folks as they're going through the implementation process. There have been things that have gone beyond, for example, there was one system that was interested in a comment that I had made about the concerns-based adoption model. And as a result of that, away from the touchpoint process, I wound up spending some time with the team on going through some – developing their understanding of that concerns-based option level. So that there's that kind of support that helps – thinking about the people who are listening to this. And you know, this is something that anyone can set up as a way of providing support for team or for a group who are going through a change process.

Ed: 27:00 And that is, finding someone who can be a thought partner with them and having that thought parnter be someone who also has some background in the area that they are

exploring so that they can provide not only the right questions to get them to think about it more deeply, but occasionally providing them with some resources. Have you thought about this? Or here's a resource to go to, to learn a little bit more about what you're exploring. So there are opportunities that I think people have to make sure that when they're implementing something, that there is support behind it. It's not just saying, okay, well we're going to go out and do this. What kind of support is being provided to that? And that's what I think we do as an organization. We provide that kind of ongoing support. It doesn't happen just once or twice it goes on and we're really developed a relationship with the awardees. We develop trust and provide the kind of support that gives them a feel that they can really do this. They can really make a change and really make a difference in what they're doing.

Steve: 28:31 Thanks Ed. Audrey, you wanna kind of close us out here?

Audrey: 28:35 With the two pieces that Amy and Ed have talked about, what about the conversation? What about learning about what it is our awardees need? I'm going to go back to an old fashioned piece of Learning Forward that we used to talk about. Content, process and context. And I think one of the things that touchpoints can do is look at the content and process, which I think that Amy and Ed have covered. I think the other piece that the touchpoints are – you can't measure the success but it's there. It's how we explore the context of each of these people. But if you look at the system that each of our awardees are in, it's very different. And to be able to explore that context and among the people on the call and among the preparation and dialogue we have among ourselves, that to identify the context helps us identify how that person can work in that context. And for me, that's a gift for not only our awardees, but for us to learn how the context of education is changing as we move forward.

Steve: 29:45 Well, thank you to the three of you. It has been my pleasure to work with all three of you. It’s been my pleasure to be on some touchpoint calls. Thanks a lot guys.

Audrey: 29:57 Appreciate it. Thanks a lot.

Steve: 29:57 Bye, bye.

Ed: 29:58 Bye, bye.

Steve [Outro]: 30:00 Thanks again for listening. You can subscribe to Steve Barkley Ponders Out Loud on iTunes and Podbean and please remember to rate and review us on iTunes. I also want to hear what you’re pondering. You can find me on twitter @stevebarkley or send me your questions and find my videos and blogs at barkleypd.com.