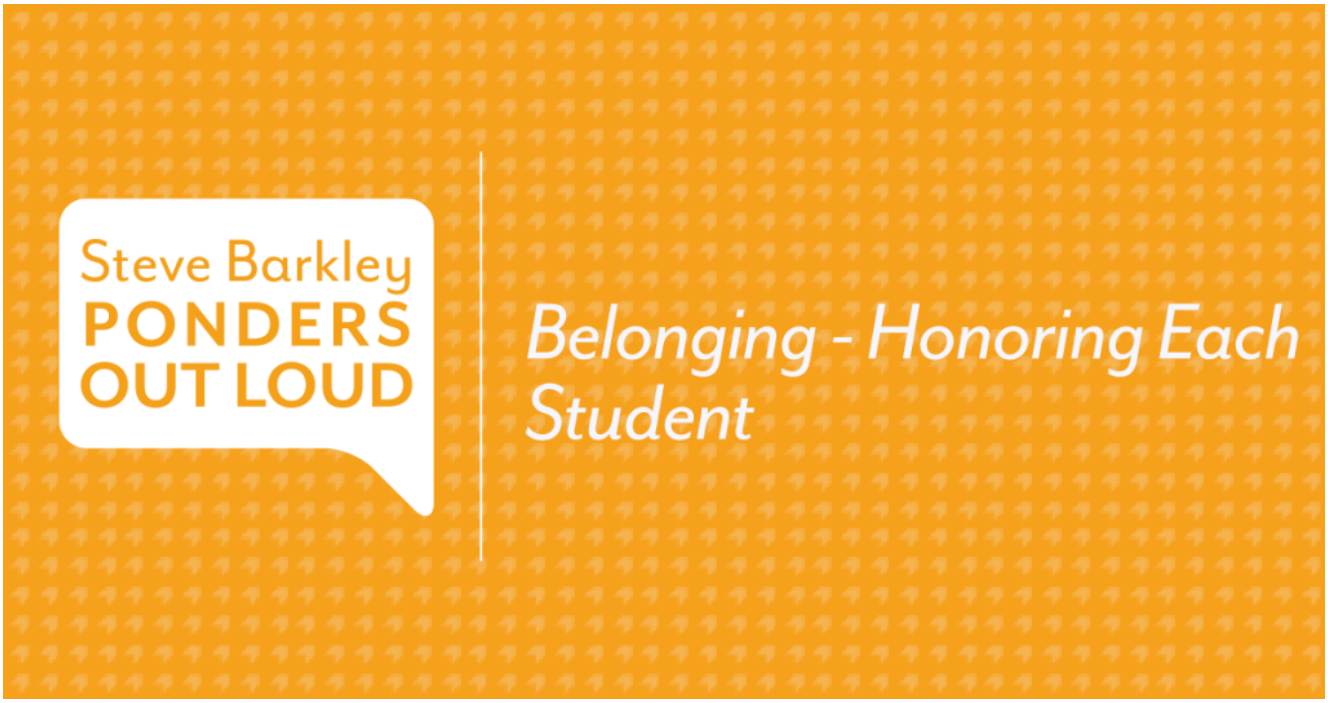
Podcast: Belonging – Honoring Each Student



Every educator sends signals to students that, consciously or unconsciously, determine who experiences belonging—and who doesn't. When students perceive they do not belong, they are at risk for a host of adverse consequences. Conversely, when students feel a sense of belonging, it can lead to an abundance of positive personal, social, and academic outcomes.

How can instructional coaches and school leaders support teachers in identifying unconscious actions that interfere with our intended message of valuing each learner? How can we intentionally plan actions that nurture a community that embraces differences?

In *Powerful Student Care: Honoring Each Student as Distinctive and Irreplaceable*, authors Kathleen Budge and Grant Chandler provide insights and practical support.

Read the article, *"The Signals We Send About Who Belongs"* here.

Connect with Kathleen: parrettassociates@gmail.com

Connect with Grant here.

Subscribe to the Steve Barkley Ponders Out Loud podcast on iTunes or visit BarkleyPD.com to find new episodes!

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.

[00:00:30.000] – Steve
Belonging – Honoring Each Student. Joining the podcast today are the authors of "Powerful Student Care: Honoring Each Student as Distinctive and Irreplaceable," Kathleen Budge and Grant Chandler. Kathleen combines 26 years of experience as a teacher and administrator with over a decade of work dedicated to bridging the gap between the university and the teaching profession. She is a Professor Emerita at Boise State University, where her research focuses on poverty, rural education, school improvement, and leadership development. She is co-author of "Turning High Poverty Schools into High-Performing Schools." Grant has over 35 years of experience as a high school teacher, central office administrator, higher education dean, professional learning director at a large research university, technical support provider, and executive coach. He is currently the President and CEO of Students Matter, an organization that supports districts in meeting the academic and non-academic needs of each student. He has designed and led professional learning experiences, K-12, and workshops at national, state, and regional conferences. He

also hosts a podcast titled, “The Wheelhouse.” Welcome, Kathleen and Grant.

[00:02:02.340] – Kathleen
Thank you.

[00:02:03.340] – Grant
Thank you. It’s great to be here.

[00:02:05.920] – Steve
Well, I reached out to both of you when I found an article that you had in ASCD, and the title caught my eye: “The Signals We Send About Who Belongs.” You have an early section in your article titled, “Recognizing Dehumanization” and that really jumped out at me. I’m wondering if we could begin with a little discussion about what you mean by that.

[00:02:34.120] – Grant
Sure. Well, thank you for letting us be in your podcast today. We’re really glad to be here. We wrote the article because what’s really important is that the teachers understand that it’s not just the signals, but it’s about every decision that they make that sends signals that really communicates to a student whether or not they belong. We know that’s hard. We know it’s really, really hard because in the current climate, there’s a lot of things that happen in education that are dehumanizing. One of those is this transactional nature where we are focused solely, it seems like, it feels like, to a lot of teachers that were focused solely on test scores, on this race to get kids to the end of the year, to that high stakes assessment, and where they really feel like they don’t have the opportunity to slow down, stop, and build the relationships and the connections that are really important. One of the things that we argue in our book, and we also talk about it in this article, is that those structures that we seem compelled to throw out there for teachers because of a lot of different reasons, and I know Kathleen will jump in and she’ll add to that, really contributes to this idea of what

dehumanizes students in the educational environment.

[00:04:03.060] – Steve
Kathleen, I'm guessing – pretty important looking at the start of the school year?

[00:04:07.800] – Kathleen
Yeah, exactly. Each school year, you think about this in particular, you think about parents who are sending their kids, and all parents love their kids, and they're sending them off to what is basically an institution. I mean, it's a major institution. Dehumanization is the thing you fight in every institution. In schools, we have a history. In the US, we have a history of dehumanization in terms of just how we moved from one-room rural schools to responding to the changes in the population and size and demographics. It's a thing we've struggled with for a very long time. One of the key things that we did not put in the I think there is a very important thing that gets at this dehumanization and how you counteract it in the article, one of the shifts that we made in Powerful Student Care" was really getting folks to think about the difference between thinking of kids as we need to do this for all kids versus we need to do this for each student. We talk in the book quite a bit about that. That shift is so subtle. My daughter is as a middle school teacher, and she said, if they don't get anything else out of that book, that thing sticks with me, Mom.

[00:05:37.710] – Kathleen
It's like the difference between… These are really Grant's words, but it's the difference between all usually becomes most. Oh, 80%, oh, 70%, it becomes most. But each can't become most. Each is each. It really helps us focus in on this is an individual human being, and we serve individual human beings. That's an important piece. It's not that it's easy because if you're a secondary teacher, you might have 130 individual human beings that you serve.

[00:06:13.010] – Grant
Or 160.

[00:06:14.760] – Kathleen
Or 160, yeah. I mean, it can get so crazy. It is not an easy task for teachers. But one of the pieces in the actual article that I think really gets at this dehumanization is, do know the things we're doing to cause it? We call it the barriers to belonging and welcoming. But those elements that we talk about, we describe, are the way you counteract those things. You become aware of those barriers, and you are purposeful about those things. So it's sort of this, I would just say it's a constant fight. It's an institution. So how do we humanize this institution? Especially at the beginning of the year, the beginning of the year sets the tone for everything else. It's your most important time of year to build community, and you got to start right off the bat with community.

[00:07:13.480] – Steve
I'm wondering how many teachers are feeling dehumanized in the institution now.

[00:07:21.920] – Kathleen
Absolutely.

[00:07:23.440] – Grant
Most all of them.

[00:07:26.320] – Kathleen
Yeah. Somebody's work that we draw on is Santoro, Dolores Santoro's work. She talks about, we should be more worried about demoralization than burnout, because they're two different things. That's the thing that Grant referenced about the focus on test scores and the march to a certain test score at the end of the year can be so demoralized realizing when that becomes your entire focus as teachers. That's why it's so important to have this broader sense of purpose, which ties

into that, how do administrators and coaches really, what do they look for and that thing. You want to have an ongoing dialog in your schools about purpose. What's our purpose, individually and collectively? And then what is the purpose of school in this school? What do we believe is the purpose? Because those things are so tied to thinking of what we do as a human endeavor versus a widget endeavor.

[00:08:42.500] – Grant
I remember supporting a district a few years ago, and it was the opening week for administrators, and they were probably 15 buildings in the district. They were probably 35 people in the room. It was the week before teachers came back. The big conversation – I had to buy bite my tongue. The big conversation was, when they went into classrooms in the first week of school, would they be putting a rating in the system? I was absolutely mortified. I took it long enough, and then I was like – they're looking at me like, you look like you have something to say. I was like, time out. First, I'm going to applaud you for going into teachers' classrooms in the first week of school. Do you recognize or realize that they don't know the kids that are sitting in front of them by name? The only reason they can address them by name is because they put them in a seating chart and they have a little visual that they're picking up and they know that the third kid in the third row, his name is Jim? I said, why would we ever think that it would be okay to cast judgment and put a rating in there?

[00:10:04.760] – Steve
A flip on that is I'm frequently working with coaches. They'll tell me that the first month of school, none of the teachers want them in their classrooms because the teachers suggest to them that they aren't far enough. I know what that means. They're being judged. I keep coming back and saying, hey, the first day, your first 10 minutes with kids is a good It's time to have a coach there. All you got to do is tell the coach,

What do you want to accomplish? What is it you want to accomplish in that first half hour, in that first day with kids? And can a coach help you look at decisions and choices you made that help you accomplish that?

[00:10:46.260] – Grant
But another adult coming into your classroom isn't about casting judgment, right?

[00:10:55.260] – Steve
It's about how important this is if you figure the first week is really, really important.

[00:10:59.120] – Grant
Yeah. I remember I was outside of an elementary school in the fall, and this puts it all in perspective. It was the first day of school I was visiting. I was as technical support. It was the first day for the elementary, and there was this mom who was standing at the fence gate because she had just brought her kindergarten to school. She's putting on a brave face as the kid goes in the school. It's to be a parent of color, a child of color. The kid goes through the door and then the tears are… She's just sobbing. She looks at me and she goes, "You have no idea how hard this is." I I totally do. I totally do. I said, "What's on your mind?" She goes, "I just want them to love her as much as I do. That's all. I just want to love her as much as I do." She didn't say, "Oh, I just want her to pass the end of course assessment at the end of kindergarten. I just hope she doesn't…" It was just like, I just want them to love her as much as I do. It puts all in perspective, right?

[00:12:17.130] – Grant
Signals we send.

[00:12:19.000] – Steve
In your article, you laid out four transformative actions to cultivate belonging. I'd like to just name them one at a time

and have you talk about them with the thought of, what is it that coaches and administrators can do to encourage teachers around that? If we got teachers thinking they're being evaluated, we know what not to do. Let's hit some of the to-dos. The first one that you mentioned was to nurture a community of difference.

[00:12:54.000] – Kathleen
I'm happy to talk about that a little bit. That That notion of a community of difference was the name, that phrase was, we are borrowing from Carol Shields, who did a lot of work in the '90s and early 2000s around this concept of a community of difference. Part of that was in response, interestingly, to this notion that schools shouldn't be run like institutions. They should be run like communities. What she is, the problem with our vision of a community is it becomes about homogeneity instead of diversity. She said, What schools really need is a community of difference. Then she defined that as the paramount value is respect for the equal worth of… First, respect for difference and the equal worth of every individual in the community. It seems like it's almost like a dichotomy, but you can't really have the respect for an individual, and you can't really have an individual feeling welcomed or belonging without community. So the two are so important. If I think about how we came to understand and conceptualize Powerful Student Care and this particular action, it isn't something separate that teachers do. I mean, yes, you might do team building activities that feel like they aren't grounded in a curricular basis, but they don't have to be.

[00:14:29.660] – Kathleen
And so what we talk about, we use in the book, we use a nautical metaphor. And so we call these things the navigational instruments of building community. And really what they are is everything you do. For example, what are the processes, the structures, the routines that you use in your classroom? And are those grounded in respect for difference

and the actual equal worth of every individual? As you're setting up your rules and your rituals and your processes, do you have that in mind? Your methods of instruction, are they based on that? It's not something that's set separately. It's like the curricular choices you make.

[00:15:19.680] – Steve
Is it showing value, the teacher showing value for the difference?

[00:15:24.680] – Kathleen
Value for the difference and value for the individual. Each individual is equally worthy. Having that in the back of your mind, so when you are doing team building, when you are doing grouping of kids, when you are making decisions about who accesses something, are they based on those basic principles that we all are different, there is difference, and we respect difference, and also that each individual has equal worth? I think it's so important for administrators and coaches to listen and look and observe and talk to teachers about those sorts of things. It's like, why are you making that decision? Tell me about your grouping schemes. Tell me about the rules that you have in this. How did those come to be? Were they co-made with your students? Do you power share with kids? Do they have voice? Do they have choice? It's those sorts of things that ground and develop and build a community of difference.

[00:16:31.500] – Steve
You're triggering for me a struggle that I frequently run into when I'm working with teachers in teams or PLCs. They make this connection that being on a team means giving up your differences or individualness. If I can't get the teachers to understand it about themselves, the team is stronger because of the difference. When we start making away the differences, we've lost the strength of the team. But it's striking me that if teachers are having troubles understanding that for themselves, then it's not forefront of their mind with kids.

[00:17:13.380] – Kathleen
Yeah. That was the problem with the concept of community as it was being conceptualized prior to what Carol Shields said. She said, no, this isn't about sameness or losing oneself. This is really about how we each individual contribute the rainbow of what you see in terms of time and talents and identities and that thing. That's why the whole thing with both dealing with those other two, welcome and valued, go together. Because valued, you can't really value someone unless you see them and see their differences from and their sameness to each other. It's a tough one, but it's an important one.

[00:18:02.480] – Grant
If the three of us came to the same table with each of us with the same exact strengths, the team would be no better off than if they were just one of us. And yet we accelerate that strength by recognizing the strengths that each of us bring that are different to one another.

[00:18:24.380] – Steve
Grant, move us into the second one that you have in the article then. "Ensure each student is unconditionally welcomed."

[00:18:34.200] – Grant
Well, this is bigger than just belonging. What does it mean if we conditionally welcome someone? It requires a level of decentering ourselves as teachers. Think about what happens when you invite a guest to your home. You do things not because you love it, but you do what is going to make the guest feel comfortable. You're going to make… You put up your best stuff. You put dinner out there that's not maybe the stuff you love, but it's the stuff that that person that you've invited really, really likes. It's this whole idea of decentering our classroom space. It's not my classroom, it's not my space. It's the space for students. We want to organize it that way. We also have to recognize it with this ethic of hospitality, which is Claudia Reitenberg, that as we

decenterize enter ourselves, we're not expecting anything back from our students. We are simply extending this ethic, the ethic of hospitality. We are extending welcome to students in a in a way that is not something that they have to earn. It's not something that can be lost. I remember having a conversation with a group of teachers a couple of years ago talking about this idea of unconditional welcome, and they really struggled with the word unconditional traditional.

[00:20:16.000] – Grant
They wanted to put limits on it. Well, a kid is welcome in my class until. I said, well, let's separate what you're not welcoming to the classroom and the human that is in front of you. Because is there really a time when we would tell a child, whether they're 6 foot 4 or 2 foot 6, that we're not glad they're here? We may not love whatever the other issue is, but the human being that's there, we want to create that.

[00:20:50.860] – Steve
If I'm the student, I feel that I'd be missed.

[00:20:54.580] – Grant
Yes, right? Absolutely. Yes.

[00:20:58.520] – Steve
Great. Kathleen, you want to take us on to the next one then? "Each student knows they're valued."

[00:21:05.440] – Kathleen
Yeah, knows they're valued. So again, that moves… First of all, you can't feel valued if you're not unconditionally welcomed. And before I do that, let me just say, even Claudia Rotenberg, who has that philosophy about an ethic of hospitality, she'll say, it is like what we do in our homes, and it isn't like what we do, because usually, we as adults, it expects some reciprocation. It's not that hospitality. She also says, the important thing is not that we ever completely make it. Yes, that would be great, but that we have that

orientation and strive to unconditionally accept. I think what Grant just said, it's so important to separate a child's behavior from the human I mean, it's the basics there. That's a piece of that, unconditionally welcomed. We're all welcome to be here. So welcoming is the beginning of valuing. And then with valuing, valuing is really about building in kids their ability to see what they can do and what they contribute. It's helping them see their contributions and feeling like they make contributions. If they were gone, like you said, that thing they do would be missed because it's valued here with what we do.

[00:22:40.920] – Kathleen
That piece is really around, it builds on some of the other tenets around eventually wanting kids to feel that they contribute, that they have a voice, and that they eventually develop agency to speak for themselves, to speak on behalf of the community. It sounds very theoretical, but when you really think about it, you see classrooms that look like this, and it looks like kids who are busy bees doing all kinds of things, and they are making choices and they are having a voice in how things are run, and they know that. So they can tell you that. One of the things about both of the tenets that we've talked about and the other three that we haven't, is if a coach and an administrator want to know what's going on, talk to the kids. Ask the kids, do you feel welcome? How does it feel to you? Those sorts of things. Tell me what this classroom is like. Do you feel like you have something to offer here? It's those kinds of things that you can find out a lot from talking to the kids.

[00:23:56.500] – Steve
My wife's a school counselor, and kids say things to her that just set her on her ear that haven't been said to anybody else. Nobody else in the building is picking up that environment in the classroom. A kid sitting and talking to her for a few minutes will just lay it bare. It's almost a role

that as a teacher, I could ask my coach to play. Spend some time talking to my kids and listening to the things they'll say to you that they may not say to me as something that's important for me to know.

[00:24:34.720] – Kathleen
Yeah. One of the reasons we put the five tenets in what is the tenet and then what would we like to hear kids say is that we really encourage teachers to talk to their kids. Do they feel welcomed? We can extend welcome. It doesn't mean they feel welcomed. We can try to build in them a sense of being valued, but we don't know that unless we talk to them or see them or observe them, are really good kid watchers. But it's really, again, with both of these, welcome and value, valuing as with the other three, it's integrating them in all you do. If we've got routines, how do our routines help kids feel valued? If we have grouping structures, how do we use that to help kids have voice? If we have classroom rules, where are the kids' voices? It's those sorts of things that… It's those two things, welcoming and valuing, that you want them to be thinking about as they're doing the things we do as educators.

[00:25:43.560] – Steve
Grant, you want to start us with tackling the barriers to belonging?

[00:25:47.300] – Grant
Yeah, on the flip side of all of that is – here comes the negative talk from me. We got to confront the things that get in the way. A lot of that is stereotyping, it's othering. I think the clearest way to describe this is recognizing that human dignity is a birthright, and that a lot of things that we do intentionally and unintentionally are violations of dignity, especially if we haven't confronted some mental models. Maybe I have some implicit or explicit issues around children who live in around children of color, around LGBTQ, by whatever those things are. I've got to confront those. I've got to confront those if I'm going to be able to eliminate

those things from my classroom that violate human dignity. Two really easy ones around human dignity. One, we got to stop blaming kids when they don't learn something.

[00:26:53.940] – Steve
Bingo.

[00:26:54.640] – Grant
That's a violation of dignity. If they didn't learn it, it's on me. I didn't teach it the right way for that particular student. That doesn't mean I'm a bad teacher. It just means I tried to teach Kathleen that, and she's still not getting it. That's not Kathleen's fault. If I blame Kathleen, I violated dignity. I violate her dignity. The other thing that we see a lot is one of the biggest ways that we violate dignity is we dumb down curriculum and we have mind-numbing lessons. Sometimes we do that because there are some biases or some stereotypes coming in. It all is interconnected. Confronting our mental models about children who represent people who are different than us is really important. Thinking about what it means for them, for dignity to be respected, for it to be embraced, for us to eliminate those barriers, those ways that we violate dignity is really, really important. Two of the big ones, of course, are stereotyping and othering. But I think it's even clearer and easier to talk about. To talk about it from this lens of dignity. What violates someone's dignity?

[00:28:18.680] – Steve
I write and talk a lot about coachability. If I had my magic wand, Kathleen working with the universities, one of the undergraduate skills you'd have to have to graduate to be a teacher is coachability. You have to prove that you're entering the profession as a coachable individual. But what really hits me with that is the things you're labeling there, Grant, the vast, vast majority of the time are unconscious.

[00:28:49.760] – Grant
Absolutely.

[00:28:50.500] – Steve
So as a teacher, if there's not an eye or an ear in the classroom to record that and play it back for me to hear, I really have nothing to fall back on but hoping the child's negative behavior… It's like I talk to teachers – if you look at a student and you don't like the nonverbals you're seeing, the first thing to do is go over the mirror because to what extent is it your nonverbals that are impacting where the students are there? But there's so many unconscious behaviors that I have that to raise my effectiveness level as teacher need to be brought to a conscious level. Coaching is the way to make that happen.

[00:29:35.810] – Kathleen
That is super important venue. I mean, that is to have a coach. The mental models piece is really where the barriers to all five of the tenets comes in. Teachers need to know their content. They absolutely need to know their kids, but they need to know themselves. It has to be part of the practice. It has to be that introspection, reflection. We call it contemplation in the book. That has to be built in. To do that, you have to have a running set of questions in your mind. That's a practice you have to develop. It doesn't come naturally. Things like stereotyping and othering people, we don't want to think of ourselves as doing that, but we all do it. That's the angst about a community of difference is people are different, that's where we tend to go. It is a piece. I would say from a systems level, to think about administrators at the school and district level, if you've got teachers blaming kids, and it's pretty prevalent in your school. My first thing I'm going to find out is I'm going to ask, are the coaches and the principals blaming teachers? Because it's the same exact thing.

[00:30:57.760] – Kathleen
If the people you're coaching are not learning, it's not…You got to go to the mirror then and say, what do I need to do

differently? The mental map work, my work with Grant in "Powerful Student Care" and the work with my partner, Bill Perrett in "Poverty" has been central. It's just like that piece of introspection, reflection, contemplation, whatever you want to call it, has got to part of your practice, or you just really can't fully implement, for instance, these five tenets.

[00:31:39.760] – Grant
We got to get to the point where we ask… I mean, we all make a thousand decisions a day. Every teacher, every leader does. But if we're going to make a thousand decisions, we better ask 3,000 questions.

[00:31:51.960] – Kathleen
Yeah, of ourselves.

[00:31:53.460] – Grant
Because we better be exploring that deeply because how many of those decisions that we make are just off the cuff and often, those decisions are based on assumptions. We know we could talk for another whole episode on what's wrong with assumptions, right?

[00:32:11.380] – Steve
I will look at putting that on our list for an invite back. How about telling folks a little bit more about your book, "Powerful Student Care: Honoring Each Learner as Distinctive and Irreplaceable?" I just love those words. What's in the book that we didn't get a chance to talk about? Just point people in the directions.

[00:32:30.000] – Grant
I think in the book, it's an ASCD publication, by the way. It's available at ASCD. I think in the book, we spend a little bit more time, obviously, talking about all of these different ideas that we've touched on. We've been focusing on two of the of the tenets, and there are five. So beyond welcoming and

valuing, there is recognizing that each student is here to do well. That positive presupposition. There's an innate human desire to do well, that students were there to help cultivate self-efficacy and agency. And then we spend a lot of time talking about this concept called joy-filled learning, which is where students recognize and understand that what they're learning is authentic and relevant. It connects to their lives now and into the future. In the book, we also offer four scenarios that I think are very powerful. In the article that you read, we hinted at one of them around Siena, a young lady who is living in poverty and her teacher. So there are four scenarios, and then there's another scenario tying it all together. So you can dive more deeply into each of the ideas that we were talking about.

[00:33:48.240] – Grant
There's lots of tools in the book to help you do that. I think the scenarios really let it play out and let you see what this looks like in a real-life, authentic way.

[00:34:01.960] – Steve
Kathleen, you want to maybe talk about one of the tools, a tool or a strategy?

[00:34:07.860] – Kathleen
Yeah. One of the piece we didn't have a chance to really go into in the article – we have these five tenets, and each of those tenets are what a child… is focused on, what each child experiences. A child experiences, welcome, valuing our belief that they're here to do well, a sense of agency, and joy. We have a piece in the book we call "Our Way of Thinking." That way of thinking is this contemplative practice. Each of the tenets has, for example, a list of questions that you might ask yourself about your kids, or you might ask about yourself, or you might ask about that tenant in and of itself as it relates to your kids. There's a set of questions that attaches to each of the tenets. People are listening to this and they're wondering, what are those 3,000 questions we should be

asking? There’s some stuff in there that really helps you think about, okay, these are the things that I maybe need to be thinking about if I want to know, does each of my kids feel welcome? That’s helpful. There’s several other things, too, just to really reinforce that contemplative practice.

[00:35:43.960] – Kathleen
Really what that is, it’s a dialog protocol with yourself and sometimes with your kids. There’s some other tools in there that are around how are the different ways you might ascertain how each child feels in terms of being valued, some ways that you can do that.

[00:36:06.940] – Steve
Grant, you want to tell us a little bit about the work of Students Matter?

[00:36:11.800] – Grant
Students Matter is a company that’s simply dedicated – they provide a wealth of a menu of services to districts who are on this journey, even if they don’t know anything about this journey called Distinctive and Irreplaceable and Powerful Student Care. But if you’re really interested in meeting the needs of each student in a way that is not transactional, but is actually transformational and relational, then Students Matter provides the support in that way.

[00:36:43.040] – Steve
Well, I got to give a big thank you to both of you. I enjoyed the piece that I read, but I really got engaged in thinking in our conversation today. You want to share with folks how they might follow up with you with questions they have or learn more about your book and the work you’re doing?

[00:37:05.260] – Grant
You can stop by ourstudentsmatter.org, and there’s a place there for you to reach out and ask questions, anything that you want to engage. That is ourstudentsmatter.org.

[00:37:21.200] – Steve
All right. We'll put that in the podcast lead-in. Kathleen, easiest way for folks to check in with you?

[00:37:27.760] – Kathleen
Yeah, probably it's my email. It's just parrettassociates@gmail.com.

[00:37:36.960] – Steve
I'll put that in the podcast lead-in, too. Thank you so much.

[00:37:40.180] – Kathleen
That'd be great.

[00:37:41.280] – Grant
Thank you very much. Have a good day.

[00:37:42.560] – Kathleen
Thank you so much.

[00:37:45.020] – 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.