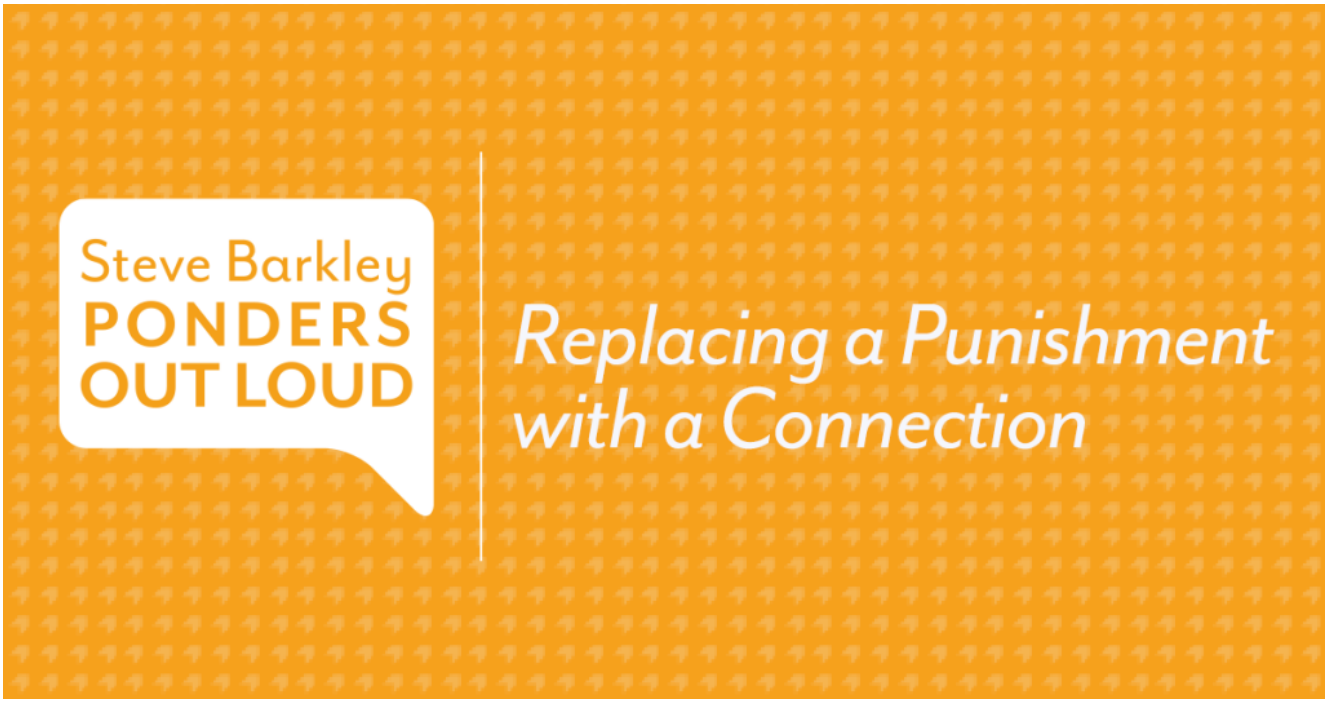
Podcast: Replacing a Punishment with a Connection



What payoffs are possible if students, who were assigned to serve detention, had the option to take a two -hour hike in the woods with a guidance counselor instead? High school counselor, Leslie Trundy, shares her experiences with the" hike as detention" plan. Trundy, guides the hikes including a stop with a view, a snack, and a short poem focused on starting anew. Consider what you want students to learn from your management and discipline programs.

Read the NPR article, *"At this school, kids given detention can choose a hike instead"* here.

Email Leslie: ltrundy@rsu1.org

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Podcast Transcript:

[00:00:00.340] – Steve [Intro]
Hello and welcome to Steve Barkley Ponders Out Loud. Together, we'll explore ways to support teacher growth, elevate your coaching practice, and boost student success. Each week, I'll share my own insights as well as conversations with inspiring guests to help you lead with confidence. Thanks for listening.

[00:00:30.000] – Steve
Replacing a Punishment with a Connection. Leslie Trundy, our guest today, is a high school counselor in Bath, Maine. I invited her to join the podcast after reading an article about her program that offers high school students who have broken rules such as skipping class or being on their phone or disrespecting a teacher. Those students get the option of taking a two-hour hike with Leslie rather than sitting in a classroom after school. As a woods hiker myself and a believer that little can be gained from students in detention settings and suspensions, I was anxious to learn more from her. So, Leslie, thanks so much for joining us.

[00:01:19.760] – Leslie
You're welcome. Thanks for having me.

[00:01:22.220] – Steve
Would you start by telling us a little bit about your own background and then a little bit about the Morris High School?

[00:01:30.000] – Leslie
Yes, thanks. Well, I'll start by saying that I'm a daughter of a special Ed teacher. I think that's important to this story. I grew up watching and hearing my mom talk about some of her students that she really made connections with and made a difference in their lives And that was certainly an inspiration to me wanting to become a school counselor. As a young person, I went to Michigan State University thinking I might want to do something related to international relations or maybe pre-med. I really was all over the place. And I landed in the Social Science Department there, where I had a

dual focus in Anthropology and psychology. So how our cultural views impact our health and wellness, and how our psychology, how our thoughts about our own health and wellness impact our health and wellness, which was a great undergraduate degree, little did I know. It certainly didn't lead to an exact job, but I had some time after college where I worked seasonally at L.L. Bean and for my father's promotion business, and I also traveled. So I spent a summer in Alaska, and I spent a summer hiking the Appalachian Trail.

[00:02:39.500] – Leslie
And all of that led to a discovery that what I really might want to do for my calling was to work as a school counselor. And in undergraduate, I was a resident assistant, which was a profound learning experience for me to be that trusted young person for a freshman and sophomores. And I thought I really enjoyed that job. And that's what led me to school counseling. I got my master's degree while also raising a young family and starting up a marriage and a home life. And so it took me five years to get my master's in School Counseling from the University of Southern Maine. And after I graduated, I got the job at Morris High School a few years later. And it really was my dream job to work at Morris High School. It's the only school I've worked at. I live in Bath. And before working as a school counselor, I was promoting Bath in the downtown. And so it was real natural for me to… I really wanted to live and work in the same community and be available to families in the grocery store if that's where they were able to access and ask a question of me.

[00:03:50.090] – Leslie
And it really was my dream job to work here, and it really has been my dream job. We're a school of about 600 students now. At the time I started, we were 850, so the community has had some changes. We have a long history at Morris High School. We boast one of the oldest, largest, and most active alumni associations in the country, which means that students get a

lot of support from alum who believe in them. And although we are historic and we have a lot of traditions, I find that the school community is nimble in its thoughts around making changes that will benefit students. This detention hike is such a great example of that because without hesitation, the administration really supported me from the start.

[00:04:37.160] – Steve
When I was reading about your background and I read about the hike on the Appalachian Trail, that was a pretty lengthy amount of time. Did I catch that?

[00:04:47.620] – Leslie
It was. It certainly doesn't have to be. My son, who is 24, he just through-hiked. He started March second, and he finished June 30th, so he was like a four-monther. But it really is fitting for my personality that at that time, I started April first and I finished on October 12th. So for me, it was a six and a half month journey. And I would say that that's just who I am, I think. Sometimes it takes me a little bit to sort things out. But I had a phenomenal experience on the Appalachian Trail. I came to it with very little backpacking experience, and I left feeling a confidence in myself and my ability to do something hard and reach a long-term goal unlike anything I'd ever done. It was really a phenomenal experience for me, and it's a touchstone in my life. Really, I know I can do big things.

[00:05:46.480] – Steve
Yeah, it's just awesome. How did the connection come to mind for you to look at hiking as the alternative to detention?

[00:05:59.060] – Leslie
Yeah, because I've been at Morris now for a while, I have seen other venues. The administration I knew, especially in the old school, it was a little bit more visible where I could tell that kids weren't… They were at school, after school, helping out. I was like, "What are you doing?" Then I would find out

later that they were doing service to lessen their time. Because the structure we use at Morris is the most time, you can either get a one hour, two hour, or three hour detention. Sometimes we'll have to use in school suspension or out of school suspension. But in terms of after school detentions, three hours is the most time. There was a combination of things. There was this notion that you could get two hour detention for community service. That was in my mind. I was also thinking, I've been advising the Outing Club. Last year was my fourth year. How can I reach more kids with the Outing Club? I get certain kinds of kids who will self-select in, but is there a way for me to reach other kids in the school. I attended a leadership conference hosted by Teens to Trails.

[00:07:06.320] – Leslie
They are an organization in the State of Maine that really promotes getting high schools to get kids outdoors. That was my fourth leadership conference. And there was a workshop that was all about leading kids, and especially in a thoughtful, mindful way. So they were really talking about mindfulness. So she was leading us in this mindfulness exercise. So we were in this beautiful setting at a camp in Maine, and the energy in the group was a quiet energy. And she was like guiding us in some thought-provoking things. But mostly she was just saying, I want you to use this time to just reflect. This is what was bubbling up for me. I was like, I really thought to myself, because she had preface it with just two hours in the woods can make a profound difference. And I've seen this theme in other readings that I have done. But there was something about the combination of her saying that and my thinking, how can I reach more students? That I thought to myself, maybe I could do this option for kids. Maybe administration would let me, instead of them sitting for three hours indoors, they already spent the whole day indoors, maybe I could just take them outside and it would be better.

[00:08:26.720] – Leslie

It’d be better for the kids. It’d be better for the school community. And that was a Friday. Monday, I asked the administrators in our standing meeting that we had, and Thursday, I had my first hike.

[00:08:39.260] – Steve
Wow. Have you heard the term, “forest bathing?”

[00:08:43.480] – Leslie
Yes.

[00:08:44.980] – Steve
The first time I ran into that – I became a woods walker rather than a woods hiker during COVID. Living here in Switzerland, we didn’t get locked in the degree which a lot of the European places did. It was my hour every day that I could be out in the woods, and I just recognized the impact of that. I got my 12,000 steps in yesterday with a hike through the woods to the pond and back, and it’s easy to recognize the impact of that.

[00:09:25.640] – Leslie
Yes, I love that. I would say another thing along with forest bathing, I read something recently about how when you’re walking, how your eyes are tracking, and that movement also is good for our brains and processing things. From the Appalachian Trail, that is what I was walking in the woods for basically six and a half months. I felt the healthiest I’ve ever felt in my life. I really recognized that the weather didn’t matter. I had tools to address the weather. I had confidence in my ability to not feel nervous if it’s raining or whatever, snowing, and just feel natural and at home. It makes such a huge difference.

[00:10:14.060] – Steve
Working with secondary students, well, it caught my attention because here I’ve always been big on what they call forest kindergarten.

[00:10:23.100] – Leslie
Yes.

[00:10:23.940] – Steve
Have you seen some of that?

[00:10:25.060] – Leslie
Yes, I have.

[00:10:26.460] – Steve
Almost all the schools around here have at least a forest day. What you just mentioned about the weather – it does not matter. Rain, snow, sleet, hail. If it's Wednesday, and Wednesday is the Forest Day, these three and four-year-old kids are hiking the trail into the woods. When I go hiking, most of the woods around here, you keep coming across a little cleaned-out area where they have a spot for a campfire. Many of them will even have a little wooden shed built where they'll have shovels and all kinds of things for the kids to dig and play. Just the other day, I know it's inappropriate to film kids, but I wanted to film these kids to show my wife. They were probably three years old, and there were three teachers with them, and there was a rather steep, short incline. The teachers had had put ropes around trees and come down. These three-year-old kids were using the rope to climb up. And then when they got up the top, they turned around and it was all wet and muddy. They sat down and slid down to the bottom like a sliding board in the mud.

[00:11:47.500] – Steve
And then they grabbed the rope and just start back up.

[00:11:52.620] – Leslie
Again and again.

[00:11:52.870] – Steve
Yeah, over and over. And the one was a little girl. I was guessing she was maybe two and a half, she seemed younger than the other kids. She was really struggling. And there's a

teacher pushing her from behind, and finally the other teacher reached down. I stood there and waited until she got to the top. And as soon as she did, I broke into applause. And then all the kids went running for the rope. “Oh, my God, we got an audience now!” We’re all climbing and sliding down. You see a lot of that here in Switzerland. It was great when I found your piece that you were working with secondary students. Tell us a little bit about what we see or hear if we joined you on one of the detention hikes.

[00:12:37.680] – Leslie
Yeah, great. We gather after school. Every once in a while, I’ll advocate to get them before school ends. But for the most part, we meet up after school and confirm who’s coming with us. Last year, it would be often that I would have extra students who would just jump on who didn’t have detention. I would say about half of the hikes, we had extra people. I always invite the students on the hike. I always invite them that they can come without getting in trouble, they can join an outing club without getting… They can just join the club and do other bigger things, or they can just do this weekly hike. I make sure to let them know that. We gather and then we leave the school. At the time we’re leaving the school, everyone else is leaving the school in their cars, but we’re walking on the sidewalk. In a short distance, we reach the ball fields where we have… There’s a football field there and baseball and field hockey and soccer. We walk adjacent to the ball fields for a bit before we’re in a small patch of the woods on the Whiskeag Trail.

[00:13:40.820] – Leslie
I usually pause at the sign to orient kids. A lot of kids are familiar with the area, but I think it’s helpful to just see it. Even on bigger hikes, I noticed that kids don’t really want or need the map, but I’m always trying to give them the map so they can orient. Then we cross through a small cemetery, and we cross the road, cross through a small

cemetery, and then we're really in the woods. And that's the main part of it, where we're making some loops on trails that connect back, but we don't have to repeat the way we're going. And my aim is to keep it right within that two-hour window. But sometimes I get a very fast group and we're a little bit quicker. But at some point, about halfway through, where there's a view of the water and a bench, we pause to have a snack. I usually ask students to bring water bottles, but many of them don't do that. So I have extra water and snacks. And I read a very short poem that has some nature theme. I talk about why I'm doing it, and then we travel back.

[00:14:52.100] – Leslie
And the other thing that will often happen along this journey of this hike is in the beginning, kids will say, "Well, what are you in here for?" And, "What did you do to get in trouble?" And those conversations are so interesting to hear their perspective of what they share and also what their peers share back. So sometimes I don't even have to redirect at all because the peers will be like, wow, I can see why you're in trouble because that seems like… But it tends to be, I would say, supportive and healthy. And it's happening, again, we're walking, we're talking. And I really make an effort to try and talk with each student that's on the hike with me. Because kids will spread out, it gives me an opportunity just to touch base with them, maybe ask a follow-up question or even just get to know them, because some of the students aren't my students, and I don't have context for who they are. And I would say a side benefit of the hike is being a trusted adult for students, connecting them to a resource that they might not have thought was still available to them.

[00:16:00.890] – Leslie
One of my big stories was the boy who missed a lot of school. So he missed the deadline to apply for a Voc Tech program. And he was like, "well, it's too late." And I said, I knew it wasn't too late because I knew the rosters. And I said, "it's

not too late for this and this program." And he was like, "it's not?" So that felt like saving that starfish. And that's what the hike entails. And we go in all weather. We go in all seasons in all weather. And even though it's the same hike, it's amazing how different the woods look week to week in terms of what's different.

[00:16:38.220] – Steve
Yeah, that's a joy of the woods. In some of the work that I have done in the past around classroom management, I came across value for teachers to explore a question that was labeled, "What is your classroom management curriculum?" In other words, getting teachers to think, what do you want students to learn from the way that you manage your class? Rather than, I manage the class so that I can teach something else, there's actually learning coming from the management. I'm wondering what thoughts you have on that being a good question for schools to be asking about their discipline plan. What is it you want kids to learn from the discipline we're implementing?

[00:17:31.080] – Leslie
Yeah, I think that that is such an excellent question to ask schools. It's like if you're a parent of young children, when you get that advice to consider the environment that the kids are in. If your child is moving from crawling to being a toddler, you have to look at your space in a whole different way and you want to remove possible holes in the floor kind of thing. I think it's the same with classroom management. I have seen some masterful classroom management strategies at Morris. For example, one of my teachers often will keep the lights off, or if the lights are on, there'll be periods of time where the lights are turned off. It just creates a really different energy for the kids. Really framing your language about what you want from the students and also being consistent about you, the teacher, communicating what you want. Being consistent about where you communicate it for

students and reminding students of those classroom routines, maybe writing them down. Because one thing I also have learned over the years in meetings is that a student with ADHD, you tell them in the fall and they remember. But a student with any attentional challenge, executive function, skill challenge, they really do need that constant, shorter, consistent constant reminders, which is it scaffold them to be their better self.

[00:19:06.180] – Leslie
There is a lot that can be done with classroom management to support positive outcomes for kids and for learning because it seems like it takes away from the learning, but I think it actually just really…it sets the table for great learning.

[00:19:22.620] – Steve
Long, long time, I've been a proponent of restitution as a alternative for inappropriate student behavior because I see that setting the stage for relationship building. That's what was going through my mind when I read the article about you. I think that I read that your school does community service as another alternative discipline piece. I've always thought in those options that I can build that connection with a student. In other words, sitting in a room silently for 90 minutes while some adult is on guard duty, I don't see what you walk away with. A kid cut class, so we suspend them for two days. I'm not sure what the learning process is there. But a student who's engaged in some community service, I can enter a conversation with them. I can even complement them on on the work that they did or what they produced. That sense went through me that you can get into a conversation with the student on your walk that you might not have gotten into in your office with the student.

[00:20:48.280] – Leslie
Absolutely. I'll ask kids, do they know this trail? Sometimes kids will say, "Oh, yeah, I used to walk this trail all the time. I'm not sure why I stopped." It's amazing what it opens

up, and I would say we do still offer community service as well, and kids have taken advantage of that. They might form a relationship. Our custodians are amazing, but they might form that better understanding relationship with the custodian and might think twice about, we don't have a lot of litter, but just taking care of things. And once you yourself have done the cleanup, it's hard not to clean up, right? So I feel like that has been good. Sometimes students have done community service with the kitchen staff, which are also wonderful people. And sometimes they've done raking outdoors, and it's like taking pride in your space. And it definitely improves, I think, the outcome. And they will say that kids have been interested in the hike, but they were behind in their work, and they used the three hours to work, but they were the kids who were going to do that, then that made sense for them.

[00:21:57.860] – Steve
If you're using the detention time to get work done that you want to get done, that's pretty positive. My finding is that too often there's a kid sitting there staring at the clock for 90 minutes, and I just don't find any good coming out of that. Have you run into any resistance or pushback on your implementation of the detention hikes?

[00:22:25.300] – Leslie
Yeah, I would say there's been two families that recognize I recognize that their rambunctious boys just enjoyed it a little bit too much. They really got the sense from maybe the stories that the boys were telling that maybe there wasn't much reflection or growth happening. I would say both of these boys, they really are happy wherever they are, whatever's happening. Their ability to self-reflect maybe isn't quite there. They were fun to have on the hike. But I also understand that one dad said he can go anytime he wants, but not if he has a detention. If he has a detention, I want him to serve it in the school. That boy has chosen to come on hikes last year and again this fall, but I won't ever have him

for a detention hike because he isn’t allowed. You got to respect that, too.

[00:23:21.100] – Steve
Yep. The big question there is what’s the conversation the parent has with the child after to the detention.

[00:23:31.220] – Leslie
Yeah, for sure. That boy has shown growth. That’s the other cool thing about high school is they grow in lots of different ways, and it’s really cool to watch them grow and change.

[00:23:48.660] – Steve
I was hearing student well-being as I read through your stuff. I’m thinking of all the things I’m reading getting kids off of technology for a couple of hours during a day. A lot of the listeners to this podcast are instructional coaches or school leaders. I just wondered – any thoughts that you might share, any insights about building student well-being and the whole mindfulness piece?

[00:24:27.100] – Leslie
Yeah, definitely. I think we are seeing a challenge there with being phone addicted, video game addicted, social media addicted, and the cost for kids in terms of their sleep. Sometimes they’re staying up too late on some of those medias and just their attention span, their ability to be quiet and allow themselves – their nervous system to recalibrate because video gaming and things like that, it definitely hypes you up in a way that can impact your well-being. It takes a minute to dry out from it. Even if you stop playing the game, your adrenaline is still pumping through your body. I think our school last year, we were the pioneers in the state for using Yonder Pouches, which is the cell phone pouch. When I say that it was an almost immediate change to our school culture, I would be understating it. I think that it was hard for kids at first and parents, but right away, kids were saying good morning and hello to adults. We were just really more present.

Teachers removed that barrier for teachers to have to constantly police the cell phones. Being phone free has been really great for our school community.

[00:25:51.900] – Leslie
On the hike, there's back and forth with the kids. "Can I have my phone? Can I not have my phone?" I do I don't allow them to carry their phones unless there's a huge reason they shouldn't have it, but they're not on their phones on the hike. And I think taking those breaks really does increase well-being. It's really rare you see kids reading anymore. And even adults, if you've traveled anywhere, you know that in the airport, it's the rare person that's reading. A lot of people are on their phones. And just giving space to look up is so important for our well-being. 100%, I think that's the case.

[00:26:33.760] – Steve
You triggered – I had a person on this podcast teaching a graduate-level class on Saturdays at a university, and she talks about the times that she's last minute heading down the hall to the class, and there's no noise at all. She thinks it's been canceled, and she walks in, and there's 25 people sitting in the room, everyone on their phone, and that she has to force graduate students to put down the phone and get up and walk around the room and talk to two people before she starts her class. That is a biggie.

[00:27:17.460] – Leslie
I think that kids are relearning how to just be and talk a little bit to each other. I think we're getting there because this is year two. Every year, it's going to get easier, I think.

[00:27:30.940] – Steve
Terrific. Well, Leslie, I was looking forward to this conversation with you, and you certainly didn't disappoint. I really appreciate it. If listeners would like to check in with you with the question that they have, what's the best way that

they might be able to do that?

[00:27:50.040] – Leslie
Yeah, great. Thank you very much for having me. I would say the best way to reach me would be through my school email, which is ltrundy@rsu1.org.

[00:28:06.280] – Steve
Okay. We'll put that in the lead-in to the podcast, make it easier for folks to find. I'll also attach a link to the article that I had read.

[00:28:16.000] – Leslie
Okay, great. Thank you so much.

[00:28:18.260] – Steve
Thanks again.

[00:28:18.700] – Leslie
Take care.

[00:28:22.200] – 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 and find my videos and blogs at barkleypd.com.