Podcast: Administrators and Teacher Leaders Teaming Up to Mentor New Teachers

By pairing an administrator with a systems-level view and access to resources with a teacher leader deep in classroom expertise and credibility, a school-based mentor program added support to teachers new to teaching or new to the school. Their partnership sent a message that mentoring isn't something done to teachers—it's something we do together.

> *"The most meaningful growth happens when learning is collective and public, not private or evaluative."*

Read Tim's article,"How Administrators and Veteran Educators Can Team Up to Mentor New Teachers" here.

Email Tim: tmontalvo5119@bcsdny.org

Visit Tim's LinkedIn.

Email Amanda: adeserio3738@bcsdny.org

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.

[00:00:29.500] – Steve
Administrators and teacher leaders teaming up to mentor new teachers. On our podcast today are Timothy Montalvo, Assistant Principal, and Amanda Deserio, a veteran teacher from Fox Lane Middle School in Bedford, New York. Tim and Amanda provide a building-based mentoring program for new teachers. In an article about their program, I read this statement that caught my attention: "The most meaningful growth for teachers happens when learning is collective and public, not private or evaluative." Now, listeners to this podcast know how that aligns with my mantra that teaching is a team sport and a Public Act. I'm looking forward to learning more about their program and their findings. Welcome, Tim and Amanda.

[00:01:22.160] – Tim
Hi.

[00:01:22.660] – Amanda
Hi.

[00:01:23.980] – Steve
Thanks for being with us. Tim, I'm wondering, for starters, what did you identify as the need that led you to initially to

put this program together?

[00:01:36.780] – Tim
Yeah, so we started four years ago, a little over three years ago, and it was one of the first things that was brought to me as one of the new administrators in the building, the new administrator in the building that the idea had been brought up, I think by Amanda, actually, to Mary, our principal, about something middle school-specific. We have this really robust onboarding process for our new teachers to the district, which takes them all four years throughout their tenure. Skillful teachers, one of them. There's focus on different strategies for different groups and populations. We're incorporating some science of reading into that, too, now, but nothing really for our building. What does it mean to be a new teacher at Fox Lane Middle School? That's at the point where I said, I don't even know what it means to be a really good teacher at Fox Lane Middle School, because while I have a bunch of middle school background and experience, this is new for me. Who am I to come as a newcomer to this building to say that these are some things that we should be focusing on. Out of respect for all that was done before all that's happening, I really felt it was important to make sure that we had one of our teacher leaders, Amanda, who is a teacher leader in our building, to craft this and co-create this.

[00:03:03.540] – Steve
Amanda, what would you say you picked up as a teacher that needed to be addressed and caused the suggestion for this program?

[00:03:14.020] – Amanda
Well, three years ago would have been my 10th year here. I'm in my 13th year at Fox Lane Middle School. I was looking at the district level of ways that I could show more leadership in one of the things that really I was interested in was mentoring. We do have a mentor course for our new teachers that's district-wide that's run by someone who does a

wonderful job. There was really no need or place for somebody. I went to our principal and said, the middle school is such a unique animal. There should be something where we're helping just our middle school teachers because you could come from a high school and go to a middle school, and it is completely different. You can go from elementary to middle, and middle is its own unique animal that needs to be tamed in a very specific way.

[00:04:08.840] – Steve
[laughter] I'm only laughing because I have a lot of years in education, okay? I've always described that why anybody would want to teach middle school is hard to figure out, but the people who love to teach it would never want to be any place else.

[00:04:28.740] – Amanda
That's why I've been here 13 years.

[00:04:33.240] – Amanda
Once you know the crazy, you're good with the crazy.

[00:04:36.670] – Steve
That's a great indicator. Amanda, the article talked about you and Tim partnering on the program. I wondered if you'd talk a little bit about what that partnership means.

[00:04:52.020] – Amanda
Sure. We brainstormed together some topics that maybe the teachers weren't getting in other onboarding processes, and especially, Tim, coming from what are the educational hot topics, what are they seeing in evaluations that teachers need more help with, and then me coming more from the teacher life perspective, you've got parent-teacher conferences coming up. You've got report cards. You've got management issues. You've got an evaluation coming in. You need a formal lesson plan, or what are ways that you could strengthen your teacher life, the things that are going to come at you every year. We took that

duly, and each session we would have an education topic and a teacher life topic that we would both collaborate on and give our experience to both. But then it also it left them with a new educational learning, but then also something that they could implement the next day or something they might have been worried about or something they were looking forward to in their calendar that they had a little bit more information on. So a little bit of classroom application, a little bit of just teacher application of what to do in this career other than what you have to do with students.

[00:06:10.040] – Amanda
So we took it from there and we had a very long list of ideas that we had to narrow down to about eight or nine.

[00:06:16.070] – Tim
Yeah. Part of our focus was to make sure that it was short, it was sweet, it was to the point. The idea that… Sometimes our program I'm butted into or dovetailed with the district-wide mentoring program, depending on the day that it fell. Some of these folks were here till seven or eight o'clock at night after teaching a full day. Then we were an in between of like, okay, here, let's talk about middle school a little bit. How could we make it as focused as possible? We wanted to make sure that, A, it was only a half an hour, and a lot of the times it felt like a marathon, and it was only once a month, and it would be in the place of one of their extra helps because we wanted to make sure that contractually, they're obligated to stay after school for three days out of the week. We didn't want to tack something on to that. So to try to increase that buy-in, we wanted to make sure that we were explicitly valuing people's time.

[00:07:15.900] – Steve
Would you give us one or two examples of a specific topic that you've had?

[00:07:28.140] – Amanda

We did everything from classroom management, we did the elements of a strong lesson, we did science of reading. We had a reading specialist, one of our specialists at school, come in and talk. We did some teaching English language learners.

[00:07:44.350] – Tim
We did some translanguaging. We always tried to pair it with, for instance, the day we did translanguaging, we also did a lesson plan swap. For instance, we'd spend a few minutes about just some of the basics. There were some ESL teachers teachers in the room that provided that expertise. That was the other thing that we wanted to do, too, because we wanted to recognize that even though you're a new teacher here, you might not necessarily be a new teacher. We had some new teachers who had 5-10 years of teaching experience. They just happened to be new to our district. In addition to tapping them in, there were also times when we brought in other veteran teachers on their areas of focus. For instance, one of our teachers, Matt Lepre, has this very systematic positive classroom environment structure that he puts in place. He led one of the sessions so that, A, it wasn't just us talking all the time, but they were being introduced to multiple people in the building that were masters in these different areas and then able to tap into them if they needed to. The biggest takeaway is the most popular topics were those life ones, like Amanda was saying, that teacher life.

[00:08:53.280] – Tim
The month before open house or back to school, our parent-teacher conferences, Amanda went over some of the frequently asked questions, some of the things like what you should anticipate, and here are some possible answers to alleviate the stress that inherently creates. Another one was the… What was another one, Amanda…

[00:09:15.870] – Amanda
Professional development.

[00:09:16.810] – Tim
Yea professional development was another big one. We have all these professional development obligations here in New York for credit and whatnot. There's a lot of offerings that our local collective provides, our BOCES provides, and then our own teacher center provides. Just one of the differences, whether it's salary advancement or whether it's this is something that I'm interested towards, but I also want to build towards something else. All those different moving parts, we were able to present to them in an adjustable way that was applicable and just things that people should know walking into it, but you don't.

[00:09:52.780] – Amanda
The year that we started this, I also became the director of our in-house staff development program, the Bedford Staff Development Center. One, it was a way for me to teach all the teachers what these are the requirements, this is where I can help you. But also it was a way of garnering a needs assessment where I could see this is where people are struggling, this is where we need to tailor our teacher-led professional development.

[00:10:20.320] – Steve
In the article that I read, you talked about three benefits of the program being confidence, connection, and continuity. I wondered if you'd take those one at a time and maybe give an example of what it is you see happening.

[00:10:38.600] – Tim
Sure. That confidence piece was realizing all the things on the plate of any teacher, and then especially teachers newer to the building, newer to the culture, giving them that background just so that they can go into situations like the parent-teacher conference, like their final evaluation with our principal that Amanda also helped them prep for with that confidence. That connection, creating that community of other new people to the building and just saying, here's a time and

space to really speak freely. You're not being evaluated. You can ask any question you want. It was actually beneficial because our principal is the lead evaluator of all new teachers, but she wasn't always in the room. It provided that safe space of… That's definitely not our principal at all. You could go to her with anything. But just the reality of this is my lead evaluator. Do I look dumb asking this question? Maybe let me not ask it. It provided that connection, that continuity. Then just the continuity piece in particular was we created this learning walk, which was like an intervisitation. Teachers were asked to highlight one thing that we went over in the continuum in this series and just getting feedback from their peers, like we said, in a non-evaluative way.

[00:11:55.020] – Tim
So while we were using the Danielson framework to our conversations and our look for us, it was in no way, shape, or form being calculated anywhere. Then the most important part of that that I found was the debrief and then just bringing in the teachers and sharing, okay, this is what your peers saw. What do you think?

[00:12:15.720] – Steve
Who did the learning walk? The new teachers of each other or you had other teachers do the learning?

[00:12:22.420] – Tim
The new teachers of each other.

[00:12:24.000] – Steve
Oh, cool.

[00:12:25.100] – Tim
The first year, we asked for volunteers. Then the second year, we I really just wanted to use it as a sounding board and just a launching point for the program itself. We did require everyone to host one and to take part in one.

[00:12:43.500] – Steve
Very cool.

[00:12:44.190] – Tim
You got the full breadth of it.

[00:12:46.600] – Steve
What's going through my mind is I've done quite a bit of work in the training of mentors for school districts because I come from a strong coaching background. But some of the research on that is that as helpful as the mentors are, and most beginning teachers identify their mentor as critical, second to that was other new teachers. So the time with other people who were going through exactly what I was going through tended to be highly rated by new teachers.

[00:13:23.500] – Tim
Yeah, they all had the benefit, at least in the first year, of a mentor in their content area, and most of time, like 90% of the time within their school. That's a constant, whether they're meeting with them on a regular basis. But yeah, just that idea of just this person, these people are going through the same thing that I'm going through, goes a lot farther.

[00:13:43.020] – Amanda
I think, too, that just helped bolster all of their confidence, whether they were a first-time teacher or just a teacher new to the district that had years teaching somewhere else, just knowing I'm not the only one that's going through this. I also have these questions and just the connection of that in this go, go, go profession, you might not ever get a chance to walk across the building and have a discussion with the new orchestra teacher or with the new ESOL teacher, but you're having a lot of the same experiences. We were able to give them that space and that space to talk honestly and that space and time to just come together. I thought the learning walks specifically were incredibly valuable because you're so inundated in your everyday life as a teacher, especially in

your first few years, that you don't even think it's possible to go pop into somebody else's room. What you do, it's completely eye-opening and inspiring. I mean, that was one of my favorite days 10 years in, even. I'm telling our course teacher, I'm like, I'm stealing that idea, and I love it, and I'm going to go do this now.

[00:14:51.840] – Amanda
It's just to see the students that you have in a different place, in a different location, looking at a different subject is just eye-opening as well, and it helps you to look at the students in a different way, too. So not even just the teaching part of it, looking at from the student perspective as well.

[00:15:09.880] – Tim
It's just something that we, as a building, are trying to promote. It's just part of our culture, just normalizing being in another classroom and just the power of just through osmosis alone, not walking away with having to write something up or it being part of your review cycle, but just like, I'm going to spend 10 minutes in this class and just see what I get out of it and then see all the different ways that I could apply whatever great things are happening. Or just even like, I'm really struggling with this particular kid, and he's failing my math class, but he's doing amazing in ELA. What could I be doing more of to help recreate that environment for my content area?

[00:15:52.100] – Steve
I'm real big, especially when I'm working with the middle school PLCs that are frequently a grade-level PLC rather than content, for teachers to be able to see the same students they have in two or three other teachers' classrooms, and then to be able to come back together as a PLC, what's the same and what's different can generate a lot of ideas and reflections for teachers.

[00:16:21.040] – Amanda
Well, we use the team model here at Fox Lane, so we have a lot of that in just our everyday discussion, which is great. I saw this in science first period, what are you seeing in social studies, fifth period. But also to my team, in particular this year, have been thinking, how can we do some intervisitation where we go see, one, each other teach because we're with each other talking about students all day long, and we hear the students talking about all these classes, but then also to see them in a different area and make it a more well-rounded version of what we see of the students.

[00:16:54.240] – Steve
I put one together a couple of years ago in an elementary school. I had a fourth-grade teacher, 20 years experience, she saw her class in PE for the first time. She'd been teaching 20 years and was blown away by how different her students were in a PE class from back in her own classrooms as to who showed leadership, who showed perseverance, that gave her a whole different perspective on her kids. It was just amazing that you could be in that building all those years with the same people, and that opportunity never happened. You listed some suggestions in the article for other people who might be thinking about this. The one I wanted you to start with was you wrote, "Center the experience for your students." talk a little bit about where your focus was there.

[00:17:47.880] – Tim
I've had the benefit of being in a few districts, a few different placements with ultra levels of affluence, ultra levels of poverty, and everywhere in between. We have a great mix here at the Fox Lane Middle School, where we see students from all different experiences. Not treating one particular group as a monolith, but what is the value of identifying where students are at, where are some of their common struggles, and then how can we then tell this program to the students first, and then just then ultimately see, okay, what

are the ramifications for professional development or something like this? It’s interesting.

[00:18:31.480] – Amanda
Two, one of our one big building goals is building relational capacity with the students following the AVID framework. So centering the experience on the student and first building that connection with them before you’re dissecting them as a learner will give you so much more information or else you’re putting a puzzle together without half of the pieces. So really focusing on the student as a whole helps with that as well.

[00:18:58.320] – Tim
Yeah. And even taking a look at our building, as Amanda was saying, we have a few different plates like every building does. And so over the past few years, we’ve taken a look at our student problem solving process through our MTSS and just taking a look at that tier one environment. What is not working in that tier one environment for that particular kid? We’re not looking at the kid as the problem, even though we call it student problem solving. But what in the environment is that student not responding to? That’s a big pill to swallow sometimes because everyone here we feel is working at 110%, and at the same time, that 110% or the way that 110% is being delivered isn’t working for this particular kid or this particular group of kids.

[00:19:49.180] – Steve
I work with a backwards planning process where if you consider that your focus is on the student success and the student learning, that the next step backwards from that is what I labeled as student learning production behaviors. And so what is it that the student does that causes the learning to happen? So I use the statement that teachers don’t cause student achievements, students cause student achievements. But now you’re ready for the next step back. And so what does the teacher do that causes the student to engage in those learning

production behaviors that's going to lead to the student success. To me, that's the hard work of teaching because what I chose to do worked for 90% of the kids. It doesn't mean that I did something wrong, that I got three kids that it's not working for it. It means that I haven't had the chance to figure out what it's going to take for those. So back to your learning walks and your continuous teacher learning and teachers learning collaboratively all feeds into that.

[00:21:09.760] – Amanda
Just the more tools you have in your toolbox and the more you're exposed to in professional development, the more you can pull from to try and have the confidence to do so.

[00:21:22.700] – Steve
So as we've been talking, and Amanda, when I heard that you've been there for 13 years, it caused a question to jump in my head that came up while we were talking. I've had a couple of people on the podcast that are focusing on Gen Z folks coming into teaching. I'm wondering, with you being 13 years in, if there's… And especially when you talked about the teacher life, because that's what those folks talked about with the Gen Z perception of teacher life. The one I really… I had a person on who said, "What can we learn from our Gen Z teachers?" "What do we as experience folks learn?" I'll just give you the great short example. The woman that I had on the podcast, she's now actually doing the HR for the district. But at that time, she was a principal, and she had this new teacher that she was so excited about having. The woman was really strong in the classroom and everything. And about five months in, she came into the office and said, "How do I sign up for a mental health day?" She said, as the principal went through, like, "What are you…

[00:22:49.020] – Steve
Did I totally misread you?" And then she went on to say what she really discovered was parent-teacher conferences were coming up, and this woman really knew herself and what she

needed to do. And that's what she was talking about – what do we need to learn? I laid that question out – what do you folks find with new folks?

[00:23:10.400] – Amanda
I would say I feel like as a millennial, what I'm seeing from Gen Z teachers is they do have a bit of a don't sweat the small stuff attitude, and they do take better care of protecting their mental health, which as teachers, we are known for burnout. As a millennial who sweats everything, it's nice to see that it's protecting your peace. If you're not at peace, you can't show up every day as the best teacher you can be. But I do think, too, in the age of technology and in a people business, making sure that you can have that strong interpersonal communication is something that Gen Z sometimes needs more focus on or just more practice in. They're great at connecting with the students because they're in the know. When I was a young teacher, I remember having all that, and I'll say something now, and they're like, she's not cool anymore. I'm like, Oh, jeez. [laughter]

[00:24:21.720] – Tim
[laughter] It's not even funny anymore.

[00:24:23.700] – Amanda
But, too, I think there's anything – there's struggles that any new generation of teachers coming up needs to focus on. But then there's also things that older teachers need to be more flexible on and more veteran teachers to see what now is working and how they can connect with the Gen Alphas of the middle school and the connections that they can have. Because for a lot of us, it's like teaching aliens, Gen Alpha, sometimes. Being able to make those connections in this special way that Gen Z can is a real talent and strength.

[00:25:00.000] – Steve
That collective, us as educators, learning from each other is really important.

[00:25:07.800] – Tim
Steve, one of my other hats is I teach pre-service teachers at the undergraduate level. That's been a learning curve for me because I remember the pre-service teacher I was or just undergraduate student. That's not the reality in any way, shape, or form now. To Amanda's point, it's not anything that different is bad, but different – just we have to take stock in our new realities. We're at an inflection point in education where we are facing massive burnout. Between just the burnout and the retention and the recruitment in education, we do have to take a look. Maybe some of our structures and our systems have to change to meet where we are and to meet people where they are. Why is it bad for a teacher to take a mental health day? Would you rather that teacher show up in front of a group of students? But if that teacher is emotionally intelligent enough to recognize that, great, take that day, come back, and let's do the work, roll up our sleeves the next day.

[00:26:23.040] – Amanda
Isn't that what we're teaching the students anyways, emotional intelligence?

[00:26:26.620] – Tim
Yeah. We have to practice it ourselves. We're doing A lot of work in SEL right here and across the country. If we're teaching it, then we got to practice what we preach, right?

[00:26:38.400] – Amanda
And, too, I feel like educators are some of the most flexible professionals that you could find. To be, like Tim said, in systems that have not changed in 10, 20 years and finding the flexibility within those systems is difficult, which is unfortunately leading to that burnout and teacher retention issues. But being able to rely on each other and learn from each other is something that can keep it alive.

[00:27:06.960] – Steve

You just hit it. That's what I was going to come back to. Anything that you can be doing in a school to create the concept of teaching being, I call it a team sport. You use the term collective. If you think of new teachers, the idea that a first-year teacher is given the full responsibility that the 13-year veteran teaching next to order has. There's no other profession where we would look at that happening. The idea that we lose people before they get a chance to develop their full skill base says there's a problem in our design and our structure. Everything you guys are doing sounds right where we need to be headed. The more you can grow it, the better to create it as a culture.

[00:28:06.540] – Amanda
One of our big cultural pushes, as there's here, is collective efficacy, specifically for us around our literacy games. But even thinking one step up an administration of collective efficacy up there to help sustain teacher retention and learning and joy of the profession is also… It's like we, as teachers, know all the things, but it's got to go through the system.

[00:28:36.880] – Steve
Before I close out, I was wondering, is there anything you would identify that you had a chance to learn from putting this program together and working with it and being partners for a couple of years?

[00:28:51.520] – Tim
Yeah, there's a bunch of lessons. Just that idea of collective efficacy, that idea of the value of just increasing increasing teacher confidence, increasing teacher connection, increasing that continuity, and all that benefits that that has for kids, but also to make sure that our teachers are showing up every day to their best. But one of the things that is funny because Amanda is like, "Do we tell Steve we're not doing this anymore?" Because we're not this year. I'll explain why. We're not doing it this year because it was working, and we're not

doing it this year because it wasn't working. We're doing it because we want to increase our capacity, and we've totally reshaped the way we do our faculty meetings this year. Every single faculty meeting is a PLC. Ms. Harrison, our principal, has taken back over that new teacher group, and each one of the three other assistant principals has taken over different content areas in which we are just focusing on one to two different strategies, giving time to develop implementation, implement it, and then just debriefing at that next meeting. We have three cycles of that. Our most recent one is the idea of relational capacity and inquiry.

[00:30:03.760] – Tim
We taught the administrators with the cooperation of our secondary coordinators, these different strategies for, let's say this last round, relational capacity and inquiry, and just ask teachers to just pick two of those. Their only focus now for this next month until our next meeting is to implement it. The only focus on our next meeting is to discuss how it was implemented and debrief. Just the idea of being able to let go of something really cool like this in and of itself is a lesson. To just say, okay, we're going to do something even more cool, something new, and be okay with shifting things.

[00:30:50.440] – Steve
This is really strange that you bring this up because as I was listening to you, where my head kept going and why I talked about PLCs is that the next step is moving what you were doing with your new teachers to be more inclusive of the staff having those experiences. It's sounding to me like that's where you've gone.

[00:31:17.680] – Amanda
One thing, too, I think as in the receiving end of the PLC, I think it's been great to learn these strategies and be able to debrief. But what I would really love to see is for the administration to pick people that they know are already doing these things well and highlight the successes they're having

and have those people teach us how to do it. In their first year of doing this, it's something that can continue to evolve because we found the importance of the collaboration between teacher leaders and administrators. But two, that creates buy-in for teachers. It highlights that you're capable of achieving this, which it's all the things that we tell the kids. You can do this if it's possible. I'm not just telling you to go try this strategy.

[00:32:04.990] – Amanda
Do hard things. [laughter]

[00:32:05.720] – Amanda
[laughter] You can do hard things. Exactly. I think, too, having more of that teacher collaboration as we build the PLCs and showing off the highlights of people that have successfully done these already, because we have a lot of people that have already been diving into a lot of the strategies, would help us to reach some of the successes that we had together in our program in our new facilitation to the greater faculty.

[00:32:33.360] – Steve
I'm hearing educator efficacy.

[00:32:37.620] – Tim
100%.

[00:32:38.370] – Steve
For the whole school.

[00:32:39.440] – Tim
And student agency, right? Those are our two focuses.

[00:32:43.640] – Steve
Yeah. Well, listen, guys, thanks so much. I will put the link to the article into the lead-in to the podcast so folks can find it. Is there a way that the listeners could check back in with you if they have questions or want to find out more about

the new directions you're taking?

[00:33:05.480] – Tim
Yeah, on Blue Sky, I'm montalvoedu.bluesky.social. I'm also on LinkedIn under Timothy Montalvo. Then on X, it's @mrmantalvoedu.

[00:33:20.700] – Steve
Okay.

[00:33:22.500] – Amanda
Amanda?

[00:33:23.980] – Amanda
For me, just my school email.

[00:33:26.740] – Steve
You got it. We'll put your school email in there. That's perfect. I'll post it in the lead-in.

[00:33:35.440] – Tim
Thanks, Steve.

[00:33:36.000] – Steve
Alright. Thanks. Take care. And hey, have a great holiday.

[00:33:38.660] – Amanda
Thank you very much.

[00:33:39.180] – Tim
Be well. You, too. Bye-bye.

[00:33:41.660] – Steve
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.