Empower the Learner Profile

Kathleen McClaskey, CEO of Empower the Learner and co-author of **"Make Learning Personal"** and **"How to Personalize Learning,"** identifies the need to develop student capacity to support their own learning, achieve agency, self-advocate for their learning and realize their hopes and dreams. As leaders, we need to create the same for staff.

Visit the Empower the Learner website.
Get in touch with Kathleen: kathleen@empowerthelearner.com

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PODCAST TRANSCRIPT

Steve [Intro]: 00:00 Hello and welcome to the Steve Barkley Ponders Out Loud podcast. Instructional coaches and leaders create the environment that supports teachers to continually imagine, grow and achieve. They model an excitement for learning that teachers in turn model for students. This podcast is dedicated to promoting the important aspects of

instructional leadership. Thanks for listening. I'm thrilled you're here.

Steve: 00:33 Empower the learner profile. Today's podcast conversation is with Kathleen McClaskey, the CEO and chief learning officer of Empower the Learner and the founder of Making Learning Personal. As an experienced teacher, K-12 administrator and consultant, Kathleen is passionate in empowering all learners with the tools, skills, and practices to be self-directed learners. Welcome Kathleen.

Kathleen: 01:10 Well, thank you so much for inviting me here, Steve.

Steve: 01:13 Kathleen, I'm wondering if you'd start off sharing a little bit about your background and how that led to the work you're doing now with the Empower the Learner Profile.

Kathleen: 01:26 So basically, back about a decade ago, when I was in collaboration with a colleague of mine in a company called Personalized Learning, we decided to really help kids or help teachers understand how kids learn. And so we actually developed this process early on and we developed what's called the UDL Lens, a universal design for learning lens, of access, engage and express. And so we really trained teachers and parents how to use this particular profile. It was called just the Learner Profile at that time. So after a bit of research of the last several years, I really dove deeper into this piece called Identity and the importance of kids developing an identity and the Empower the Learner Profile is exactly that, is to help kids really realize and understand and to share their identity and to be okay with that. So the Empower the Learner Profile includes three aspects – who I am, how I learn that's using the UDL lens, and what I aspire to be.

Kathleen: 02:41 So again, we want to really empower children with that understanding because we want kids also to value

themselves as well, and to, again, develop that positive self image around the Empower the Learner Profile and that does exactly that. And happy to share some really good examples of that. I've met up with many teachers over the course of the last decade using the learner profile and currently using the Empowered Learner Profile, and I have one teacher that I have collaborated with and co-presented with, and she's a special-ed teacher in Wisconsin, and she has used the Empower the Learner Profile with all of her caseload, all kids with special needs at the high school level. And that Empower the Learner Profile by the way, really just sort of empowered kids to be able to advocate for their learning.

Kathleen: 03:44 So that's one thing the Empower the Learner Profile does. The other piece is that not only did you have kids advocating with their classroom teachers about what they need to learn and wouldn't that be wonderful if we could all get kids to do that, is that those kids actually took their Empower the Learner Profile and they led their own IT meetings and they introduced the adults to who I am, how I learn and what I aspire it to be. And how powerful is that to be able to lead your own IT meeting or at your learner led conferences and share these things out about yourself. And so that has actually produced incredible results and the level of self confidence that I can advocate for who I am wherever I am. And so that's a lifelong skill. So that's the real power behind the Empower the Learner Profile.

Steve: 04:45 So I had written down on my notes that you describe the Empower the Learner Profile by saying that it causes students to support their own learning, to achieve agency, to self-advocate for their learning and to realize their hopes and dreams. And as I was just listening to you and running those things through my head and thinking about the fact that the podcast we're recording here is instructional coaches who work with teachers and administrators and it's striking me that the four things are critical to look at for

their work with teachers. A word that I frequently use with school leaders is called model the model. In other words, the majority of the time that a teacher is interacting with an instructional coach or a school administrator, they should be experiencing the same kind of things that we'd be expecting the students to experience with that teacher. And so I throw that out to you and ponder the degree to which it makes sense through the administrator's eyes.

Kathleen: 05:58 Well, this whole idea of agency, I wanna focus on that because several years ago, I was asked by ASCD to write about personalized learning and learner agency. And one of the things I like to point out to administrators and to teachers is that that truly should be our promise to children, is that they'll develop agency and their learning. And I think it's a great focus that administrators could have. Agency is really the capacity of children to act independently and to make their own free choices around their learning. I've spent a lot of time in classrooms and observations or even as a teacher and we want kids to be able to have the power to act around their learning and to develop agency. Agency is such a gift in the end, but that should be our promise.

Steve: 07:09 Would it align that a teacher who's not feeling agency in her own learning is unlikely to be creating that agency for students?

Kathleen: 07:23 Right. Wow. You really hit the the nail on the head because that's really true and we want teachers to be able to model agency.

Steve: 07:34 If I'm gonna coach teachers, understanding a teacher's hopes and dreams and assisting the teacher and being a self advocate – an empowered teachers gonna empower learners.

Kathleen: 07:50 Correct. Yes. And often when I'm doing workshops or even webinars or whatever our presentation is, I

have teachers do their profile because we are first and foremost learners and we have to understand ourselves in that way. It's highly empowering to understand both our strengths and challenges. Teachers are very forthright and they basically say, "yeah, I have a really hard time doing this, but I'm really great at doing this." And how good that feels to talk about it, because a lot of times teachers sort of suppress those things. But the importance to create a culture in the classroom where everyone is valued and heard and seen is so important and creating that culture really begins with the teacher. And so kids would feel comfortable enough to share out all these things about themselves and that kids sort of value and respect each other in a way that they'll say, "geez, I didn't know you had a hard time doing that. Could I help you with that?" So just think about that whole lesson around empathy.

Steve: 09:17 So if you were observing a faculty meeting and you weren't seeing teachers have that sense or culture as to how they work as a
faculty, it'd be rare for the teacher to go back and create it.

Kathleen: 09:31 Exactly. For sure. It depends, you know…

Steve: 09:36 There are those people. Yeah.

Kathleen: 09:38 Yeah. There's some teachers that just want to want to comply with whatever administration says, and there's some that are
independent thinkers and saying, I want a classroom culture where every child is heard. And you can do that and I've seen that happen in action and it's so incredible when kids can share these things. I think that the model, the PBIS model actually lends itself to that positive behavioral intervention system and I've seen where kids can share these things openly and the kids are caring about each other.

Steve: 10:27 I have to say piece that's rushing through my mind is, sometimes the place I've seen it most difficult to have that environment is when you bring the school administrators in a district together. There aren't a lot of districts that created that that safe culture.
Kathleen: 10:48 Right.

Steve: 10:49 I'm often surprised when that comes out in my coaching with the school administrator where they'll share things with me that they really don't have anybody else in the system that they can have that kind of conversation with. So that can make it difficult then for that school administrator to create it within the school. But that concept of modeling the model all the way up the leadership process here is critical.

Kathleen: 11:17 I've worked with administrators as well and the question is how do we create the school culture? And it really is where the administrator is modeling that. Because the thing is that we wanna create cultures where everyone is seen and heard. And I think in our focus in schools and especially by administrators about testing and whatever, , I mean, where is that gotten anyone? It hasn't necessarily created the culture you want. Creating a culture of inclusivity takes a lot of work and it really starts from the top. I can't really think back in my own career where administrators did that very well, but I think that more than ever, we have to create that culture. That's far more important than all the testing we could possibly do, because if kids are feeling great about where they are and who they are, and they trust each other, there's no greater feeling than that in schools. And that we care about each other. There has to be a humanity in the school environment and if there's not, everyone really suffers.

Steve: 12:54 We labeled earlier that it was critical for teachers to to ask and listen and we can move that same statement then to the school leadership. The school

leadership’s ability to ask and listen is critical to starting that culture with teachers.

Kathleen: 13:14 You bring up a really good point. It is about listening. And I think we should be honing in on that skill about being a good listener.

Steve: 13:27 For sure.

Kathleen: 13:28 And I think that’s the one quality that so many people do not have, but it’s so essential in a school environment to be a good listener and to teach children to be good listeners.

Steve: 13:42 And to teach them what that means. I think too often, they think it means doing what the teacher told me I need to do.

Kathleen: 13:50 Yeah. Well, the thing is, is that it’s a hard thing to do. I had a Dad who was absolutely the best listener I’ve ever known in my life. He listened and did not perform judgment, but would reflect. So I had that gift of good listening in my life and that model – it’s the most powerful thing you can do with children – one of the most powerful things is to listen and reflect and not make judgements of others.

Steve: 14:27 Kathleen, I appreciate the things you’ve shared here and the thinking you’ve gotten me to do. Take a moment or two to tell listeners how they can find out more about the empower the learner profile.

Kathleen: 14:41 Yeah. So first of all, I head up a company called Empower the Learner and that’s at empowerthelearner.com. You can certainly reach me at kathleen@empowerthelearner.com. We are gonna be starting our program at the end of the summer and would welcome either individuals or groups of individuals from schools to participate in the Empower the Learner Program. But I also

wanna tell you that the Empower the Learner Profile is actually located in a wonderful program called Book Creator, which is used by virtually thousands of teachers around the world. And you can do just the Empower to Learner Profile with kids in a very interactive way and it's completely universally designed so that kids can express these things and tell their stories about who I am, what I aspire to be. So bookcreator.com is the place where you can find that profile. It doesn't include how to build a backpack or a plan around that, but it's a great start and a great tool for administrators and teachers to use. And it's already been used by I think, like 63,000 educators have already accessed that program and used it. So take a look at that.

Steve: 16:13 I appreciate you making that available to folks. Have a great day.

Kathleen: 16:18 Thank you so much, Steve.

Steve [Outro]: 16:22 Thank you 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.