Podcast: School Staff Learning – Increasing Student Success

How does a staff's engagement in reflection generate increased staff learning that promotes ownership and accountability for student success? Highly experienced school leader, Dr. Matt Horvath, explores leaders work with coaching, PLCs, and professional learning for classified staff. The podcast provides insights and questions to promote your reflection.

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Podcast Transcript:

[00:00:00.340] – 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.

[00:00:29.840] – Steve
School Staff Learning – Increasing Student Success. Joining our podcast today is Dr. Matt Horvath, who recently became the principal at Manhattan Beach Middle School in California. Matt brings 25 years of experience in education ranging from a high school social studies teacher, dean of students, coach, athletic director, and assistant principal. In addition, he has also served as a middle and high school principal, and most recently as assistant superintendent of personnel services for Beverly Hills Unified School District. As Matt and I spoke earlier, it was clear to me that he brings a lot of experience and insight into his current role of middle school principal and he just began this school year. I'm really looking forward to our conversation. Welcome, Matt.

[00:01:27.220] – Matt
Hi, Steve. Thanks for having me on. I really appreciate it.

[00:01:30.430] – Steve
Super, super. I'm glad to have you here. I enjoyed our earlier get acquainted conversation. I'm looking forward to the podcast. For starters, would you tell people just a little bit about the Manhattan Beach Unified School District and then a little bit about about your school?

[00:01:49.780] – Matt
Yeah, sure. So, Manhattan Beach Unified School District is a beach community, school district, very affluent community. We are just southwest of Los Angeles. Extremely affluent community. The school district's about 5,500 students. We have

4 elementary schools, 1 middle school, and 1 high school. Again, it's a wonderful school district, very high achieving. And again, it's on a beach community. So it's pretty interesting. You've got tons of professionals, people who've done– you have doctors, lawyers, very traditional. You have a lot of different professional, ex-professional athletes that live in our community, which brings its own uniqueness. So we're an athletic powerhouse in the school district. And we also have a lot of actors and kids. So it's a very unique place, but it's also a beach culture. So it's a kind of laid back. So you got all these different people coming together in this kind of laid back, sunny Southern California community. So really, really cool place and just a wonderful place to be. It's where I call home as well. So it's a great place.

[00:03:07.930] – Steve
And how about the size and the structure of your middle school?

[00:03:11.150] – Matt
Yeah, so our middle school, we're about 1,175 students. We have grades in grades 6 through 8. Again, they come from those 4 feeder elementary schools, and we feed with the high school, which is Mira Costa High School. So our job in the middle school obviously is to prepare them to go over – most students kind of shift over to the high school, but very high achieving. Again, very affluent. Tons of parental community involvement, not only at the campus. I say some of our parents are our best employees because they're here every day volunteering and helping out and giving their time, you know, but as well as their resources. So tons of money that they give to our staff, which is great.

[00:04:01.740] – Steve
Comparing the community that you're working in now back across the different places you've worked across your career, kind of similar, great differences?

[00:04:16.030] – Matt
I've worked in a few like this. Locally, Palos Verdes is a similar community. Beverly Hills, very affluent, different types of folks that live in those communities. However, I also, when I started, I moved – I grew up in Detroit and started teaching there, which is far different than these communities. But when I moved out, I started working in Los Angeles Unified School District – completely different. Very low socioeconomic status, high Latino populations where we're predominantly white in this area. So very, very different. But I always say kids all have needs. They all have different types of needs. They all need our love and they all need our support and they all need a good teacher in front of them. Just, I believe focusing on different types of needs that our communities have.

[00:05:11.030] – Steve
A middle schooler's a middle schooler. [laughter]

[00:05:13.360] – Matt
[laughter] That's right. They're all goofy and crazy and figuring it out and all over the place on a daily basis, which hopefully is keeping me young, Steve.

[00:05:25.710] – Steve
I can only imagine that the fun – I know the fun and excitement of that. So I'm excited about the different experiences you've had from different places and different roles. So kind of bring all of that into our conversation. And when you and I spoke earlier, we identified 3 topics to explore connected to the learning of school staff. And one was professional learning communities. Then we also talked a little bit about the professional learning for classified staff. So if we could kind of take those one at a time. So starting with coaching, what have your experiences been with coaching, either informally or as a formal program in schools?

[00:06:13.920] – Matt

Yeah, so I have done a ton of work around administrator development in my time. And throughout that, I've really based my leadership on coaching and not necessarily – well, somewhat mentoring also, I think there's different roles in that, but I take coaching very, very seriously. You and I talked about it before, I said, I believe our best teachers are our coaches, the folks that also coach, because they understand that sometimes if something's not working, we need to change midstream. So as an administrator where I was working at the district office and overseeing principals and coaching principals, I've taken that back now being in the middle school and working directly with teachers, and I take that same lens. I'm there to observe. I like to collect evidence with our teachers and then provide feedback and coaching and ask lots and lots of questions. And I think that's really important to the growth of our staff. And I try to model that because I believe that's the best way to teach our students as well, right? I inform our teachers it's not about me giving and you receiving.

[00:07:31.100] – Matt
How can I facilitate the learning and ask lots of questions and really press on students – they're the ones with the knowledge. We want to just get that out of them rather than I give, you receive. And then, how can we ask lots of questions? How can we coach them, give them the supports and the scaffolds when they don't, but to really, you know, get that information out of them.

[00:07:54.660] – Steve
I'm currently writing a blog focused around reflection. And to me, that's what makes the coaching piece jump out. And you said ask a lot of questions a couple of times. And the key value of those questions is that they create an opportunity for reflection that not many of us can do on our own. So creating an environment where that reflection time is built in, I think, is critical.

[00:08:32.900] – Matt
That's right. So anytime I observe a classroom, I say, "I'm here to support you and help your growth." And I always leave by saying, "I can't be in your classroom every day, but I want you to be thinking about the same types of things. I want you to hear that voice in your head. Matt's asking me lots of questions." So after I leave, I will leave them with my script, but then I also leave with questions to ponder – reflection questions. So you're always thinking about, did I have my goals and objectives aligned to the instruction and to the assessment that was happening in the classroom? And I say, if you can answer those 3 things and you can reflect upon those 3 things and honestly say, yes, they were aligned and here's why, then I said, I think we've got it. And I really think that that's an important piece. And as you stated, it just doesn't happen enough. In my world, I'm the biggest reflector on an hourly basis, daily basis, nightly basis. I'm waking up thinking, reflecting on things that went, that happened that day and how I could do better, how I could do things differently.

[00:09:43.820] – Matt
So I try to impress that upon people because I think that's where the true growth happens. And if we create the conditions that are safe to be able to reflect and say, you know, it's okay that we've made some mistakes, it's okay we didn't have it right on. And if we can create that safe atmosphere, the effective filter comes down and people feel safe, they take risks. And ultimately I see some of the best growth in teachers and I hope they're working with their students the same way and we see growth with our students as well.

[00:10:19.610] – Steve
I'll point you to that – you are so right on there. And I'd say that's a great question to build into the end of some of your coaching sessions with a teacher, which would be what similarities do you see between the way you and I interact in

this conversation and the way that you do with students? That modeling, I think, is really, really powerful.

[00:10:44.220] – Matt
I love it, Steve. Every time I talk to you, speak with you, I get nuggets. I get nuggets from you and I'm like, yes! This is what I need to add. So I think of this – I talk about this triple track agenda when I'm doing different professional developments. I say, today, it's your learning here, but what are you gonna take from your learning to then take it down to that next track to support students. We're here in this professional development. I'm modeling this with you. Now you're taking that and modeling it with your students. And I think that's really important that we think about it that way. And that's a great question. I say these things, but I don't put that in my questions. So thank you for that.

[00:11:32.360] – Steve
And really the ultimate next step of that then is the kids taking it to their classmates.

[00:11:38.060] – Matt
That's right.

[00:11:38.640] – Steve
So now you're really building a support system network into the school. And again, I think it's one that comes back to your connection to sports coaching. It's pretty common for a sports coach to build peer-to-peer, player-to-player coaching into the system where kids know what to be looking for and being able to give feedback to each other, knowing what we're looking to execute. And it'd be similar to carry that over into our classrooms.

[00:12:13.780] – Matt
Love it. Yeah, for sure.

[00:12:16.360] – Steve
So let's go on to look at professional learning communities.

Those are a big area of interest to me. I did all of my teaching on teaching teams that functioned as professional learning communities before that phrase was out there. So I'm an early believer. And when we talked before, I know that you've got PLCs built into your middle school now. So you wanna talk about the structure of that a little bit as to how you have set up the PLCs and how you're looking at them working?

[00:12:54.340] – Matt
For sure. So my background, and when I was a middle school principal, 13 years ago – even longer than that. I was high school, middle and high school, 13 to 17 years ago during that time. We had a weekly professional learning community time set up where we had a late start. So we built systems around that. The unique thing about now, cut to Manhattan Beach Middle School, is they had created a structure prior to me arriving where they have a daily professional learning community time set up. So teachers, we have a 7-period day, so most teachers teach 5, they have one conference period or preparation period and then one PLC period. So it's a common planning time and common professional learning community time for all teachers. So very unique because…

[00:13:49.530] – Steve
That's awesome.

[00:13:51.070] – Matt
Yeah, it's great to the point that you have built the systems and structures to make it effective, right? So coming in, during my interviews and communication with some of the district office folks were that they just didn't find the accountability systems and structures were not there. They thought people were not using it as effectively as they could, which naturally I think on a daily – you think, great, daily PLCs, but there's work to be done there. There's thinking, there's structure that needs to happen. So one of the things I focused on when I came in and I asked lots of questions before

we started to see how effective, what kind of, things were happening, what structures, accountability structures we had in place. And I found some where I was hearing the department and hearing the work they were doing. I quickly knew I got to get out of their way. They got it. They're on. Get out of their way to the effect of I can, you know, impart some things, but not a lot of major work to be done here. Some other departments I could quickly gather that, yeah, we need to do some work here.

[00:15:02.810] – Matt
We need to create some structure for them. Get them some help with some knowledge and do some – we did read some articles around professional learning communities and ways to support them. So we implemented some of that, we did some reading, we did some reflection. Everybody has a Google Doc, so a Google Form that has professional learning communities, really the 4 questions that you think about, what do we want students to know and be able to do? What happens when they don't? So we start with that, and then on the Google Form, it's essentially give some reflection upon what their daily work is, their daily learning, what they're working on together. We create goals on this document as well. So it's really a working document. So we try to, myself and the other administrators, get into those PLCs and listen and be engaged and be involved. But as you can imagine, in a middle school, we're running around, it doesn't always happen. On this form, we use it as an interactive form. We try to jump on every day. They will provide some feedback. I am always asking questions. "Sounds great. How have you considered…" And that's one way to kind of keep engaged and I believe keep the accountability.

[00:16:21.670] – Matt
And we found it a really unique tool because then I get some great responses back from them saying, "yes, we have considered. Had you been there, Matt, you would have heard…" And we jab and joke a little bit, but it's really– it's been a

productive way to hold each other accountable. Michael Fullen talks about internal accountability, and I try to stress that with our staff, that when we're internally accountable, these are when the best results will happen. This is the best type of accountability that the state can give us things, our district, the county can tell us what to do, however, until we're internally accountable to one another, that's when we will really thrive. So that has been our structure. It's been working. It's been working well since the last we spoke. The thing that I am still kind of considering of this nuance, this piece between professional working communities and professional learning communities. I've been really kind of thinking about that and thinking about how does that play out and how does that work for us? Because I really, I like what you're talking about.

[00:17:34.920] – Matt
Sometimes we are just doing work and then other times we find departments that are really learning. And what I've been doing is during our department chair meetings is having our team share out the work that they're doing as well. Things that we like to highlight, I'll ask some departments, hey, I'd love what you were doing, can you share out so other departments can, can pick up on that? So we're finding it's certainly a work in progress, but we've demonstrated a lot of growth. I think we've built a lot of trust and I'm anxious to see where we continue to grow in that area.

[00:18:11.750] – Steve
So I'm gonna offer you another question to play with.

[00:18:14.550] – Matt
Okay.

[00:18:16.610] – Steve
The 4 questions that PLCs usually use.

[00:18:20.060] – Matt

Yes.

[00:18:21.180] – Steve
I add one. And that is after you've described the outcome you're looking for from the students, the phrase that I use, which took me a long time to come up with, is student learning production behaviors. So, my focus is that teachers don't cause student achievement, students cause student achievement. And that again makes your great connection to the performing arts folks and the athletic coaches. They can't teach you these things. They can teach you how to learn them. So if you decide, here's the skill set we want kids to master, here's the concept we want kids to develop. So then my next question is, what would kids need to do that would cause them to most likely do that learning? So just the way a coach would say, what do kids need to do at practice that's most likely to develop the skillset I want? So what is it that when you walked in and you watched kids, you'd say that what those kids are doing is likely to get us to that outcome we want? And then the rest of your questions stay the same. But I found a lot of teachers jump from here's the outcome, how should we teach it?

[00:19:40.470] – Steve
And if instead you're sticking into the middle there, here's the outcome, what would kids do to learn it? Now I can go to what I would do about teaching it. And then when you get to the later questions, then you can begin to differentiate that. So for the kids who've mastered it, they need to spend their time doing this. For the kids who haven't mastered it, they need to come back and spend their time doing this.

[00:20:05.170] – Matt
I like it. Yeah, that question inherently to me, the light bulbs are going off to say when we're answering this question, we're more of a professional learning community.

[00:20:20.060] – Steve

Yeah/ Because then, you said that you ask the PLCs to share their things they're doing with each other. Another word that you can sneak in there is to share what they're learning with each other.

[00:20:33.900] – Matt
Love it.

[00:20:34.640] – Steve
So they're making a discovery. One of the pieces I've put out with folks is you really know that your PLCs have arrived when they're causing a lot of problems for you as an administrator. And what I mean by that is they're pushing. You know, they're coming up with new ideas and new ways that could take the kids to this next step. And either, we don't have the schedule for that now or we don't have the resources for it, but they aren't just getting the work done, they're pushing it out into the future.

[00:21:11.800] – Matt
Yeah, that's great. It's something spot on here. We have, without going into depth, it's really an advisory period that we do once a week. It's really around – we do reteaching, we give makeup tests, we do support intervention during this period, and teachers create what that, we call it airtime, what that airtime is each week. And then students, they either will bring students in or students can elect to be in there and they can choose to be in there. And it's fascinating to be thinking about that and how we engage that.

[00:21:58.720] – Steve
So let's go to the last one that we had identified, and that was looking at the learning for classified staff. And I'm guessing in the last position you had, that was a focus of yours. And I'm wondering what you learned there that you bring into the principalship.

[00:22:21.170] – Matt

Sure was. So my focus, and this is how I kind of met our mutual friend Rob, was in human resources, what I was finding is, 90% of the problems that we had on our campuses came from the classified staff. So maintenance operations, custodians, different classified folks, not necessarily our teachers. So the problem with that is many of our classified managers do not have background or training in coaching or advising, support, mentoring. So what I found, I really took an emphasis to say, we have a gap here and we really need to help work with our classified managers to support our classified staff. So I did a lot of work with them, training, coaching. We went through coaching models and leadership. We spent a lot of time focused on that. And in that time, I started developing more of a reflective model of evaluation. My belief is we don't necessarily always treat our classified staff as professionals. We don't involve them in the work of the school. We don't bring them when we talk about student achievement, yet I would argue they're vitally important.

[00:23:49.630] – Matt
Having a clean campus and having a well-run campus and the people who do the real work on our campus are extremely vital. So even way back when I was a principal, before I used to, when we had talk about student achievement or we looked at data, I always had my classified staff with us and said, and they said, "why are we here?" I said, "because you're extremely important." So I've always felt this. And in constructing this evaluation, it was really about thinking about treating folks like professionals, but helping them be reflective like we do teachers. Thinking about goals. What do the goals look like rather than what we find in the state of California, certainly, and around classified evaluations is a checkbox. Did you do your work? Did you run the trash? And it's all of these checkboxes without any reflection and without ways that I as a manager can support growth and development. So in shifting into this role, I thought, wow, what a great opportunity to start, you know, implementing some

of the work that we did here. So I meet with my classified staff as well as met with our other assistant principals, meet with classified staff, the ones they oversee, to create goals, to think about what they hope to accomplish, some of the outcomes that they want to accomplish, and really approach it from a perspective of, again, they immediately think, why are we doing this?

[00:25:29.110] – Matt
Because you're professionals, because you're vital, it's important, and we wanna help you grow your growth and development and support. So we meet, we set, we create goals, and we think about what goals look like for each of our classified positions and what that might look like in collecting evidence -when I'm going into a classroom – what evidence am I looking for? And we talk about that. What does evidence look like for a custodian? What does evidence look like for an instructional assistant? What does it look like for my office managers? And we talk about some things that are really important to us and things that we're looking for. And the beauty is we have found a lot of really good improvements and ownership in the work that people are doing. And from our perspective, it's not just when we're thinking about having them reflect or giving feedback, it's not just, well, the class wasn't clean. Here's some evidence. As evidenced by, coming in in the morning and seeing 5 pieces of trash or seeing floors not swept or student learning environments not optimal as evidenced by…We think about ways to capture evidence.

[00:26:58.770] – Matt
And for us, when we start focusing on the evidence, it's no longer personal, right? Just as we do with coaching teachers, it takes it away from being personal. I did something, it's focusing on the evidence. Again, I believe kind of lowers that effective filter. And there's no debate, we collected this evidence, but it's not about that. How can we improve, right?

What does improvement now look like? So it's been fascinating to watch our classified staff really, I think their mindset has shifted one to really reflect on what they want, how they want to improve, how they can improve. But also just the fact that I feel like because they're thinking and reflecting and being treated like professionals, we've seen just a different culture on our campus and this, hey, I'm an important piece to be on this campus. It's important for me. I serve a role greater than, you know, what I believed in the past. Like, I'm important to this. And if I don't do this and do this well, then we're not gonna thrive as a school. And I think that has been a huge thing for me and something I wanna continue to explore with some growth and development tools and some rubrics around this area.

[00:28:22.810] – Matt
So it's been exciting to see, and again, one of those work-in-progress things that we wanna continue to grow.

[00:28:30.750] – Steve
As I was listening, this thread was running through my mind that I'd be using to kind of close us out here. And it was connecting reflection with learning. So all the top of things we talked about are ways to create increased reflection that brings about that increased learning. But you pulled a new word in here for me to add to it, and that is ownership, which I think then completes if there's a circle here, the reflection leads to learning, leads to ownership, which leads to continued reflection. And it makes it a pretty neat cycle.

[00:29:15.590] – Matt
Yeah, I was going to say a nice cycle there. I'm with you. I think of cycles and how do we close loops, how do we continue loops. And I think you're right. And I think, again, I get back to, when you say ownership, I think of that accountability, this internal accountability. If we're all working together, we're all pulling our weight and we're working on behalf and we know I'm doing this because the

person next to me is counting on me – they count on me and they believe in me. And I think the more we can create that type of culture, that we're in this together better we can. Yesterday I had, I'll leave you with this. Interesting, take it back to students. We had some physical altercations 2 days ago and then yesterday, what people believed was a physical altercation and students, kids, middle school, they get physical. I don't condone it, but I understand, but my problem with it was, kids all started running to it, which creates a bigger problem. So I immediately get on the intercom and said, we are a family, we're accountable to one another, we have to look at one another and take care of one another.

[00:30:35.830] – Matt
And then followed that up with a letter to my families to say the same thing. This is what happened. We're a family, we're accountable to one another, and as a family, speak to your children about this type of behavior. And to me, I think we try to create this culture in all aspects of the work that we do, that we are accountable, that we're working together, we are a family, and that we've found our culture has changed completely. Part of me coming here was this campus needed a culture change. There was no – there's no secret sauce, there's no magic pill that we take. It's just a matter of, I felt, you know, creating that accountability, creating that ownership as you suggested, and, and really looking at one another and saying, I got you. So that's what we're attempting to do, and I feel like we're in a really, really positive direction this year. And it's – you can feel it on our campus and ask people from from last year to this year, how much different it feels. And I said, it's all the same players, right? We've created a little different structure, that different way of looking at it and accountability and ownership.

[00:31:57.000] – Matt
And people are rising to that, and it feels really good.

[00:32:01.270] – Steve
It illustrates the difference between accountability and responsibility. Because you have the ownership, you put the accountability on yourself. So other people aren't holding you accountable. Other people may hold you responsible, so whether it's the teacher in the classroom, whether it's the classified staff, whether it's the administrative leadership, whether it's the students, and even you extended it to the parents, is accountability comes from ownership. And so you use the reflection and the learning. You closed it all out for me with that. That's great.

[00:32:40.620] – Matt
This is why I love talking to you. I can say things and you tell me what it actually means and what I'm actually doing. So I certainly appreciate that. You're my coach.

[00:32:52.440] – Steve
You put great insights out there. I value it. Matt, before closing out here, how can listeners who maybe have a question on something that they heard in the podcast and they want to follow up with you, what's the easiest way for them to do that?

[00:33:06.780] – Matt
Yeah, appreciate it. So I have a consulting company that I think is probably the best, leadershipnexus.com. So Leadership Nexus is how I do a lot of my side work. I would love to say email my work mail, but it's, it's so jam-packed.

[00:33:26.910] – Steve
I got it. We'll put that link to your site.

[00:33:31.270] – Matt
Yeah, my website is in there and I always encourage people to reach out.

[00:33:37.370] – Steve
Alright. Have a great day.

[00:33:38.670] – Matt
Yeah, you too.

[00:33:39.490] – Steve
Bye-bye.

[00:33:40.440] – Matt
Bye-bye.

[00:33:42.930] – Steve
Thanks for listening, folks. I'd love to hear what you're pondering. You can find me on Twitter or LinkedIn @SteveBarkley or send me your questions and find my videos and blogs at barkleypd.com.