

Ep.26 The Ellen and Michelle Show

FULL TRANSCRIPT (with timecode)

00:00:10:14 - 00:00:31:26

Hello welcome to episode number 26 of the What's Up, APS? podcast or as my next guests will call it the Ellen and Michelle show our at Jamestown Elementary School and we're talking with two of our new principals Michelle McCarthy of the Jamestown Elementary School and Ellen Smith of the new middle school that's going to open in the fall of 2019. We'll be back to have a conversation with them right after this.

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Mr. DAN Why do you work so I guess I'm just happy buddy. Why. I love my job. You love driving the bus. I really do. Well I love riding your bus Mr. darn as well and I wish you were all buddy here. Grab

00:00:52:17 - 00:01:05:11

Grab a tissue. Arlington public schools is looking for bus drivers. If you are interested go to AP SBA us for more information. Arlington public schools one hire at a time.

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Welcome back to the What's Up, APS podcast. And we're continuing our new series on new principals. And today we're Jamestown Elementary School. We're talking with Michelle McCarthy and Ellen Smith. Thank you ladies for joining us and welcome to the podcast. Like I said we're just talking to our new principals just want a quick talk about your background Michelle where you're from what colleges you went to and how you came to be. Jamestown Elementary.

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OK hello thanks for having me. And Ellen it's great to be here with you. Thank you. I originally grew up in upstate New York from Albany originally. I always knew that I wanted to be a teacher and to be a principal My dad was a high school principal and I used to just love hearing his stories at the dinner table. I went to school and at the College of Saint Rose where I graduated from which is in Albany most people who go to the College of Saint Rose come out as teachers or social workers. And after that I moved down here and I actually started teaching first in Prince Georges County. I was there for three years but since I knew I always knew that I was going to eventually end up in administration. I took the following year off and I went back to school full time at Trinity and got my master's in educational leadership and through that experience I had to do an internship and I ended up doing my internship during the summer here at Jamestown. Nicky Smith was the principal and Holly Hawthorne was the is still the principal at ATF and they were the summer school principals here. And so they mentored me through that first experience and then the principal Nikki asked me if I wanted to work here the following year. So I took that job as a third grade teacher and started my professional journey through Arlington and I've had a lot of fabulous experiences here I was here for a few years when I went to the math department. I worked as an assistant principal at science focus. Then I went on a brief hiatus to Colorado where I did administration out there always knowing that I would come back to Arlington and always wanting to be the principal at Jamestown. I was always my dream. And so that opportunity became available this year after spending the last two years at these parks.

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Well welcome to our always evolving schools. Welcome back to Jamestown. Talk about your background. I know you've been to public schools for a number of years now 30 years now 27.

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You talk about your background and how you came darlings both ways.

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Great thank you. Michelle and Frank for having me on. So I was born north of Albany the Adirondack Mountains in Glens fall Glens Falls.

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Yeah so two New Yorkers here which is awesome like you.

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My dad was in the army though so we ended up moving around every two years and we lived all over the country and in Germany and England. So a home base was always upstate New York after I graduated from high school. I end up going to college in Washington state Western Washington University and got a teaching degree there and then the call of family brought me back to the east coast and I ended up in Arlington and I ended up being working an extended day until I got hired at Thomas Jefferson Middle School as a part time drama teacher part time reading teacher. It was very fun. And from then I got a teaching job teaching English seventh grade English at Jefferson. And I didn't really if I love Jefferson it is a fabulous school with a fabulous community. So I taught seventh grade there and then eighth grade English as well. And I had the opportunity then to learn about Ivy. When we broke the ivy pigments and so I envisioned and really implemented the ivy program at Jefferson and then I had the opportunity I'm an administrator. I was fortunate enough to be able to get a job at Jefferson doing that. And it's been very exciting.

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How it going to be a leap. Jefferson I would love for having left Jefferson.

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It's hard. That's the family I've grown up with in the last twenty seven years right. So but fortunately I feel like Arlington is a very supportive community so I go back to Jefferson on a regular basis. But Casey and Graham and Kate at HP women have been very supportive in helping with the construction and all of that kind of thing. So it's been great fun.

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Michelle You mentioned that you attended Jamestown as an intern and then as a third grade teacher. So one of your first few months been back like back here at Jamestown.

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Great. Actually they've gone by very quickly. They've been really busy. I had the fabulous opportunity of working with Ken win her. That was the previous console can contact her and she and I overlap for a couple of weeks and she did a fabulous travel transitioning me. Just to kind of learn about the things that are in place now because a lot changes over 20 years so I've just been spending time getting to know everybody you know I think that's the most important part of this job is to see how things are working. Get to know the families get to know the students and just learn about the culture of school. So it's been

great the people have been so kind and welcoming and forgiving my day so it's been it's been great to talk about the Jewish community both the students the staff and the families. Everybody has been really supportive. I mean I think that I'm on the block as people I have to be working in this community. The families have been so supportive. If you need anything. If any teacher needs anything if they express that they need something if they even mentioned it in a conversation we would be able to provide it for them from the families. The teachers are fabulous. I don't know if you saw the recent article in the nation.

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Then we have the best teachers here and it sounds and we're very proud of that.

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I've been saying that all along and I was just out there for the public to see there. They will do anything for any child. I mean we really talk about meeting the needs of all the kids and we work really hard to do that and the students are great. They're so happy and they love to see me. And it's been really fun. So it's great to be better at elementary school.

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You. We talk about you being in Jamestown or Jefferson for so long. What kept you there. What kept you. Especially at the middle school level.

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I know this sounds like an oxymoron right. But I love middle school students. I really do. I'm elementary trained and when they ended up in the middle school initially I thought OK well at least my foot in the door and then I'll find an elementary position.

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And what happened is that I think especially in seventh grade kids are curious and interested in so much and yet pushing your way a little bit more resistant. Trying to be independent and I really like the complexity of that. I like I like who they are as young people and they also have such incredible kind of imagination for what the world possibly brings. And they like to try and bring that alive one of the kind of one of my favorite memories is doing community service activities with kids freight that really gets them and taps into their passions and taps into what they're eager to do in the in the things that they're eager to see. And so Middle School has just become a great kind of home for me. I also feel really fortunate. And Michelle you had a lot of different experiences as well. And it's just interesting that I was able to have a lot of different experiences in one particular buildings though you know having the opportunity to bring in the Ivy program was was really unique and it completely changed the way that I interacted with the school population and changing a job like that brings new skills and new opportunities and the same with going into administration. It was never dull.

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You mentioned your elementary trained.

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Do you have any concerns about how I'm going and I'm learning about elementary education but I'm going to go teach middle school students to any concerns about you know I didn't really because I do feel like elementary teachers in particular are really grounded in how do you support kids. And so that skill set for me was key to brain to working in the middle school and I think it's key to continuing in the middle

school as we need to be focused really on supporting middle school kids to be the best that they can be. And one of the best ways to do that is to be focused on that whole child. And I don't mean to say that high school teachers don't. I think they do but often they're content to my entered first and child oriented second. And so that that elementary focus really I think grounds me in supporting middle school kids.

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Michelle talk about the differences between middle school students students who came over from from the middle school level. What is that difference.

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Yeah I you know I love being at the middle school because I think what you touched on too I feel like their kids are trying to find their independence right but they still need adults to kind of guide them along the way. The social media piece is so huge right now and the influence on with social media plays such a big part in the middle school you know upbringing and their development and it's hard to balance that. You know you want. You want them to understand it but there's a lot of things that they need to learn about it. I think at elementary school they grow so much in a year you know you see the growth. So it's so obvious when you see them at the beginning of the year and when you see them at the end of the year and you see that in a different way. I think as a middle school you know it's it's more like they're they're all growing physically but then you can also see the emotional growth really at the middle school level to really big and then kind of on a different know you know the cafeteria level is very different in middle school than it is at the elementary school.

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They're always happy to see me coming at the elementary school not always the case at middle school. But I mean both of them both experiences have taught me so much.

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You mentioned that you had a couple weeks overlap with Ken when do you still pick up the phone and you were calling saying I asked you a question about this or I get your advice on that.

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Yeah. So we tried to get together you know maybe once every six to eight weeks and usually in between there there's at least one urgent message. It's like I'm so sorry to bother you but what would you do with this. So she's been so really supportive and helpful.

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That's good. Ellen the new middle school presents some big opportunities for you. You're basically using this man for your building a school from the ground up even though the building is already there. Talk talk about what that's been like as you're looking to hire teachers and set up schedules and all that stuff that goes into putting together the school.

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So I am really working on building an addition from the ground was actually learning about construction has been really fascinating to watch. There's a water I guess a high water table in Arlington County. I don't know but there's water everywhere there. And so working around the you know construction zone with her garden taking care of water issues has been a big deal. And then it's been just fascinating watching a facilities and operations and the way that they work delivering who's our product manager has

been fantastic and coordinating with me and making sure I'm aware of everything that's going on that's been really interesting. So from the ground up learning about the addition has been really interesting. But it is it is an incredibly exciting opportunity to be able to open a new school and be thinking about the philosophy and the culture of the school that I really like to build. And having had so many years in middle school I have some very kind of strong feelings about how I would love to see it be for kids. So hiring the staff then that will buy into and support that vision as well as picking the furniture and painting the classrooms all to support one common vision.

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It's incredibly terrifying and exciting at the same time. I was ever good at interior design for it and color not my words but you know I'm learning a lot.

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And to be honest actually right now I'm getting the opportunity to meet with families occasionally or in middle school information night and that's the best part is finally meeting some parents and meeting students who are excited and nervous and worried about how it's all going to go and and helping helping them kind of catch the vision that it's going to be great.

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When we talked to Heidi last week we talked about how they walk in mean new students for their boundary changes. It sure is becoming a new neighborhood school. You don't have any Kurd families to talk with and you're bringing in a lot of families to build this new school. What is that like. What have you been doing it to to welcome those new families.

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So two things one is kind of direct outreach in terms of middle school information night and going to PTA meetings and you know I've done a number of those already and and that's been neat to actually have feedback from parents while I'm thinking about this. I'm worried about this and have some reality attached to the vision. That's kind of in my head and the other the other piece of that is thinking about how do I really integrate kids. So we've got kids coming from both Swanson and Williamsburg that have really strong communities already. One of my major tasks is to help those kids merge and meld into one community. And so that's part of the way that I'll do that is through starting the ACA the student council association and I'm going to ask those seventh and eighth rising seventh and eighth graders to really be the founding fathers so to speak and take some ownership for some of that kid culture that we want to involve in the school. And then they've got to pick the school mascot. They've got to pick the school colors you know they've got some fun things and they get to engage in around this new identity with regard to fifth graders and really sensitive to the fact that this is their last year in elementary school and I don't want to overwhelm them with a lot from middle school because it all it'll creep up on them quickly. So I'll go into the elementary schools in January just to get some ideas from them about mascots and then they'll come over and visit the school in April when everybody else goes to their middle school to visit. These guys will come and visit me and we'll take a tour of the building. The addition will do some kind of figure out some ways for them to leave their mark on the original buildings that they feel a sense of ownership for. And then do the most important thing which is eat lunch. They love to you know when they come. And then I have really an open door policy right. So I've had lots of parents reach out and want to talk and I'm happy too. This is a time when I have the time to do it. Whereas next year might be a bit more complex. So you know it's a very open door policy. Groups of people coming to visit. So we'll continue. I'll continue to just make this outreach into the spring and the summer right. Because I do want

parents to have face time with each other and have some social events around which we can talk about what's going to happen and get to know each other a little bit more. So I'm thinking ice cream socials and things like that.

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Good. We're on our second part of our new principal series we're talking with Ellen Smith the new principal of the new middle school to open next fall and Michelle McCarthy the new principal of Jamestown. Michelle talk about your vision for the future of Jamestown or Jamestown is a very well established school a great school but you coming in with your own ideas what do you see as the future for the school.

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Well there are so many fabulous things in place right now that there don't want too many of them to change. I want to maintain the high expectations that we've always had here at Jamestown. We have a fabulous Cotai inclusion model that we use with our special education students and we have seen great results with that. But I think one of the best parts about being a principal is that you get to see everybody teach. Right. So I know that we have fabulous teachers because I've been in every single classroom. And so what I really hope to do is to build a culture where we can observe each other more as peers collaborate more and just have more opportunities to learn from each other. So I'm working on that and then I also think just adding similar rigor and project based learning to the work that we're already doing so that kids can continue to be really engaged and challenged when they're here at school.

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Technology plays a big role in James town's curriculum which woven throughout a lot of different things. How do you see that as a how does that play a role in education especially your himself.

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Yes. So the Afghans have been a great tool for us and it's provided an opportunity for us to do so much personalized learning. The kids you know there's so many ways now they are second grade for instance is working on their animal projects right. So how are they going to do their research. Long ago they would only use books. Now they can watch a video. They can do brain pop there's so many different ways for them to get information. And then when they create their project it's not and you know we used to always see dioramas right with the shoe boxes. Now they do. I am a movie or they can do this both sides are just so many ways for them to express themselves. You know the fifth grade groups are doing you know they do book groups and they respond to each other using Google Forms and said When I was teaching we used to use closed notes in books you know. So it's just a lot of ways that we infuse it that way. All right. Support us in many ways by always providing lots of different apps that we can use any time I say something that might be like a paper pencil thing she always flips. Well you know you could do this with the technology. So just always trying to infuse it and then just making sure that the teachers have the training that they need to stay up to date with them because it moves so fast and apps that were good last year we might not be using anymore this year because they've been improved so I think that just providing that professional development for the staff also is really important.

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I don't see some fabulous technology projects coming out a few years. Yeah.

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It's so good to have a principal such a historic school the history behind the Stratford building if it is I think it continues to be one of those things that is constantly kind of impress me on a daily basis. It's it's amazing actually the fact that this was the first building in the Commonwealth of Virginia to be integrated desegregated and to really trigger that for the rest of the state. It's amazing. I've had the privilege really through the naming process to meet one of the students that integrated the building and talked to other community members especially from Halls Hill who integrated Stratford junior high.

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Back in 1959. And it's an amazing story of kind of community support and hard work and then individual strength and determination of both the adults and the young people. I mean I always think about gosh seventh graders having to go to a new school in the middle of the year and walk in kind of through lines of Arlington County Police officers and then fortunately nothing happened that was negative but the stress associated with that must have been incredibly challenging. There's one story that their parents the four kids who integrated their moms all the way into a house right across the street and stayed there the whole day. Kind of one mom hosted them because they were worried about what was going to happen and whether their kids would need to get out of there quickly or and fortunately nothing did. But it's an amazing amazing piece of history to be able to really make come alive for our middle school students and then ask them to consider for their own life. What was the implication of that.

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That's good be that piece of history is going to be part of the new building.

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Yeah. Yeah. The architect and then a committee that the superintendent had on the historical commemoration really had some great ideas about how do we commemorate this historical event and then what it triggered for the rest of the state of Virginia. And so there is some artwork sculpture work in particular that skip this in the design to be part of the exterior of the building and then on the inside there are Mobil's Mobil planned that will kind of pull all of it together the historical piece but then also unique attributes of the kids the middle school kids that will be there and really help celebrate this idea that we all have strengths that we bring to the table and if we tap into those we can do amazing things. When do you listen to in particular Michael Jones who was one of the four who integrated the building he talked about he was just a kid. He was just a regular kid and this was hard but it was something he thought he could do and I think tapping into that for every child and there's an entire internal strength that they bring that gives them great power. Part of my mission to make them come alive.

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You mentioned the naming process and building this episode was being taped before the school board meeting but will be played afterwards. What are those names that you're going to put forward that your committee has come up with at the school board's going to look at.

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So I've had the privilege to work with a really fabulous group of representatives from the community from the civic associations from staff from the schools that are impacted by moving in from some students who participate on the Navy committee as well. And we've gone through a long kind of iterative process of talking about how do we celebrate this history with the name and also be kind of respectful to concerns that other people might have about different different names. And so there's been a lot of discussion there's been a lot of talking through and over and listening to each other having guest speakers

so at the school board meeting we will talk about two names that are are our top choices. One is Stratford middle school to really kind of celebrate that historical event of 1959. And then the second is Dorothy Hamm Middle School at the historic Stratford building. Dorothy Hamm was a civil rights activist here in Arlington who was one of the parents involved in the initial lawsuit that began the process. So both really I think have incredible power and significance. And for me as principal they both have an opportunity to really talk about civil rights and the civil rights movement and what happened here in Arlington some very unique opportunities for this year for you it really is. Wait can I make a plug. On February 2nd we will have a historical commemoration of some in some way shape or form it's the sixth anniversary of the integration. So be looking for some sort of announcement about it for a second. Yes. At least that's the discussion. But look for more more kind of ideas and information about that.

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Michelle what are some of your most satisfying moments as an educator.

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I think they're so satisfying moment almost every single day. As an educator I think that's partly why we're in it as educators. But I did have something fabulous happened a couple weeks ago and that was that one of my third graders that I taught here at Teen Town came back to see me and her family still is in the neighborhood and she brought our class picture.

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And so and she talked about things that she still remembered than we did when we were in third grade which for her was 20 years you know really 20 years ago. So I think opportunities like that are really you know this is just demonstrates that we really make a difference in the lives of kids. And then you know just a small having a child read to you is also really satisfying especially kids who have struggled for a long time and then when they finally get it and they bring a book to you and you can sit down and and listen to them read that's always really satisfying. I think having been at the mental school level to you know seeing kids who might not make the best choices but then are able to turn it around in and by the end of the year are completely different child. They've matured they recognize that they made poor choices. I think that's also really satisfying so there's a lot of wins every day in this job. I would love it.

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I completely agree that there are a lot of wins and it's such a special place to be. And I do. I love it when kids come back. Yeah you know when you work in the middle school they're not as they're more reluctant perhaps to come back it's maybe not their favorite time of their lives so they don't come back very often. So then the ones that do reach out and come back have been really special. The other thing that I was thinking about this is one of my favorite things to do is to greet kids and sing off the bus in the morning. And that became a really important part of kind of who I was at Jefferson. So when I went back a few weeks ago to do bus duty for fun I miss the kids a whole bunch of in particular eighth grade boys got off their bus and keep running up to me and gave me a huge hug and that was like I was like They're wonderful people and they are. So that's the kind of thing that makes you get up the next morning and go back and do a student.

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And it is surprising to sometimes the kids that come back to see you because even I was here I was not in the building one day and some of the kids from Williamsburg came by. And when I find out when I found out who they were I was like you know happily surprised that I never thought that they would see me

again. You know you just never know how you influence people and sometimes it takes years until you find out.

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And and most of the time I think we don't know yet. I mean that's one of I wish we could. I'd love to track these guys. Yeah see what they do with their life and say please come back and write us right about your success. Yeah.

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How some of your previous experiences as an educator helped you both for you or your new roles as principal.

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Well I mean I can speak to. I was so fortunate to have a number of different roles in Arlington. I think that working at central office was such a great opportunity for me to really learn about how Arlington public schools really works. And I did that a long time ago and so now I feel like I know who to call. Like I know who to call if I need something with instruction I know who to call if the buses are late or famous you know I mean it's just given me the opportunity to really get to know everybody in the county so that when I came to this position I felt at least prepared in knowing who to ask questions to even though there are definitely days when I'm not always sure exactly what it is that I want to do. So I have the right people to call is always really really important.

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I wish that that's a skill that I wish I'd had a little bit more of. One of the things that I do really value is that as Ivey coordinator I really was asked to make change in a building without having the authority to tell people to do it right. And so that taught me how to collaborate with us so that we can create the vision that's best in the moment or the best for kids in the moment. And I do think that that that will be valuable in that one principal doesn't make the school or do you talk about being collaborative and getting to know people learning how to work with people to create a common vision and to then implement that vision without being just principals saying make it happen is really hard. And I think that experience was really helpful in building that school and the I know I'm going to have to continue to work on it right. But it's definitely invaluable. And I agree the variety of experiences has been really it's given me multiple perspectives through which to look at the experience of a child in a school full I have something I've asked other principals of on the podcast.

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You have other principals as mentors on speed dial that you call the time we talked about genuine earlier but other current principals that you're like help. I need some help and I do this.

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Absolutely. I feel like right now my favorite text group is the middle school.

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Just text that question out there and then they're pretty quick with a response or they'll be crickets now.

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Oh yeah.

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They're all the middle school principals. Principals have been really supportive as have you know Cynthia Johnson and the superintendent center. Yeah.

00:31:51:12 - 00:32:14:27

Yeah I mean I again since I've worked in a lot of different schools you know Mary Bailey was my first principal when I was an assistant principal. So she's my mentor for me this year. Carina Cornell is Carlin Springs she's been a fabulous mentor to me. And then last week I needed something answered and I just went through with some friends on her own and I got the answer.

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Are you nothing good. Yeah just go to the list. So it was it was great.

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I mean they will all somebody will always answer me to help you which is great. I mean the principal group has been so supportive. Anytime you have like this similar we have you know a group message and that's the same thing if you ask a question you can get 10 responses quickly.

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So it's been it's been great to have that network of support truly that we are. I would have to say I do think when I became an AP that AP group became a really valuable professional learning community for lack of a better jam right where we can talk to each other about what to do and I feel like the principals have done very much the same thing.

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Can imagine a text group with five people is manageable but 20 hours is an email.

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So yeah I'm pretty sure you're one of the things you're looking forward to most is the first battle next next fall.

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I can't wait to have a first down and have kids come in on buses and then walking and I'm really looking forward to actually starting the real work. Yes.

00:33:23:08 - 00:33:33:24

Great. I appreciate you taking the time to join us on the podcast and I look forward to seeing what the school is like in the fall. And continued success here in Jamestown. Thank you both for.

00:33:33:24 - 00:33:40:22

For joining us on the podcast. Frank. We appreciate it. Thank you Michelle. Thank you for hosting us anytime. Thank you.

00:33:41:03 - 00:34:15:03

And thank you all for listening to what's up a podcast. You can find us on stitcher. Tune in Apple podcasts google play wherever you get your podcasts. And if you need if you have a tip for a show or you want to hear something more. Send us an e-mail at apsnews@apsva.us or send us a tweet. @APSVirginia and we'll talk to you next time for our third and final podcast in the series on our new principles and for the Ellen and Michelle show.

00:34:15:19 - 00:34:16:20

And we'll talk to you later