

Ericka Polanco - Webb: Hello, you guys, and welcome to the Gladiator Soundboard podcast.

My name is Ericka Polanco - Webb, and today, I'm going to be talking to Dr. Simon, who is [the] Superintendent of Gower District 62.

This podcast is powered by the Gower Foundation, and we're so excited.

This is the first episode, and so we're gonna have a great conversation. I'll let Dr. Simon introduce himself to you guys and maybe share a little bit about himself.

Dr. Simon: Happy to have the opportunity to join a podcast like this one. I've had some experience with podcasts in the past. They've always been pretty good, and it's nice to be able to do something local just for our school district.

The Foundation has always been sort of forward-leaning and looking for different ways to involve families in our community, and this is just another example of that.

So I'm looking forward to the conversation.

I think we have a handful of episodes planned, so this will be the first one [and we will] I come out of the gate talking about the overall educational experience.

A tiny bit about me. This is my 10th year in our school district as Superintendent. Prior to that, I had 16 years of experience in the Chicago public schools in all different kinds of roles. If anyone's interested, next time you see me at an event, just stop and ask, I won't take up too much airtime in our podcast talking about the resume, but I'd be happy to share any of those experiences. They've all been great, but nothing that measures up to the experience in the last 10 years, especially the last handful. Lots of challenges and lots of what we call in our school district good things to share. So, [I'm] happy to talk about it tonight and looking forward to the following episodes.

EPW: Okay, thank you.

So, today we're going to be chatting about the holistic educational experience at Gower, and so I just want to ask, you know, what do some of that look like right now?

VS: Yeah, so you know, sometimes I always want to be cautious of putting buzzwords out there, you know, it seems like a holistic experience like what, what exactly does that mean?

And for us, it really is talking about whole child experiences, like what does school mean? We talk a lot about reading, writing, and arithmetic. At least that's what we've all been sort of told to me. It's more about relationships, relationships, relationships from the adult world and also with our students, with our teachers, and also with each other.

So, you know, our school district has a motto, "Children At Their Best," and I think that really just encapsulates what we talk about with a "holistic educational experience." It's children at their best collectively. So for parents that are listening, you know the idea here is your child at their

best. What does that look like in and around the school? We take a big part in that, and that's what it means.

EPW: Okay, so I've heard a little bit about the range of readiness models that is used at Gower to understand [student] performance and growth throughout the year. Could you please share a little bit more about how our teachers apply this model to help students reach their goals?

VS: Yeah, absolutely. So, range of readiness, when we talk about this model, really the idea, it was born in 2018 here in our school district. The range of readiness is this idea of readiness for the next level of high school. Our school district is a preschool through 8th-grade school district. Our students largely go to Hinsdale School District 86. So the idea is their readiness for that next level of high school. That's what we mean by range of readiness.

So when we think about individual students, going back to our motto about Children At Their Best, I really like to think about this when I talk to parents individually about their children. It's one of these things where if you could just imagine like turning up the dial on a value, you know, kind of radio or something like that, and every time you turn that dial up or down, you know, something changes. So the idea for us for an individual student is like, what will all those dials of school look like?

What's the educational dial look like? Is it a good fit? Should we turn it up? Should we turn it down? Is it too rigorous? Is it too demanding when we think about extracurricular activities, Clubs, other kinds of things that are related to and around the school, Does that dial have to go up or down?

And then the same thing with just sort of the best question to ask, like good old-fashioned fun around school, but also, just how is school going? When, when I know, I asked my daughters, they're both grown now, but when I think about how was the day as a parent when you get that answer most of the time, it's, oh, it's fine, but you, you prod a little bit and get into that, that discussion with your children, you start to get an idea of how it looks going up or down.

So a range is a student might be performing at a lower academic level, and we start to think about what that means for their experience and transition to high school. And that could be starting as early as kindergarten, honestly, which is, we gotta be careful and pump the brakes a bit, we don't get too far ahead of ourselves there five, you know, but at the same rate, We want to make sure that we're doing our best by this motto of Children at their best by making sure we have that right all the way to eighth grade.

So that's what range means. It's just where students are along their performance continuum, so to speak, how teachers use it gets a little bit more in the weeds than that. The idea for teachers is to do this three times a year. There are students who are taking this MAP assessment, NWEA MAP, the fact that our upcoming board meeting, February 21st board meeting, We'll be talking a lot about that mid-year progress.

Teachers use that data. So those are sort of like your health checkups that are a little bit more frequent from an academic standpoint of how things are going and what is that range looking like, and how ready are they for the next level? That's really what it means.

EPW: Okay, That's very comforting as a parent to kind of really be able to understand and grab kind of what all that means. So moving along too, um, the classroom and just different kinds of learning styles, um, we do know that research shows that there are multiple learning styles, and so we would like to know how our teachers work to identify a student's learning style um within the classroom with there being so many learners present.

VS: Yeah, That's right. That's a great question. I appreciate that one because it drives to the point and keeps us as a school district accountable. That is our mission is really about every student and every child finding the best fit for them and their needs, then then, this question about learning style has to, has to be answered, right? It should be a comfortable answer. And it is for me, because first of all, yes, There are multiple learning styles.

You know, typically we talk about how students learn, are visual learners, Auditory learners? Uh, is it kinesthetic, you know, movement or tactile? You have to, you know, see and touch these kinds of things to move forward and really understand them. I think that's probably the best kind of learner to describe myself and, and, and and other examples of more preferences, but they're generally considered learning styles, individual or group. How does that work for a student?

And even the use of technology, you know, so all these things are really uh and flow throughout time in terms of how schooling works for students.

So to get right to the point, how do teachers do this? Well, first, before we even get into a classroom, There are a number of learners in the classroom, but we're really proud and our, and our board of education has been supportive for years, my ten here for sure. And prior to that, they maintained relatively small class sizes. So just right out of the gate for us, we will have smaller class sizes than what you'll generally find. That's, that's, That's a great opportunity for our teachers, just right up front.

So there are fewer learners in a classroom, comparatively speaking. But you know, we don't look too far beyond our own boundaries. We think about the learners we have in our class, whether it's 16 of them or 18 or 22 of them. Some of our middle school classes might be a little bit larger, certainly and those would be a little bit larger. But all that said, what we have to think about is going back to this idea from the beginning of the podcast, talking about dials, and really seeing what works. You know, I think of Goldilocks, you know, two are too soft. What's the right fit for these, these students? And we have to figure that out.

So a year in and year out, multiple times a year. I said we will test three times. That's a formal benchmarking assessment, but these are more formative assessments that take place on a

daily basis for sure. And oftentimes multiple times during a day. Uh, if you're a parent, think about this like I'm on a road trip, you know, beyond the question of are we there yet, Are we there yet you're checking on how everyone's doing? You know, our in-house, Everyone is hungry, and anyone needs to stop for another hour. How's everyone doing? So thinking of teaching that way is like it's a long school day. But teachers are regularly plugged into what is happening, and that helps us adjust what that child needs in secret behind this, and I'll be quick on this part of the answer, but the secret behind some of this is we won, we think we have it, and parents can relate to this, but when we think we've got it figured out, don't forget these are students that are growing and changing daily, weekly, hourly, you know, so we have to think a little bit about, um, you know, what it is that the individual student needs now and paying close attention to that so that we are hitting that exact best fit, the best we can, and being realistic about the fact that it does change over time.

EPW: Nice, nice. That's, that's comforting to know, especially, Um, you know, having young learners in the district, and I know that's a conversation that a lot of parents that are interested in the school district, you know, they kinda wanna know, they wanna know how, how will my child fit into this classroom with different learners at different stages? So that's great to know. So we do a great job at building classrooms where there's a range of students, performance levels are represented. How do teachers differentiate their instruction in the classroom to meet the different levels of learners?

VS: Yeah, that I would like to say that they're magicians and they're just amazing at what they do teaching as an art and, and they're amazing. That is part of the answer, honestly, but I can go a little bit deeper with that, but first to talk about and thinking about one of those first prompts and questions, holistic education is like, wait, what that means is apparent every word right now and every description about public school is really, really important because in more, In my career, this is my 26th year in education.

I haven't seen as much public attention or more attention on public schools in the media as we have over the last handful of years. So that said, it's got a lot of attention on it, and that's, and to me, that's a good thing. I love the fact that people are asking questions and really wanting to know what's happening. So this podcast, a testament to that from, from the Foundation's point of view, and you know, I'm glad to participate in it, but saying that it's another buzzword in this question, differentiate so as to come back to questions like how do we differentiate instructions?

So to, to take the, the buzz word out of it is really just for a touch, it's like we end up with, let's say 20 students in the classroom, and let's just say that, you know, generally speaking, there are four generally accepted learning styles, visual auditory, like a read-write, maybe tactile might be called that in some spaces and kinesthetic moving around if that's the case, and it was as easy as to say, well, we got 20 of them, there are four, and it just worked out that there are five of each kind of learner.

If that was the case. Just think of how to juggle that parent that has multiple Children who know this well, especially if you have two or three in, in grade school at the same time, someone's in fifth grade, someone's in third grade, someone's in kindergarten. Not only is it difficult to say, Do you know what's for dinner, and how do we figure that part out?

You know, everyone has their preferences and needs, but then it's other kinds of things to their interests, you know, the demand of time and all this. So differentiating is really trying to just do your level best, knowing what you have in terms of students and their needs and then taking this really important but unfortunately limited resource of time and, and, and making sure that you're trying to hit all of those needs in the best way possible. And it's not just learning styles. So if it just broke evenly too, say 20 students for learning styles, oh, we have five of each. That probably has never happened in the history of education.

But if it was that case, you can think of how difficult that might be. But let's put on top of that. The fact is that it's not just the learning style. We go underneath that learning style because, actually, many students have multiple learning styles, and they can change over time. It's what their actual academic learning needs are at the time. So it could be that it's math, or it's science, or it's in math, it's a particular strand of content that we're looking at. That most of the math unit is totally fine. But there are just this other couple of parts to it that the students are still working on and still developing in teachers by doing the formative work, another buzzword. So but doing the regular checking-in, doing that regular progress monitoring of like how's it going, how's it going?

Like crazy about it? Like how's it going? How's it going multiple times? The idea then becomes, we should be able to make those adjustments on the fly or day to day or week to week, and as the assignments come in and those conversations and relationships, which is what we started this whole conversation tonight with, that's where that kicks in when you have that plug of a relationship with a student, and you really understand, as a teacher and educator, what they need, then you are able to make those adjustments hourly period after period, weekly, and so on. So that's what we mean when we talk about differentiation, I think it's helpful for parents to sort of get a peek behind the curtain a little bit to understand what that actually could look like in real space and time for their child.

So, what it could look like is what we would call centers or smaller groups, in a classroom where, uh, we might use the word like stations that you could imagine right now, we're gonna be working over here on this particular skill set, and then we're gonna work over here. Sometimes it could be a group work independently and, and it varies from grade to grade hour by hour. So the idea is that all of that planning teachers do.

So you look at the teacher's schedule, uh, and, and to me, it's heroic work. Like they're just constantly figuring out what it is that every student needs and trying to adjust as we do with parents and ourselves, in, in the real world. But that's what it might look like. Um, that's it in a nutshell, I think. But when we talk about how much planning goes into it, and then we go and teach, the teaching part is actually, and if teachers hear this, you know, they might shake their

head just for a second, but I think they don't know where I'm going with it. The teaching part, the instruction parts actually, probably the easiest part, the planning going into it and the adjustments after it. That's where the real work takes place.

And um, if we're not paying attention to that, that's where students can fall behind as individuals, not have their needs met, and quite honestly, it's just not, that's not good enough. So that's why we do it the way we do.

EPW: Okay, okay, so speaking of the kind of progress and how, how all of that is done. What, um, what do teachers do? What do teachers use to understand progress over the short term and long term and adjust their teachings in the classroom for that?

VS: Yeah, absolutely. So, when we're in these kinds of centers or small groups, you could do their simple sort of strategies, like an exit ticket. Like, how is it going right now? It could be this way we're doing this podcast right now and off to the side, we could be like, hey, quickly thumbs up, thumbs down, like how's it going?

You know, so we can get a quick progress monitoring and say, no, we need, you know, slow down. We need to speed up those kinds of things. So that is a big part of what's happening in the classroom. But we also have this, like, strategic grouping is what we'll call it. But the idea is that depending on the child's current performance and the word current, that description is really important because it can change. But current performance teachers that are able to identify, oh, in this case Erica and Victor, you know, the two of you are working on this particular strand. So along with these other two Children in your class, these classmates, these four working on this particular part, we can watch how that progresses, you know, what happens over time and keep measurements there. So those groups are really, really important, but you need to be able to have the assessments in place to do it, and that comes from teachers in the classroom. But we try to hold ourselves as a bigger school system accountable by doing what is referred to as these benchmark assessments with MAP.

So students will say at home, how was school today? Oh, we were map testing, you know, that's, that's that, that would be the reference. We're map testing, and we map tests at the beginning, the middle and the end. How do we start off? How are we doing so far in the middle? That just happened? And then, how are we doing at the end? Our district goals, you mentioned long term, but our district goals are principal goals are each of our principles, and our teacher goals are aligned to that. The results and the outcomes that come from those benchmark assessments.

So they become really important at the same time. Not so important that we want to have more stress in inducing events or anything like that. So you might hear Children, and this is how we would know if we're doing well with it. And we do ask parents this question, uh, every chance we get and certainly when they are sitting with teachers during conferences. But how's it going? And, and it's just a really simple question, but it's important to hear that we'll have students that want to hit their goals, right? Like they know what the middle of your goal is, and they know

what the end of your goal is. And I think that, and I've always felt this way, but I think that having students take part in their own progress, like we don't keep it a secret what their goals are. Um, they know them, parents know them in many cases, maybe not always, but students certainly do, and they work toward them. And I think that's a pretty special balance to be able to say we do want to be accountable for our learning. We don't want to stress anyone out, but at the same rate, we want to be public about this too.

So anyone listening to this, you know, if, if it sounds okay, you know, I'm kind of not alone, I understand what's happened. That sounds pretty good. There are a lot more details behind these, these answers I'm giving, and we try to put as much of that on to our website public facing sort of, you know, um, resource. But under the district website, in the district info tab, there's a separate page called academic performance. And I think that anyone that's really interested in going deeper with this, like a graduate level, you know, conversation of, about it would go to that website and have a better understanding of how we really report out that accountability of what we're doing is a school district.

When it comes to learning again, all under the umbrella of Children at their best, and parents hear this as, please. Like anyone listening is like that means your child at their best doesn't just mean like okay, Children at their best. So, you know, everyone's kind of okay, no, it's

Children collectively saying their best, meaning the individual child. So if there's a parent listening to this going, okay, I like what I'm hearing, but that's not my current experience with my child. Like something's not quite going along with what he's saying, you have to reach out right like that. Communication is just so, so important. We tried to do this with parent conferences and email exchanges with teachers, and so on. Our principles are fully engaged. And you know, if any parent ever found that not to be the case, I would say, you know, try at least benefit out one time, send a second email. If you didn't get a reply, you should receive it within a day.

But if, if not, you know, send that second email and then just continue to press because it's just too important. Right? Like I say casually often, I've been quoted for this in different places, but I say when it comes to education, this ain't a dress rehearsal, I actually say it even, you know, less grammatically correct by saying this ain't no dress rehearsal.

And I say it to get people's attention because of the fact that there is an urgency to this work in the sense that they're here right now, that they are in the Children, they're here right now. We have to get this right now. So it does put a little bit, well actually, maybe even a lot of welcome pressure professionally on us as educators. That's how seriously we take it. And I always just feel that if it's not feeling that way for you as a parent, in any of these cases, you have to reach out right, like and advocate in some sense.

I learned that as a parent myself, and I always try to repeat it in spaces like this whenever I get a chance because just far too often when we talk about everything tonight so far, how do we differentiate what the experience looks like for kids to all, you know, great questions, and then they're aimed at having Children be at their best academically and socially, emotionally, all of it,

right? Like we want them to be the whole package, we want the student to just thrive when they're here.

There are times when that might not feel like it's the case. And then, more times than not, parents may just feel like, gosh, it's just so complicated, or I don't want anyone to think, you know, bad about anything. So they might just sort of be okay for too long with something, and I just don't want that to ever be the case. Just too important. So I think I'm a little bit off track.

EPW: No, no, thank you. No, I appreciate that because, no, I appreciate that because I can understand and hear the passion, and I really do appreciate, as a parent, you know, just the amount of access there is to information and you guys even being a proponent for advocating for your child and things like that. So all that is really important. So moving on to the early learners, right? Regarding the pre-K program that you spoke of earlier, we know that Gower has this early childhood preschool program for pre-K three and pre-K four. Uh, this program focuses on early intervention for students identified to receive additional support as students transition from preschool to elementary school. They join peers who come from a vast array of just different experiences. Can you help us understand what types of programs are available for students as they transition to elementary school and the accompanying support that these students receive?

VS: That's a big question and an important one. So I really appreciate it. And just so I'm hearing it clearly to summarize, it's, you know, we've got our early childhood center at our pre-K three and pre-K four, so three and four-year-olds in preschool is not compulsory. You don't have to go to preschool, and you know, but we really encourage our families to have their kids go to preschool.

You also mentioned that this is an early intervention program for students that are identified to receive additional support. That's true. This is a grant-funded program, and it houses roughly 60 to 70 students. We have four sections of our pre-K, two in the A. M. And two in the P. M. So it's a half-day program, roughly 16, Seventeen students in a class. That will be somewhere between 60 and 70 Children.

Most of us can go up to about 80-20 per class. And that's getting a little bit too big. So we keep it in the mid-sixties, and this is based on students who have already qualified, and that's important to hear that term that they've qualified for this program. And the qualification comes from early childhood screenings is the appropriate term to use here. So there are early childhood screenings that the school does and determines whether or not there's a particular need around, let's say, things like language and speech motor skills. There could be some other kind of developmental uh needs, social-emotional needs, but typically, a combination of these could also be economic needs as well. So all of this screening takes place uh early on, we try to do it, and it can be as early as 2.5 years old. So what ends up happening here is there's an outreach from us.

We, you know, families that are looking for preschool programs typically reach out. We try to put this out there as the best information that we can. A lot of times, parents who go to private preschool programs in the area find out, oh, there is a public school option.

Let me go and check that out. So, so we do a lot of outreach and best advertising, so to speak, as we can do. And then pending the results of all these screenings that take place three times throughout the year typically. And, and if somebody new moves in and we have to do a screening, it's fine.

But these screenings take place. As I said, three and four-year-olds will even start at 2.5 years of age to really get lined up to when they turn three. You know, we could, we could get them to school, and if they qualify, they're in. So I'll come back, and I'll talk about what those programs look like as they matriculate up into our elementary and into our middle school over at Gower middle. But when students do not qualify, we try to encourage those families to seek either another option, an alternate option like a private pre-K program, A lot of great ones in the area. People shop around, and they could kind of find these things out. Many families actually say, okay, you know, hey, I'll just see you for kindergarten, you know, and they come back. So that brings up a point you brought up in this question that regardless of where they start in preschool, whether it's private, or they don't go, or they're in our program at some point, they come in and funnel into our kindergarten program, and our kindergarten program could have anywhere from 80.

Typically it's in the nineties, but it can be up to 100 students. So depending on how many sections or classes kindergarten will have, one hundred is a lot for us. If we had 100, that's five kindergarten teachers. Um, if we have less than 100 depending on the exact number, it's either four or five sections of full-day kindergarten that we have, we have had a full day now for probably 67 years, I think it is. So, that said, everybody comes into this funneling process of kindergarten. I started by saying preschool, and you don't have to go. Don't, don't hear that if it's discouraged. It's just not compulsory. It's not. It's not mandated kindergarten.

However, it is different. We need to get you into school. So that said, you brought up the idea that there's this vast array of backgrounds for students. So then it gets to the point that now that everyone's here and assuming that we all got in kindergarten, what are the programs that we have? And there are a number of them. And here's where it's really amazing if you just wanted to do a unique study on teacher speak and how we talk to each other and a parent decided that's not an educator professionally. All parents or educators certainly, but not licensed educator teachers.

If they just kind of listened in, you'd hear all kinds of acronyms and buzzwords, and we speak so freely about those kinds of things. And oftentimes, we might forget uh that not everybody knows what those things mean. So, this is a great question. Those programs because I would say something like ELL or EL Um, when I talk about ELL. That's English language learners.

So these are students that might have a different language other than English spoken at home and may not speak English at all as a student. And if that's the case, they would be what we

would call in the short-term, an ELL Student, an English learner student, that's one program. And when a student enrolls, whether it's kindergarten or seventh grade and wherever they come from, a home language survey will be given one of these kinds of screenings, and it will determine whether or not they would qualify for that particular program.

So every program I'm going to speak about is a qualifier that has to happen. If no qualifiers are kicked in for a particular student, then you will get the old-fashioned general education program which is great General education. Many students have access to different programs depending on these qualifications. So I'll come back to the English learner program. We determine if other languages are spoken at home other than English, and depending on the answer to that, we go further.

What about what's the frequency of that other language being spoken by the child? We screen them to speak English. Yes or no, depending on that, we have levels of need, and that will come with support around learning the English language. So that's a pretty easy 1 to 2 to follow when we think about another program that's called the special education program. This one becomes, and all of these are mandated by statute and law. But we are thinking about a special education program. This would come with a different kind of screening depending on the academic need or could be other needs of students without getting in the weeds on the actual answer.

The screening for home language is pretty easy. Is another language other than English spoken at home? Yes, no, if yes, we move on. If no, that's that they don't qualify. Generally, when we think about special education, there are eight different domains, and it really gets into it.

We have special education teachers that are experts in this field. And so they will be involved in trying to figure out if any additional services are needed for the student. If the answer is yes, then that becomes a special education program student. They're enrolled in that program as well. Certainly, general education is their special education. Is there the idea of turning dials up and down really works well here? How many services do we need for special education?

And there could be students that need special education and also home language or EL. So right away, it starts to become complicated, and we have this diversity in terms of need from a program perspective. So English learners, special education, some parents that are aware, and it might be listening underneath the umbrella of special education is where common false.

But you would hear the 504 programs, section 504. And it goes back to a federal statute, almost had a fed statute, almost went into talking like a teacher here, but we go into a federal statute, and this would be considered like a health or medical program. A good example would be a student that's pretty significant asthma or something like that or is visually impaired or something. To this. This degree, there could be different programs tied directly to a health or medical type condition that obviously has to be followed very closely. Uh, medication could be involved in these different kinds of things. So we would work very closely with that family to qualify for that program. So that's another one. We have, uh, there are others, for instance, there is a homeless program, uh, in my days in the Chicago public schools.

This was changed to be called students in temporary living situations, which I think is actually a better term because it captures a little bit more precisely what some students experience when they do not have regular housing. So students in a temporary living situation might be doubled up with family. Um,

You know, it could be a situation where there's something wrong with the house, it could have been a fire that could have lost their home, that it could be evicted all these kinds of things. Um, but we call that a homeless program free and reduced lunch program certainly is related directly to economic qualifications. And then one that we get a lot of questions about is our 80 program.

So right away, we say 80, and let me just tell you what that stands for. It's an accelerated track program. So I'll just say it again, you know, for the people in the back too, because it's like you say, the 80 or accelerated track, it usually gets parents to kind of lean forward a bit and be, oh, accelerate track, That sounds great. You know, so we, we, we qualify students for that beginning in third grade around math in English language arts, which is kind of fancy term for saying, you know, reading is what we would essentially say more complex than that.

Reading specialists would like me to say it that way. It's E. O. A. But English language arts. But that said, academically or the accelerated track program, the 80 program is one that we've had here for over a generation. And that is something that students would qualify for based on how they're doing academically. So as you can imagine, Um, roughly 1000 students, all different needs close to 40 different languages spoken in our school district, all kinds of needs of diversity and not just ethnic diversity, economic diversity, diversity of levels of education, all kinds of diversity in our school district instantly. We have different sorts of needs, different sorts of approaches that need to be used for all of these programs. So right away, we have to differentiate or meet the needs of individual students. So it's a long answer. But it's important because we have so many programs in our school systems, and not everybody's familiar with them, and not everyone's experience is the same. So that said, you could be neighbors, and both get on the same bus, and if you take the bus to school and both go to our middle school, and everything is, you know, seems to be exactly the same. But they could be an entirely different program depending on their individual needs. And even if they're in the same general education program. All those other ones aside, if they're just in the general education program, I will almost guarantee that their needs would be different in that program as well. So that's the trick and, and that's what I said earlier in, uh, an answer just sort of, you know, jokingly, but, but partly to say that teachers, as magicians, right? And teachers, as, you know, really artists and an expert at what they do. So we're proud of our staff that they do a really, really nice job. And so I think that answers everything about our programs. I hope I didn't leave any out.

EPW: No, no, that was so very helpful. A lot of times, we are not aware of just how many programs that the students have access to. And so it's great to kind of hear about all of them and what they kind of encompass.

So moving on, if you are a parent, um, and you like to plan ahead, which I do, um, and you want to ensure that your kids are prepared academically for the transitions between elementary and

middle as well as middle and high school. How does the district work across buildings to ensure that the 4th and 8th graders are meeting all of the academic standards necessary for success throughout their educational journey?

VS: That's the question, right? Like that, that's the wrap on the podcast, this question, right? There, all the other ones are really great questions. But in the end, it really is about how we are handing off the baton to the next lap at the next level. And, respectfully, I'd add in kindergarten as well, like how are we getting students prepared for kindergarten? We spent some time talking about preschool. That's a big way of getting students prepared for kindergarten. If you recently had an experience as a parent enrolling a kindergartner, it's been in your last couple of years, you would know that there are different orientations, you can take the bus to school before school starts.

We really try to get our families involved in that orientation as well. So, kindergarten is the early entry, and we want to make sure that they're prepared for that. Now, being academically prepared, our preschool program does a really, really nice job, but as soon as they're here in kindergarten, we want to make sure that they're ready socially to be ready for kindergarten. So, it can be viewed as a long day for kindergarteners. Um, and when we think about the demands that we have in place, and, and, and again, respectfully our families have in place for us, it's, it's a high-performing school district. So for us to have shifted to a full-day kindergarten program years back was part of the community, um, our response to community expectations.

So, we're really proud of our kindergarten group. We think about all the step-up activities that they have in the summer, for them and their parents. And then, when you drop your child off, we even have the PTO do a great job with this, the boot breakfast, right? And the Foundation that he was involved in. But it's the, you know, boo hoo, yahoo, it's the yahoo my students are off to kindergarten or boo hoo, I'm sad that they're off to school, and we see both, and we will have parents that have, and this is a true story. We have parents who have a very, very difficult time dropping our kindergarten off, standing at the front door, upset, crying, and might just sit in their car in the parking lot the entire day for day one of school. That, that, that's not uncommon now if there's somebody in our middle school parent listening to that going, uh, you know, by the time it gets to middle school, then it's, how was the day?

And you're, you're really pleased when your child gives you more than it's fine, Do you know? Um, then you get to eighth grade, and you're thinking, gosh, as a parent, you know, where did the time go and wait for high school? Hang on. It's some tough sledding ahead and, uh, so we, I know it, our teachers know it, our administrators know it. So we really, really, really work hard to try to make sure that that transition to high school is successful. We think about transition a lot. Uh, and if we didn't, then I don't think we're meeting the promise that is inherently linked to our motto Children at their best, right? Like that's how I think it's an appropriate way to kind of wrap up my comments on this podcast to say. We started with Children at their best, and we have to end with Children at their best. And tonight we really appreciate the questions. They were so thoughtful, uh, shout out to the Foundation and those that put this together in the background. I really appreciate the thoughtful questions right from parents, you know, concerns and from

parent thoughts like very genuine and uh, you know, I hope I did a good enough job of answering what I could, and I look forward to the next one.

EPW: Okay, well, thank you so much. This was a great way to kind of end things here. Um, what is very resounding here is that Gower is small but mighty and full of impact. And so that is something that, you know, we definitely want the community to know about Gower, just kind of the work and the great things that are happening there. And so I'd like to thank you for being on the podcast today. Just sharing all this great information is gonna be so helpful to the community, and we look forward to further conversations with you.

VS: Thank you, Good night all!