

Episode 3

Meredith Mosconi: Hi, everyone. Welcome to episode three of the Gladiator Soundboard. My name is Meredith Mosconi and I will be moderating this episode today. So, I am on the Gower Foundation and I am the programming chair, but also I am the proud parent of a first grader who goes to Gower West and a future kindergartner. So, really excited to be here today on behalf of the Gower Foundation. As a reminder, if you haven't been able to watch episodes one or two that are on the Gower Foundation's website under the Gladiator Soundboard page. And I am honored to introduce Dr. Victor Simon today. He is the Superintendent of Gower 62. He'll be chatting with us today about a topic that I know is near and dear to a lot of parents' hearts, which is grading, learning, and testing. So, Dr. Simon, I will go ahead and hand it over to you to introduce yourself to anyone who hasn't had the pleasure of meeting you.

Dr. Victor Simon III: Great. Thanks a lot, and you know, happy to join tonight and really glad the Foundation has gotten some positive response from the, the first couple of episodes too, to listen to on the podcast and, you know, when you say tonight's episode is talking about grading learning and, and testing. Yeah, they're, they're all important. I think the one right there in the middle of learning is, is, is the most important. But I do know that grading investing are topics that, parents have questions about and want to be familiar with how we do things here in Gower try to gain some understanding of, of this important topic in, in a student's education and, you know, happy to be here to do it and you know, proud to serve in the gower community, always get a chance to brag about Gower in so many spaces. And, you know, we're, we're hearing a little bit and getting some feedback from folks that are listening to these podcasts outside of the gower school community and might be having a little bit of an impact in conversations in other spaces. And I always think that that's, you know, great for us to do as a smaller school district here in Dupage County. Yeah, absolutely.

Meredith: So I can go ahead and just jump right in. So, you know, as educators, you get to spend the bulk of your days with our kids. So you're welcome. But no, thank you. Thank you is what we mean for sure. But just to start this off broadly and then we'll go into a bit more basics. What, just from a high level, are you doing with the kids during the day?

Victor: Let me just say it this way. It starts with our district motto, Children at Their Best. That's what drives our work here in Gower. And what exactly does that mean? Well, it can mean a lot of things, and it means different things for different students, and every family is gonna be unique. So when we think about the number of hours that we have with the students from Gower West, the start time is 7: 45. It used to be the reverse. It used to be that Gower Middle started earlier and recognized that there was an advantage to having the middle schoolers start a little bit later and getting them ready for that high school experience. And, and we, we know that the high school calendar is moving to a little bit of a later start over time. And so going West starts earlier and 7:45 to 2:25 long days. And for those students, it's generally one teacher that they have throughout the day. They see other adults, certainly. But it's that homeroom teacher, you know what we think about, and those students do have electives during the day. I, I, I, not that they're choosing, but they have pe, so we know they have that physical education, and that's 30 minutes. They have art, 45 minutes a week. There are music lessons that are 40 minutes a week. Pretty unique for, for kindergarten through fourth grade, there's a music lesson and experience throughout those. Those grades ultimately lead to a choice of whether to pursue

band in middle school, which is, which is, we have a great band program there. They've scheduled lessons with our district librarian, the Steam program. So science, technology. And when we think about the engineering, art and the math that's involved for Steam, our counselors, our school counselors and social workers are part of our students day and experience and also technology lessons, you know, to think about what digital citizenship looks like for students early on in their career here in Gower. So all of that said is what's taking place throughout a given week of time and bits and pieces throughout any given day. But essentially that, you know, that's what it is. They're part of a classroom that is part of a grade level. And you mentioned first grade. So, you know, we have five classrooms in first grade, typically four classrooms at a grade level, and then they're also part of a family as well, and they get a chance to interact with, with peers in other parts of the school. There's a 30-minute lunch; they have our earliest lunch that actually starts with those first graders at 10 55 and goes all the way to 11 25. And our fourth graders rotate in at 12 15 to finish up lunch. So that's what's happening throughout a school day in the most technical sense at Go West. But the teaching part of it, these are licensed professionals that are actually helping students learn throughout their experience in any given school year. So that's, that's goer West goer middle more of the middle school model. When we think about class periods that are 43 minutes long, we start at 8 30 and go to 3 28. Those class periods are single class periods throughout the day for your core classes, math, English language, arts, social studies and science, and our English language, arts, or what we might call reading and writing. is a double period, or what's known as a block in, in our world of education. Our students are relatively new. Over the last few years, we invested some time in our schedule to build in what we call an advisory period, which is a 28-minute period that would take place for our 5th and 6th graders while our 7th and 8th graders have lunch. So we have the whole cafeteria full of our 7th and 8th graders and then flip around when 7th and 8th grade have their advisory, 5th and 6th grade have launched. So this advisory period is coupled with another small component called WIN, which stands for what I need. And that WIN time is part of their advisory as well. So really trying to have teachers dial in on what it is that individual students need in terms of support, or extension activities. We talk a little bit about that later on here in the podcast. And I want to keep in mind, too, that it's not just those core classes. The middle students also have a choice for the band. We have a study hall and foreign language program, and they can also take electives that are involved in stem art music. We have a family comm in consumer science program. And we also have something unique here called team leadership, which is a class as you would expect around leadership activities. So, and of course, every day, students have pe here in government, and they're part of a grade level, and they're also part of one of four houses. If you think Harry Potter, they're, they're the type of one of four houses here in Goa, which is new this year and has been positive.

Meredith: I love that. I feel like it's such a wonderful balance of making sure there's variety, but also that like holistic focus on, you know, education, ensuring they have that core, but then also the personalization for each student. So I think that's wonderful. Well, I'm gonna, I'm gonna drill us down just a little bit to the testing. So as parents, I mean, we know that standardized tests are just so incredibly important. But we also know that our kids seem to take a lot of tests. So I would just love your thoughts on Gower's approach to testing, to standardized testing. But then also if you could just give us a little, you know, a cheat sheet of the standardized test that the Gower students take and the implications of that.

Victor: Sure. Yeah, that, yeah, the cheat sheet. I like that. We're talking about tests and we'll, we'll talk about cheat sheets. I love it. So we think about when I think about assessments and you mentioned, you know, state assessments, things of that nature. So there's the test that we sort of, well, that we have to take required assessments that are part of being a public school in the state of Illinois. So to list those out, these are gonna be some acronyms, but there is the I A R, the I A R is the Illinois assessment of readiness, and that's the spring test that just happened. It just happened last week. We're doing makeup now. But the annual spring test is the state of Illinois assessment of readiness. And this goes out to students that when we think about third to eighth grade, how they're doing, reading and math essentially. So those are your high stakes, the other one that's required. And this is only for 5th and 8th grade. This is the Illinois science assessment it's only 5th and 8th graders would be talking about that year in and year out. It's another required assessment from the state of Illinois. And again, just a comparison of grade levels and how they're doing. So that's, that's essentially it for requirements unless students are enrolled in a specific type of student program. So, for example, English learners will take a test called the access test. In some special education programs, students will take this dynamic learning map or DLM test. Those would be more highly specialized unique assessments that are specific and tailored to students in specific programs, like I said, English learning or special education. So those are the required tests that have to do sort of things. Now, I use this analogy and say, OK, it's like an after-the-fact assessment report. Well, then there's the health checkups, the regular; how's it going throughout the school year? And that's where we choose to take certain assessments. So we're a N W E A map user. So the N W E A map is a K kindergarten through eighth grade, reading a math test that's actually taken three times a year called beginning of the year or B O Y, the beginning of the year, middle of the year, end of the year. So the beginning, middle, and end of your assessments are taken on a map, and these are more helpful, at least in our opinion and our approach to assessment for individual teachers and in some cases, groups of teachers to get this assessment data, that is considered to be a benchmark assessment at different times of the year to see how students are progressing through their current school year. So it's really helpful for teachers to have the ability to retool, shift resources time, go back, move forward, you know, adjust essentially. So as they start the year thinking here, here, here's how the year is gonna go, and then they get this information that comes in as early as kindergarten. So this applies at the earliest grade levels for us in elementary settings to see how things are going for groups and individual students and adjustments could be made. I would say on the fly, but in a positive sense, that they're made because we're pointing at the information of how students do at least three times a year. The really nice thing about this one is for us. This is my 10th year here in Gower, which just feels pretty incredible to be here that long. But when I think about the history of assessments, if you do this three times a year, you're here as a kindergarten, or you go all the way kindergarten through eighth grade, that's nine years of schooling that you know, is taking place and you're doing this three times a year. It's a lot of assessment data. What's great about this? and these are short assessments. This generally takes 45 minutes to an hour to take an assessment on a map. So the scheduled students understand what their goals are. They know what their scores are, those kinds of things. They know it's about progress and getting better. I will talk about some of the pressures that might come with this assessment and others assessments now, behind the scenes and even in front of some students, and how we address it. But essentially, it's an opportunity for us to get that. And I love the word you used earlier, this holistic view of a student's experience. We don't have high mobility in Gower. So our community is blessed in that way where we don't have students, you know, coming and going in in large numbers, students

definitely come and go and there's, you know, some, some mobility there but, but generally speaking, students transition right through Gower West and right through Gower Middle and on to the high schools. So you have over 20 closer to 30 plot points of how a student's trajectory of assessment and learning is taking place on these benchmarks. It gives us a lot of information. So, in other words, we're not going to just throw everything out and start over if something goes awry. We have a history of how students have performed over time and can really try to tailor what their instructions should be. we call the best fit for them as they go through year to year. At least that's the design behind it. And then finally, there are some smaller assessments that take place in the background. There's some more benchmarking that takes place called Fast Bridge. This is something that would be used for students to figure out what levels of specific support they might need, especially if they're currently performing at a level that's not at the grade level, whether that's higher or lower than that, and then they can do some social-emotional component to this, of how students are feeling about their experience in schools. And then certainly I think we'll talk a little bit later about this AT program. We have, we, we get in that specifically, but the COGAT test is something that's taken second through fourth grade and again, fifth through seventh grade is needed, and that'll help with some of these programmatic decisions on the school level. So, and we have these must-dos we have these, we choose to do, and then there's a, a platform or a menu of some smaller assessments that are really fine-tuning what a student's experience is as they matriculate through Gower.

Meredith: I mean, that's amazing. And as a data and nerd, I love the fact that you have all the plot points there. I would love to hear just a little bit more about how gower uses the results. I think especially from those kinds of autopsy reports that you mentioned; I'm just gonna keep your analogy here. and how that helps to inform classroom testing.

Victor: Yeah, I mean, so when we think about any classroom testing that's happening or any classroom teaching, that's, that, that's, that's going on, and they're, and they're linked obviously, when a student is, you know, experiences a classroom, whether it's kindergarten all the way through eighth grade, the teacher is gonna have a lesson and teaching is taking place and that teachers wanting to find out if, if learning is being had, right? For, if students are gaining mastery is the way that we might talk about it or if they're learning and showing mastery toward these particular learning standards. So we got to keep in mind that, like all of the assessments, I just talked about some of these sum ones that take place like one time a year and these other more benchmark formative tests that help us shape and experience throughout a year. Those are really important. I honestly, I, I'll tell you as a practitioner, I don't think those really belong even on the same page with what teachers do day in and day out in terms of, I would say, hundreds if not thousands of small little assessments and decisions being made any given day when you have 20 students and how things are going for each of those students. I mean, I, I've been a teacher, and I know when a lesson is going really well, at least I think I know, and then I also have a sense of when it might not be going so well and how teachers are able to get this information, day to day, hour to hour, even minute to minute in some cases is more powerful when done well as a professional than any of the assessments that I just listed. You know. So, in that last prompt, like all these things that we have to do and that we choose to do, they add value, and they have their place in the whole experience of learning. But again, the practitioner in that room with the students helping them learn how to do, fill in the blank, whatever it is them tho those professionals along with the students and, in many cases, along with parents and having conversations back and forth, email chains, phone calls, face to face zooms, things like

this, all of that information is just really, really powerful to help us keep good on the promise of Children At Their Best.. So that's really important. So, directly how do we use the results well? And these ones that function more like an autopsy, you know, again, you know, or an end-of-year summary report. I'll say those have their place for accountability at the state level, holding schools accountable. Are we doing what we're supposed to be doing? So what percentage of students are at quote grade level? How are students performing all this? The Illinois School Report Card and judgments could be made about schools doing well or not so well. And gower does really well on these assessments, so that, you know, all things considered, that is turning out the way we would expect it to turn out. We're doing well. We don't pay a ton of attention as practitioners to that assessment because of the fact that it's speaking about the year that already pretty much happened. So like, here, here, for instance, the testing is right now we're in makeups; we were finishing our makeups last week was a big testing window for us. A couple of days worth of testing for the state assessment. Those results will get preliminary results this summer. Those results won't go public until right around Halloween of next year. Usually October, and I've read they're pushing that deadline out perhaps all the way to December. That said, you're already halfway or a portion of the way in, like you're, you're maybe close to counting down the winter break by the time you're getting scores publicly about last year. Like there, there are so many things that change in a student's life, day to day, week to week. Certainly, year to year that I don't know how helpful that is for teachers to go back and try to retool. It gives us a maybe 100 ft view or maybe 1000 ft view of what's going on. But really, where we get into the cycle of continuous improvement, what we talk about is a plan, do, check act that cycle. I talk a lot about that cycle, write a lot about that cycle and share it with the community. It's, we have a plan, we go out, we do that plan, and now the assessments that we take, the ones I mentioned, especially N W E A map. That's us, that's our go-to, that helps us check on the work as a district as, as schools. And then we're able to take some actions about how to get better. So that's how we use it at a school and district level. Teachers, we have to keep in mind to get information in the form of whether it's homework assignments, responses to discussions, just generally how a student is performing in the classroom. Like what is their overall vibe in the classroom? Like, are they OK? You know, that kind of stuff is playing out all the while. So teachers are using that information to inform their teaching day in and day out. So it's just, there's a lot, as you can imagine, it's just, it's a lot of input, and as, as parenting, same thing, you know, it's like, you mentioned the soon to be kindergarten first grader, you got a lot of inputs, you know, all the stuff is coming, and you're trying to figure it all out and, you know, you'll get the line of best fit and, and you, you, you'll make that work, and we all do as parents. And so when we think about this as a setting where all the families are trying to do that for their own Children here, they all are in the classroom together all at the same time. And the teachers are trying to figure out where everybody is, how they're progressing, and a student that is taking off, let's say, you know, the first three months of school, the student is just rocket fuel, taking off everything, you know, all green lights, something could occur to where that changes. So we want, and we encourage, and we really are proud of our staff for being so attentive to individual student needs and performance. I am the Superintendent, and I know the Principals feel this way. I don't want our teachers getting so caught up in a score that's published here or a score that's published there. because their attention needs to be on the student that's in front of them. Like we have to meet them where they're at today, like, and tomorrow morning, when they show up, like today, was a good day. Tomorrow might not be the best day for a student. And so our teachers have to be ready for that, and they are ready for that. And that's why I classify them as capital t and like hero status. Like, they do some really, really great stuff. But that doesn't mean

that we just ignore the test results. So at the end of the year, in June, I report out, and on our website, we have an academic performance page under our district info tab. So Gower62.com, right? District info, drag down, and you'll see academic performance.

Meredith: Yes, I mean, first of all, I love the transparency there. I think that's so important and just the, you know, trust in the community. But also, as a parent, I love the fact that the focus that you put on teachers and really allowing them to do their jobs and connect with their students, and you already somewhat went into this. But I'm going to ask anyway. So as we kind of switch to that learning area, just thinking about what you mentioned of really having to understand the student individualizing it for them. How exactly do the teachers ensure that they are, you know, appropriately challenging the students in class? And I would say something similar to what you mentioned earlier. I think that means students who are not meeting great grade level expectations or students who are exceeding and really ensuring that they're tailoring that to each level.

Victor: Yeah. Wow, that's, that's the question, that's a question for schools. It really, it's like, so how just to rephrase here, like, how to make sure I have it, like, how did teachers ensure that students are being appropriately challenged in class and meaning students that are not meeting grade level and students that are exceeding grade level expectations and, and that's it. Right. Like, so the first thing and it is so important and I just to, to go super slow down motion here and just make sure that anyone likes listening to this and parents hear this clearly, it's the descriptor that currently needs to be used in front of both of those descriptions of students. So it's like students who are currently not meeting grade level expectations, and also teachers are responsible for helping students and giving them the tailored instruction for those that are currently exceeding. So it's like not meeting currently, and it's, it's a subtle change, but it's really, really important because it just gives a lot of power to how things can change quickly. Every parent knows this. Every parent knows this, that things could be going amazingly well. And all of a sudden they're not going amazingly well and you could be in the pre-K stage all the way up to, you know, through the toddlers into pre-K, early elementary. And it's, this is, this is incredibly challenging. And then, and then you get into this intermediate grade level, and you're like, oh, OK, catch my breath. You know, they're 8, 9, 10. I think it's OK, but they come with a whole new set of change challenges, and then you have friends and family or maybe, you know, relatives, and you look, and you go, oh, preteens and middle school. You know, when my kids get that age, they won't behave like that. Oh, yeah, they will too. You know, and then you're in middle school, you think about high school, and it's just like, oh gosh, you know, those pro it, it is so relative throughout, back to the question, like how, you know, how do they do that? So, let's be mindful that it can change at any time, and any variety of factors can make someone that is doing extraordinarily well in school all of a sudden not be doing extraordinarily well in school. So that said, we know that it's not something that's just fixed as the student gets it, and that's just it. There are other factors at play or like the environment that they're in, the external environment. There's a lot that's happening that could change things for that child. So that's one we screen every student. Here's how it goes for us. We screen all of our students every year in math and in reading. We do that in the fall, winter, and spring. This universal screening is taking place essentially through this NWEA MAP assessment that gives us a blinking light. Whether that blinking light is red, yellow, or green, it is just proverbial lights here. They're not real lights flashing, but like red, yellow, and green lights going off, telling us to stop, something needs to be attended to caution and kind of what's happening here. Green light all systems let us go safely

through that intersection. So the fact that that's happening throughout the year three times in a very formal screening sense hopefully sort of assuages any concerns of, like, well, will my student or my child be taken care of and their academic needs throughout the school year? What I'm saying to you is that formally minimum of three times a year, they'll have this universal screening. So we'll be able to catch a lot of the flashing lights in different colors for us. Change is inevitable. Growth Is Optional. Like that's a T-shirt for me to print if my future kindergartner wants to say hi, you wanna say hi, say hi hi. There's a little one, a little Gladiator. Oh, thanks for that. Yeah, apparently that's great. All right, as we said, Chaos as we said, yes. And I know that the podcasts oftentimes, you know, have to be edited for space and all the rest. But having a kindergartner stop in and say hello. I hope I make the final cut. But you know, we can cut out the crying now. That's OK. We cut out the crying part. So, you know, we come back, and I'll just say, you know, you know, thanks for that. And when we think about change being inevitable and growth being optional, it gives teachers this charge of like, first of all, it's OK that things are gonna be changing like we have to expect that, but to make growth not optional and to be intentional about how we want to grow and get better as a system and as a community like that's, that's where the real work comes in. So for us, you know, we're constantly looking at how to get things to be a little bit better, one more notch higher. And, you know, conversations we have with folks like you and the Foundation, the PTO, certainly the Board of Education, many, many, many parents and families all trying to figure out what's best for their own children in ways that are meaningful. That's the conversation. So we have to be ready to adapt.

Meredith: I love it. And I love, you know, the idea of parents being involved, and I know that I've reached out to some of my, you know, child's teachers, and they've been absolutely wonderful and accommodating questions and all of that. I know you mentioned something earlier, and I would love to dig a bit more into it; which is can you help me understand a little bit more about the AT program? So, how do students qualify for it? And what does, what is it about that program that makes it different from the everyday classroom?

Victor: So, as early as second-grade teachers can initiate a process for this accelerated track program in which, in short, it's essentially a program that exists within, within a school that is moving at a level that's essentially a grade level ahead. Right. And in some cases, it could be more, depending on the individual student. But so it's, it's what you would think it would be. It's a, it's a good title, the accelerated track program. So it's just, even though we can initiate the process beginning as early as second grade, the programs for students in grades 3 to 8, and students have to meet the criteria for the program and walk through each of the parts of the rubric for this. Here's where it's always really cautious, and what we said earlier about the current and about pumping the brakes. I understand, and I, I just, I mean this in the best, best, most positive way. It's like I understand as a parent that maybe I'll be listening now. And hey, the podcast and the superintendent are talking about the accelerated track pause, pause, like get the notes out. How do I get my child on the accelerated track? Like because they have to be on the accelerated track. Right. I understand that energy and, and I do, and what I think about is that, instead of going into the rubric tonight, like, how do you qualify? I'll just suffice it to say that if a certain number of points are earned on a qualifying rubric and this is all on our website under parent info, you can get to all these, the rubric itself, but there's a qualifying rubric in these areas of math and reading. And we have to try to figure out whether or not these three data points are met. So we look at those scores and the NWEA MAP typically at the 95th percentile or above. That's one of the sorts of cuts. There's the COGAT test. And then, students

are asked to do an activity, such as an in-class writing prom to a math performance task, and to see where they are in these different areas. So test performance tasks, gather it all up, and see how things are going. If qualified, the accelerated track might be the right move for that particular student. And then, our teacher at West is Miss Pollock, and those students would leave their classroom to participate in Miss Pollock's class, the accelerated track at the Middle, those are taught as separate classes by our math and our English language arts teachers as part of the student's regular schedule. We've had students that have been bussed from Gower Middle, like fifth graders, sixth graders, bused to the high school to take higher level high school classes because that's the level of acceleration they were at, and you start to, wow, was my reaction to when you, when you, when you see that, and you think like, OK, that's great that, that idea of pump the brakes. And I am an, you know, education is an urgency and like this is a dress rehearsal type of guy like this is important stuff. But at the same rate, I just want it to be balanced with this. Like what's the right fit for the student holistically that I brought up earlier, and like just because you can doesn't always mean that you should is, I think, an important phrase for lots of people to think through. But in cases like this one, a highly successful student did great all the way through there could be cases where the student's level of anxiety will kick in and just overall like this high-performance anxiety and just like really stressed out over, over this. And we spend time here in Gower, our social workers or our school counselors get involved in some cases. Our Principals have been involved in these teachers where a student could be brought to tears over performance in school. That's clearly a line there that we need to work through, and that involves the family. And that involves like, hey, what, what are we doing? This is not what the test is supposed to do, you know, like there's, there's the intent, but then there's the impact of what this test is doing. So we've had families that might have qualified for A t to get into this higher track but then have self-selected to say, you know what? No, you know, I'm not. I'm not interested, for a variety of reasons. Maybe they try it out, don't love it as much, and that's great.

Meredith: Thank you for clarifying that because I know a lot of parents have had questions about that. I'm gonna switch to our last topic, learning before we go integrating. So obviously, the integration of technology and education has changed, not to say that we're all from, you know, the 1900s. But sometimes, I feel that way. Its changed since we were in school. So we would just like to have a better understanding of how Gower uses technology to support learning. And if you have any examples of how Gower has, you know, intentionally integrated technology to help fill student gaps and support student growth?

Victor: Yeah. Yeah. Sure. so there are some paper and pencil tasks, but they also use the Chromebooks, you know, blended in what way? Well, the dial is not turned all the way up on Chromebooks, it's not turned all the way up on pencil, paper, it can be adjusted and back and forth, you know. So, there's a blended experience. We use Google Classroom. So we're what we call a Google Shop here in Gower. And that's our learning management system. So how do students interact with what their tasks are and their responsibilities are? That's a learning management system, and technology helps expedite that. And so those platforms are used by teachers and students throughout the day. So that's in the week and the year. So that's sort of how technology is always there in the background. Now, it's provided other ways certainly for students to engage with teachers and other students. So Google Docs chats, emails, discussion boards. you can get immediate feedback on different assignments and activities that teachers are adding. They could add voice memos and voice comments into the Google docs like there's

just a lot, a lot of power and expediting that could happen behind the scenes in, in, in these Google docs, and that comes with some balance, you know, you want to be clear about that as well. The different apps that we use software applications, you know, these are all online subscriptions, these are all there is part of helping enrich the world of technology. So the devices are loaded with things that are supposed to be helpful, and the timing here is good because I just saw this past week, an email came out from our engaged learning specialist, our tech folks that work, they are teachers here and they work with our teachers specifically and ask, hey, what subscriptions are we using? What subscriptions are we using? What do we want to keep? What do we want to get rid of? So they're, they're retooling that in the background all the time as well. So in fact, here at the government, we tried a different learning management system and didn't love it. And you know, we, we, we, we move back into a different direction. So we have a long history here, 10 years of this I three. So that's how we innovate, and that's how we integrate to inspire learning. I mean, now you could, you could bring in experts across the country, virtual author visits, virtual tours, talking with students across the globe, as all these things have happened and still happen, and here's the balance with this on technology and I know we want to talk about grading as well. So I'll move quickly here on the, on the side of digital citizenship. I mean airplane mode screen time. These are things that are important for parents to know. So we try to, to bring parents into that conversation, provide as much information as possible early on, you know, how do we expect technology to be used? But when it comes, there is a little bit of a dark side to some of this, with cyberbullying and other kinds of issues on accessibility, you know, and then you have all this access to information. So how are we protecting students at the same time? So, you know, without going way into the security details of anything, we use a platform called Go Guardian. And it's just a tool for teachers and administrators to use. It monitors, student access can search for and look and, and flag inappropriate content, things like that. And those are the kinds of interactions that we might have early on while students are figuring out how to use the network and other kinds of devices and really work with families directly to make sure that everyone is kept safe. And, of course, there are rules, regulations, and laws in place in the state of Illinois nationally that make sure that we're focused very clearly on our student's privacy and safety. So when I say technology is ubiquitous and it's everywhere here, we know that to be true. Not just in schools, we know that's true. But at the same time, schools, I think, are held to a probably higher standard than most places in the sense of what kind of things have to be in place, for student safety when it comes to technology. Yeah, I mean, I love the term digital citizenship. I just love that. But I like how you guys accept that technology is a part of our lives and really use that to further education and teach kids, you know, early how to use it and how not to use it, how to use it, how not to, right? Like, yeah, the phone's a tool. I mean, this is the this, the phone that's right here sitting next to me, this, this phone is more powerful than anywhere near the first computer that I had as a teacher in 1997. You know, like it's, it's not even close. I mean, one photo on this phone here is larger in terms of storage size than, than a disk if you know, a floppy disk could hold, you know, like, so we could either embrace what is in front of us or really just try to go this uphill battle and just, you know, really probably a lot of wasted energy and effort to, to try to avoid it. So, let's be mindful of how it can help us. And, you know, I think we're better for it. So, and we've had, we've, we've wrestled and we still wrestle with technology in schools and always do. And, you know, we get ideas all the time from, from families or parent groups that will say, you know, hey, phones should be, you know, banned and leave phones at home, and it's just like, phones are a tool, and then it's the appropriate use of the phone is the issue, not the phone itself. So, you know, we're here to help, and any ideas from parents listening, you know, please reach out,

we're always, you know, an open ear to that and, and making sure we're trying to lean forward as a parent. I really appreciate that. And you got little ones, too, right? So like, you know, technology is gonna only be more and more powerful, right? As they go, they already know how to use my phone to phone in. Yeah, they, I'm sure they do, and they know how to look at me on Zoom and say hello. So it's like it's, we're in pretty good shape so far. so I'm gonna switch us, like you mentioned, over to the last topic for today, which is grading. so not to go back and say again that we're from the 1900s,, but I feel like this is a theme that we grew up with this traditional A through F grading scale. So obviously, any parents who have opened their, you know, kid's report card have realized that gower employs a 123 standards-based grading scale in kindergarten through sixth grade. So just a few questions here on this, and I'll just kind of rapid-fire them and feel free to, you know, take them as they are. But I would say the first one is like, just help us understand what this means. Just, you know, talk to us like we're kindergartners, literally. And then how, should we understand this in the context of, of the A through F grading scale, or alternatively, should we be relating that back? And then, finally, how do we use the scale to understand our children's growth and progress? Sure. Yeah. Sure. OK. So, yeah, this is, it's a long answer and I know that we've, you know, I'm being mindful of our time and I, I also want to make sure that we spend some time here. So I'd ask in advance like the editors just, you know if we go a little long, it might be worth the content, you know. So, you know, I'm gonna let, let, let's, let's dig into it. One thing that is so, so important to hear is that it's important to keep in mind that students can learn without grades, but they cannot learn without formative feedback and, and formative assessment and feedback. So to state it again. Clearly, they can learn without grades. Imagine, I know it might not be a popular opinion, but students can and do learn without actual grades, but they cannot learn without formative assessment feedback. So, that said, I am also from a traditional grading scale of ABCD or ABCD F. You got an F as a problem. These are problems, CS. You need to try to do better if you can. A's and B's might get it done. But what we know now with a 123 and a lot of parents do throw their hands up and like, I'm confused, I don't know what this means. Help me. I want to have a better understanding, and they come in a positive light. I want to get behind this. I just don't know what it means. So just help me. So when you say they're like, tell us like we're kindergartners, I really, I appreciate that approach for two reasons. One, you know, we could probably go to, like, fifth-grade level and handle it there. But, I would say kindergarten is really important to think about a kindergartner. Kindergartners here have received standard-based grades for many years. But kindergartners are a good example of until we tell them ABC D F, like, until they come to know what that would be, they wouldn't know, same with the first grader or second grader. Like we made up ABC D F and all the things that go with it, you know. So it's tough to get away from, but at the same rate, what we have to think about is if it's true that students can learn without an actual grade when research is very clear about grades aren't, what does it, it's the feedback that you get. So we'll make it really super clear what a one, a two, and a three are. One area of concern has not met the standard. So a teacher that is trying to figure out does this, can this student spell the word, you know, whatever. And if that was the standard, it's probably a pretty bad standard in and of itself. But if that was the standard and they couldn't do it, it's an area of concern that one expected level of performance is progressing, they can do it, you know, like we, we got it right like that. So that's, that's, that's pretty good. That one little thing is in the bag, you know, so they're progressing on that specific standard in three. Now we're talking about consistency. They're proficient, they've got it down, they've got it down. 12 and three, like one, not there two growing toward it. Feel pretty good about it. Three, we feel like they've got it down to a point where they can consistently demonstrate that level of understanding. So more on the

side of the application. So we think about hasn't met standard one expected level performance to like twos, right? Where you need to be, there is consistency. So for parents, if you see twos and threes, you're you, that should be positive, that should be OK. My student is right where they need to be; where are they not proficient? It would get your attention. So two would get your attention. But what really needs to grab attention, or the attention of a parent, is one. So it's just like these are the areas that there's a concern. Two is not a concern. It's just not that they're proficient yet. Like that word's important to throw in. Yeah, like it's just maybe it's October, you know, and they have a little bit of time to go still, or it's a new topic, and by the time this was graded, it was reported it's a two, and that's OK. Like we'll get there to two threes in terms of proficiency and consistency. And if it stays in two lanes, that's fine too. It's expected level of performance, you know, it just might be somewhat inconsistent. So we're talking, that's the difference, not inconsistent, consistent. That's a 12 and a three. We try to make it as simple as we can. and again, you know, when we think about whether a unit is new or new learning, you might see lots of tunes as time goes on those tools turn into many times threes. So that's in a nutshell, what it means. And now when we think about how we use this to help our own Children as a, as a parent? You, you think, well, if I knew if it was a, a or a B, I'd be, you know, it'd be more helpful. It's like, well, I don't know, I, I mean, maybe out of comfort, maybe that's helpful. But the difference between A A and A B, I mean, I mean, it's discretionary many times. It depends on where you put the line. Is it a 90, or is it a 92 or 93? What's the cut-off to get an, a, like a lot of that is so, sort of arbitrary in terms of setting a grade scale? So here, not arbitrary. I'll show you. Can you do this? Yes or no. And if the answer is no one, the answer is yes. Great. Let's see if we can do it consistently. That's the difference between the two and the three that is very helpful as a parent who has looked at her child's, you know, card in the great card in me, and they're like, wait, I'm a little confused.

Meredith: So I really appreciate that breakdown there. Our last question for the evening is just as we think a little bit more about how our students will be leaving school as they move on to high school, trying to understand when in high school they will experience your traditional A through F grading skills. So what exposure do they receive to this scale at power to prepare them before they transition to high school?

Victor: Yes. Yes. Yes. That's why we get that question a lot. And so our sixth grade, our fifth grade, sixth grade right here right now, all of Gower West K four, all of Gower West. It's been like this for a minute. All of Gower West knows nothing other than standards-based grading. So 123 World has been in Gower West for some time. Now you think in your, you, you have kindergartner now, you think you look back at your kindergarten and think like, oh, what's this gonna be like in fifth grade? It's a long time, but it does happen in a snap, and those fifth graders and sixth graders right here now at the lower middle that used to be, you know, over there at Gower West know nothing other than standards-based grading. So for them, it's just how it should be. It's just what they would expect, but we also need to know we're not a unit district. We feed into high schools, but the high schools are not part of our management. It's not part of our leadership. It's not part of our administration. So we want to make sure that our students are prepared for high school. So that said our 7th and 8th-grade core classes. So our social studies, our science, our social science, science, math, and our English language arts. Those are traditional A F grading scales. So the core classes are still maintained in the traditional sense in 7th and 8th grade, our upper middle school grades here in preparation for high school. So if you can imagine, at any point, if high schools start to go back to this quote of

the idea that students can learn without grades, but they cannot learn without feedback. If there was ever a change in the future, go middle is very close and ready at any time to just flip the switch and say, OK, great. This great sixth-grade class, whichever one it is in the future, that's about to go to seventh grade. We could easily just continue on standards-based grading. That is not what we're doing right now. So to be clear, I don't want anyone that's like, doesn't love that idea to think anything differently. The high school as far as I know is continuing a traditional letter grade system as long as they do. But the guarantee from us and the commitment are better than a guarantee. Our commitment from us is to make sure that our students are prepared for that. So our 7th and 8th graders, as long as we know there's a traditional grading scale, will have exposure to it and use a traditional grading scale here at the middle school in 7th and 8th grade. Now, their pe class and their electives, their pe and elective classes can go into a 123. And that's simply because of the fact that that's what they know. They know that the feedback is really helpful to them. And that's the lower stakes in the sense of being ready for high school. So it's like our 7th and 8th grade is kind of like the best of both worlds here as they continue on. Now, I go back, and I think the age of our standards-based grading is our current sixth-grade class. That's a long history. So our current sixth graders all the way zoomed back to when they were, five, and they were kindergartners. That's what they know is standards-based grading. So our commitment to doing this and doing it well has been here for some time now. And as we go, as I said, into 7th and 8th, we have a hybrid approach. So a fair, appropriate mix of standards-based 123 is not showing that they can do that. Standard two, they can do it, but it's inconsistent. Three, they have it down. It's consistent. I could do it on Monday, and I could do it on Thursday. You know, that's important. That's an important distinction. And when we think about that for 7th and 8th graders, again, best of both worlds for them. Yeah, I think that's a great combination there. So ensuring they're still receiving that feedback. But being prepared for high school and what will be coming with high school.

Meredith: Dr. Simon, thank you so much for your time today. I think just chatting with you for the last hour has really shown you the time that you put in and the dedication you have to the school. But I also love the focus on the teachers because, despite my little joke about your welcome earlier, we know how much you guys care about our Children. We see it with our Children every day. And just again, wanna thank you.

Victor: You're more than welcome to serve. Listen, we're, we're here to get better. It's progressed to perfection. We know there's not. We know it's not perfect. So, you know, we're here as partners. If information comes up, this is all about grading, learning, and testing in the end. If the students are not having a great day, you know, Mom and dad aren't going to be asking about what the grade was. You know, if it's not a good day, we want to get to the bottom of what that's about. So, you know, we're partners with you. The community is a strong one here in Gower. I think this podcast has been a lot of fun, and, I really appreciate the space to chat with you and, really appreciate having a little stop in and say hello on zoom. So now she gives me the hallway. Just make sure she stops and says hello. Yeah.

Meredith: You'll know when she joins because she's a firecracker. But, thank you. Have a great day. All right.

Victor: Bye-bye.