

Ep. 27 New Principals 3

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Happy New Year and welcome to Episode 27 of the What's Up podcast. I'm your host Frank Bellavia with school and community relations and welcome to 2019. Thanks for joining us today. We're wrapping up our series on our new principals. And joining us today are Marleny Perdomo the new principal of key immersion school and Carlos Ramirez the principal of Randolph Elementary School. Welcome. Thank you for joining us and Happy New Year. Happy New Year. Happy New Year. So first off Marleny let's just talk about your background where you're from your college and how you came to U.P.S. and what you've been doing while you're ready.

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Yes sure. Originally from Columbia and I have spent my entire professional career as an educator. I began teaching high school French and then I transitioned into teaching English as a second language. And then I became an elementary school teacher later on an assistant principal and now principal. I attended that in public university in Bogota Colombia. Then I went to Wisconsin Carthage College and then Ohio University for my masters degrees and then I studied at George Mason for my educational leadership degree and it came to be basically almost by accident. I was looking for jobs in the area and I was afraid that different positions here at EPA and I initially was hired as an EMT to take on the area was what I was looking for but I ended up in elementary and high state the career spanned both elementary and high school and some college as well.

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Is there a preference in terms of what you like to do spend time or is it all the same to you.

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I am back in elementary because I believe that that is where my heart.

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I mean I love working with kids no matter what age but I definitely have been working with older students and adults at some point in my career by the elementary level. And I'm happy to be back.

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Carlos talk about your background where you're from college you went to your background and how you came to us.

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OK. So I am originally from Venezuela from the neighboring country of Lenny's and I grew up in Caracas and I went to a university which is the equivalent of a teacher's college here in the US because I wanted to be a teacher. I wanted to be an English teacher and then I came here to America about 18 years ago and that's when I decided to pursue a masters in teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages. I went to Greensboro College that was back in North Carolina. I had an amazing experience teaching students who came from all over the world. And that's why I was able to actually put into practice all of the skills that I had learned. Then I had an inkling for leadership and I went to Appalachian State University in Boone North Carolina where I was able to pursue my studies in school administration. Then after that I had this inkling of living here in this area simply because a lot of my friends and colleagues

former colleagues had moved to this area and you know it was not a secret that salaries were much better in this area than they were in North Carolina back then. And so I started looking for different positions not only in Arlington but also neighboring counties. And it was that specific interview that I had with Jessica that felt the my principal then who hired me that I said I think I'm staying here. I had this feeling that Arlington was for me. And so after being a teacher at the Claremont immersion I was a science teacher back then and also in math and Spanish language teacher. I became an assistant principal at the same school. And after that I took on this new role in this new adventure.

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What made you decide to go into teaching. What was it that drew you to teaching.

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So my mom was a kindergarten assistant and I always saw when I was growing up how busy but yet how much she enjoyed the fact that she was all the I'm cutting coloring pasting doing things for her students and I always joined that fine over the weekends especially. And I always she always took me to her school and I always joined the kids and I kind of felt good because I already knew what all of the projects were about. Whereas it was new for the kids in her classroom. And then when I was growing up I always thought of you know how do you make sure that you teach people how do you teach people. I have always had that inclination. I thought it was fascinating to me that people actually were able to teach you how to do something. And I didn't know how to figure it out. And so when it was time to go to college. Coming from a humble background. My parents including my mom she said no no no. Don't go into teaching. It's not going to give you any money. And so I actually went to college first to become an accountant and administrator a business administrator. But a couple of years into that program I said No no no this is not for me.

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So that's when I transferred to the teachers college and I saw the light and it was just beautiful for you my lady buy into teaching.

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You know I did not really start my you know my my career at the college level thinking that I was going to be a teacher. I wanted to do international relations in a lot of languages. Ever since I was little I used to. My parents used to say that I grew up in the morning and I would be speaking just like anything that it was you know anything that was didn't make any sense and I told them that I had learned a new language overnight and I wanted to learn new languages. And so I went to the university initially it was a teacher's college and my brother was a teacher. So I was kind of sort of interested and he was kind of you know just nudging you a little bit to go into teaching. And he said Why don't you go into the languages school. And I did OK fine I studied French in English and it was sort of like a triple major in Spanish. And I was thinking German at the same time. And I I said you know this is kind of fascinating and then they started teaching us how to teach languages and I really really liked it when I started tutoring kids and that when I was a sophomore in college. And so then I realized that I could do it. And I said well this might be something to fall back on international relations I wanted to be a diplomat. And if that doesn't work out then then I can always teach. But I really like the teaching and I didn't get into you know I didn't pursue the trying to go in to a career in diplomacy it was just you know things kind of fall into place I ended up getting a scholarship to go to a school in Wisconsin. And I was just fascinated. My next step was going to be Sorbonne because I had some way of you know I had arranged everything but then I got another scholarship and ended up in Ohio. And you know I was always teaching something I got a graduate

associate ship and I was teaching for the department at the university and I realized that I really liked it so I decided to I did complete a master's in international relations and did some work in El Salvador related to that. But interestingly when I wasn't there I was teaching about civic education when I was doing a job there with a nongovernmental organization. But when they came to this area again thinking about doing something in international relations a friend of mine said you know I know that you like that but you do such a good job teaching. She had supervised me and she said Why don't you just give it a try. I think you'd be great in your brother. He is now he actually went on to become a principal then he was a superintendent of a region superintendent and then he he was he retired and then he went back to teaching. He did not want to be an administrator anymore. He's been always my biggest supporter.

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Yeah. Talk about your language you speak French English Spanish and German.

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I only studied German I did have some conversational German at some point I went to Germany and I could get by with the minimum and I also studied Japanese in the same. I did not pursue those any further. My dream is to eventually go back and study them because a I got the basics. And it was just fascinating to me. Anytime I hear somebody say something in another language I and what they're saying and at least get to say hello to them. It's always been a pattern of.

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How does having those experiences with those language help you in your current role as a principal of an immersion school.

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I think that they help me a lot in order to be a speaker of another language. The main thing is to be able to take risks in my kids see me taking a risk every day and I tell them I use them and I use myself as an example. I say to them that I did not learn English as a young kid like they are doing now. But I did it when I was older because I went to the university and that you know. So to me I want to model for them what language learning is about in what it does and how it opens your brain in your mind in your view of the world. And because I've had that experience again when I was a supervisor I we had the Arabic and Chinese programs and I traveled to China. I was able to learn how to say hello in Arabic and Chinese and I know the difference between people who like what Amharic sounds like verses Arabic and you know so when I have families that come to me and if I know which language and I know how to say hello at a minimum I greet them with that. But I also I also think that because my mind has become flexible my brain is sort of like flexible to language learning. If I have a family whose English skills are somewhat limited I work with them and tried to make meaning in and they appreciate that. And I think that for me as the principal of the school is also really important to convey that message to teachers and constantly reminding them that in our school everybody is the second language. So. And now presenting the idea that it's not just the ls that everybody you know we're working with the concepts of our other World Language Learners. That's who we are. All the kids are you know so that everybody understands that in teaching the students all of the pedagogical approaches that we should be using from language acquisition apply to all of the kids in the school. So

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When I went to school you basically didn't start language until high school. So when I came to Arlington I was surprised to see that kids are learning element or language at the elementary level. Why that change and why is it so important for kids still learning a language at a younger age.

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I mean I guess the driving force behind it is where research says you know in your brain your brain when you're young of course you respond you're absorbing everything and you can the possibility of developing the language at the native speaker level is much higher. The earlier you start learning the language. So for our students to begin to be exposed to another language that early age that's a great advantage because language learning is also as I said before is about making your brain go in a different direction out of the comfort zone and you need to take a risk and you need to negotiate meaning in there that is making a lot of connections in the young brain and that can apply and transferred to other subjects you know where you're having to force yourself to think a different way. And so really the push for language acquisition should be really at the pre-K level and on because Europe really targeting a prime window for learning a language makes complete sense with the brain especially the brain is a sponge.

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Yes. Carlos talk about your your rules over here 20 some years in education and how we have prepared you to be a principal.

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So one thing that I wanted to say is as a Marlena was describing someone who grows up learning two languages I could relate a lot to what she was saying because in my case my parents made a big financial effort of sending me to a what back in the 70s was calling bilingual school which is not really what is an immersion school nowadays but back in the day know we had one hour of English every day since I was in kindergarten. And that helped me a lot. Start to start making connections and to start viewing the world differently. Also you know as you learn other languages you also have a broader perspective of where the world is like around you. And back in the 70s to the there was this oil boom in Venezuela and a lot of people from all over the world started going to Venezuela to work in the oil industry. And so I remember back in elementary middle school and high school being surrounded by people who were students who were from all nationalities in the world. And so you know. Knowing another language was always a plus for many things. When you're in school you know if you if two people know a language that other people don't. Then of course you can communicate with each other without people knowing exactly what is happening. So we kind of could get away with some things. Not everything but then you know talking about the 20 years of experience as an educator. I when I graduated I saw some political instability that was happening back in Venezuela. I was not able to graduate in a timely manner when all of the schools were looking for teaching teachers or were filling up their teaching positions. So I basically graduated late very late in the summer. So when I was out there looking for a job the only thing that I was able to find my very first year of teaching was a kindergarten position. Was it hard. Oh my. It was the hardest year in my teaching career ever. Well of course because it was the first year. But at the same time it was because he was kindergarten you know for those who don't know what kindergarten teachers do. My hat's off to them. And

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And it's always been. I never went back to kindergarten. I love kindergarten teachers and I really supported them a lot. Now as an administrator but it is really a titanic task on a daily basis. So anyway after that I remember talking to my principal saying I would love to stay at this school but can you please

give me a higher grade. And so she did give me higher grade. She gave me a second grade and then I ended up teaching mostly every single grade in elementary. After that I moved here to the US and I taught in a middle school. And that was quite a difference in age and also attitude towards learning and towards being in school. You know middle school kids are learning how to be adults. But at the same time how to transition from being still kids. And then I also had the opportunity to work at the high school level. But then you know there was something always in me that said Do you really need to go back to elementary. I even did some teaching in community colleges in the evening and worked with adults. But again you know the joy whatever sparked me was part of joy for me was working with elementary students and holding you back. Yeah. So that's what kept me pulling it pulling me back to to elementary and so that's when I started at Claremont. And now I'm a principal of an elementary school and I'm very happy about that.

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And you know I was happy the fact that you know an administrator.

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Oh she is elated. So she had no idea that I was applying for this position and she was packing her suitcases and I hadn't told her anything about me applying interviewing and actually getting the job. But I did say to her I said Hey do you mind packing a couple of outfits like you know if we go to special events or something and so she dutifully did so in the day that I picked her up at the airport she said. So what are we going to do are we going to go somewhere special Anderson. Actually tomorrow we have a school board meeting and that's where I'm going to be sworn in as a as a I'm going to be appointed as a principal. And she was really really happy. She attended the the school board meeting. She didn't understand much but basically you know she was there and I was her interpreter that night she was basically asking me so those people and I said OK they are the school board members. And what is a school board.

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Well the school board doesn't. And who's a gentleman. Oh that's the superintendent. What does the superintendent do. Well he does this and this and that. And

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And so basically I was not only into agreeing interpreting but also explaining to her that the equivalence of how things work here in America versus how things work in Venezuela. And so she just had a lovely evening and she really loves the fact that I'm now a principal.

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So that's great. And you talked about the Randolph community over there. So what have you noticed throughout the community. How is it building with your transition.

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Yeah. The the Randolph community is a wonderful community. I haven't been welcomed and failed. I mean I've felt so welcomed since day one. I still remember the day that I went there with the superintendent to be introduced to the community and to teachers. And even though the school was basically a hard hat area because they were doing a lot of repairs over the summer a lot of people showed up and I was able to meet the PTA president many teachers and members of the community. Right then it was really fantastic. And since that moment on I've been having lots of conversations with the community with parents with teachers. People seemed to be very appreciative of the work that we do at Randolph in

Randolph. To me is a very unique place because we are we are a small school. We are a neighborhood school. But at the same time we're a school that is mostly 100 percent or almost a hundred percent a walkable school. We only have one bus and that is only for students with special needs.

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Yes I see only one video. Oh yeah. Exactly.

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Having come from from a big school where we had also a lot of buses you know having one bus is just a joy but also a joy to me is the fact that I see a lot of families walking every morning with their hands kissing them goodbye and then they themselves walking back to their houses or to their workplaces. Of course we also have car riders but basically everyone lives in the community. And so that makes you feel more part of it in the sense that hey you know you're from around here and we all love Randolph and the reason why we're here is because we like Randolph and we like the program. And so you know those are the things that I feel that I take with me every night. It's you know how wonderful it is to work with such a warm and fuzzy community.

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It's great when you talk about your experiences with key the key community taking over for Marjorie who'd been there for probably six months of school started 23 years.

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Years ago the school started way back here.

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Yeah. Talk about that transition and the community.

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You've been without your experiences so far just like Carlos's experience it's been incredibly welcoming. The of course taking over the leadership of the school after a principal has been there for so long. Those are big shoes to fill in my of course made such a significant impact down there on the school the community. And I know we thank her for all that she did. The community has been amazingly open and supportive and we have a PTA that is really engaged in the from day one. You know they've been helping me and offering support. We have incredibly giving parents the they really look after the well-being of everyone in so the PTA auction that is usually for as it happens in March. The planning began in the summer. I am always amazed at how committed the parents are giving up their time going you know finding people to donate goods or services for the auction the amount of time that they put in it. Considering that this is all volunteering in all the money that is that raised goes to the school everything goes back to the kids so that anyone who needs to get some support with them special programs that happen after school they get scholarship money. I am always you know they are very they inspire me. Right now we have a group of teachers from Poland who are visiting and we have families that just are given them room and board for the duration of the trip so that the teachers can have this opportunity because a you know it would be very expensive to do it on their own. In you know and we have parents on the Latino side also that are giving their time. They come to meetings at on Wednesdays. They have prepared their presentation that we did for the harvest in the dream that was completely their initiative. Beautiful. They are doing a lot for the school. So I really feel very fortunate to be there because the commitment of the parents not just to the program you know being a choice school everybody who comes

from different school areas to our school. They have made a commitment to the program and they have made a commitment to the school. So just incredibly supportive and I appreciate their help.

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What is the relationship you kids have for a number of years as with the Embassy of Spain. You talked about being a diplomat as a way to be diplomat talk about their relationship with the Embassy of Spain.

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Yes it's very positive and productive and it's very good for the civilians because they were part of the international Spanish Academy consortium. So part of that means that they provide us with Spanish assistance like a cultural ambassador that comes every year in their role is to come to the classroom to spend time in different classes supporting the language acquisition and they stay with the family again a key family that gives them room and board for a year in a talk about a given community. Then they basically adopt this place and then they form long lasting relationships they have families that keep talking about the Internet that they had way back when the kids were in elementary and they have kept you know relationship in and have visited with each other. So the IOC gives us that value in addition to providing us with some books and some trainings and it's an excellent way. If there is any type of special presentation if they bring a speaker you know they always give us some preferential seating but it's great to know that we have them the ambassador has been to the school. I know my dear he was awarded the a Catholic which is an incredibly you know an honor that is usually not bestowed on citizens that are not Spanish citizens but it really helps us alive and it gives us it gives us citizens the opportunity to participate in an exam that gives them called the daily and when they if they want to study at the high school level they would like to study in a European University in if they pass that exam that gives them an entry that door to that and so they get a certificate from the Spanish the Ministry of Education when the complete the 5th grade.

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So it's a great great thing that we have going on to talk about Randolph again. You mentioned that the school is an AP program or an exemplary project is International Baccalaureate. Did you have any previous experience with that before you came to Randolph off or is it something that you're learning as you as you go. I mean what is the program around.

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So no I did not. I mean I had heard about the Ivy program and when I started applying for Randolph I realized that Randolph was an Ivy AYP program primary years program school and has been a learning curve for me. I have been learning from day one how the program you know where the program is about how the program is run and how basically it is related to the social emotional learning and also how we are instilling all of the learner profiles in students from day one in every single grade level because the idea is that if we have those learning profiles in students by the time they get to middle school or high school and then continue with the program then they're gonna be able to use those skills and by those learner profiles I mean risk taker caring Oh inquisitive inquisitive. Because you are you are an Ivy parent. Yeah. So I have been so fortunate to have a very good Ivy coordinator who has been basically holding me by her hand by the hand with you know all of these new components of the Ivy program and every month a new learner profile and every month I see how during the ABC notice that we have once a week we develop the lessons based on how we can infuse all of those skills in students learning in math and reading and social studies in science. It has really been a positive experience for me.

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We're talking with Carlos Ramirez the principal of Randolph Elementary School and Marlana Perdomo the principal of key immersion. Talk about your visions for the future of your schools coming to establish programs been around. So this is a learning curve for you is your first year. What are your ultimate visions of your schools for the future.

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For me really the goal of the immersion program being able to ensure that the students develop the highest competencies and the highest proficiency levels in both languages.

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So for those who are acquiring English as her as a new language that I would really look at making sure that they are the progresses continues to be an umpire with the students who are English dominant and surpass that in them for all of the students acquiring Spanish is the second language ensuring that by the time they go into middle school that their language skills in all the means speaking reading listening writing and that they had the highest level possible so that once they get there they continue to advance in their language development so that by the time they get to high school they can participate in AP levels. I be do very well on the daily exams that I mentioned before or take AP Language in score of five so that they can get college credit. Colleges accept that and you know prepare them in such a way that it's not just fifth grade is the goal that you know at the elementary level we think about their trajectory and that we build them their skills in a very successful way their ability to interact with each other to the parents be aware of the opportunities that even at the elementary level you have to start preparing your kids for and taking advantage of opportunities that are going to situate a minute good on a really good path.

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Looking at post secondary education in my case the vision that I have for the future of Randolph is pretty similar to our in the sense that we are working really hard to make sure that our students not only achieve at the elementary level but also that they are able to become global citizens. But that's part of the Ivey program and they're able to use all of the skills that we're teaching them right now and I'm talking about the skills of the learner profiles but also I'm talking about you know reading skills writing skills math skills science skills everything that makes them be a wholesome individual so that they not only takes out to middle school and be ready for middle school but also to continue with that in high school and in the end you know so that they are really a productive member of society whether it is here in the United States or anywhere else in the world. Randolph is a very diverse community and I acknowledge the fact that maybe some of our students are going to be very productive citizens of the United States and are going to stay here and work here and some others are going to probably pursue careers some other in some other part of the world and they're going to have the skills that are going to allow them to succeed anywhere they decide to go.

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Do you guys miss being in the classroom. That's a good question.

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I do I do but I do make it a point to go in the classrooms a lot and I love reading to children. So I'm doing every Friday I go in in a class. I wish I could do the math and sometimes I've been able to do more but I make it a point to go and read with the kids and I love making sounds and voices and making gestures and they and they are excited and they received me very well they're very kind but I love doing I miss many

parts of it. I miss that report that you develop with that with a small group of kids and or a small group of kids. When you do a day as an administrator in that continuity that you know you see them grow. From day one and then until the end of the year and then you just sort of you know it's done and then a new year begins. There's many things I miss about teaching. I definitely love teaching. But as an administrator I get to see the whole picture. And like I say I get to choose my moments when I go in and interact with the kids.

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So there's an advantage in that I feel like as an administrator even though you're technically out of the classroom but you really are back in the classroom a lot.

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You know just like Marlena said I do enjoy being in classrooms whether it is that I am observing a student or I'm serving a teacher or I'm doing it walkthrough or I am simply visiting the classroom just popping in or that I'm reading to them. I also have this program called Reading with the principals the assistant principal and I take turns to visit different classrooms in the fall and also in the spring to read to them. We work in close collaboration with the librarian who picks and chooses some of the books that are the most popular for kids at every grade level and really the kids enjoy. I enjoy a lot being in the classroom reading aloud to them and also the other thing is that we sometimes when I feel like I'm not enough in the classroom that I bring the classroom to me and I can explain that to my assistant principal and I have started this program which is called Lunch Bunch with the principals and so we have had the opportunity to have lunch with fourth and fifth graders five or six at a time every week and so every Friday we have lunch with them and we intend to continue doing that until we have had lunch with every single one of them. So I think it gives us the opportunity to have that closer relationship with each and every one of them especially in fourth and fifth grade when they are able to articulate a little bit more about how they can make our school a better place and also that they feel that their voice is being heard and so do I miss the classroom do I not miss a classroom.

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I think that I love what I'm doing right now and I love the fact that I have that kind of constant connection and connection and face value with with students.

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One of the things I've been asking the principals as they went on is who you have on speed dial to call with questions. Would you do Marjorie on speed dial where you could pick up a caller and say Oh I did this I do.

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I do. I got some of the principal colleagues are my go to for things that are currently ongoing and then with anything related to the history of the school I contact Marjorie or Emily. The former assistant principal and I have group of principals is extremely helpful even without offering without asking the offer help and then say listen this is coming up and this is how it works because a number of things that are thrown at you at some point are you just can't manage. But I do believe that we have a very close group in the help that I've received is amazing. I've got a few that maybe four or five that I know I can just quickly text and then get an answer right away.

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Is Jessica a painful one of yours.

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Jessica I text all the time but I also of course have Cynthia Johnson who's the principal's principal and I also have you know basically everyone in the elementary principals group on my speed dial simply because they are also very welcoming and very supportive group. I also have my mentor who's Kim Graves.

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She is terrific and she has given me the opportunity to actually listen listen to me and say it's ok it's okay. And I could see him doing that.

00:37:40:17 - 00:38:17:01

Well I wanted to thank you both for taking the time to join us on the podcast and wish you all the best of luck in for the rest of the year in your new roles as principals your and your schools. Thank you for joining us. Thank you so much. Thanks for taking time to listen to the podcast. You can find us on our podcast or Google Play and of course you can find us wherever you get your your podcasts. If you have any questions or you want to hear a topic please email us at apsnews@apsva.us or send us a tweet @APSVirginia and we'll talk to you soon. Thank you.