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Annalies Corbin: [00:00:14] Welcome to Learning Unboxed, a conversation about teaching, learning, and the future of work. This is Annalies Corbin, Chief Goddess of the PAST Foundation and your host. We hear frequently that the global education system is broken. In fact, we spend billions of dollars trying to fix something that's actually not broken at all but rather irrelevant. It's obsolete. A hundred years ago it functioned fine. So, let's talk about how we reimagine, rethink, and redesign our educational system.

Annalies Corbin: [00:00:49] This is Annalies Corbin, your host of Learning Unboxed. And I am excited today to share with you more of our ongoing conversation about middle college, early college, early access programs into post-secondary that we've had the privilege to be able to see, to explore, and to think about around the country and other parts of the world.

Annalies Corbin: [00:01:13] And my guest today is a really innovative and wonderful leader in that space that I was so fortunate I have the opportunity not only to meet but to actually go see his program, see his school. And so, joining us today is Brian Sien, who is the current Principal of Clackamas Middle College, which is a fabulous school outside of Portland, Oregon. Brian comes to us with over 23 years of experience as an educator. He was a teacher. He's been a leader and innovator heavily involved in transformative education in a variety of ways throughout his experience both in traditional and in charter public schools.

Annalies Corbin: [00:01:59] And so, his passion is in working with students, teachers, and administrators, and state leaders, really, to provide seamless transitions from K12 education in to post-secondary for all stakeholders. And for those of you that listen on a regular basis, you will know that those topics are near and dear to me. So, Brian, thank you very much for joining us today.

Brian Sien: [00:02:23] Yeah thanks for having me. This is exciting to talk about education. Like I said, we need to really do this more often.

Annalies Corbin: [00:02:30] So, absolutely. And that's the entire purpose of Learning Unboxed is to really go out there into the world, find great examples of folks that are just quite frankly doing really amazing things. And for full transparency for our listeners, as I said, I was very fortunate to stumble across you and what's happening at the Clackamas Middle College last fall and some work. For those who've been listening to the other podcasts, we've been talking a lot about our colleagues and our friends up in Alaska. And it was actually bringing folks from Alaska Project down into the Lower 48, as they like to put it, that I found Ryan and the program at Clackamas Middle College. And in bringing

them down to sort of see what other folks in their region are doing inside of that middle college or early college acceleration space.

Annalies Corbin: [00:03:20] And I have to admit, Brian, I was blown away by your program. And I don't say that lightly for folks that know me. I've seen so many and crazy and amazing innovations in education around the world, but that's not something I see very often. And I have told many people since you and I first had that visit, if you want to see something really innovative, go see Brian and what's happening outside of Portland. So, very excited, again, to have you here. And I would love for you to, sort of, just give us some general overview of what Clackamas Middle College is because the reality of it is when we step back and think about acceleration programs, despite the labels that we often will put on things, at the end of the day, it boils down to how you, the user, and those who have created the programs really define them. So, what exactly is the Clackamas Middle College in your own words?

Brian Sien: [00:04:16] Well, Clackamas Middle College, I think, we're going into our 17th year of existence. And we started kind of as what a traditional, I guess, you could say in middle college was as we're on a college campus, and we were serving students that really weren't represented in the traditional K through 12 system. And then, as time kind of went on, we kind of started morphing into kind of the early college piece where we're like. "Well, we have these kids that we're really servicing well, and we're giving them experiences that they're not normally getting in the traditional system, and we're trying to give them access to the college piece as we were picking up steam, and starting to add more structure, and learning from our experience." We started to kind of say, "Hey, we can get these kids more college credits, and we can also get them their degree when they're with us."

Brian Sien: [00:05:07] So, we've kind of morphed from the traditional middle college to early college model. So, we're kind of a blend in both of those. And what we're hoping to do is get kids when they're ready at ninth grade for high school to build their skills and slowly transition up to full-time college student. So, by the time they graduate in four years, they're able to get -- hopefully, we're shooting for their college degree and high school diploma, or if they fall short of that, they're getting a significant amount of college credits and their high school diploma, so that when they leave us, they're feeling comfortable, they've gone through all the process, we've provided a lot of guidance and support into their next steps, so that they feel confident and comfortable with moving forward and saying, "Hey, I'm ready to go to the next step in post-secondary education." So, that's kind of the gist of our school and how we do things. And then, there's a lot of details in there on how we scaffold kids to get ready for college. But that's kind of a gist of kind of how it works.

Annalies Corbin: [00:06:04] And I think that that's one of the things that really appealed to me. There are very few strict definition middle colleges left around the country. The majority of them, like the Clackamas Program, that have been around for great length of time, have a tendency to morph and become closer to what we might, by definition, call an early college or some hybridization thereof. That's a fairly common thing that happened over time.

Annalies Corbin: [00:06:37] And at the end of the day, the reason that we see that that happens is to something that you already touched on, but I really want to dig in because one of the things that I love about the variation that your program represent is the recognition that for students to truly be successful in that 11th and 12th grade or a true college experience before they leave the K12 system requires that they have a level of readiness to be able to get there. And to, then, do that in a equitable equal opportunity approach means that we have to modify the way we think of our programming around readiness to get more kids to take advantage of that.

Annalies Corbin: [00:07:15] And so, that then moves that middle college or early college experience down into that 9-10 space. And in some cases, even down into middle school. So, we talk a little bit,

Brian, about the work that you do in the earlier pieces as it relates to student readiness for your programming. What does that look like for you guys?

Brian Sien: [00:07:36] Yeah, that's a great question. So, I think we wouldn't be able to do this if we weren't a charter school and unable to kind of approach education in a different way. And then, our partnership with our school district, North Clackamas School District, and then our community college, Clackamas Community College, has really grown into, kind of, for me, setting up the structure of what it can look like to get kids ready or college-ready for when they're juniors and seniors, and then when they leave us.

Brian Sien: [00:08:00] So, it's very complex problems as far as, okay, you just can't throw seniors on a college campus. So, we had to step backwards, like you said, and go to the earlier grades. And when we get kids, we're like, "Okay, let's kind of set up the structure where we really want to try to hit a lot of the college readiness skills that we can or, at least, create college readiness skills from our perspective. And one thing that we did was to get a foundation for what that would look like as we did some research into a lot of what David Conley did and into what makes a successful college student when they get to a university or a community college.

Brian Sien: [00:08:35] And then, he had four steps for that. One was cognitive strategies, one was content knowledge, one was learning skills and techniques, and what was the transition and the matriculation from a high school student to college. So, those four areas kind of give us a foundation of, okay, this is what we need to do to get our kids ready for that next step. And so, we started adding in the color a little bit to the picture into how it personally fits with us. And we started with our 9th grade, and we got kids into advisories based on their grade level.

Brian Sien: [00:09:06] And we really were able to take a model of the traditional model where there's a counselor with a high number of students to breaking it down into teachers working with kids and all the staff members working with kids in these advisories to really prepare them for this college-readiness skills outside of the academic classroom. Because we felt we were doing a good job in the classroom but outside of the classroom it was like, "Well, we can't rely on a counselor to meet the needs of all of these amounts of kids." So, we really got on board as a staff, and came together, and said, "Okay, what do we want to do?" and came up with some core values and beliefs, and really came up with a mission together.

Brian Sien: [00:09:42] And that mission really took hold into the culture of our school because when you're building a program to transition kids to college, a lot of times, the culture is fluid and it changes. And we wanted to make sure that it was really solid for all of our kids from 9 to 12, but especially for a 9th, and 10th, and 11th grade kids as we prepare them for the college readiness. So, we did that advisory. And then, we called the College Readiness Seminar that really worked on those key learning skills and techniques that a lot of people would attribute to those soft learning skills. And we really focused on, okay, what do those kids need at the next level? And so, we researched and talked to our kids that were actually starting to go to college and said, "What do you need that's going to make you successful that makes you successful at the college level?" And we backpedaled a little bit, and they told us, "Well, there's persistence, there's time management, and there's organization."

Brian Sien: [00:10:34] And so, we looked at those and created rubrics for our 9th and 10th graders, and 11th and 12th graders, and then we created a process for as kids are getting these skills, both academically in the classroom, and this key learning skills, and techniques, they're starting to show this readiness. And then, we created a process for transition that every term - and we're on the trimester system -we put a list of kids up through this deliberate process, through our College Readiness Seminar Class, of who is ready and who is not ready based on those specific rubrics. And so, we were able to pick the top 25 kids. And a lot of times, there could be 70 kids that were

nominated, but the top 25 that we felt best represented us and themselves as far as college ready, and then we started the transition to the next level. And that really definitely helped.

Brian Sien: [00:11:21] And the next level was something that's really interesting because we wanted to make sure that those kids who have those skills moved forward but that we kind of took a lot of pressure off of their shoulders by they didn't have to worry about scheduling, or they didn't have to worry about teachers, or they didn't have to worry about building their classrooms. We would set that up for them. And then, we really provided guidance and support for that transition. So, in a year's time, when they went through that program that they were ready to go to the next step, which is full-time college. And so, we created steps and scaffolding along the way just because of a necessity. And it's aimed to be really, really successful for us, and we've been trying to improve it ever since.

Annalies Corbin: [00:11:59] And, actually, that was one of the things that I was most impressed by and intrigued by at the same time because I've seen any number of, I guess, attempts is the right way to put this, at what you were talking about, but I've never seen what I would think of as an onboarding opportunity for students that was quite as scaffolded or as successful, I would say, as the piece that you have put in play, that transitional piece. And I loved the notion that as students become ready for that, they are nominated. Then, keeping in mind that every kid -- I'll be really, really clear with our listeners, every kid who is at Clackamas Middle College the expected and there's this anticipation that they are going to be successful in all aspects of the program that the school lives and breathes.

Annalies Corbin: [00:12:57] And so, there's no expectation that some kids are never going to quite make it, right? So, the culture itself, back to your point, really lends itself to seeing that student success, but then this scaffolding program, and I do want to dig into that a little bit if we could because I think that the folks listening are maybe really, really curious about how you do that. And when I had the chance to speak to several students, I heard over and over again from them as well that that was the thing that made the difference. When I said, "Why do you think you're being successful in your college classes?" they always came back to that transitional piece. So, could we dig in just a little bit, Brian, and give us some more details about how you had that set up?

Brian Sien: [00:13:38] Yeah. And that's great, great lead in. I think the big thing that we came together to realize is, "Okay, we can take what's working in traditional public education, and we can really be innovative and create a structure to allow this to happen. And that's really the first step is to set up that structure for movement from kids from one level to the other. And that takes a lot of work from behind the scenes. And, obviously, being a charter school and the partnership with our college and our district really helped allow us to do that and be autonomous to create that.

Brian Sien: [00:14:09] And then, we really came together in the inside of the building. We said, "Okay, we really want to create this culture and our mission," And we all got together - our students, staff, adults - to create a mission statement that just really hits on inclusiveness, innovation, challenging, and that really prepares students on a personal level for independent learning. And the independent learning is key for us because we want to make sure that we identified students being independent or being dependent. And so, through our rubrics and through our whole process, we really were able to focus on that.

Brian Sien: [00:14:43] And so, yeah, kids would be able to make that transition from high school when they showed that they were really grasping the concepts and the skills to really get set up for that next level. So, yeah, it kind of came about as being, okay, like I said, we can't just set kids up and let them go. We have to really provide that scaffolding. So, from back in the day, we really kind of came together and said, "This is really what we want to do." And so, everybody's on deck with really working with our kids, and collaborating, and working. So, our staff, there's a lot of credit in that as

well to be able to come together and really match our core values and beliefs with the mission and vision of what we want to do.

Brian Sien: [00:15:22] And so, yeah, students will plug away in their classes, and we're just going to be assessing them on what skills they have. And then, once they master those skills, then we start that transition into the college level. And we've developed it

with the college. And then, we had to add a little bit of more scaffolding every year that we were there to make it more successful for them. But all kids really push each other. And that's the most important thing is the high expectations that we have. And I'm a firm believer that if we do have those high expectations for everybody, everyone can meet it, but we just need to make sure the ones that might not be ready yet, we're providing the support for.

Brian Sien: [00:15:58] But the nature of the system, and what we created, and the culture that we created is, like you mentioned earlier, the kids push each other to get over that bar, and they really see this as, okay, this is something more that I can shoot for while I'm in high school. And it's kind of like that golden ring that everybody wants to get. And everybody is on the same level as far as that's what they want to do because they don't want to have their friends move up before them. So, it kind of creates this healthy level of competition. But at the same point time, the kids that don't make it in we're able to pull back and say, "Okay, these are the specific reasons why you didn't make it." And then, that involves self-assessment on these rubrics on the behalf of the kids, communication with their parents, communication with their advisors and all teachers to really try to help them get over that bar.

Brian Sien: [00:16:45] And so, it creates a really healthy competitive environment. And most of our kids are able to get up. And beyond that, because we're really trying to look at the ones that didn't make it up, and what are the next steps for them, rather than the ones that did. We're going to continue servicing them and providing support and guidance for them, obviously. But the ones that didn't, like, "How do we make sure that this is equitable for all kid, and we're able to provide the support for every kid to do that?" So, I think, the environment and the structure really leads to that competitiveness and that ability for everybody to strive for that.

Annalies Corbin: [00:17:16] And it's a real community atmosphere when you're there. And so, for folks listening, it's a small school. And you have kids who come in at many different levels of readiness when they enter your program, correct?

Brian Sien: [00:17:36] Yes. Oh, yeah, yeah. That's the thing is we have kids -- I mean, we like to have kids come to us when they're in 9th grade, but, oftentimes, there's kids that might transfer in. Because we are a public charter schools, so we have to accept kids when they come to us. So, they have various level of skill levels and experiences. And so, we try to plug them into the advisory, the grade level advisory that they're at, and really try to build from that.

Brian Sien: [00:17:58] And the big piece of that is just really making sure kids are aware of the whole process, and what it entails because I never came from a system like this, but I wish I could have had something like this to push me a little bit harder because I was just kind of going with the flow in the regular traditional education that hasn't changed much over the last hundred years or so. And it's really good, just a way to approach students because everybody comes at a different level, like you said. And so, they're going to move up at a different time and level based on what their needs are.

Brian Sien: [00:18:29] So, we focus on the individual themselves, but we also take into account where they're coming from and where they're at. And there's some kids that go through our system for three and a half years. And then, the last couple of terms, they're able to show that progress to get

a couple terms of college, which is fantastic. And they've grown a lot in that time to be able to make that step. So, yeah, they come at all different levels, but we're able to kind of work with them and meet them where they're at to try to really create that independent learner to move on to the next level.

Annalies Corbin: [00:18:59] Yeah. And those kids are really, really proud of themselves. And you could watch it stretched all across the board. And everything from talking to the kid who, for a whole host of reasons, was able to get access very early on in their experience, and so were earning many, many college credits, to the kid, like you said, who was only going to have a few under their belt by the time they finish. And when I was there, I got to talk to kids you know on all ends of that spectrum. And, universally, the kids that I spoke to, they all said the same thing that when it came time to take that first college, fully independent college course - and we're going to come back to that in a second - that they were confident to do so, and it may have been a little bit of fear around the edges, but there was no fear about actually taken the leap. And so, that was a really impressive thing to be able to see that the kids were confident, that they had been given all the skills that they needed in every opportunity to be successful.

Annalies Corbin: [00:20:00] But the other piece of it, and I think that there's really just to some of the culture of your school piece, is that university, the kids also told me that they felt like they could go to the faculty at any time if they were struggling and find people to help them because the faculty is very, very invested in those kids individually. And I think some of that has to do with the way you've structured that advisory and the way you've structured the interaction that your faculty broadly has with the kids. Now, it is a relatively small school. So, just for our listeners, what are the student and teacher ratios as it relates to the total numbers that you've got in the building and what's going on?

Brian Sien: [00:20:46] Yeah, we have 300 students total. And then, we have it broken up. Like I said, the scaffolding, the three types of programs are basically entry level programs. Those are college prep programs. And anybody that comes to us every year will start in that program. And that's basically a microcosm of any high school across the country of kids. You'll see your high-flyers, you'll see our kids that are in the middle, and you'll see your kids that are maybe one step from dropping out, and they want to try your program to see if it's working. And that's kind of how that kind of starts out.

Brian Sien: [00:21:16] So, you get a lot of different people right away coming into your program, but it's really interesting in how that really transcends itself into giving them opportunities that they may never had at a traditional school that they transfer into us. But, yeah, they'll come into us. And then, our advisors just really get to know them and have an emotional connection to them. And you can see that when we're talking about sending kids up, advisors feel like they are the one that can advocate for the student best. And that's kind of the setup. That's one of the goals of the advisors, to make sure every kid, as a person that knows them really well. And having 300 kids allows us to do that.

Brian Sien: [00:21:54] So, in our college prep program, we have about 150 kids in the beginning of the year in that program. So, roughly about half of our kids are going

through that process of working hard, learning about college readiness skills, meeting with advisors, meeting with teachers, really creating that sense of community. And then, throughout the year, they will transition to our next program, which isn't full-time, primetime ready for college, but is showing the academic skills that they're proficient enough or mastered the high school piece.

Brian Sien: [00:22:29] Now, we're ready to just kind of step onto the college piece because they're showing that they're starting to move into that proficiency there. And that's our Pathways to College Program that really, like I said, gives them an opportunity to learn in classes with each other. And the

small cohorts really help because they know each other to work, and collaborate, and take college courses, core college courses from college instructors together for three terms.

Brian Sien: [00:22:54] And then, once they show that they're ready for that, then they will move into our last program, which is our college extended options, which is full-time college. And then, they have an advisor and a counselor assigned to them to meet with them regularly a couple of times, two to three times every term, specifically about their plan, and where they're going, and what courses they're taking, and making sure that they understand the whole registration process and all of the logistics that go behind getting a kid from high school to college.

Brian Sien: [00:23:22] So, it's kind of a scaffold piece, which is really nice. And we have about, like I said, 150 in our college prep program. And our transition program, our Pathways to College Program, we have about 75 kids. And then the rest of the kids, from 50 to 100 every year, we have in our college extended options program. So, that's kind of how it's broken up. And I think our smallness and our size really allows us to connect with kids and make it a personalized journey for them, and also for our staff as well. I think that's important.

Annalies Corbin: [00:23:53] Yeah. And so, I think that as other folks out in the world contemplate what their hearing you talk about, my guess is one of the things that they're going to be curious about and also want to roll up their sleeves maybe and dig in a little bit is the pathways to college piece. And, again, one of the things that I found really intriguing about the way you had that structured was the way you developed the curriculum for that piece of your program. So, could we dig in just a little bit and talk about that? So, you jointly created that experience with your post-secondary partner. Can we talk a little bit about what the nuts and bolts of that looked like? Because I think that that's one of those places where the kids really saw success because you were very deliberate about the way you design those sets of courses that those students go through while they're that transition space.

Brian Sien: [00:24:45] Yeah. And it's been quite the evolution over the years, but I think we have it fine-tuned enough where it's really, really successful for the kids. But we started with, like I said, when we were like a traditional middle school or middle college model, we started with that, "Okay, we need to give kids access to college. How do we do that?" And we started with some classes that weren't as academic to set up for kids. How many terms should they be taking these before they take courses just kind of on their own by themselves? And so, that cohort model is a huge piece of what needed to happen when kids moved to that next level.

Brian Sien: [00:25:21] If they're moving by themselves, it's not going to be as successful as if they're in a group together, and we can focus on them. So, the big piece was, "Okay, we're going to move our kids together to the college campus. Solely, our kids, they're going to take courses by college instructors." And so, that took some time to figure out what that would look like with our college. And then, they were also going to take -- it evolved into, "Let's get them entry level college courses because they're showing, academically, they're ready. Their college readiness skills look good. Let's go ahead and try to introduce them into what they need for their associates degree or their transfer degree.

Brian Sien: [00:25:56] And so we thought, "Well, the term one can look like they need a public speaking, a Comm 100 class." And so, we got an instructor for that new high school kids, but also taught the college level and college quality courses as well. And then, we're like, "Well, obviously, writing is a big component." And we worked on writing in our college prep program very heavily, and integrated with all of our teachers and advisors, and we even worked with it in our advisory class. So, we felt that when we set kids up, we're like, "Well, they're ready for the Writing 121, English composition course, which is a basic course in college or university."

Brian Sien: [00:26:28] And then, we started to fill in the gaps of their schedule with high school classes that they may need. If they needed a math class, they could take a math class back in our building. If they needed requirements, you take action. The kids get in the community and provide service to the community, or a senior internship that would be plugged into those.

Brian Sien: [00:26:48] But then, the last piece that I think really came together is to follow these kids through that transition program. We needed someone assigned to them. And, fortunately, we're able to provide resources and see the importance of having counselors, and guidance, and support for kids outside of the classroom. So, we have three counselors for 300 kids, which is a pretty good ratio when you look at high schools across the country. And this person that was responsible for these kids would be able to follow them for three terms and, also, provide a class to two classes a week to really help them with that transition.

Brian Sien: [00:27:25] So, they would go over anything from, "Okay, how do you speak to your college instructor?" to "What does it look like to get over to the college campus? How do you integrate with other college adult students?" And to the simple things of, "Okay, we're going to work on time management. We're going to continue working on persistence. We're going to continue working on organization." And our counselor, she provided a great buffer to the to the college instructor, so that they would all be on the same team, in the same page when it comes to really helping these kids advance from one term to the next.

Brian Sien: [00:27:57] And then, that would be one term, which ends up being around 12 to 14 weeks of a trimester. Then, they would move to the next term if they were successful, and take a foreign language course, or take a Writing 122, a continuation from the writing course. And then, she would still be plugged in to them every year, every term, every week to make sure that the kids are getting their needs met socially and academically. And then, they would transfer to a third term with some other courses. There would be a continuation of their foreign language course history to a one lectured style format for kids to get used to. And then, she would be in touch with them again weekly, biweekly. And even individually, she meets with them individually to make sure that not only as a group, are they moving along, but individually. And some kids hit some tough times, and we provide support for them. And then, if it continues, we bring them back in building, and we build them up again, and then we start moving them on again.

Brian Sien: [00:28:49] So, it's kind of a fluid process that's specific to individual kids, but I think that counselor, the partnership with the college, and just kind of the vision of what do these kids need on that pathways to college, let's give them those classes and the support they need to make sure that that year is successful, so that when they get done with that year, they're ready to step foot on the main campus, take courses with any instructor by themselves, or if they're taking it with a student from CMC grade, whatever, they're moving towards their degree or towards their future and what they want to go on to after high school. So, that's kind of the nuts and bolts of how it was set up. And it's taken, like I said, the evolution over time to figure out what the important specifics of that program were. But like I said, setting up the structure is like the biggest piece of it all.

Annalies Corbin: [00:29:37] Yeah, it's the heaviest lift, but it's also that foundational piece that's the most meaningful at the end of the day long term. So, a point of clarification because I'm sure folks are wondering. So, some of those pathways to college courses are full independent collegiate credit, but are some of them, many folks would assume were also going to be a dual credit opportunity. Is that the case?

Brian Sien: [00:30:00] Yes, all of them are dual credit, for sure, for us. And that's the nice thing about that. They can get high school or college credit for those courses taught by a community college instructor. And in that program, specifically, like I said, they're all moving together. So, they all in on

each other, and work with each other, and really form this wonderful relationship and collaboration because they're together for a year to get through that. So, that's really nice. And in the three terms in that program, the kids can get up to 27 college credits, which is really nice. And it's about, I think, 3.8, probably about five high school credits when they're in that term. So, the dual college high school credit really definitely helps us with that.

Annalies Corbin: [00:30:42] And the other thing that I thought was really wonderful about the way you've structured this piece of the partnership and the fact that you crafted this transitional piece, the pathways to college piece, really hand in hand with your college partner. So, it wasn't just that the high school goes to college and says, "Hey, we think we need these courses. And oh, by the way, we want a collegiate person to instruct them." You crafted them right out of the gate, as I understand it together. right? So, you had an equal investment in the long-term success of the students but, also, the program itself because of the way you very specifically tailored your partnership, correct?

Brian Sien: [00:31:21] Yes, it was definitely a trial by fire in the early days with both our district and the college because we were doing something that has never been done. And they were like, "What are you doing?" And we're like, "Well, we want to try this." And in time, they let us do it, but we weren't quite there. And so, we have some successes and some failures that they kind of saw. And then, they came to the table and said, "Well, these are kids too, so we're all invested."

Brian Sien: [00:31:46] And then, throughout time, we've developed this wonderful relationship where we are meeting every month to talk about our kids, and then the programs, and setting up the structure, and the courses, and the instructors. And so, we've done that together, but like I said, it's been through trial through fire to make sure we've been through the ups and the downs with our district and our college. And I think we've come out the other end, like you said, to really be a strong partner with them but, also, collaborative towards something that we're all investing in, which is our kids to be successful at that next level.

Annalies Corbin: [00:32:17] Right. And just also, I think, because, again, I can see their trailing list of questions that folks are frantically jotting down as they're listening. And so, I want to anticipate a few of those. But one of the ones that I know that folks are curious about is, so, Clackamas Middle College, as you indicated, is a public charter - let me clarify - and it works in partnership with the college, but the kids who come to your school come from more than just the Clackamas School District. Is that correct?

Brian Sien: [00:32:53] Correct. We have kids. We're right outside the Portland proper area. So, we get kids from all over the Portland metro area. And I would say, about 65% of our kids come from within our school district boundaries, but about 35% come from outside, which is the whole Portland metro area. I mean, we have kids coming from various miles and from all over the place. So, that's kind of cool because we're able to open it up to other schools with our Charter Law in Oregon. It allows us to accept any kid from wherever as long as we're providing services, and we're meeting that standard.

Annalies Corbin: [00:33:27] Right. And one of the other questions I know that folks always have - and because I was there, I saw with my own eyes, I can definitely verify - oftentimes, what happens to these programs, as you well know, is they become very elitist in the sense that they tend to attract the highest performing students. And so, therefore, they become these very, very high performing programs, and they'd really don't meet the needs of a broad diverse population. That is not the case at Clackamas College. So, when you go there, you step in the doors, you see an incredible array of diversity across the ways that one might measure that.

Annalies Corbin: [00:34:04] And so, it is a really, really diverse group of students, of faculty, of population. It's right in the crux of things in the community. And so, how is it that you have been able to maintain that, so that it doesn't become one thing or another? The what, does it matter? But you've done a really good job historically of ensuring that this program has very broad appeal and access to many different kinds of students. How do you do that?

Brian Sien: [00:34:37] I mean, that's the big thing. I mean, for us, as a school, I feel like you're only as good as the kids that you're letting in. And for us, it wouldn't be successful if we weren't opening our doors to everybody and really trying to make it work for everybody. And that's a huge thing. And from all over too. I mean, that's a real -- if our system is going to stand the test of time, it's going to be able to take any type of kid and provide services and support to.

Brian Sien: [00:35:00] So, it has been a challenge because, yeah, you get your kids that are on track, that are high-flyers, that really want to get that college piece. But even they need support and guidance in that transition. And so, we make sure that we're supporting their needs. But the other students that may have a disability, or a language issue, or maybe they may have some behavioral issues that have carried in from another school, we really try to break that down and create a culture where they feel that we really, really know them.

Brian Sien: [00:35:28] We do so much work on really setting school culture and affirming identity and equity. And we were fortunate enough to do a survey this year where we got our results back. And this is just our college prep program. We didn't even do our college transition programs or college programs. We had 84% of our kids, in the 84th percentile, our school culture was ranked. And that was ranked nationally, and it also compared to our school district. And that was something we spent a lot of time building. If we're going to have every type of kid come in here, we have to be sure that we affirm our identity, and connect with every one of those kids, and really provide the support, so that they feel successful, and they can actually make that move because they're showing college readiness at some level.

Brian Sien: [00:36:09] And with that comes the creation of another program within our Pathways to College Program. We have students that may not be going to transfer to a university. And so, we want to make sure that we're meeting their needs. And so, we created a Career Technical Program within our Pathways Program, and then a transfer track where kids that we're really solely interested in the university track or post-secondary education at that level, we wanted to make sure we met their needs but, also, the courses within the Career Technical Program were also filtering those out as well. And kids are able to, from their freshman year or when they transfer to us, really dive into the tool. We use a whole code for them to really match up their interests, their skills, their aspirations with career fields, and with jobs, and with the university programs that actually meet those needs. And so, that we're able to see before they go into our Pathways Programs, and they're showing readiness into that, we're able to see what program best fits their personality and their skill set.

Brian Sien: [00:37:12] And so, our Career Technical Program has really helped to meet the needs of our whole student body. And we would offer foundation courses such as Comm 100, basic communications, Writing 101, technical writing, a Psychology 101, that human relations that all kids need for a degree anyways. And then, we have a counselor assigned to them as well to make sure that we're really getting on track with that.

Brian Sien: [00:37:34] And the fun part of that program to really keep a hook in their mouth is the elective courses. We have a manufacturing course that's just called Adventures and Technology where they do a little automotive, a little welding. We have a horticulture career exploration. We have a wild land fire program, and we have digital media communications. And we're consistently working with new types of electives with our college to make sure that we're trying to meet the needs of all of

our kids. And so, that's the path that some of our kids go into. And it's proven successful. And to really answer that question, can you serve all kids? And the answer is yes, we can. We just need to make sure that we're ahead, we're innovative, and we're really trying to meet the needs of our kids.

Annalies Corbin: [00:38:12] And the other thing is that you have to be a community that's willing to get it wrong as often as you strive to get it right and to recognize that when you don't quite have it, that you're going to tweak it, you're going to modify it in the best interests of kids. And you guys have clearly spent a lot of time the last 17 years doing that over and over again without fear. And so, to be able to do that means you have to have the right people involved. And so, what I see and get asked all the time when I am doing this work in schools is administrators, community folks asking over and over again, how do you find the right teachers? How do you find the right faculty and staff to do the things you aspire to do.? So, Brian, how do you hire? That's a fundamental thing people always want to know. How do you do it?

Brian Sien: [00:39:01] Well, I think being a charter school helps because you have candidates that are really interested. And the Learning Unboxed, you're thinking outside the box type of cliché that you want to save for that, but you really want people that are interested and ready for the challenge of changing, which is scary to a lot of people, and being innovative, and stepping up to something they've never. Like I said, I haven't experienced a charter school, or a middle college, or a transition like this ever, but I was willing to step outside and create something that I felt was going to better meet the needs of the kids that come to us.

Brian Sien: [00:39:37] And I think our teachers, and our staff, and support staff, and secretaries, and counselors, they're all on board with that. And if it's too overwhelming, we're doing it together, or if we're changing too fast, or we're doing it together. And we have a lot of diagnostics that we use to allow me to see, "Okay, are we getting a little extended here? Do we need to pull back? Do we need to really dive into this for longer?" And so, I kind of sit back, and read the gauges, and just make sure that everything's balancing out. But it's definitely hiring those people that are going to meet the needs of our kids and are up for the challenge. And they make the choice to be there, and they're not just placed here from a school district. And that's been a huge key for us. And it's very successful.

Annalies Corbin: [00:40:19] And so, then, as you think about the next iteration, what's the next big piece for Clackamas Middle College? In terms of the things that you're either aspiring to or the shifts that you want to make, what's next for you?

Brian Sien: [00:40:37] Yeah, I think, for me, it's to continually improve every year. I mean, we try to make decisions based on the data that we get from our kids. And so, that's a huge thing. And I think, creating a data-based decision informed school is really important because you're not reacting to the old school of a lot of schools do implementation or planning and implementation, and they go back to years over, and they go plan. And there's no evaluation and there's no predicting of what's going to be ahead. And so, I think that's a big piece is to really master that. And we're getting better, and our teachers are a part of it, and our staff's part of it, and we're all on board to really look at the state, and say, "Okay. this isn't working," or "Our mission, we said we're doing this. Are we doing it? And this doesn't show." And we're willing to improve and change that.

Brian Sien: [00:41:24] And then, outside of CMC, other than getting better, and improving, and better meet the needs of our kids, is to try to expand it into a middle school program because if we can teach these concepts at an earlier age, and see them, and transition them into high school, I feel like in the four-year model of graduating kids, I think we can get those kids, what they need a little bit more than we could if we just start them in ninth grade. So, lots of big thing.

Brian Sien: [00:41:51] And then, also, if there is a possibility to disseminate our information and replicate our schools around the state, that would be a cool thing to do. So, there's a lot of things in the future, but I think it's just kind of solidifying and perfecting what we're doing. And that's always going to be the case where we're always going to be improving, but it allows us that opportunity to step back and say, "Okay, how can we make this better? How can we have a middle school that feeds into us?"

Brian Sien: [00:42:16] Because we're measured, unfortunately, by what everybody else measure with a four-year graduation rate. And we're doing that high school and college at the same time. And we were offering -- for some of our kids that may have transferred to us a little bit later or that may have struggled at one point in time, we wanted to offer them a fifth-year option to continue with that. But when the state's measuring your success by four years, we had to dial it back. And so, we're getting a lot of our kids a ton of college credit, and the majority of them are getting their associate's degree, but it's become harder and harder because we're measured by a system that's a little bit different. So, that's kind of frustrating.

Brian Sien: [00:42:54] But when I look at the last 10 years that I've been keeping track of this data, as far as the college and once we felt like we had the system down, we've graduated, I think, in 10 years, 770 kids. And 300 of them have graduated with an associate's degree.

Annalies Corbin: [00:43:08] Wow, congratulations! Wow!

Brian Sien: [00:43:09] Yeah. And every one of them get college credit. And there's a lot of kids that are right -- we had 183 of them are right to 60 to 89 college credits. So, if we

had a feeder system, then we can pretty much ensure that all kids are going to get either a certificate, and go out in the workforce, and be successful, or get their degree, and go on to post-secondary education, and feel like they can do this because they've been doing it for the last four years.

Annalies Corbin: [00:43:33] Well, I certainly applaud that. And from our conversation that you and I have had before, we certainly advocate for that. And what we see over and over again is very successful early college, middle college programs, to your point, you have to build that feeder. And so, you have to change the way you think about readiness. And changing readiness means you have to push down, right?

Brian Sien: [00:43:56] Yeah.

Annalies Corbin: [00:43:57] And then, back to your point, because, unfortunately, better or worse, we all live inside of a system that requires that we play to it rather than adapt to the actual needs we're living in today. It's just part of the reality that we have to cope with. So, to your point, it's harder to take the fifth-year option to make it fly, but we always have the option to move it back down. And so, we certainly encourage that frequently over and over again. Every chance I get, I tell folks, "Go down, go down, middle school, middle school, middle school." So, I applaud you for that.

Annalies Corbin: [00:44:28] So, very quickly, as we wrap up here, I'm getting the signal from the production team. So, what might your parting law be? I like to end every one of these conversations with folks that are scratching their heads saying, "Hey, what we just heard Brian talking about is awesome. I really want to do it." What's the one saying that when you started this you wish somebody had told you of something that you knew that would make all the difference in the world that you want folks who are contemplating going down the road that you have traveled that they should know?

Brian Sien: [00:45:02] Yeah. I would say whether you're in a traditional system or a newer, unique, innovative system like ours, which is a little bit different, I think you've got to definitely set the bar high and make sure that you're going to meet that. But, also, do things to meet the needs of your kids. If you need to change a little bit, if you need a

tweak within a traditional system, you can do a program like ours. And so, don't allow, just because things have been done a certain way, to keep doing it the same way. Look at what your kids need, what the society needs, and really feel free to step out and start doing that because that's a big piece of it.

Brian Sien: [00:45:39] And I think, a lot of people are just kind of stick with the status quo because it's there, and that's the only way to do it. And I think if you really want to improve and do things differently that you should be able to step out. And hopefully, there's going to be more and more programs like this that people can feel comfortable doing that because they're seen models around the country, or around the state, or whatever it may be.

Brian Sien: [00:45:59] So, I think it's just dare to step out to meet the needs of your kids. And always, always, always improve. And I think the core of that comes down to affirming everyone's identity, making sure that you're really meeting the needs of not only your students but all stakeholders, your staff. And coming together and sharing a common mission and vision based on core values and beliefs because that's going to set the tone for everything. So, once you set the structure of it up, then all the work and the culture of it up, then it will start falling in place. So, that's probably a big answer to what you're asking, but there's a few nuggets to take away from and really try to push yourself as an educator or a leader in this work.

Annalies Corbin: [00:46:41] Yeah. And I truly, truly appreciate that. And, actually, I want the T-shirt. So, that was the quote, "Dare to step out." I love that. So, I want to tell you thank you so very much both for your time, and your insights, and, quite frankly, for what you do every day for our kids. And so, thank you for that, and keep up the good work. And I'll be really curious to see how many folks pick up the phone, or give you a call, or reach out by email because they heard about the amazing things that you're doing. So, again, I reiterate to anybody listening, if you want to see somebody amazing, make a trip out to the Pacific Northwest and go see Brian. So, thank you again.

Brian Sien: [00:47:19] Yeah. I want to thank you. Like I said, we need to have more forums like this to really share our models because once we can see that things can be

done differently and successful, I think that's going to catch on, and it'll be contagious. And there's a lot of great models and programs out there in the world, and in the nation, and in each individual state. And I think we need to see those models and really rise to the occasion rather than continue with some of the same stuff we've been doing that may or may not work in the past.

Annalies Corbin: [00:47:45] Absolutely.

Brian Sien: [00:47:45] So, thank you for the opportunity, for sure.

Annalies Corbin: [00:47:47] You're very welcome. Thanks for joining us. We appreciate it.

Annalies Corbin: [00:47:52] Thank you for joining us for Learning Unboxed, a conversation about teaching, learning, and the future of work. I want to thank my guest and encourage you all to be part of the conversation. Meet me on social media, @annaliescorbin. And join me next time as we stand up, step back, and lean in to reimagine education.

