



## Paolo DeMaria

**Paolo DeMaria:** [00:00:00] Why don't we bring people together and create a strategic plan that sort of sets a roadmap for that continuing journey to excellence?

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:00:09] 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:** [00:00:45] So, welcome to today's episode of Learning Unboxed. Oh, we are super excited, as always, because we have a wonderful guest today to talk with us about sort of the bigger picture of the way the education machine works in many, many places. And so, joining us today is Paolo DeMaria, who is Ohio's Superintendent of Public Instruction. So, welcome to the program, Paolo.

**Paolo DeMaria:** [00:01:08] Annalies, it's great to be with you.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:01:10] Excellent. And to set some context for all of our listeners who come to us from all over, a little bit about Paolo, colleagues know Paolo DeMaria as a passionate leader, and a tireless worker, and a respectful listener, and a man with a great sense of humor. And I can attest to that as well. All of which are qualities that he uses on a regular basis as he supports Ohio's 3,600 public schools and 1.7 million students in the State of Ohio.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:01:37] And I can attest that he is an enthusiastic cheerleader, an energetic advocate for Ohio's public schools. And so, Paolo, with all of that in mind, and just to sort some additional context for our listeners, I've known Paolo for a number of years now with PAST Foundation being based in Ohio as well. We bump up with Pablo in the work with all the public school staff on a frequent and regular basis. And so, for our listeners who might not know, let's start with, what does a superintendent of public instruction do from the sort of big umbrella sort of approach?

**Paolo DeMaria:** [00:02:12] Yeah. And by and large, what I do is I lead the state entity that's really responsible for ensuring state policy is carried out. And a lot of people think, well, oh, the State Department must be just slightly below the federal agency with all this power and all this authority, and I actually look at it just the other way around, right?

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:02:34] Right.

**Paolo DeMaria:** [00:02:34] The real power in authority lies in the school building and at the school district level. And our job is really to try to create the conditions to make sure that those entities are in a position to be successful. And sure, the state might prescribe certain standards for what we want students to know and be able to do. We might prescribe certain standards for how we measure the success of the system and use that to create a feedback loop to say, okay, what do we see?

**Paolo DeMaria:** [00:02:58] How does that inform what state policy should be like? How does it inform supports for schools and districts? But ultimately, the great work happens there. And I won't say we're on the periphery, but we are in sort of service to the rest of the system, creating the conditions for success to take place in the interests of every student receiving an outstanding education.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:03:18] And you've been very, very heavily involved in education and public education, and quite frankly, in public policy for much of your career in a variety of different roles over that career as well, but you have been sort of sitting in this seat now for a number of years.

**Paolo DeMaria:** [00:03:38] Yeah, five years.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:03:40] For multiple, at this point, governors, right? And so, it is a role that often transcends politics in many ways, in many places, not always, not every state operates that way. But certainly, Ohio has the tradition of recognizing that this position is one that is a position of stability that's highly necessary. So, share with us just a little bit about-

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:04:06] So, in addition to the aspirational, and then the day-to-day work that you're doing, you're also heading up initiatives, you're helping local communities, all these superintendents in schools and school districts around the state. Think about what the future might look like. So, give us a sense, for example, I know over your tenure as state superintendent, there are several bodies of work that you're super proud of that have had lasting impact on the state. Let's talk about a couple of those pieces.

**Paolo DeMaria:** [00:04:35] Well, let's start by talking about the state strategic plan. So, when I came into the agency, I found an organization full of amazing people, lots of great ideas, a really pretty strong policy context, but I found us to be a lot more reactive rather than proactive. And I also found us to be very much more, perhaps, compliance-oriented than service-oriented. So, one of the things I contemplated early on, working with the State Board of Education and others, was to say, why don't we bring people together and create a strategic plan that sort of sets a roadmap for that continuing journey to excellence?

**Paolo DeMaria:** [00:05:08] And so, we brought people together. We spent over a year. We had focus groups. We went out into the community. We had regional meetings at 13 places across the state, brought in a number of experts and convened little subcommittees. We emerged with a document called Each Child Our Future. And it lays out a whole—there's an infographic that shows the whole child right at the center, and then all the contributing factors.

**Paolo DeMaria:** [00:05:32] We've got a vision statement, a goal statement, and 10 sets of strategies. And one of the things that that plan really did was it helped to do exactly what I hoped. And that was shift us into more of a proactive. What are the things we should be doing to drive the system toward excellence? And how do we, as an agency, pivot to being more service and support-oriented rather than necessarily compliance-oriented?

**Paolo DeMaria:** [00:05:56] That doesn't mean we did away with the client's parts. There are just two things we have to pay attention to, both under federal law, under state law. But we can do it in a way that's actually, how

do we help you as a school district to become excellent and to move on that road? And it really embraces this idea, there's no one size fits all. Every district is unique. Every building is unique.

**Paolo DeMaria:** [00:06:17] Every child is unique. Hence, the name, Each Child Our Future. And that if we collectively focus on meeting the needs of each child, that begins to help us improve as a system, and then also improve for each individual with the goal being each individual reaching success. So, that strategic plan then sort of form the foundation, because those 10 strategies then gave us the entree to say, okay, what kind of initiatives will we develop in each of those areas?

**Paolo DeMaria:** [00:06:49] One of the strip strategies was around literacy. Great. At the time, the federal government was putting some grants out among the states. And so, we applied for one of those grants, received a huge infusion of federal resources, and we put together a statewide literacy plan, and then started making grants to districts and schools that wanted to pivot their own approaches to literacy. And we did a lot of great work, and we applied for a second federal grant, and done even more work.

**Paolo DeMaria:** [00:07:15] We're seeing a lot of energy and momentum around how we improve the way we teach literacy, something so essential to the education process, and doing that across the state. And the other nine strategies, also everything from transforming high schools into much more powerful tools, places for transitioning to, and helping a student to find his or her success and what they wanted to do in the future to advancing the cause of early childhood education, to quality teachers, quality principals, excellent curricular materials and instructional practices, and on, and on, and on.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:07:52] Yeah. And I remember this process, because I participated, like so many of my colleagues did. And it was a wonderful endeavor in part, and one of the things I did appreciate about the way that you approached this was there was a very deep reaching in to stakeholders. And I use that sort of phrasing very, very deliberately in terms of not just gaining and gaining input, but the actual ground level of how then would the deployment of these strategies actually in practicality work.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:08:26] And ironically enough, for better or worse, you got to test a lot of this, when the big, bad bug came and showed up in the world, and we're still sort of in the grips of it. But I'm really curious, Paolo, how did all that fabulous foundational work that you did, how did that come to play in a moment of crisis that challenged so, so many? Because my standing back and sort of watching the work that you and the department did in the midst of trying to navigate the pandemic, and what it was going to mean for everybody, you know, from the outside looking in, it really appears that you reached in and leaned back on that work fairly heavily, and that it did, in fact, play a role in the decision making as you move forward.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:09:13] So, in my mind, that says, hey, that foundational strategy work that was here, we leaned on it, and I suspect we also learned a lot about sort of where its gaps were. And we'll talk about that part in a minute, but share with us just a little bit sort of the more reflective component about that work. And then, this thing comes about, because you're not unique, not just in the US, but around the world, as leaders having to suddenly think about things differently.

**Paolo DeMaria:** [00:09:40] Yeah. So, going back to the structure, the plan, one of the core principles, and it's in a bright blue box in the center of the infographic is this notion of partnerships. When we went in to do the strategic plan, we knew that if we all work together, we will have a more powerful impact, because people will feel invested in the plan. And so, many times, the strategic plan sort of sits on the shelf, but ours, and I was concerned that maybe that would happen with this one, too, but so many people were invested in both its creation and in its success that it really brought lots of people together.

**Paolo DeMaria:** [00:10:12] Now, what was interesting about the pandemic is it almost sort of drove us back into reactive mode, because suddenly, rather than being proactive, we had to sort of say, okay, there's this thing now that's disrupting everything, what do we need to do in terms of public policy frameworks? What do we need to do in terms of permissions, and compliance allowances, and so forth and so on, to accommodate that?

**Paolo DeMaria:** [00:10:35] But in addition to that work, our message loud and clear to everyone, and what people sort of migrated to naturally was, let's reach out to our partners. So, you saw many schools and districts, and partners defined in a very broad sense. I saw so many more teachers communicating with other teachers about how to use technology, how to leverage, or this isn't working for me, or I see that you're doing that, and it's really working, how can you help me?

**Paolo DeMaria:** [00:11:00] District to district superintendents talking to each other about the conditions they face, but then also, and in some ways, more robustly, engaging with local partners, whether that was the foundation community, the social services community, the advocacy community, other child caring organizations, the health care community, the mental health community, and so many strong partnerships that either existed and were amplified or were newly created. And no prior period was the relationship between local health departments and schools stronger than it has been over the last 18 months, because that was a necessary thing that had to take place for those entities to kind of oversee their respective missions in their communities.

**Paolo DeMaria:** [00:11:41] So, you're exactly right that the way we got through, and the other thing about partnerships is it really gives us some comfort and some support from an emotional and a mental perspective. We need to have that support that comes from mutual work towards a common goal in helping our kids to be successful, and safe, and well-fed, and had their health care needs tended to. That's what brought us together and really allowed so many, many communities in Ohio deal with the pandemic in a very successful way.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:12:16] Yeah, and they did. And the other thing that I certainly appreciated about it, in hindsight, and we're still in the midst of it, but we've come through an awful lot, right? Part of that hindsight component of all of that is recognizing the value in seeing that our communities are so individual. And we all know that, we live that every day, right? We talk about it. We had this opportunity sort of in a different way to see it in real time. So, it was living out right before us all, right?

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:12:44] Because community on the east side of the state is going to react and deal with the situation very different than a community in the northern portion of the state, and so on and so forth. And we did see that play out in real time. So, one of things I'm really curious about sort of from your role and within the department is, how does dealing with something that is so different for everybody, how do you wrangle that?

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:13:09] Because that was not an easy lift, Paolo. I mean, no question whatsoever, because honestly, it was so different across the entire state. What was the premise that you used to sort of operate in that space to ensure that all the things that needed to get done as best we could do them with what we knew at the time was able to be implemented and deployed effectively? How do you do that?

**Paolo DeMaria:** [00:13:32] So, I think there are really two factors at play. One was all the long time that we developed a strategic plan, and even prior to that, one of my key attitudes has been there's no one size fits all. Ohio's a beautiful patchwork quilt of just like you said, you've got urban, you've got suburban, you've got rural agricultural, you've got Appalachia, and you've got a host of variety of different settings, and that's okay.

**Paolo DeMaria:** [00:13:57] And every one of them has to sort of approach the educational undertaking in a way that fits their own context, their own student body, their own community values, and so forth and so on. So, if you start with that assumption and use that to guide you as you do the work, then that's a good starting point. The second key aspect is one of trust. You have to trust that both leaders, and teachers, and staffs working in a cohesive manner, and working with their boards and their communities, they're going to make good choices that meet the needs of their community.

**Paolo DeMaria:** [00:14:30] Now, I will be the first to admit that, sometimes, in local communities, there wasn't always agreement about what those right choices were. But I think it was okay to allow those communities, and frankly, every community to go through those debates and those struggles to arrive at a place where they felt like this is what's going to work for our students and also recognizing that there are choices to be made.

**Paolo DeMaria:** [00:14:55] And so, if a student was at home with an older adult that was immunocompromised or something, we understood and all districts understood that other alternative options had to be pursued. So, you saw a lot of remote learning. You saw a lot of sharing of ideas of how to do that, all the while that many, many schools, especially in some of our less populated areas and in rural communities, where back in school, pretty much from the very start of the 2020-2021 school year without much disruption. And so, every district handled things a little bit differently.

**Paolo DeMaria:** [00:15:31] And our goal really wasn't to try to tell anybody what to do as much as it was to help people understand what their options were, what approaches might be valid, and then let them decide for themselves while we created the policy context that allowed for that variability and maybe even a little more variability than we're actually used to in the regular course. So, it's that notion of trust and that notion of not trying to sort of say, we're just going to impose something that's going to fit everybody, that I think allowed us to have, by and large, a relatively smooth 2021 school year.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:16:10] Yeah, as best as one could in the midst of a pandemic. Absolutely. And not every state took that approach. You didn't say it out loud, but I can, we work in multiple states. And some states, it really was a very top down, you will all do sort of approach. In other states, it was extremely hands off with zero guidance and people were wandering in the woods. In Ohio, you sort of, and your team took a different approach that was that sort of care and guided sort of opportunity, which I appreciate that very much.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:16:42] I want to, recognizing that, yes, the pandemic was the thing that happened, it had lots of impact, we all know that, we don't need to continue that piece of debate, and we're still in it as we get ready to start the new school year, but I do want to shift gears a little bit, because one of the ancillaries that's going to come from the experience that we've all collectively had is tied to innovation.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:17:02] And the reason I want to have this piece of the conversation is because Ohio has invested, and I don't necessarily mean that from a dollar standpoint, but has invested time, energy, and thought, and a lot of leadership around fostering and making innovation in education space not only okay, but the thing that we want to champion, right? And you, in particular, have done a lot of work in this space.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:17:30] And so, I want to talk a little bit about the opportunity for innovation, not just sort of the standard sort of course that was part of strategic plan around innovation, but also the things that we've learned from the pandemic and how that then you believe translates to the opportunity for innovation in schools or in education. So, what are your thoughts about that?

**Paolo DeMaria:** [00:17:52] Well, I mean, I am a big advocate for innovation. And I think what happened is we have been talking about using technology in education for years, and years, and years. And I've often said to

audiences that this microscopic virus did more to expose educators to how to use technology, both well and not well, than any other policy, or incentive program, or investment that we've ever made.

**Paolo DeMaria:** [00:18:19] I remember some of the state's earliest investment in Schoolnet and other programs to put technology in the classroom. We spent millions and millions of dollars. And all over the state and the country, education systems have been investing. This little virus did more to actually hold people in, and say, okay, now, you have to understand more. Now, you may not like it, and it may not work as seamlessly as you'd like, especially if you're just beginning to use it and think about how this works, but we had a huge learning experience around technology.

**Paolo DeMaria:** [00:18:50] And I think that opened a lot of people's eyes to exactly the word you used to this notion of innovation. Because while, generally, online learning got painted in a relatively poor light in the media, educators actually saw it in a much more nuanced way. And they saw that there were, in fact, a number of students that actually benefited from it, that actually operated well in that setting.

**Paolo DeMaria:** [00:19:16] And so, those educators are starting to think about, okay, I'm going to build that in. And part of that means, it really drove home this message of, a classroom, pick your number, is it 19? Is it 22? Is it 25 students? It's really a collective of different personalized learning experiences. And the best teachers are going to be able to figure out, how can I make an engaging, and enriching, and a strong learning environment for each one of them in maybe a different way?

**Paolo DeMaria:** [00:19:45] How do I allow for more student self-directedness? How do I create an engaging learning environment that really makes that student want to work? Maybe I'm doing more project-based learning. Maybe I'm doing more STEM approaches in my classroom. Maybe I'm doing things that speak to a child's aspirations. Maybe I'm infusing more work-based learning opportunities or out-of-school learning opportunities.

**Paolo DeMaria:** [00:20:09] I think this unleashing of the idea of different than what we used to do, especially for many, many people who are sort of just used to, I get to school, this is my classroom, this is how they do, now, thinking about, okay, I can do things differently, and each student could have an even more powerful learning experience. And so, I think the climate is really right.

**Paolo DeMaria:** [00:20:33] And some of those communication infrastructures, those teacher-to-teacher superintendents, the superintendent, new partnerships, new relationships that emerge, I think, create the conditions where that innovation can really grow and prosper, but it has to also start with, there's a dispositional aspect to it, right? You have to be willing to say, you know what, I'm going to try something different.

**Paolo DeMaria:** [00:20:56] And the thing I love about educators is that that notion is built into the DNA that most educators that I know, that idea of, different is okay if it's going to work. I'm always looking for ways to improve what happens in my classroom, improve the outcomes for my students, I'm open to that. Now, I may be a little cautious, because if I don't have the time to really work it out, or if I don't have the support from a coach maybe or another teacher that's doing it, or if I don't really have the confidence that it's going to make a difference, then maybe I'm a little hesitant.

**Paolo DeMaria:** [00:21:27] And that's where great leadership and great school culture enter into the equation, because it's the leadership and the culture combined with the willingness to take some risks, but also work through the successes and the failures that come with that risk that really result in that climate that fosters

innovation and can really show that innovation really can make a difference, and set you on a new trajectory, and build its own momentum once you get going.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:21:51] Yeah, absolutely. And I agree with that 100%. One of the things that I had to chuckle, you needed to chuckle many of the days, because we just need it. Otherwise, we crawl under a rock and cry, right? So, one of one of the chuckles that I had over the years of working with a variety of schools, and school settings, and individual teachers, and I will remember early in my career of working with schools in front of this innovation and transformative space a conversation I had with a teacher, and I can't remember, middle school, high school teacher.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:22:24] There was actually here in Central Ohio, one of our schools, and the teacher was talking about the struggle with communication and with technology, back to your point. And this is a teacher who had not utilized a lot of technology. And when you boil down, the reality is this lack of experience, confidence, and a little bit of fear of that thing might know more than I do, and what do I do with that? Right?

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:22:47] But the other piece of it is just not being in the habit of relying on and utilizing technology. And this story came to play, because we discovered, as we're trying to onboard a teacher into using a new technology, that she had never opened her email, ever. As long as she had had her school email, she had never opened it, because she was afraid of it.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:23:07] And one of the things that was really intriguing and the reason I chuckled is because, suddenly, not only does everybody have to open their email, but then they had to learn all these new things really, really, really quickly. And although to your point, it might be a little stressful, there might be some hesitance, you're hoping for all the components to get in.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:23:25] At the end of the day, though, we did collectively see, even our most reticent, suddenly roll up their sleeves and dig in, because the moment provided that. So, I use all of that sort of bit of story to sort of ask the question, when we think about the work that the state has done and the investment that has been made, there's been numerous throughout the pandemic, and as we think about the innovation space moving forward, where's that next sort of sweet spot?

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:23:57] And I don't mean to hold you to it, but I'm just pie in the sky here, because I think there's a lot of conversation that's happening across many, many, many states around where and how do we make the next set of strategic investments as it relates to education, and I don't just mean mean money, obviously, to bring us to a new experience, that new vision of education that you really sort of lead with, quite frankly, Paolo, here, so that we don't slide back? How do we do that?

**Paolo DeMaria:** [00:24:26] Well, again, I think part of it starts with having a vision and also recognizing that that vision for greatness goes to each child. That's why I keep coming back to, and I'm not exactly sure the process that we used to arrive at the title for the strategic plan, but I think about it every day, is that notion of each child. At some point, the educational system started out actually very individualized, became more industrialized, right?

**Paolo DeMaria:** [00:24:55] And now, we're getting back to, what is it going to take to help each student get on that path for success? So, first, there's a recognition that that's our obligation. And this really dovetails with the equity agenda. So many times, people think about the equity agenda, and they try to silo it into different identities and different—but it's really when you draw it down to its very essence, it's about, every student has a different mix of identities.

**Paolo DeMaria:** [00:25:21] And we have to sort of embrace that and also make sure our belief is such that every student can succeed. You might have an IEP, you might be in a low-income household, you might be in a foster care setting, you might have asthma or diabetes, that doesn't make really a difference to the ultimate goals. There are successful people with all of those circumstances and our obligation is to help each child succeed to the point of their capability.

**Paolo DeMaria:** [00:25:54] And we should never say no. I don't think Suzy can handle this or I don't think Jimmy's going to be able to manage that, because in 99.99 out of 100, kids will always exceed our expectations. I don't think a child can use a laptop like that. Sure, they can. I don't think this child is going to be able to do this new reading program. Of course, they can. And time and time again, it's been proven that students are hungry for challenging opportunities and they will rise to the occasion if given the supports that they need.

**Paolo DeMaria:** [00:26:28] So, I think to your point, it starts with that realization, and then an exploration and this infusion of personalized learning approaches, mastery learning approaches, not being satisfied and not being—I always use the example of, who thought it was a good idea that if a student gets a D in Algebra 1, that we should just put them in algebra 2, right? I mean, there's no point.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:26:55] That's crazy. Yes.

**Paolo DeMaria:** [00:26:58] Or, that we passed a student who failed fifth grade or just barely got a D in fifth grade reading, and we put them in sixth grade, right? There's no logic to that. And we have the capability, without robbing opportunity from other students, to help ensure that each student continues to grow, and learn, and gets the attention they need. Because if we are sure when a student has a successful experience, they're more excited about learning, they're more engaged about learning, and they create their own momentum, rather than being put in a place where we know they're not necessarily going to succeed, and that creates its own challenges, and yet our system is stuck in many respects.

**Paolo DeMaria:** [00:27:42] And this is the hard part, because you went to school and your parents went to school. And this idea of grade levels, it's all ingrained in our society. The school calendar is ingrained in our society. And great, ABCD mastery. I don't know what mastery is. I know what ABCD is. And if you think about it, it's such, in some ways, a silly concept, because we really want everybody to master, I want everybody to get an A, and yet people sometimes revolt against, well, everybody getting an A, that can't be right. So, we have to break through some of those paradigms. And we can interweave them. There are ways to do that so that people still understand what's happening in their child's classroom without feeling like, oh, my gosh, if you're abandoning grade levels or grading, what does that mean?

**Paolo DeMaria:** [00:28:28] Because we've seen places work through those realities, but the point is, if we want students to succeed and each child to succeed at some level, then we have to commit ourselves to personalization, customization, and a mastery basis that really reflects and embraces the differences that students bring, the different paths they might choose, and their own aspirations, and inspirations, and desires, because ultimately, that recipe of recognition, and cultivating student's desires, and then making an engaging learning environment will ultimately lead towards that vision of each child being successful.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:29:08] Absolutely. Without question. And we all want to see us get there, right? So, it's definitely speaking a language we absolutely appreciate at PAST. As we sort of think about wrapping up our conversation, you have announced that you are retiring. And so, passing the baton to someone else. And so, I would really love the opportunities to sort of close our conversation today with sort of asking you, thinking about that moment where you step back and somebody else has to sort of step into the process that you've

laid the groundwork for, where do you see, you're having that conversation with that next individual, say, here are the things that you want to be, not aware of or even mindful of.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:29:56] But from your own aspirational work, the career that you've led, when you think about the potential that the education of Ohio has, what is that thing out there that's sort of a golden orb almost if you sort of think about, if we could, that maybe we should? What would that thing be, or maybe there are multiples, just sort of recognizing that as you step away, what is your message back to those that are slogging along here?

**Paolo DeMaria:** [00:30:27] Well, first of all, let's not call it slogging along, because it's a joyful pursuit, which is, at various points in my career and choices about what areas, what fields I could go into, and I chose education because of the amazing people that work each and every day in this joyful effort of shaping our future, right? It's a very creative endeavor, because we are taking these young people, and building in them, and allowing them to acquire the knowledge and skills that are going to make our future. These are our future, our leaders, our entrepreneurs, our innovators, our businesspeople, our safety forces, on, and on, and on, and on.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:31:08] And these kids are amazing.

**Paolo DeMaria:** [00:31:10] They are. So, one thing is never forget that. Never forget the joy that we should bring to this work and that it ought to be joyful for students, too. That's why this whole idea of student engagement, so many times, high schools and transforming high schools, I think, is something that we're going to see a lot more, because people are beginning to understand that there are a lot of students who are engaged, that they're going to have a kind of lockstep around this plan that somebody else has come up with, and I'm going to college, I'm not really sure how it's going to all fit together.

**Paolo DeMaria:** [00:31:38] But we really have to take a step back and say, who are you? What do you want? What are your passions? And how do we make this interesting, so math has meaning, and literacy has meaning, and literature has meaning, and science has meaning to you in what you want to do with your life? It's a perfect time to do that. So, this is my long-winded way of saying, what I really hope for is a continued commitment and a culture of improvement, and not just at an individual level, but at a systemic level, always looking for things that will allow us to be better at what we do, and help more and more students to be successful.

**Paolo DeMaria:** [00:32:13] And some of that will come down to great leadership skills. Some of it will come down to the culture. I love thinking about the school as kind of an organism, as a singular entity, where all the pieces and parts have to work together, but that means you have to have a shared language and a shared vision, and the ability to talk to each other, look at data, look at what you're doing, and whether it's working or not, and feeding back and refining what you're doing or rethinking what you're doing when you see that it's not really making a difference.

**Paolo DeMaria:** [00:32:41] And as your student body changes, the way you address the needs of that student body and what you're doing also changes with each class, or with each decade, or what have you. So, the sense of a real culture of improvement, a culture of feedback, a culture of excellence if we commit ourselves that we can get there, because the reality is we can find schools and districts that do that each and every day today, and we know that more and more could do the same thing if they structure themselves and commit themselves to being in that sort of improvement mode and nurture the systems that allow them to excel. I think we've got a great opportunity, because we've got this huge investment of federal resources.

**Paolo DeMaria:** [00:33:25] We have a new state funding system that I'm really excited about. We've got continuous amount of research that shows, I always tell people when I say, we really need to research what works, I say, look, we know what works, challenge is not in the what works. It's in the implementation and getting the will to actually do what works, which means we're closer and closer to actually doing more and more of it. And the more sharing we can do and the more organizations like yours can help promote what great practice looks like, that is what will continue us on a road to excellence I have no doubt that we can make.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:33:59] Yeah, I completely agree with you. And thank you very much. I think that is just a wonderful way to wrap the conversation in the sense that I love the fact that you led with the school and our education culture. It's a living, breathing thing, and it can't stay static. And we have to recognize that it is, in fact, a living, breathing thing, And it changes over time. And that's just a wonderful thing. So, Paolo, I want to not only thank you for making time today to have this conversation with us, but I also want to thank you very much for your service to the state.

**Paolo DeMaria:** [00:34:36] It's my pleasure.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:34:36] I think that sometimes, people take it for granted, but when we have individuals that are willing to step into the shoes, because it's a tough walk, it's a joyful one in many ways, but it's not easy. And so, I thank you for being willing to lead and for the conversation today. And good luck with what's next.

**Paolo DeMaria:** [00:34:57] Well, I thank everything that the PAST Foundation does for students, and for learning, and for innovation. It's so important. And I love the fact that we're partners. And like so many partners across the state, it's the collaboration that makes us stronger, makes us better, and allows us to go farther. So, thanks for all you do, Annalies, as well.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:35:15] Oh, you're very welcome. It is certainly our pleasure. We enjoy it very much, so thank you.

**Paolo DeMaria:** [00:35:20] Thanks for having me.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:35:23] Thank you for joining us for Learning Unboxed, a conversation about teaching, learning, and the future of work. I want to thank my guests 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.