



121. Bringing Education Outdoors with Jessa Goldner

Jessa Goldner: [00:00:00] It is okay for you to feel a little like uncomfortable, a little nervous about it, your students will feel that same way, and being able to feed off of that, and them seeing your authenticity about it, I think, will be what leads to your success.

Annalies Corbin: [00:00:24] 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: [00:00:59] So, today's episode of Learning Unboxed, we have a very special guest with us today, we're going to be talking with Jessa Goldner, who is part of the PAST Foundation student experience team. And what I'm super excited about is that I have been watching for at least the last six months or so as Jessa has been thinking about and doing all the design work around an environmental science program specifically geared towards elementary students. And she's been doing this work at KIPP Columbus, which is one of our area local schools that has an amazing outdoor space. And so, welcome, Jessa.

Jessa Goldner: [00:01:40] Hello. Happy to be here.

Annalies Corbin: [00:01:42] Thanks so much. So, let's start with the most high level, Jessa, recognizing that we have listeners that come to this program from all over the world, from a variety of different settings, and backgrounds, and experiences. So, first and foremost, let's set the stage for folks who might not be familiar with KIPP in particular. So, what the heck is this thing called KIPP as a school within our sort of ecosystem of schools locally?

Jessa Goldner: [00:02:09] Yeah. So, KIPP is a giant campus. It has every grade from actually like before preschool all the way through 12th grade. And within that has all different buildings. It is a public charter school, so you go through an application process, but then once you get in, you're in for the rest of your schooling. And we are working out of a building that is called their Battelle Environmental Center, and that is kind of in the middle of the campus, and it's a really great place for all of the different grades to come and learn about the environment. Yeah, we just get to work with all the kids, and you were talking about the one that we're doing specifically for elementary school students, so that is for a rising first to fourth grade.

Annalies Corbin: [00:03:00] Right. And before we get into the details of the program, so as Jessa said, so KIPP is a public charter that's within the City of Columbus, Columbus City Schools, and it is also within Franklin County in the State of Ohio. Not all states across the US for our international listeners allow charters,

but Ohio is a school that does. But again, this is a public school experience. But this is a unique KIPP campus in the entire KIPP ecosystem, which they're KIPP schools stretched in multiple states across the nation. What makes this KIPP so unique?

Jessa Goldner: [00:03:37] It is on 123-ish acres, I believe, is what it is, campus. And so, yeah, the buildings take up a chunk of that, but then everything else is land that is accessible to the students, where a lot of inner city schools, they don't have that access to outdoors, although you can do great outdoor education even if you're looking at the side of a building, it is great to have access to trees, and ponds, and all of that that KIPP campus does actually have.

Annalies Corbin: [00:04:09] And so, that was one of the reasons that KIPP partnered with PAST Foundation is because they wanted to tap into our ability to design great STEM and STEAM programs that can be utilized, but more importantly then, that PAST Foundation tapped into bringing just full on, because your particular background and passion is in environmental education and everything that has to do with getting kids out into nature.

Annalies Corbin: [00:04:38] So, let's start pretty high level. So, what was the primary intent or goals, I guess, if you will, for you? We're coming off a pandemic, which everybody is well aware of. And so, despite that, you actually did get to, in the last year, do some work out at KIPP, both in-person and some virtual work. So, you had a pretty good sense of sort of what the potential was of this location.

Annalies Corbin: [00:05:03] So, talk to us a little bit about when you were thinking about designing programming, specifically to run this summer, and then we'll get into the work that you're going to be doing in the coming year here in just a minute, what are you thinking about as it relates to making sure that you're doing really, really great program content design and development for elementary kiddos in science education, when full disclosure, again, for our international listeners, in the United States, we don't test in most states science in elementary school or certainly not in the earliest grades levels, yet we know foundationally and fundamentally that science and curiosity are absolutely keys for student success. So, how do you wrestle with this sort of quandary when you're thinking about what you design?

Jessa Goldner: [00:05:50] Yeah. So, getting to go out there, where you were speaking about, I got to go and do an afterschool program, very, very low amount of kids, and those were actually different groups of grades as well, so I got to do the elementary up to early middle school grades. And from that, I was able to see that like they had gone outside into this space that KIPP has, but they hadn't really explored it. So, they have gone out there, gone on walks, and that could be with their classroom or with another afterschool program, for example.

Jessa Goldner: [00:06:25] But they hadn't really looked at a tree up close or looked at what was inside of the pond. And though we weren't able to do, to like go into too much detail with the afterschool program, because it was only an hourlong, I was able to see that they were curious about those things, because when we would go outside, they would ask those questions like, what is this? Why is this, this way? And I also had the privilege of being there at the late winter going into spring, and so got to see how the campus itself transformed, became like this very vivid place of life.

Jessa Goldner: [00:07:04] And that sparked so much curiosity in myself that led to kind of the programming that I wanted. I also am really passionate about mindfulness and how we have all of this research on mindfulness practices and how good they are. We have all this research about outdoor education, how good it is, but we don't have much of combining the two. And I'm just like, why is there this disconnect between the two?

Jessa Goldner: [00:07:34] And then, going back to the elementary school, where they don't have the science, but they have that mindfulness that is now embedded into classrooms. And so, kind of piggybacking on that and using that in the outdoors to be almost like the thing that opens the door for them. So, they know they have some of these practices of, if I need a second, like I'm getting angry, if a kid is feeling angry, they know that they need to take a second away, because in the classroom, we have that habit, but how can we do that in the outdoors and using that as well?

Annalies Corbin: [00:08:08] So, before we get into the nuts and bolts of the actual content you created, because I do want to talk about that, I am really curious, because one of the things that, certainly, I have seen in my years of being involved in this work, and certainly, my travels all around the globe, looking at and thinking about education in a variety of different places, it is not uncommon. It is not uncommon, especially in urban areas, you ask other cities as well, this is a common thing, I see this in lots of places, urban kids, oftentimes, aren't very comfortable in the outdoors, much less, to your point, have spent as much time exploring it.

Annalies Corbin: [00:08:45] So, oftentimes, there's a fair amount of trepidation. There's this fear factor, that sort of unknown that, oh, my gosh, it's fine for me to look at the environment on my television, or on an iPad screen, or whatnot, but to actually go out there and be part of it while the bugs to land on me, the frogs to hop across my toes, to get dirty, to get in the mud, that's not necessarily something that a lot of urban kids are comfortable with. So, how do you wrestle with that component as you're thinking about immersing kiddos in something that, for some, could be wickedly uncomfortable?

Jessa Goldner: [00:09:25] So, definitely, you start out slow, but then you're also observing the students outside and seeing their comfortability level. I also do this thing at the beginning of my classes, where I have this little mind pie chart and it has little pieces of pie cut out of the circle, and one has a very comfortable, comfortable, not so comfortable, not comfortable at all. And they take a piece of nature like a rock or a stick, and they put it into that piece of the pie right off the beginning, before we even go outside.

Jessa Goldner: [00:09:59] And then, at the end of the week, we come back to that and see where we are. And I encourage whenever, there's always people that are very comfortable actually, or at least think that they are very comfortable, and I always encourage them, I say, if you placed your object in that very comfortable spot, be mindful of your fellow friends, and either help them out, show them that something isn't actually as scary as it is, or also see their boundaries, and don't try and push them too far, though when we go outside, it never failed.

Jessa Goldner: [00:10:34] There was always kids that wanted to roll down the hill, so they aren't scared of the grass. And then we would go, and there's maybe say there's a group of 10 of us and we find a little frog. So, maybe there's one or two people that are afraid of the frog, but there's always at least one kid that isn't scared of the frog, and puts it in their hand, and then seeing a fellow student have it in their hand and nothing bad happened to it, it encourages every other one of them.

Jessa Goldner: [00:11:02] And then, that one that was scared puts it in their hand, and they just light up, and that just is so amazing to see like something that I grew up doing, and like I have a really great picture of myself. We scooped a big old bullfrog out of our pool, and I'm there holding it like in my hands, and was never afraid of that stuff. But to know that some kids have never gotten that, they've never gotten to put their feet into the mud on the side of a pond, and it's just those little—it doesn't have to be something so grand all the time.

Jessa Goldner: [00:11:39] It can be something just like that. And you can see how each little experience gets them more comfortable. Yeah, a bug and a bee flying by your face isn't so comfortable. I have a fear of

spiders, but whenever I'm around the kids, I'm like, it's okay, and I have to take that into myself, my internal of like, it's okay, it's just a spider, it won't hurt us, because I do know that it won't hurt us, but I still have this fear for some reason.

Annalies Corbin: [00:12:08] So, you like the kids to sort of see you as an active learner with them.

Jessa Goldner: [00:12:11] Yes.

Annalies Corbin: [00:12:11] Yeah, that's a really key component.

Jessa Goldner: [00:12:13] And it's also when they find something, even if it's something that you've seen. So, we saw so many baby frogs this summer, and every time, they were so excited, and you also have to be so excited. Every time, you have to like solidify that that is something to be excited about. Every time.

Annalies Corbin: [00:12:33] Surely.

Jessa Goldner: [00:12:33] Yes.

Annalies Corbin: [00:12:33] Alright. So, let's get into some of the nuts and bolts about the actual programming you did. So, talk us through a couple of the activity elements. So, you know something that you like the most, and we will make sure that for any business interested, we will put some of the program elements, we'll make them available online, so you can download them. And anybody would be able to reach out to you, obviously, and ask you questions about, how can I do this or what would it look like? But share with us a couple of the activities and why you made the decisions that you did around, I'm going to do this as opposed to something else over here.

Jessa Goldner: [00:13:08] One of the very like most simple ones, we got little paint chips, just like from Walmart, and we're going to nature walk and the kids have to find that color in nature.

Annalies Corbin: [00:13:21] So, in other words, the paint strips, like the strip of green colors, or blues, or whatever, right?

Jessa Goldner: [00:13:27] Yeah. And that's something you don't spend any money on it, and you just go out there. And at first, I was like, oh, the little kids, they're going to lose interest. They kept going back. I ran out of colors honestly of them doing it. And when they would come, and they'd be like, oh, like this one looks like it, or they're like, oh, this one's blue, so I'm going to make it the sky. Like, I want to challenge you to see if you can find something else that is blue.

Jessa Goldner: [00:13:55] And so, this activity is making them better observers. So, when we have the green, for example, there is so much green out at KIPP campus, very fortunately, but I wanted them to not just pick, I handed them the thing, they look down the grass, oh, there's green, but look closer. And as we went further into our walk, there were people like finding bugs that had different colors, finding flowers or like the middle part of the flower. And definitely, in those little, little kids, completely like blew past my expectations.

Annalies Corbin: [00:14:30] So, you're really tapping into see, think, wonder, right?

Jessa Goldner: [00:14:34] Yeah.

Annalies Corbin: [00:14:34] You're really, really utilizing that instructional strategy is a way to get these kids to be better observers. And as better observers, then what can you do with them now from an activity standpoint? So, you've taught them to observe? So, what do you, as an instructor, think about what's next for them?

Jessa Goldner: [00:14:51] So, once they're better observers, then they are better communicators. And so then, you can go deeper into each activity. So, we did an activity, where they had to find macro invertebrates that were in the stream. And then, from those macro invertebrates, they had to compare them to, we had a list, we had a little picture, and they had to like match them to what was on that list, so what they saw that was underneath their rock, for example.

Jessa Goldner: [00:15:27] And again, like all of them were really, really engaged with that. Yeah, at the highest level, yeah, it's just kind of matching up pictures, but we've got to go a little bit further into that and talk about water quality, for example, and see how, oh, like these macro invertebrates, they have green, meaning that they're only really found in really high-quality water. So, what does that mean?

Jessa Goldner: [00:15:51] And then, from there, they had to do some, yeah, inferences of that. So, that was a really good activity as well. And then, kind of also going off of that was one where I wasn't sure we had a life in the forest week and I really wanted to do tree identification. That's not something that I am so like an expert at by any means, but I wanted to do something like high level, but I knew that the Department of Forestry was coming in, and so I kind of wanted to do it after they came in to see if they did any programming with us.

Jessa Goldner: [00:16:26] And they actually did a really great programming that had identifying leafs, and they had also a key, and we kind of just tried it out to see if they would be good at it. And again, they were really great at it, and they didn't just do the identification, but they write about it, and they saw that, oh, this is a simple leaf, so I need to know where I can find that in this identification key. This is a compound leaf, where is that in here?

Annalies Corbin: [00:16:51] So, your little first and second graders were able to do this between simple and compound leaves, and waxed poetically, I have no doubt, at the end of all of this.

Jessa Goldner: [00:17:01] Yeah, those are the ones that really stood out to me. But they also loved making arts and crafts, which was a lot of fun, utilizing nature into our arts and crafts, and again, observing it and seeing it in a different way. That was another really big thing I wanted to put into them.

Annalies Corbin: [00:17:19] And as I recall, one of the things that you did as you thought about and structured all of this is you really thought about the KIPP campus as a series of biomes, of connected biomes, which again, biomes is something we study, but we often wait until middle or high school to really, really dig into what that means. And so, we don't always see expression of biome as something that you're doing with our smallest sort of activities in our sort of school setting. So, you talked about sort of the walk of life in the forest, and just share with our listeners, what were the other biomes? How did you think about this?

Jessa Goldner: [00:17:55] So, that first week was environmental curiosity. So, getting them curious about it, starting those observation skills. That was that first week. The second week was life in the water. And so, there, we got to look both the pond that we are very fortunate to have there, and then also Alum Creek. And then, the third week was life in the sky. So, talking about aviation birds and all of that stuff. And then, life in the forest was that last one, where we talked about more mammals, and yeah, like plants.

Annalies Corbin: [00:18:30] Trees and all that sort of stuff were rolled into that. So, I assume that as you were working on all of this and living with the kiddos, actually engaged in doing this, there were some surprises

along the way, right? So, share with us. I always love to ask that question, because we can be the best planners ever, and the reality of it is, the minute we implement with our kids, kids surprise us, and I know you have some surprises, so share a surprise or two with our listeners.

Jessa Goldner: [00:18:59] Of course. Well, just like the overall surprise of planning too much, I was doing that, but it just solidified that it's good to plan a lot, because you will go through things quicker sometimes than you intended, but then also, there are things that will take a lot longer, or you will see that they are enjoying it more. Like for example, we got to dissect owl pellets, and I thought, oh, these are my kids, they're going to be done in the little—they took two hours to dissect it, and they were engaged the whole time. So, yeah, planning a lot of activities because you never know when you're going to have to pull something out of your back pocket. So, being good at that.

Annalies Corbin: [00:19:46] And I think one of the other things that I loved about that, and owl pellet is a perfect example, right? Because one of the things that, and elementary teachers, I would argue, universally are better at problem and project-based, even though they may not use those sorts of words themselves. They think of it as inquiry. They also think about the fact that they're doing a fair amount of integrating of topics along the way, because it's a single teacher in a classroom teaching all the stuff, right?

Annalies Corbin: [00:20:11] So, elementary teachers get to wear sort of that universal, I'm a fully inclusive instructor any way by design, but I think one of the other value propositions here is despite the fact that elementary teachers, by their very nature and their training, are really adaptive, that environmental school settings, I don't mean the environment outside, I meant, truly, the environment, that is your structured or formal school setting, oftentimes still squashes the just go with the flow, let's live in the moment of these students being curious and wanting to dig a little bit deeper.

Annalies Corbin: [00:20:51] And the reality is that the program that you utilized this summer, versions of that will likely be implemented this fall as an opportunity to have even more students engage in the same content. And any teacher can teach reading, math, for science, and although we intuitively know that, sometimes, it's very difficult to get our administrations to get on board with the fact that for the next two weeks, we're going to learn everything there is to learn by studying these frogs out at the pond.

Annalies Corbin: [00:21:27] But it's possible, and it's not just possible, it's doable, and it's fun, and it's manageable. So, what do you say to that teacher that says, hey, I really, really want to do that, but how do I even approach being able to do that? And I'm not talking about the conversation with your building leaders, yes, you have to go do that, but how do you shift your own mindset to say, I'm going to be all in?

Jessa Goldner: [00:21:49] Oh, yes.

Annalies Corbin: [00:21:50] Because you're battling that every day when you take your outdoor programs that you do in the summer, and you say, let's do this in school, right?

Jessa Goldner: [00:22:00] Yeah, I think it's just showing them how versatile it is. It's, yeah, more so showing that educator, taking them through that process, like doing the whole activity with them, making them the student. Then, at the end, they most likely will have that aha moment of like, wow, that was actually a lot of fun. And here are all of the things that I learned, and here are all the things that my students would learn from going through this activity in this way.

Annalies Corbin: [00:22:33] All the standards, because the number of standards you hit this summer, I mean, it really, quite frankly, fairly mind boggling. If you think about the fact that you had these kids for a week at a

time, and some of the kids did multiples and variety of different configurations, but the reality of it is you were able to teach a tremendous amount of elementary content in the time you had those kids.

Jessa Goldner: [00:22:56] Yeah. We were asked by KIPP to make a lot of it also literacy-based as well. And so, although I had kind of already planned on incorporating that in various ways with journaling and such things, but because we were asked about it, we were even doing it a little more intentionally and going through about it in that way, because they had said that, yeah, the younger kids have lost a lot of that literacy.

Jessa Goldner: [00:23:23] And so then, yeah, it was almost like, oh, it's kind of a given that we were already implementing literacy into what we were doing, because I had the activities that I had already wanted to do, kind of already incorporated them. You do have to switch a little bit for the first and second versus the third and fourth, because they do have a little bit differences in what they could do. But honestly, all of our first and second graders were able to write their name.

Jessa Goldner: [00:23:51] I know that that was something that one of the KIPP Admin had said like, make sure that they know how to write their name, and make sure that they can like count up to a certain number, and all of our students were actually able to do that before coming to us. And so, because they did have that, we were able to like push them a little bit harder in that literacy aspect.

Jessa Goldner: [00:24:11] But I don't want to say it's easy, because you do have to think about it a little bit harder, and like you're saying, like change your whole like pedagogy honestly of how you have learned and how you have been taught even, I've just been given the great privilege of kind of being taught in that way, not through my K through 12, but in my professional life, so it's almost like the only way I've ever kind of seen it is it's easy that way. But it's something that once you start thinking that way, you can't stop thinking that way.

Annalies Corbin: [00:24:50] Well, I would agree, but I mean, that's sort of my mindset, too. So, I always like to close the program by really sort of thinking about the fact that there are folks that are listening, and they're saying to themselves, wow, I can do what Jessa's doing. I can do that in my own classroom. I can do it in the grounds around my school. I can do it in my neighborhood. I might be in a rural setting.

Annalies Corbin: [00:25:13] I might be in an urban setting. And that doesn't really matter. But sometimes, it's that first leap of stretching outside of, this is what I do every year, and I've been doing it every year for the last 15 years, as a teacher. And especially in the wake of coming off of a global pandemic, the world has handed us, for better or worse, an opportunity to say, it's a different place.

Annalies Corbin: [00:25:37] And so, I'm going to be a different kind of teacher or instructor, right? I don't know what that's going to look like, but I'm inspired by what Jessa said, and I want to do that, too. So, how do I get started, Jessa? Because getting out the door, sometimes, is the hardest part. How do I how do I start on this journey as so many schools are starting right now? Right? And there are so much outdoor learning that can happen in the fall, no matter where you are. How do I get started?

Jessa Goldner: [00:26:05] I would encourage, start slow. First time you're taking your kids outside, it might also be the kids' first time outside. So, if it is just even taking your kids out, like for example, KIPP has this little amphitheater, taking them out there and doing your reading lesson there, doing your math lesson there, like on the steps, they're sitting, they're on like concrete, very low actual nature other than they're breathing fresh air, they're getting to see everything.

Annalies Corbin: [00:26:33] They're out there.

Jessa Goldner: [00:26:33] They're out there. I would say, do that first. I also want to acknowledge that some classes, they have 30 students, 30 middle schoolers. That can be a lot, especially on that first through 20th time outside. So, yeah, so starting slow, understanding that it is okay for you to feel a little like uncomfortable, a little nervous about it, your students will feel that same way, and being able to feed off of that and them seeing your authentic authenticity about it, I think, will be what leads to your success.

Jessa Goldner: [00:27:13] And so, yeah. So, go out. Go on just doing your class outside. Then, maybe you go on a short walk between, you go outside, you take your class outside, but then you have a little break, 10-minute break. You go around a little loop, maybe even just walk around the school building if you're somewhere that's more urban, and point out some things. Your kids might not point out some things, because they don't know how to do it, but you go around and you see a grasshopper, you're like, oh, guys, look, it's a grasshopper.

[00:27:43] Kids have most likely seen grasshoppers, but you pointing it out, you being the one to say, this is cool, shows them that they're also allowed to think of it. And I think that having that idea going forward, you showing that things are cool, and things are interesting, we all can remember a teacher that we had in class that did weird, wacky things, but you remembered them. You remember that, you were excited about it. And yeah, you look back fondly, like you're saying, And I think as we all grow older, we know that being weird is cool.

Annalies Corbin: [00:28:21] Weird is cool, so own it. How cool it is to be weird, right?

Jessa Goldner: [00:28:26] And being excited about things is also really cool. And I think, yeah, those are my first two steps for you of starting out slow. And then, also, showing your excitement and your passion for the outdoors, whether it's just on walks. It doesn't have to be backpacking through all these things, but seeing all of the things you can see outside.

Annalies Corbin: [00:28:51] Absolutely. Well, thank you very much for joining us in the conversation today, Jessa, for what you do with kiddos, and for sharing a bit of your experience with us.

Jessa Goldner: [00:29:02] Yeah, of course. Thank you for having me. I appreciate it.

Annalies Corbin: [00:29:04] Alright. You're very welcome. 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.