



145. Improving Mathematic Instruction for Middle Schoolers with Elly Blanco-Rowe

Elly Blanco-Rowe: [00:00:00] What are the questions that we're asking? How often are we asking these questions? Not just of ourselves, but of others, and then vice versa.

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.

So, welcome to today's episode of Learning Unboxed. And I am super excited because we are going to be talking about an organization and it sets a program by Teaching Matters, which is a national New York City based nonprofit, whose mission is to close the opportunity gap of a radically unequal education system for underserved and historically marginalized children.

Over the last three years, Teaching Matters through its many programs has served over 250,000 teachers and leaders, representing over 7.5 million students. Those statistics alone are worth celebrating, and I'm super excited because we get to talk today about one of their programs, in particular the Math Acceleration pilot program.

And joining us to sort of share about what that program is and to lean in on her expertise is Elly Blanco-Rowe, who is an expert in K-8 mathematics. She came to Teaching Matters with over 20 years of teaching, coaching, and school leadership experience. So, Elly, welcome to the program.

Elly Blanco-Rowe: [00:01:44] Well, thank you so much, Annalies, for having me. I'm excited to be here.

Annalies Corbin: [00:01:47] Excellent. So, first and foremost, give our listeners who come to us from all over the world sort of the 60,000 foot view, if you will, about the parent organization Teaching Matters.

Elly Blanco-Rowe: [00:02:00] Yes. So, we actually started as a technology-driven organization to help teachers integrate a digital setting in their classroom. And over the years, have evolved based on the needs that were observed in New York City schools specifically. So, we are a national organization. However, in starting in New York, we were partnering with a school district that serves a million students.

And so, currently we have a variety of components within our organization, such as Early Reading Matters, and

Literacy, and Science. And so, I'm part of our Math Department, which is called Math Matters. And, specifically, I'm coaching teachers and school leaders in about five schools right now through this program.

Annalies Corbin: [00:02:45] Yeah. And it's a really intriguing program. And I'm going to just read something that comes directly through the materials that your team sent over to me. And I want to use this as the launching point because, honestly, when I read this, I was so jazzed, so excited. I'm just thrilled to see that someone is making the statement, putting it out there, and saying, you know, let's really think about and talk about this differently.

So, I'm just going to go right from, so part of this is, "As teachers recognize that students missed instructional time and opportunities over the course of the pandemic, the temptation is to remediate. We hear this over and over again. I teach all the content that students missed. Instead, Math Matters, this program is encouraging teachers to ask themselves what do students need right now to be successful in accessing grade level content. And learning acceleration, providing just in time support to students so they can access grade level content, is backed by research and will ensure students are on track and ready for future success in high school and beyond."

So, let's really dig into that, because this is a really big debate that's happening all over the country and other parts of the world as well. It's like, "Hey, we've got this gap. We know our kiddos got behind 30, 40 percent," depending on where you're talking about in the world. And you're saying, "Don't worry about it. Let's, instead, do." So, let's dig in to this idea.

Elly Blanco-Rowe: [00:04:09] Yeah. And head is rolling hills challenges, of course, a lot of it with gaining buy-in because of the gap. Our intuition is to go to that basic gap, and try to get in as quickly as possible. And what we're seeing for children to be successful and what we've seen success to look like, is, keep them at their grade level, keep the content at their grade level, and then let's scaffold and differentiate to support student learning along the way. Which, at this point in the school year, more and more teachers are definitely buying into that and realizing that we can't get through every piece of content.

A curriculum is just a guide. It's not set in stone. And we have to really piece through it and identify what is most critical for students. And we use that through learning standards and identifying what the needs of the students are. So, using assessment tools to figure out what are those gaps that we're coming into already and then how do we fill those throughout.

Annalies Corbin: [00:05:16] Right. So, just to be super clear here, essentially, as I sort of understand the process that Math Matters program is utilizing is basically to say, we recognize that kids showed up this year behind because of the pandemic and the influences of the pandemic. And those were many. And they were not the same for every child by any stretch of the imagination. All circumstances were different.

And so, rather than saying we're going to try to make up a year-and-a-half or even two years, in some cases, worth of content in one year to try to bridge that gap, we're saying instead, let's keep them on par. If the student came in and we're starting this academic year at the third grade, we're going to say we're doing third grade math, but recognize that we're going to teach the math that we need in the moment to get the kids through the program to stay on track. Do I have that correct?

Elly Blanco-Rowe: [00:06:06] Yeah. That's exactly it. And it's done in a variety of ways. So, if you're looking at just the lesson level, for example, you're teaching the grade level standard, like we said on par, you're guiding students to do it. And then, when it's independent practice, at that point, you differentiate the instruction support that students are receiving.

Because some students, like you said, will come in with no gaps whatsoever. And then, some students will have a three or four year gap, which can be challenging for our teachers. And that's where we come in really to support with coaching, lesson planning, curriculum development, and constant support because it is a heavy lift and a big shift.

Annalies Corbin: [00:06:45] It is a heavy lift. And that's one of the other things that I liked about the way you structured this work is that, not only recognizing, "Hey, here's the plan and here's how we're going to do it with, and we're going to stay on task, and we're going to differentiate in another way." But that coaching, it's not like coaching either. As I recall, it's 25 days of dedicated coaching and opportunity. So, yes, let's talk a little bit about that support because it's a lot of support that comes with this program.

Elly Blanco-Rowe: [00:07:15] It is a lot of support. And sometimes I feel like I live in some of my schools, I'm there so often. And one of our many strengths is that our coaches, myself included, come with a variety of skills. So, even though our content expertise might be siloed, we're able to adapt all of our processes based on the school and the individual teacher. So, what we want to see in the classroom, we're doing ourselves through our coaching.

And what that means is that, I could coach five teachers in one building, but the process in which I support them looks very different. And so, the days that I'm in there, I'm in the classroom with them, I'm teaching with them, I'm running small groups with them, I'm lesson planning with them, or I'm planning a lesson to that demo so that it's collaborative. It's not just, "Hey, here's a program, go figure this out on your own," which oftentimes happens.

And I remember being in the classroom myself and being given something and told, go for it with no support. And so, we recognize that this work can't happen in isolation. And if you really want to see these shifts in our school systems, then we really need to get our hands dirty, so to speak.

Annalies Corbin: [00:08:28] No, absolutely. And so, I guess I want to dig in just a little bit more on this because I know our listeners are going, "Okay. But help me understand exactly how that works." So, let's go back to that third grade teacher. So, I'm a third grade teacher and I'm teaching my math lessons. And so, what's different about this program and this approach as opposed to just the same teacher independently saying, "Hey, I recognize my kids aren't ready for this lesson, but I'm going to sort of plow forward." So, what's different here?

Because part of what I guess I'm trying to get at is, this program is not assuming that the teachers that you're working with aren't capable teachers to be able to sort of solve this problem on their own. But what we're saying is it's a big problem and we're adding supports, a very dedicated and mindful support structure, into this to ensure that those teachers can be successful without it being a complete burnout stressor, which it very easily could be. So, help us understand sort of that one-on-one opportunity to understand what the teacher is actually doing. What's different in this particular scenario?

Elly Blanco-Rowe: [00:09:38] Yeah. So, I go into this work with the mindset that the teacher is the expert in their room, so they know their kids best, their classroom best. And so, I am not there to take over in any possible way. That's one thing that's, I think, different. There's a lot of consultancy programs where someone comes into the room and takes over and then they're expected to follow.

So, what ends up happening is that we either have a pre-meeting prior to, and so we'll review a lesson together, we'll discuss the lesson together, we'll identify moments where these are stop points. What kind of

checks for understanding do you want to have in this moment? How will this lead the lesson and the student's learning to meet our learning target for the day

We identify a learning target that is more manageable and more direct so that students can feel successful and the teachers can feel successful. What we do want is for them to see it is possible if I chunk this and make this smaller and more manageable.

And in the grand scheme of things, that's where we're saying for the school year as well. We're not saying go through every single standard. We're saying identify those key standards and then let's work in small bites so that students can feel successful there.

And then, we also talk about, in one-on-one coaching, around, How do we get students engaged in the learning? How do we think about what their cultural backgrounds are? And, again, this is where the expertise of the teacher comes in because she or he knows their students best. So, we think about how do we make this more responsive for students, and how do we identify when there's a challenge, what do we do in that moment.

Annalies Corbin: [00:11:21] And so, then we think about that and we work through the lesson beforehand. I'll go in and observe or co-teach or support in any way that I'm needed. And then, we'll receive exit tickets and look at that together as well, and then identify gaps there. And continue that cycle of work so that it's a fluid relationship that we're having here. And it's two teachers working together. It's not just installation. That's [inaudible].

Annalies Corbin: [00:11:50] Yeah. No, no. I do. Actually, I appreciate that very much because I think that that really sort of gets at the heart of, I suspect, one of the reasons why the program is successful is because you're building relationships, not just amongst the program, but with that individual teacher. I love the fact where you're two teachers working on this problem together. We're not this outside consultant that's somehow an expert in X, Y, or Z, and the teacher who knows the kids in the content. But we're literally two teachers teaching and learning about what's happening in an individual classroom together. And tailoring the response appropriately together. That's powerful.

Elly Blanco-Rowe: [00:12:32] It's extremely powerful. And one of the beauties of our pilot is around that, because I come in saying I'm here to learn too. I do know the content very well, but I haven't taught during the pandemic. And so, I'm here to learn with you. And your failure is my failure. Your success, I'll take that success as well. But, you know, it is a partnership.

And so, even before we go into our coaching mode, I would say, we spend a lot of time researching the school, interviewing folks, just getting to know them. So, I'm not going into a classroom to give feedback on my first or second visit. I'm going in to identify the strengths and really look for how do we build up from the starting point. And, again, that's what we want to do with kids, what are their strengths and how do we build up from there.

Annalies Corbin: [00:13:21] Absolutely. And speaking of the kids, one of the other things I really like about this program is the fact that the kids actually have a role in determining sort of what you're thinking about or the approach that's being taken in the particular program approach, and the coaching, and the lessons because there's a survey to the students.

So, let's talk about that a little bit, because sometimes I think we forget to really dig in deep and ask kids what's really happening in their own minds. Whether it's real or not, it doesn't make any difference. You know, the kids have a reality that they bring with them when they walk into any learning environment. And you're honoring that

by even asking the question. So, share with our listeners just a little bit about what the survey is about and sort of the why, because you ask some intriguing questions in that.

Elly Blanco-Rowe: [00:14:09] Yeah. So, the Panorama Survey, it's very broad, but when we think about content, we're looking just at the math experience of a student. And so, we're asking them very poignantly, you know, are you engaged in the learning? Do you feel seen? Do you feel heard? Do you see yourself in the mathematics that's coming in? Do you get excited by this? And in no way is it "I got you". It really is another data point for us to think about how do we adapt our work to meet the needs that they're explicitly saying.

And I'm a doctoral student, and at the end of every semester I have to fill out a rate your professor. So, why not give kids the same opportunity? Why do you have to go to college for that? If, in true, powerful education, we want to make changes, then the feedback is a loop. It is not one way. And so, we really have to listen to our clients who are our kiddos and identify what are their needs and how do they view their needs.

Annalies Corbin: [00:15:15] Yeah. I think that's super intriguing. And I love the way you reference that, that education is a loop. It's not a one way communication. It's not even by way communication. It's literally circular opportunity that keeps coming around over and over again.

I'm really, really curious because I always love the fact that, you know, programs, they really dig in deep with kids. And so, there are some intriguing myths out there in the world, especially as it relates to mathematics, we know that. Math, I would argue and have on many occasions, it's a gateway subject in the sense that it has the potential to be incredibly freeing, but also incredibly constraining, depending on your circumstance. And we've seen that it is not equitable in the way it's deployed and in the long term opportunities tied to it.

So, I love the fact that you're asking these kiddos about whether or not they can see themselves and what they're learning or if they're engaged in it. And so, I'm curious about what you found when you've done this survey. What is the data telling you before you start and engage in the program? What are you hearing from these kids about how they feel or see themselves in the work that they're engaged in?

Elly Blanco-Rowe: [00:16:28] Yeah. I mean, it's varied across the board. What we have noticed - excuse me for my loop -

Annalies Corbin: [00:16:35] That's okay.

Elly Blanco-Rowe: [00:16:38] ... is the stronger the relationship with the teacher, the more positive of the data. And we noticed that based on our observations of teachers and then referencing the data there. When we see students feeling really safe in the classroom, in the math learning, really able to explore their thinking, and are given opportunities to show and fail in a safe environment, the data is showing very positively.

And so, what we mean by that is, you know, it's a difference between 70 percent of the classroom saying, "I talk about math outside of class because I'm really excited about it. And I'm really excited about what I'm learning." Or saying, "I'm just not engaged at all. I'm just not present." And there's just nothing right now that's exciting me. And so, the questions really stem around that, around engagement, cultural responsiveness, excitement, and those pieces.

And so, we don't ask them academically driven questions. It really is about their mental and emotional safety in a mathematic classroom. Because to your point, we do see, for example, in marginalized communities so many of our young people are graduating without the fundamentals of mathematics, running into debt in college because they're having to take these foundational courses. And so, it's our responsibility to make sure

that they're ending eighth grade on solid footing so that when they get to higher level mathematics, it doesn't blindside them.

Annalies Corbin: [00:18:16] Yeah. Yeah. Absolutely. And we see that repeatedly as well. So, I guess one of my other questions sort of following up with this idea that, you know, is the data telling you or your experience with this saying that the kids are more engaged in those earlier years. And that by the time they get to middle school - because we often talk about what happens to lots of kiddos in middle school - are you seeing that the response to that question is shifting? Or are you seeing a consistent trend? I'm really curious if what you're seeing is, you know, the kiddos are trucking right along.

You know, I had a teacher one time and this is the way she put it. She was talking about she had been both an elementary school teacher and a middle school teacher. And it turned out she was actually a math teacher. And she talked about the fact that she didn't want to stay in middle school and she went back down to be a fifth grade math teacher instead.

And when I asked her the question why would she shift, she said, "Well, you know, there comes this moment when I realized that kids like each other more than they like me. And that was just really, really difficult to sort of start digging in." And that's just one of those funny sort of middle school things as kids start to transition and mature as individuals. And that's not for all teachers. You know, some folks like high school, some like middle, some like elementary school.

But I am really curious about this question about that student engagement and that safety space, because I think it's really, really important. So, were the kids in elementary school really identifying with that relationship with their teacher? And then, are you seeing that response to that question shift as they go into middle school?

Elly Blanco-Rowe: [00:19:51] So, just to clarify, the pilot is specifically for middle school students.

Annalies Corbin: [00:19:56] Oh, it is. Okay.

Elly Blanco-Rowe: [00:19:57] Yes. But I coached K to eight, so from my own experience, I think you're spot on. And part of that is the joy factor that comes with lower elementary versus upper elementary. There's somewhere around fourth grade where this kind of exploration and joy just taking it out of the learning that starts placing students in kind of buckets, like I'm either good or I'm not.

Annalies Corbin: [00:20:22] Right. Right.

Elly Blanco-Rowe: [00:20:24] And that's something I've measured, for the listeners out there. But from my own experience, seeing that when I'm in a kindergarten classroom and they're playing with blocks and they're talking about this, and they're making mistakes, and then they figured it out on their own. And we all know how empowering that is when we kind of discovered something for ourselves, even if it's known worldwide.

Whereas, in middle school, we see very traditionally structured classroom. And to your point about mentally, in middle school, students need more socialization than younger grades, actually. Because the younger kiddos actually see themselves more independently in silos. And so, we lose that cohesiveness of joy and fun and play in math that is just undervalued completely.

And that makes me sad, especially as a middle school teacher myself, I integrated games and play time. And, yes, we had traditional moments because there's times to teach that as well, but also had to give them an opportunity and space to work things out with each other and problem solve, and talk because they love to talk.

Annalies Corbin: [00:21:41] Yes. They do, with each other and everybody else. Absolutely. Well, let's talk a little bit then about some of the specifics tied to the work and the coaching and the program that you're doing. Because I am really curious, I assume that as the pilot has gone along, there have been things that have been great surprises to you.

And there have also been things that were disappointments to you or opportunities to sort of tweak the program because you are learning right alongside those teachers that you're working with, and you're co-teaching and partners with, and the kids and their experience. So, share with us a little bit about sort of those sort of highs and low moments for you as a learner in this space.

Elly Blanco-Rowe: [00:22:22] Yeah. I mean, one of the biggest highs is when a teacher has fully integrated a culture response math lesson. Meaning, using reference points that students relate to, using their own names, and then really releasing the learning and becoming more a facilitator. So, seeing that happen has been such a joy because all you hear is a buzz in the classroom. And it's not off topic. Like, students are really excited and having fun,, and talking about this, and debating the issues in which they're solving a problem. And so, when I've seen that, it's just been the elating.

The bigger challenges that we've come across is balancing the requirements of the school district with what we know works best. And I'm not trying to say we know everything. But if we value engagement and rigorous instruction, and kids valuing the math content, there's just shifts that needs to happen. And sometimes that goes against policy. As a result, they're just so much resistant because it's almost like we have to sneak it in rather than have a very cohesive and flowing learning experience for kids.

So, because we're so adaptable, as I mentioned earlier, we work within those constraints. But that can just be so challenging and really have to think outside the box for how to make that happen.

Annalies Corbin: [00:23:54] Yeah. Yeah. And I think that's a really good point because I think most organizations that are interacting, and facilitating, and consulting sort of being that third party working closely with districts have all bumped up against this. Because it is a reality.

So, I guess that gets me to the last sort of component that I was really hoping to cover in our conversation today, and that is about this notion of buy-in, not just buy-in at the the individual teacher or the classroom level, but more broad than that.

So, you know, one of those issues is around leadership. And back to your point about sometimes we bump up against these constraints within districts. Sometimes we can overcome those because we have school leaders, our building leaders, who are so on board with us that they will move heaven and earth to figure out the way so that you and that individual classroom teacher don't have to figure it out. But the leadership is out there advocating and facilitating that sort of shift for you.

But by and broadly the district level can sometimes be difficult. And, oftentimes, programs - and I can't certainly speak to this one, but we see this all the time - these great innovative programs are brought in. Maybe they're brought in at the superintendent level, but there wasn't buy-in across the district prior to saying we're all going to do this thing.

And we know what that feels like because, oftentimes, then that third party, the organization there to help facilitate that, gets caught in the middle of something that really has nothing to do with the quality of the program, or the facilitation, or the coaching that's being leveraged. So, how does Teaching Matters work

around that component or work with, I think is probably a better way to think about it, to ensure that that's a sort of smooth opportunity for everybody.

Elly Blanco-Rowe: [00:25:32] That's such a wonderful question. And, actually, when I was an assistant principal, I partnered with Teaching Matters. So, we had early reading matters in our school. And so, I want to speak from both perspectives. And a shoutout to Maria Underwood, who was our consultant. A lot of her time was spent understanding our school. Like, really learning our mission and vision, and getting to know who we were as a community. Being part of just regular meetings and so integrating herself into the school community. And in doing so was building on our goals rather than changing them.

Annalies Corbin: [00:26:11] Right. Right.

Elly Blanco-Rowe: [00:26:12] And so, because of that, the coaching and the support that our teachers received was then aligned with the work we were already doing. Because as standalone schools, we already provide professional development, we provide evaluation, we provide support when I was a school leader. So, for someone to come in and kind of be able to embrace that and build on that was powerful.

So, an example of that was, we had professional development cycles, and so Maria just ran one of the cycles over the course of the year, and so she became part of the leadership team in doing that work. And so, she was right alongside with us in the trenches.

And so, the same thing is happening now when I'm on the other end. And, also, recognizing the pressures that a school leader has. They're not just making demands for the sake of making demands. It's having empathy for the fact that they have to answer to higher power. And they have to show results at the same time. And so, they reached out to us to help support that. But at the same time, they're facing these constraints.

So, again, I mentioned a little bit earlier, like, my first couple of sessions are really about getting to know the school because those relationships really matter. Buy-in cannot happen without the relationships and without small wins because there has to be trust. There has to be trust in this individual, as an educator. Because, again, this is not a scripted program. So, it really is about us as individuals selling the work, and believing in the work, and showing that we believe in them.

And identifying the beauty that is in every school, because even in the lowest ranking schools, there's just so much that you can identify as a strength.

So, I hope I'm answering your question. But there's not one script a way to go about it. It is about getting to know each school leader, listening to that school leader really well, and then providing work that aligns to what their vision is. While, at the same time, infusing other components.

So, an example could be that I created a tool for one school where students were reflecting on their own responses, so they had the opportunity to do that. And so, that was a request. But I expanded on that by asking students more open-ended questions about how do they feel about this experience. What would they need from the teacher moving forward to feel successful? What do they need from a peer? So, providing that tool and expanding it so that we are meeting the vision and mission of the school while also infusing these best practices.

Annalies Corbin: [00:29:17] Right. Yeah. I love that. And one of the things that I really love about that is the fact that you're sort of setting the stage for these students to have ownership in their learning. And for teachers and administrators to be receptive of the student's ownership in their learning. And that's really, quite frankly, a

beautiful thing.

And the fact that, you know, you ask the students what about this made you feel successful or what do you need next time to ensure that you can be successful, both from the teacher, from your peers, from yourself, you get students into the habit - and I use that word very deliberately - of being self-reflective and being self-advocates for what they need to ensure that they can be successful. I really, really love that aspect of what you're talking about.

Elly Blanco-Rowe: [00:30:05] Yeah. And when we think about culture responsive education or the social justice and disrupting the system, this generation of students no longer can accept just being fed information for a variety of reasons. They just have access to so much out there now. And so, we have to adapt to that. We're not the givers of knowledge - and teachers were never just the giver of a knowledge.

But as a generation, I will say, like, we are recognizing that students voice matters and instilling these skills in the early on, we can see these shifts that we want to see in our education system. Because, as you noted on your website, our education system as it is isn't working. And so, how do we make the changes that are necessary? And it is really by giving power to our kids and having them disrupt the system.

Annalies Corbin: [00:31:08] And they will. That's the beauty of it. And if we just pause long enough to listen and believe, we will see that they will help us find our own way. Absolutely. I love that.

Elly Blanco-Rowe: [00:31:18] So true. So very true. And, again, when I see that happening in classrooms, and I think there's a misunderstanding between questioning and disrespecting, and this is where the culture of the classroom also [inaudible]. Because I've definitely seen classrooms thriving where students are like, "Wait, Miss. That seems wrong. What happened here? Because I'm missing a step." And so, that questioning piece is critical.

And it's a big part of our work, actually, is, what are the questions that we're asking? How often are we asking these questions? Not just of ourselves, but of others, and vice versa.

Annalies Corbin: [00:32:01] Yeah. I love that making space to ask the questions in a variety of different ways, but also from a variety of different viewpoints. And I really love that.

Elly, thank you so much for making time today to talk with us about the Math pilot program. And we wish you all the luck. We're super excited to hear more about it as the pilot sort of makes its way through. And, you know, keep up the amazing work that's happening there in New York City.

Elly Blanco-Rowe: [00:32:29] Thank you. Thank you so much. We're very excited. And we're excited to compile all this knowledge over the summer and come up with best next practices.

Annalies Corbin: [00:32:40] Absolutely. Thank you. And good luck on finishing up your PhD program. So, you know, being in a doctoral program, that's a big deal. Lots of work going on there. So, thank you for that as well.

Elly Blanco-Rowe: [00:32:52] Thank you.

Annalies Corbin: [00:32:55] 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.

