Julia Bamba: Building Dynamic, Ever-Evolving Schools

Maureen O'Shaughnessy 00:01

Hi, Julia, thank you for being a part of the Edactive Collective and presenting here at the summit. It's so exciting that we're breaking down silos and different organizations, we're coming together to see how we can recreate school and make it really a different paradigm. So, I'd love to start with you just saying who you are, who's your audience, what's your story?

Julia Bamba 00:26

Yeah. So thanks, Maureen, for having me here to present. So I'm Julia Bamba. And I have I'm the principal of Gibson Ek High School. And we are in our fifth year since our opening in 2016. Previously, before coming to Gibson Ek, designing and creating this school, I was in one of our comprehensive high schools for just over 10 years as a teacher and an activity director and a coach and then an assistant principal. But before kind of, you know, realizing this dream of transferring to a new new school. We are, um in the Issaquah School District, so we are a public, we're a public school district. We have three comprehensive high schools in our school district and are looking at opening a fourth comprehensive high school. Several years ago, we had an alternative school. And we're realizing that that was providing a really great space for our students who were not thriving on our traditional system. But that, where it was creating a good community, it wasn't necessarily meeting the needs of those students who were transferring in from the comprehensive high school. So at that time, our district decided to close that school and then launch and bring on a new real world learning school that focus on personalized learning for our students. So that's kind of where I came in was in the you know, I spent about a year and a half just researching and visiting schools and talking to students and talking to other schools that were in our, in our organization. So we are a part of Big Picture Learning. At that point, we had decided to really work with Big Picture to design our school around their core principles, but also looking at what the needs of our own community and our own students were, as we started to go through that year and a half design. I will say, you know, we're in our fifth year, but we're still like designing and prototyping and making this work and continuing to learn and grow even as we're, you know, ending our fifth year and moving into our sixth.

Maureen O'Shaughnessy 02:21

Absolutely. And that's how organizations need to be: dynamic and evolving. So that, to me, that continuous improvement plan that all schools have to have accreditation should truly be continuous and improving. And you're doing that. And, in fact, I know Gibson Ek has been a great resource for my micro school since we're in the same neck of the woods, and our teachers have really enjoyed getting to share resources and come and visit. And I was talking to a Big Picture Learning person on the East Coast yesterday. And she's like, "Oh, yeah, we go to

Gibson Ek's website and steal their competencies, their this, their that," so you're pretty much a flagship school in a lot of people's eyes. So congrats.

03:02
Thank you. You know, I think that's one thing that's really has been pretty impressive about just our school district getting behind us and supporting us in the work and the design that we were trying to do, as well as being part of the Big Picture network, is one is, you know, Big Picture really pushes you to look at what your own community needs and it's not like, "Okay, this is working specifically at this school. Here, take this and then launch and open your own school." So what that does is create a really nice collaboration amongst amongst schools for us, because we are, you know, we're about 200 students is our is our capacity, maybe a little bit under would be is is nice. We have grades nine through 12. We started with just ninth and 10th grade students our first year and then continue to grow from there. And so going through that process, I think one thing was really important and valuable for our team is that we didn't have the answers in front of us, you know. We spent a year planning and I'll be honest, once we opened that first and second day, it was like, "Oh, boy, okay, now we're in the real work that has to be done." And I think being agile and flexible, and having a team that is ready to dig in and problem solve and be okay with changing things if something is not working, you don't just throw it away. But you can think about "Alright, what is it that's working? What's not? And how can we move forward with that?" I think for our students, too, you know, we, we only bring in ninth grade students. So we don't accept transfers at other grade levels, for a variety of reasons. But one thing we've really focused on is trying to identify kids who would be a good fit for our school, who are not thriving in our middle schools, who believe that there's a different way of education, but who really want a voice in their learning, who have these amazing strengths and skills and interests that aren't being identified as when they're in more traditional work. And so we help you to really work to bring those students in and find that they're a good fit for us that they can be here and going go through that four year journey as they start with us at Gibson Ek.

Maureen O'Shaughnessy 05:00
That's wonderful. What a way to build a strong community. And I wonder, because Issaquah, in the greater Seattle area has a wonderful reputation as a school district, what led the district, you, the former alternative school, what led all of you to say, "Wait, we want to be change activators, we want to play even bigger, we want to invest in research and really see how we can make this real-world and personalized." What, what started that for you guys?

Julia Bamba 05:31
I will say early on, I think it was that idea that students are not all fit into our more traditional systems. There are a lot of students that are not thriving in those traditional systems. But as they launched and gotten into this, I mean, my belief is that this type of education is good for all kids. It's not just a type of school, that what you know, a kid that would fit; we know that our students can be very, very successful on a more traditional mindset. But the things that we focus

on here are all things that I think that students should be able to experience in their education. You know, when we were early on in designing our school, we'd go in, in our, you know, in a more traditional school and go sit in the lunch room during lunch and just say,"Hey, we're designing a new school, can I sit down and talk with you guys for a little bit?" and start telling them what we were thinking of. And what Big Picture does and things that we need. And they're like, "Oh, that sounds so cool. Okay," you know, and they start thinking about that. So you know, we've really shifted to, it's not for kids that aren't thriving in a traditional system. This is for students who want to make sure that they're part of a community, that believe they can have a voice and making a difference, that loves hands on learning, that love to be problem solvers, that are okay working with adults in our community. Why is that not good for all kids, right? So now we think about, okay, we have our 200 students, but how can we continue to grow this? And what are the core things in our model that are really successful, and that can meet the needs of all kids, no matter where they are or where they're going to school?

Maureen O'Shaughnessy 06:56
Absolutely, I'd love to see you spread and be school within a school in your comprehensive high schools and spread into other districts. I think parents are like, "I'm familiar with what I had in the 90s and my kid has to get into a good college," but your students are going off to great colleges, just like other high school students, right?

Julia Bamba 07:17
Right, absolutely. So a few things with that. You know, there are always the parents that want to make sure that this is going to be a good place for their student. I think ultimately, parents want their students to be happy. And so when they're coming and seeing that they're thriving and the work that they're doing and progressing in, that's an easy one for some parents. For other students that, or for other parents and families that are or do have a traditional mindset, I think the biggest thing that really helps parents understand our model is listening to our students' stories, and seeing the activism, and seeing the work that they're doing in the world, seeing the mentors that they have in our community, seeing the project and the design labs that students are engaged in. That starts to get parents seeing like, "Okay, I understand the traditional system." Here at Gibson Ek, students are still accessing those skills, and they're still growing in skills, like becoming a good writer, knowing how to have critical conversations, understanding how government works; like those are all embedded through our competencies, but you don't have to learn those skills and those that content through a more traditional approach. So being able to let students start to own and drive and support their learning, connecting them with the real world organizations and the people that are doing that incredible work, that starts to help parents shift that mindset. We also are really fortunate to be a pilot school with the Mastery Transcript. So we're working with other schools to be able to say, "Okay, how can we create a dynamic and an interactive transcript that not only shows that our students are gaining those valuable skills that we think all students should have when they're graduating, but these are the really specific, incredible, unique experiences and projects that students are doing." So they're

allowed, they're able to highlight those as well on the transcripts. So now that we have, we're getting close to our third graduating class, we bent a competency based model this entire time, we don't do grades and credits. were part of the Mastery Transcript, we have the Big Picture Learning and then we have the support of our district. Our student, you know, I just got an email yesterday with a student who received over $100,000 of scholarship with no GPA, competency based model, incredible schools. So that's just one story and one kid. I think the more that the more students you have going through programs like ours, and are making sure that they have you know, they're seeing what their next step is and what their future is, then people start to feel more confident. You know, for our first and second year, I would stand up and tell families like "Yes, your students will be accepted to college. Yes, they have this." We didn't have our own graduating class yet. And so now as we have students go through that process, I can confidently share that experience. And we can bring parents and students on board as well to be able to share what they learned through that process, and how a school like ours has really set them up to be successful. Whether at four year or whether they're going on and starting their business, joining the military, whatever that is. So not only is it our story, but it's really finding those students that are able to come back and share their experience as well.

Maureen O'Shaughnessy 10:12
Love that listeners, I would love to have you pop into the chat, what you see as systemic issues in education, that a model like this would address. And as you're typing that into the chat, Julia, what, what were some of the key issues you were taking on with this new model?

Julia Bamba 10:33
Yeah. A lot. I mean, how you know, where can we even start with that? I think just thinking about some of the foundational systems that we set up, I will say, we opened and we didn't have some of those more traditional things in place, like, what are we all using as a calendar? Where are we tracking all of our all of the competencies, what does that really look like? We had systems, but really putting those into place and having those in the background. Because when you're doing personalized, and hands on learning, project based learning, you're getting students out in the in the real world for internships, that takes a lot of work just in person, hard work to make sure that's all happening. So making sure that systems are set and are in place so that you're not stressing out about those and those systems aren't getting in the way of this work. I think that's really important. I think the other thing for us that we spent a lot of time on, and then we have done a few iterations of this as well, is just our competencies. So if you would see us in 2015, and our team is just in a conference room at one of the libraries in the high school, we also rented a conference room that you know, down in one of the business along, and we're just there, and we have common core, and we have next gen science standards, and then we have our own district standards, and then just be having an amazing team of staff and a few students with us. And kind of opening those up and digging through and I trying to identify what are the really key and core aspects of our students that we can have as our core competencies to then grow from there? So that's a hard one, I think sometimes people aren't sure, like, we have the

Common Core standards, or we have these other standards;, how do you embed those and not get so stuck in making sure that students are meeting all of these, but they're having a very rich experience, while at the same time meeting some of these foundational skills that are really important for them to have when they leave high school?

Maureen O'Shaughnessy 12:21
I love it. I love the thought you put into the infrastructure. It seems like I mean, the Gallup Poll has significant data on it, that Middle School sixth graders, that engagement, every year of school keeps dropping, and engagement seems like a huge issue, you are having success in turning around.

Julia Bamba 12:43
Right? I think, one, you know a few things. One is just this, the interdisciplinary work and the you know, we might see in a traditional system as an elective, it's just real and great learning for us here. So I think the collaboration and the interdisciplinary work that comes into play here is really important. Helping students that might think they're more art, art-minded are seeing like, "I can now blend art and science together." And now I have a really impressive project that is meaningful to the student, but also is working through a lot of different content areas with that. I think, you know, I do I understand that, it's like when we were talking with students it's they just want to feel like they can have a say in what they're learning, and that it also connects to their life. And so one thing is we try to do is help students see like, this isn't just school, you don't just turn on your, you know, math brain for a little bit, and then turn that off, and then go to English and turn that on. It's like, all of your learning, whether it's in school, or in our community, or at your after school activities, or sports is all comes together. So what's important for you, how can you use your skills and your talents to start to not only learn what you want to, but then make a difference in the community? I think the more we we connect students with very real world problems, or people in the community, that's where they start to see "I'm not just doing this because it's an assignment. But this is something that matters to other people, and my work is going to help contribute to this." And so you know, that's definitely a progression that students have to work through when they're in a school like ours over four years. But the sooner we can get them doing very real and relevant work and helping to push them deeper and learning with alongside adults, I think the quicker they start to see like, "Oh, okay, this does matter, this is going to make a difference. And not only am I doing it, because it helps this person but I'm actually really interested in this work. And I see how that learning can then impact others as well."

Maureen O'Shaughnessy 14:39
 Absolutely. You know, I got to talk to one of your seniors in an advisory remotely earlier this year. And it seems like Gibson Ek is also addressing what business leaders in college say, that high schools are graduating kids that aren't future ready. And the senior I got to talk to started out saying, "Yeah, I was gonna do this career and I went out and tried this. It's like, yeah or not.

And so then I pivoted, and it gave me an interest in trying this instead." And it was like three or four iterations she got to go through, but she really knew what she wanted after high school, because she interned and done passion projects. Do you find your kids to be pretty future ready when they graduate?

Julia Bamba 15:18
Yeah, I mean, absolutely. Thinking about just, you know, approaching the internship experience from a lot of different angles, where maybe a student isn't ready, or they don't want to work out in the community or go into a business with mostly adults. How can you create experiences, or right now remote experiences, where students working with mentors across the country? It's pretty impressive and something we're really excited about. So I think just that idea is that you don't have to choose an internship and have that be, what you're going to do. Part of the learning with that is that enjoying that experience, learning some of those skills, and sometimes learning that you actually really hate something, and then that helps you move you on to the next one. So I would say some of the things that our seniors say that they have left with, and maybe they see their peers in college, not having, but they are okay, talking to adults, they're okay going and advocating for themselves, they understand that if they don't, you know, they don't get something right away that that's okay, that they should be able to go through that process. And then students also, as they're thinking about their next steps, after high school, since they've had these experiences, they found out more about their strengths and what they actually like, they really do understand what a physical therapist or an architect might do, because they've sat alongside and been in those meetings and worked on projects with those organizations, they can kind of define what it is for them. And I think once they get into college, they're also understanding like, it's okay, if now I'm at this point, and I need to take a change, and I need to take a different direction or a different approach. I think they have an idea of like, I know I'll have a team that supports me in this. And that's part of the learning process, and what's important to them.

Maureen O'Shaughnessy 16:54
Absolutely. So if you had a magic wand, what would you want the results to be of this relevant, personalized real world learning that you're exposing kids to?

Julia Bamba 17:08
You know, I just I love I love when students can go through an experience like this, and then have the confidence to be able to just keep pushing through things, even if they don't know. I want the our students, you know, I hope that they see that they do have these gifts and strengths that they can contribute to others. The biggest thing is that you know, just that they can make a difference whether it's in a school community, or when in their local community or globally, like just understanding and helping students gain that, that confidence, so that when they're not with us that they continue to make a difference and look for problems to solve or things to contribute to.

Maureen O'Shaughnessy 17:49
That makes really good sense. And because this summit is about really pushing that we all become activists to create these kinds of change, what can you think of that might be a step our listeners could take, so they could leave here and take an immediate action step to help make these changes?

Julia Bamba 18:10
Yeah. You know, I always think, and saying this, I'm a little sad that I don't have a student sitting next to next to me in this, because the number one thing I think that we can all do is to bring students on board into this work, and to really include them in our decisions and making policy or looking at regulation. The more students we can have part of this, I think we can continue to grow this. You know, I always think like I could share stories, but once you hear a student, and they're able to articulate their learning and their experience, it's a really amazing and a beautiful thing. So I would just say, bring students on board, no matter where you are in the process, whether it's like, you know, launching a new school, or just designing a small program within a school or even just within a classroom, is for us adults to kind of let go of what we believe and kind of that control and start to bring students on board and start to give them those leadership roles to continue to make a difference with that.

Maureen O'Shaughnessy 19:08
I agree. And then Tuesday, the summit model of youth led intergenerational is a great chance for kids to really have a voice and be a part of the conversation and the teams that the affinity teams would be great to have lots of students getting involved in so this summit is about elevating the youth voice and integrating it because it's their world and they're pretty darn savvy about what they're not liking and what they want to see. So we can learn a lot from listening to them.

Julia Bamba 19:36
Yeah, absolutely.

Maureen O'Shaughnessy 19:38
Yes. So, listeners I'd love to have you be thinking of an action step you can take. And thank you, Julia, for this amazing presentation and the hard work that you and Gibson Ek are doing to make learning relevant: real world internships, passion projects. Julia and I are going to hop over to the Facebook group and if you click the link at the bottom, we'd love to have you come over. And Julia can answer more questions and share more resources. So thank you so much, Julia.

Julia Bamba 20:12
All right. Thank you for having me.