

Ukulele Music

Keith: Welcome to the LeeCoSchools Edcast #24 with Dr. Jason Wright. Dr. Wright is the assistant superintendent for secondary education here at Lee County Schools and I chatted with him because, as a senior member of the admin team, he could speak to some burning questions I had that I thought you would find interesting, especially in light of the events of March 3rd. I don't want to give anything away, suffice to say that we have a fantastic conversation that ranges from his professional journey to an inside look at the decision process for closing schools with many many steps in between. So, after listening to this, if you have any questions, comments, complaints, criticisms, compliments, colloquialisms, conundrums, or concerns, you can find us on the web at www.lee.k12.al.us/EdCast, on Twitter and Instagram @LeeCoSchools, on Facebook at facebook.com/leecoschools, we have our own little icon on the Lee County App which you can find in Google Play or the Apple App Store. Finally, you can email us at edcast@lee.k12.al.us Without further ado....Allons-y!

Funky Transition Music

Keith: well dr. Wright I appreciate you taking the time to sit down with me sure just get started introduce yourself tell us a little about your professional journey how you got to be here at Lee County and those kinds of things

Dr. Jason Wright: absolutely Keith I appreciate the opportunity to speak with you this is actually my second opportunity serving Lee County I'll go back and kind of work my way forward I'm from Cullman small town North Alabama I graduate from high school there in June of 89 I was hired as a coach and a substitute teacher in August so I literally have been in school all my life all right well I'll do two undergraduate work as a substitute and coach there taught in Cullman for a couple of years after I graduated from college moved to Lee County in 1995 and started teaching and coaching at Smith station high school that was my my first time here okay I was there five years worked under mr. Larry Boswell he was principal there at the time huh

Keith: well I should have run into you at some point cuz I graduated in 01 okay it's probably

Dr. Jason Wright: when you were in high school there so in fourth the latter part of your sophomore

Keith: maybe that's why we've been so nice to each other

Dr. Jason Wright: but I left Smith Station high school in 2000 went over to Auburn City Schools I was an assistant principal at Auburn high school for a couple of years and then as they did some reconfiguration in 2003 was named principal at Auburn junior high we had eighth and ninth graders grew to be about 1100 of them in one building conversation and helped open the Smith Station freshman Center

Keith: okay

Dr. Jason Wright: went out there

Keith: that was the new building back in the day

Dr. Jason Wright: that's right that's right it was the old new building a former Smith high worked out there about 10 months getting a freshman center up and running then dr. cook took that over doing a great job out there and I transitioned here to the central office and I've been here for I guess seven years now had my hand in a number of things from federal programs to career tech safety and public

information and then this is my third year serving as an assistant superintendent so probably more than you wanted to know how about my educational background

Keith: that's exactly what I wanted so Cullman is I've been to Cullman twice at my previous job at DHR I had to go up to Cullman twice for court things for the second time I think I think I might have been in Cullman the second time that we had it was either there or somewhere else in North Alabama that there was a big murder trial or something along with the courthouse this grand jury over in the water tower Wow nice of the water tower they had an Epicure of like an annex or something and so we had to do grand jury testimony over there but that's interesting um anyway so that's so my point is that that's like a four-hour drive so did you wind up down here because of the job opening at Smiths high

Dr. Jason Wright: I did as I alluded to when I graduated high immediately started coaching and substituting and working at Cullman high school during undergraduate work and then I've taught there for two years so I had this wonderful experience to be working with my coaches with my former teachers getting to know the business so to speak and having done that for six years for an undergraduate to full-time employee I realized you know I've never really seen anything outside of Cullman yes this is home and that's all I know what else is there right I had some connections with Auburn University some people that were there and had been of course traveling this area off and on for years I said why not Lee County and threw out a couple of applications and it worked out so I came down and interviewed in 95 Larry DiChiara I think was maybe in this current position that I hold now at the time I remember that day we went out to Beulah high school I met some people and interviewed talked we drove across the county of the Smith station high school similar process interviewed and talked and was offered a job that day he said you want to be a bigger fish in a smaller pond or a smaller fish in a bigger part I ended up choosing Smith's it was more comfortable - to what I was used to but it all worked out well

Keith: yeah having grown up in Smiths station I went K through 12 you know of course I sort of have a bias toward Smiths station sure you know but since I stood since I started to work in this job you know I've learned like the magic qualities of our other service areas

Dr. Jason Wright: I appreciate you using the word magic kind of our theme this year the the magics and secrets of Disney but you know that's one of the very special things about Lee County there are four very distinct very unique communities all with with positive attributes they have a lot of commonalities and that they're good people they're solid individuals and strong community connections and then they have their own unique characteristics about them as well but it's a really special place to be

Keith: yeah well and that strong community is really shown itself these past few weeks

Dr. Jason Wright: it has the unfortunate events of our weather on March 3rd and the loss of 23 lives to see how people have come together and true character comes through in those type situations and yeah again that's nationally known now how strong and the support of our community so our and the I say community is therefore unique distinct but we're really all one

Keith: yeah yeah so you're an assistant superintendent good long way from from coaching to be an assistant superintendent which is

Dr. Jason Wright: it's been a fun journey from literally a substitute teacher to to where I am now it's fun I like to tell people that when I'm asked substitute teacher to teacher coach club sponsor maintenance

crew worker assistant principal principal director to where I am now of a very wonderful journey yeah to gain experience along the way and I can relate to just about everybody in the building

Keith: well I notice what's missing from that list is technology center admin assistant

Dr. Jason Wright: that's why we have good people like you keep it going at this staff that's right

Keith: so I'm guessing what that means is that I'm not going to be assistant superintendent

Dr. Jason Wright: that's not what it means at all I have been very very fortunate along my journey to work with some wonderful people both in Lee County Auburn City and even all the way back to Cullman that technology has really been one of those pillars that has allowed me opportunities and opened doors for me along the way and part of my experience at Auburn junior high when I was there as a principal at that eighth the ninth grade building we were one of the first if not we like to claim the first school in the state of Alabama to be completely in one to one school we had a laptop device for every student in our building that was a fun rocket ride this was back in 2004 2005 timeframe and the amount of momentum and things we were able to do for our students back then was just phenomenal we had Intel Corporation involved we had literally while I was there we had I had a record I think 67 different groups that came in toured to see what we were doing look at our school model and talk so it was it's one of those things technology's been a huge piece and helped me to get where I am

Keith: yeah when I was in grad school my best friend he had kids in Auburn city schools at the time okay and I remember whatever he told me he goes they just handed him a laptop said use this for the rest of the year he's like what is pretty cool

Dr. Jason Wright: that's right and we're talking 15 years ago we started doing

Keith: well this was you know I was in grad school for 04-06 so yeah that was mind boggling back then

Dr. Jason Wright: if I had to put an identity identity on who we were that time frame I would say that the three pillars of what made our school unique and I still use a lot of this now the technology integration had in place I would say was a strong pillar of our foundation the fact that we had eighth and ninth graders in Interdisciplinary teaming which is not that common in a in a secondary school and then we introduced a positive behavior support structure when you have 1100 8th to 9th graders they can tend to be a little squirrely in that age group is where a lot of the discipline of referrals come but introducing that positive behavior support structure which we've carried some of those things obviously into our schools here now I'd say those are the three things that really identified who we were and that's a part of me that's become part of my subjective bias and things that I want to see in our schools and while it's 15-16 years ago we've started growing and developing and implementing that in our in our schools here in Lee County

Keith: well and having those outside perspectives helps sure bringing bringing everything to the table um so what are some of the challenges and more importantly some of the rewards that you you have as assistant superintendent

Dr. Jason Wright: you know that's a good question and and the challenge piece probably changes daily and it does a more global response when you're talking about challenges in public education you know often times I use the metaphors like we're trying to hit a moving target with with legislation with standard changes with assessment changes and all of those things are constantly evolving and

constantly moving and we are literally trying to prepare our students for a world that we don't really know what it's going to look like when they graduate right so so hitting a moving target is one of those challenges and another piece of that is while as educators we are not politicians we operate in a very political environment trying to balance the varied societal norms and needs of community members there are always situations that will arise where there are fluid expectations and we have a standard that we want try to meet but things are constantly moving keeping that balance while we have a set of policies that our board is approved and we had to have a set of procedures that guide our decision-making and black-and-white if you will we operate in a very gray world so that's that's challenging at times you know there is a difference between fair and equity and trying to balance those things and in a consistent manner and meet people's needs so that's that's a challenging part of not only my role but really any role education yeah on a different level and different circumstances it's the same thing that the teachers deal with in the classroom it's the same thing that school administrators deal with is they're managing a building it's really no different in this level that's part of them the challenges of being a public educator

Keith: I had to start paying attention to things that I never gave a second thought to right well since I started this job you know oh there's a there's an amendment moving through the alabama legislature to do this that's right three years ago I wouldn't have cared because it would have wouldn't have applied me in the least now it's like oh

Dr. Jason Wright: we are dealing with the public and the public is everyone yeah and we have to be very sensitive to those needs and as things change and that opportunity to deal with those things that might be challenges gets us to the rewards right at the end of the day it's always been for me about the students I've literally been in school all my life I think my mom put me in preschool when I was three years old and I tell people I have been in school my entire life in a variety of different roles but my chosen career path has been to help young people to grow and to mature and to be successful and and while my day-to-day operations interactions in this current role are more so with adults I still go back to the decisions that I make or those that I believe are in the best interest of students while I don't necessarily get to have that impact as a classroom teacher would every day all day we're still making decisions that have the student best interest at heart and that's the reward you go to the graduation ceremonies and see those students walk across and get their diploma and move on to their next endeavor you know that's a big one that we all typically recognize but but the day to day when you see those kids as we're walking through there'd be a formal observation or informal walkthrough in a building and you see those students that light bulb go off and they get it oh I see or observing a classroom and a young man sitting at a group and able to explain to his peer and in that peer interaction when you see those kids get it yeah whether it's instructionally whether it's socially that interaction that's what it's all about that's the most rewarding part to me is we're helping people as I said before grow and mature and be successful contributing members of society that's that's what it's all about

Keith: and so you guys did a lot of those school walkthroughs and so I imagine that's where you get to see some of that lightbulb moment stuff tell me a little bit about the the school walkthroughs what's the purpose of those and you know because I see them on the calendar all the time right for everybody

Dr. Jason Wright: that is something that we started several years ago and we did a book study our leadership group did a book study instructional rounds and in its most simplistic sense it's an educational opportunity to go in and diagnose things that are taking place in the classroom very similarly to that that's in the medical field you hear of doctors and hospitals making rounds and they're

diagnosing issues that patients have and then they're prescribing a treatment or medication that's the premise of this book instructional rounds okay so we took that same concept and would go into classrooms and here's what we see here are the things that are occurring how can we get better how can we improve one of the things that we're doing well one of the things that we need to maybe prescribe some professional development and get better that's how it originated over the course in the last four or five years that has evolved into something a little bit different now it's we as a leadership team will go in and and we're still observing we're still making comments still noting improvement we're still documenting those things that we're doing well we've moved away from that concept a little bit actually had a conversation with dr. McCoy and a couple of our leadership team members just last week about what's the next steps with that as we started going through and watching classroom teachers work and watching the interaction with the students the processes involved and we would like to expand that one of the conversations that we've had just recently is with those next steps maybe we start inviting board members to do those walkthroughs with us maybe we walk through with community members and business leaders political leaders those kinds of things and instead of following this older script maybe looking at what's next with that so instructional rounds with a good piece now that's a formal way that we're in and in seeing those interactions with students enjoy that I really enjoy the informal more I love this environment I love this work environment that we have we've got a great team here but it's hard for me to sit still I don't I don't sit in my office very much I like to get out on my own go visit classrooms and visit buildings and walk and interact and those informal observations are just as meaningful and rewarding to me dr. McCoy would make fun of me from time to time that we're Jason he's probably out on a tour somewhere you know I just I get no I get in a little car and go visit schools and be out that's that's what it's all about me being out there as much as possible

Keith: well you know I think it looks like from some of the stuff that y'all tweet out I think you tweeted out the picture of dr. hunter on the floor with one of the kids

Dr. Jason Wright: I did I forgotten about that that was one of the instructional rounds and I couldn't tell you what school it was but I think what my comment was I don't know who's enjoying this more more having more fun yeah I think dr. hunter was somewhere on the floor interacting with students in a game yeah that was neat that particular building that may have been West Smith station as I think back to that when it observed a classroom the activity that day was just a home run teacher was doing a wonderful job it was an elementary age group you know my background secondary one things that I didn't share with you in the intro I've never done anything really below 7th grade coaching 7th grade football was a challenge how could I would be lost in an elementary classroom and those people worked so hard but my point being I enjoyed getting out and seeing the elementary of what they're doing this particular classroom fifth or sixth grade the assignment was to develop a board game and to show mastery of this particular English language arts standard that the teacher was had presented and I walked up they were in groups of four and five working together and walked up to first little group there by the door tell me what you guys are doing squatted down there with them and talking young man just as articulate as he could be we're taking this baseball game and we're creating a game where if you get a a hit a single you go here you get to move roll the dice and move here if you roll this number and you have to answer this question about the standard and on and on and then I went to the next group they had have you ever heard of the game Candyland yeah have used to have that it's time well we're making a Candyland game on this standard and each different group had come up with their own idea and we're making a board game they could play the map to show they had understood the standards I thought that was the coolest thing just the teacher had made a connection with the students right in there the world's

baseball turns right in their wheelhouse playing games and tying the standards to it and they were showing a mastery that was that was fun to watch love that kind of love that type stuff

Keith: that's awesome so with the rounds that you've been doing and stuff what are some of the teaching styles that you really like and what are some of the one that maybe like to the trash heap of history

Dr. Jason Wright: I understand what what you're asking a successful classroom in my opinion has has a couple of key components you heard me say just a moment ago that to me it's about the students it's about making sure they're successful they're mature and they're growing so that really has to be the overarching idea of any successful classroom it's got to be student focused and remember we're in the people business some of our people are five years old some of our people are 17 years old and some are adult but it's a people business I think there's two key components to any successful classroom I think number one the individual individual facilitating that classroom the teacher in most cases has to be able to relate to students have to be a people person right and then equally important to that got to know your content when you have those two pieces working from harmoniously together some great things happen that's when that magic happens energy you use that word a moment ago recognizing that we're in an evolving world an ever-changing world using strategies that are effective that they're getting the job done and then B they're able to connect with students the example that I shared a minute ago at the board games yeah the teacher knows the content the teacher is able to connect with students they're able to in those successful classrooms integrate technology integrate games integrate through the arts through music through role-playing it's it's the buzzword that we hear the educational jargon get student engagement that's the term we put on but what does that mean what does that look like right and another piece of that to me is is a classroom environment that is using standards that are cross curricular in our world Keith and the people that may be listening you don't do math and one little segmented part of your job over here and then riding over here in one's

Keith: I don't know about you, I have different office for each thing another officer to do my math

Dr. Jason Wright: we've got some things hidden here that I don't know I know you're saying all in jest but but yeah and in science is known here another place everything is connected it's integrated and those teachers that are in successful classrooms able to do things that are cross-curricular and integrate those standards that is truly preparing students for the workforce that is truly preparing students for those next steps it's not segmented in our society and effective and successful teachers are able to do that everything and that's a big word it's in a great time and it works together

Keith: yeah I used to you know when I first graduated college I taught for a little bit um I taught at the college level I know southern Union you know some freshman level history and I would of course get my students who students always want to know why do we need to learn this stuff right and I would tell them at which I stole this from my my buddy from grad school maybe you're never going to need to know when the Napoleonic Wars were at your at your next job but one of the important things about learning in history is that you the other skills that you learn in the course of the class writing reading and digesting information and being able to turn it around in a in a accessible format and just being able to prove that you can finish a task that's assigned to you

Dr. Jason Wright: you're absolutely spot-on with that you're what I heard you say in that situation is you're learning you're learning how to learn exactly you're learning how to accomplish a task you're

learning how to solve a problem the specific standard may be irrelevant to you in your subjectivity in your area but you learn how to learn you learn how to process you learn how to problem-solve and that sense of accomplishment that you you said it perfectly yes that's exactly

Keith: they still didn't like it

Dr. Jason Wright: hey Keith that's okay you know you and I both know this it's not a matter of like and dislike it's a matter of accomplishing what needs to be accomplished and that's also learning in itself learning how to process and deal with those situations that are uncomfortable all those things that we don't like that this may come as a shock but not every time my phone rings is it a friendly voice on the other end

Keith: you, too?!?

Dr. Jason Wright: I don't necessarily like being accused of X Y or Z and having to deal with volatile situations I don't necessarily like it but I accept it as a part of my job responsibilities and I and if I can help solve problems then that's what I want to do so relating back to students did it help them learn that not everything is always going to be comfortable but there is a correct way in an incorrect way to do things

Keith: yeah we need to get that friendly filter on our phones where only the friendly people get through so what are what are the some of the problems that students face in today's classrooms that maybe they didn't face in the past for example you know like you know technology deficit or old-school teaching styles you get some of those teachers that are stuck in the past

Dr. Jason Wright: think I think one of the things that has evolved exponentially over the last several years is the simple fact that the students that we are serving right now they do not know a world without handheld devices without instantaneous information and for those of us that have been in the business for a significant number of years this is 26 for me and if we have conditioned ourselves as educators to do things the way we've always done them and not kept up with societal changes that can present a problem the students that we're serving do not know a world without instantaneous information what you and I had to do in high school

Keith: we had to work for it

Dr. Jason Wright: you know we had to you had to look up the old encyclopedias and we had to do research and we had to read and we had to memorize dates for tests and we had to memorize names that accomplished this and you referenced history a moment ago in this time those things are at your fingertips I can google anything I want and have an answer in a snap of a finger and I think the important part now in our classrooms and some of those challenges that we face is okay I've got the instantaneous answer what do I do with it how do I apply it what does this mean so it goes back to that I think the next steps and where we are now then in our classrooms is it's more important to take that information and use it apply it have questioning techniques I'm going to give you an example I heard you say history so I'm gonna try to I'm trying to connect with you instead of instead of in a classroom setting I need you to memorize Christopher Columbus and what did he do and what were the name of the three ships and what was the date and where did he land those kinds of things instead of approaching history from a recall standpoint those are the things that are at the fingertips of the computer you and I anybody can type in a couple of keystrokes and look that up we've got the name but more importantly what did it

mean from my European perspective was Christopher Columbus a hero or a villain and then asked that same question from a Native American perspective was Christopher Columbus a hero or a villain and then be able to defend your answer be able to defend your thought process that's where we are now in our society so your question some of those challenges if I'm in a classroom that still has my desks in a row and the teacher with the lectern at the front of the room and the board whether it be a smart board or a chalk board it doesn't matter it's how you use it and I am as the teacher disseminating information I'm a few decades behind ya so that leads to other challenges in the school if I get bored as a student what am I going to do I'm gonna find a way to entertain myself I'm gonna be off task I might be disruptive I might pull Keith over here to the side and start talking to you and then we're talking across the row instead of paying attention to lesson that's where things get a little bit squirrely yeah so it's it's that's challenge in a classroom we have students to get bored we have students that don't connect and we have that disconnect that's where we lose people so having teachers recognize having school leaders recognize that society continues to evolve so should the schoolhouse so should the schoolhouse it should be a reflection of our society really one of the problems that students face in today's classroom another guy I think I heard you say the word old school a moment ago our public education system is really outdated it was developed on the Industrial Revolution model if you'll think about the way a manufacturing plant are on down the road here Kia the way that works you start with a piece of sheet metal and you ship it to one area in a certain amount of time and you stamp something on and then you move it you step something on it and it moves down an assembly line then you have a finished product at the end that's the way the public education system was designed where you go to first grade you get this stepped on you you go to second grade and so part of that challenge is we don't all learn to say Keith you're gonna learn something a whole lot more quickly and more efficiently and more effectively in a technology round than I am so you might just advance and get right through that course why do we let time a clock and a coward dictate how long it takes us to de to get through a course I might take more time so when I say things are old-school those are the kinds of issues and problems of things that we're looking to try to you know address and move forward with and I'm getting way out there philosophical and big and I'm not going to solve those problems in the Lee County conference room but it's it's conversations that we have

Keith: so yeah I mean because like when I was still in seventh grade back when Wacoochee was still the junior high yeah for a lot smiths station my math teacher she had the little overhead projector who are you you know you and she would sit there and write on the thing and so a buddy of mine manda at me and a buddy we went through and did all of the work in the math book in the first like nine weeks mm-hmm and then we just had just chatted with each other for the rest of the semester at any time whatever whatever assignment she had son we already had it done we just had this rifle through our file basically and turn it in right um and so that that's the last time that I was able to do that then I took an algebra and got on up in the calculus so that was the last time I was able to do that but if we would have had options like the students do now or we could have done something else would probably you know probably profited from that a little bit

Dr. Jason Wright: you're exactly right and that's that's the concept that we're asking people to think about this instead of letting that that calendar and clock dictate when I match the standards what I've mastered it let's get credit for it and move to the next thing let's keep challenging you know the individuals one of the things that we've been very very fortunate here in Lee County to have put in place is an environment where students can do that and I'll preface by saying we're trying to do that in the classrooms it's very important for each teacher to recognize the individual strengths or weaknesses it

moves to us all but for those students that for whatever reason can accelerate themselves or just I've identified I need a little more time or maybe I just don't do this public school as well as I thought I would we have an environment in Lee county schools that are very proud of its in its fourth year Lee County Learning Center that is an environment that it's an alternate to a traditional setting that our secondary students may attend just a little bit about that the way that it works I'll back up the previous assistant superintendent that serve in this role dr. Stan Cox had this vision you know I want to give him the credit for creating an alternative pathway for students that just don't do school or have extenuating circumstances that you never at least kind of take the credit Danny and he's doing a great job over there he's done a great job everywhere he's been but this environment that we've been able to create is one that's a virtual learning environment took an old textbook depository literally in Salem Alabama that was a textbook warehouse and have converted it into what we call Lee County Learning Center or you'll hear the acronym LC squared or LC2 I have three certified teachers that work in the building have about 60 plus workstations with computers and we have a program that this is the second one that we've used we've gone from one particular package to another one now we're in our second contract but it's a virtual learning environment where a student can apply to attend it's not an alternative school in the sense that a lot of our minds go to is a punitive punitive environment right it's not that at all it is an alternative environment where students can work at their own pace that can work individually they can accelerate themselves they can take the time and slow down have an example maybe a student that I have to help support my family and work and have part-time jobs so I need to stay in school I want to stay in school but I might need a little bit more than a semester to get this particular course you can work in a slower pace I have different attendance maybe a situation like you were referencing you know you work through the seventh grade math looking when you get that credit done you get it done and you move to the next so it's an environment where students can work at their own pace and be successful in the three years of existence of Lee County Learning Center we've served over 300 students from our four high schools we have I think right at sixty spaces at any given time the students can apply students have been in and out of there we have had over 95 these are last year's numbers I'm not including anything in this current school year we've had over 95 students to graduate from high school a diploma that may have otherwise not they may have dropped out they live in those kids that got bored because they weren't excelling fast enough and dropped out and quit and went on to do a GED or so it may have been those students that were struggling and could not see the light at the end of that tunnel I said I'm not gonna make it it would have quit otherwise 95 kids in three years were able to save over 1,500 credit-bearing courses have been earned in three years and these are not including again this year's numbers so it's just a wonderful environment that has done really good things we have a career coach I think you've had conversations always podcast with Beth Parkman the food she works out there with these students have opportunity to connect with Southern Union opportunities to connect with the Chattahoochee Valley with workforce development many many wonderful opportunities out there for not only our four high schools but also this do these students the students that choose to go to LC2 remain enrolled at their home high school they're still a part of that particular group right they can walk they can graduate with their class just instead of walking down the hall to sit in a particular class in the building they're getting on a bus and shuttling to Salem to do their work that's that's really all it amounts to they're in a different physical place but still a student at that school

Keith: so the students don't necessarily have to have their own transportation to get to LC2 they can ride the bus to school and then get on another bus like a a bus transfer and ride to LC2 like in a big city and then go to LC2

Dr. Jason Wright: Keith that's exactly right you may have the option you want to drive your car so you can get up 11 o'clock and go to work and that's great you can do that provide your own transportation or if I want to ride the bus or get to my home school if I'm a student at Loachapoka high school I can get to Loachapoka on my bus route and then there is a shuttle that we run from Loachapoka to Salem in the mornings and then from Salem back to Loachapoka and after saying that same at Beulah Beauregard or Smith's so yes we do provide transportation to those students that need to attend or want to attend

Keith: I think it's a great thing that was something that I first learned about when I started working here and I've been out there and seen the facility and I think it's really cool that we have that here I think it's really awesome things about Lee County that we have

Dr. Jason Wright: there's two pieces to LC2 that I want to make sure that okay people are aware number one I've got to give just a quick overview of its intention in the number of students research we also have two different spaces out there that I haven't referenced we have a professional development space and the in the back of this building that could house a large number of people for a professional development we've had a number of different events out there when that event is not being used for professional development it's a kind of a relaxed atmosphere for those students they have set up tables for lunch they have bean bags they have games they have a place that can relax and you know work and interact with each other and then the one that I'm probably most proud of in the back of that we have established a partnership with Southern Union Community College and we are teaching a welding course excuse me a machining course in the back of that building so the union is providing the faculty member they have provided the equipment and through the articulation agreements that we have a Southern Union and through the documentation of the state students can go to LC2 and they can get a machining degree and certificate start that process through Southern Union they can graduate high school and also have a well on their way to have associate's degree in a certificate to be a machinist which is one of those high demand areas in our workforce so really excited about that this is our first full year there and that that's something that Darrin Baldwin who was the Dean of the career tech side over said you know we've talked about for years as well as things it sounds great at a meeting we'll talk about it we'll scrap some things on paper but now it's a reality and that's really really exciting

Keith: yeah well let's talk about career-tech a little bit because Beth Parkman and her episode she said that she had drunk she had drunk the kool-aid on career-tech right and so let's talk you know what is that what's that mean what are its pros and are there any cons those kinds of things

Dr. Jason Wright: career technical education is probably the most relevant thing that we offer in our high schools today the state of Alabama recognized several years ago that equally important to producing quote college ready students was for our public schools to be able to produce career ready students career technical education is a vital part of our curriculum it's a vital part of our society and preparing for the needs not every student's going to go to college that's just a simple fact in which students graduate from high school the more skills that they possess the more opportunities that we are able to present to them the more exposure that they are allowed to have to different career opportunities the better they're going to be served and I go back to what was my original statement of why I'm in this business is to help students grow and mature and be successful that is the premise of every decision that I've ever made professionally and educationally and the career tech piece is so important we have programs in our four high schools that vary based on the population that we serve based on the needs but we take a look at workforce development what are the jobs that are available

not only in the state of Alabama but more specifically right here in Lee County and right here along this I 85 corridor and we try to have programs in place that meet those workforce demands the machining that we've introduced at LC 2 that's a very expensive program Southern Union has a great program it's very well established but getting the numbers that they needed they were struggling with that so they've partnered with us and we're able to get students introduced to that a little bit earlier and be prepared and then go right out into a workforce we have in our career tech welding that's a high demand job we have it's a it's a great way to make a career right up and down to 80 they're signs in several places hiring welding welders and fitters you know now needed there there's opportunities there we have an automotive program at Smith station high school this particular corridor between Kia in West Point Georgia and Hyundai in Montgomery all along this interstate 85 corridor their automotive manufacturing plants going up there are opportunities for students there at Smith station to go through an automotive program all of our schools have business and marketing programs most of our schools have health service programs for the nursing and the medical fields and the sports medicines and those type opportunities they're exposed to we started a couple of years ago in education and training one of the problems and I didn't mention this in my challenges piece earlier but the state of Alabama is going to be in a real crisis soon facing a teacher shortage they're just not the numbers of people going into education as there once was so we've started a career tech program education and training to get those prospective teachers in high school start learning some of the things they're going to need to learn and promoting in that direction in college you're trying to meet our our workforce needs so there are many many opportunities and you know the agriscience obviously we live in a very rural area that's a very popular program that we have and agriscience is a very broad term but that we have we have horticultural opportunities there we have building science opportunities there we have animal service opportunities there so just as I'm kind of walking you through some of this I'm only scratching the surface of the opportunities that we're able to expose our students to to get them career ready students that decide a path that they want to follow and take courses in a sequence in that particular area they can literally walk out of high school not only with a high school diploma when they graduate but a credential where they are ready to go to work in a particular field whether it's in the business Microsoft certification that we have a Microsoft Academy in all of our schools where they can be quote unquote experts in Excel in Word and those kinds of things in our agriscience we've partnered with the acronym as NCCER where they will have the the safety standards they need and be ready to walk out into the workforce serve safe credentials you know the list goes on and on but it's really excited with what we're able to do a career-tech it is not and there is a misconception in a lot of areas of the world career technical education is not the old school of thought where these folks just go over here and do their own thing it's truly integrated even to the point now students can get core academic credits for some of the career tech courses you know they're truly integrated together

Keith: you are in these assistant superintendent for secondary education so you you're right there with those kids that they used to say in springtime the sap is rising and you know I think the last I heard was that they say you know your brain isn't fully developed to like 25 or something so you've got kids that you've got these kids at that age where they're not always making the best decisions and things like that and so how do you how do you handle situations like that where you want to make sure they learn from their mistake but not ruin their their future basically

Dr. Jason Wright: you you you ask a very interesting question there and it's one of those non-classroom non-curricular non Alabama standard learning opportunities a phrase that I've often used as an assistant principal and even as a principal when I would deal with students one-on-one and I encourage our

people to do now one mistake does not define an individual do not let this particular issue whatever it may be define you but using your words learn from it and grow from it and this is probably the third or fourth time you've heard me say this as an educator and it's my responsibility as a chosen career path to help students grow and mature and be successful and a mistake is only a mistake if you don't learn from it so as adolescents will do as adolescents will do even as adults we're going to make poor choices we're going to do things along the way that in hindsight we probably should not have done it would not do again right and the key is to learn from to learn from it there are a variety of dispositions in place that we can use to try to help as far as consequences but at the end of the day when a student makes a choice whether it's a positive or a negative choice there are consequences for that and we want to focus on making good choices focus on this is the reasons these are the societal norms these are the things that could happen if you make a poor choice and negative and and show students to to make those good choices and again I'm a little bit further removed from it here when it comes to the Disciplinary part when it gets to me at this point in the current role that I serve it's a pretty major infraction oh yeah whether it's bringing something inappropriate to school you know you hear in the news all the time weapons the school shootings and and it's just a it's a terrible path that our society has gone down I don't really know how we've gotten there but bringing a weapon to school is just not something that we can tolerate whether it's intentional or accidental weapons on school ground there's laws in place and and we just we have to address those things students making bad choices with substances that are illegal that's something that we deal with sometimes that makes it this way and we have to deal with those things and and our Board of Education our seven member board has policies in place and and they have set a precedent on how we need to address those things and that's what we do we want to encourage people to make good choices but if you think of it from this perspective our schools are just a microcosm of our society if it exists in your community in your society then it's gonna exist in your school and we just have to work through those things and just like Public Safety addresses outside you know we work with them to address things on the inside when we need to

Keith: yeah yeah I mean things have changed drastically I was I was in high school when Columbine happened and that was the first high profile school shooting that I was ever aware of but I mean like I took some shop classes and at high school and every one of us had a little pocket knife in our pocket then we would whip out and use in the shop for whatever you know I remember one of the times teachers like trying to get something he's like all right well he's I don't care just agonizing like whatever no no way I'd be I'd be escorted off the premises well I was also not an idiot I didn't bring it out in classes and I didn't you know Menace people with it and stuff but that was also last century and

Dr. Jason Wright: it was and it was pre 9/11 yeah well yeah big time I think September 11th 2001 the society that we live in significantly changed forever and I think that's what you're talking about as an outgrowth of that just the the pocket knives the weapons the guns the any of those kinds of things it's just not okay the value of life and the protection of life and I think that date truly change the way we exist right

Keith: so there are there things talking about times changing and I don't want this to turn into being wistful for the old for the good old day it's right right but there there are things that students have to face or have to deal with these days that for example I didn't have to face when I was in high school social media you know cyber bullying that was have a bullying wasn't a thing when I was a kid how do you help teachers face those and deal with those types of situations that are arising and sometimes new ones are arising oh sure as as the school year goes on

Dr. Jason Wright: right there Keith there is no cookie cutter answer to dealing with that that's one of those things that will continue to evolve the word bullying has always existed yeah I think it's a term that is overused there are some very serious situations out there there are some true bullying where there is an imbalance of power between one person and another person and there is a repetitive pattern of misbehavior and those things fall in that category and they need to be addressed as bullying now there are also situations that are harassment issues there are categorized as assault they're categorized as inappropriate behavior there's a lot of different things out there and bullying is one of those words that has been tied to these high profile situations and please hear me say they are unfortunate there it's just simply not a way for me to wrap my mind around someone taking their own life and the push in the magnitude to which these cases and sometimes go okay I have a hard time even comprehending that so when it comes to dealing with those kinds of situations in the classroom and the bullying and the picking on and those kinds of things we need to address them and hit them head-on and deal with it immediately and try to get things resolved know the things that any parent that I've ever spoken to any student that I've ever spoken to or any school administrator about these kinds of things number one when something happens that's unwelcomed threatening uncomfortable that I don't like that's not okay you have to communicate we have to let the nearest adult know we have to let the teacher know we have to let the school official know Public Safety whoever it is so that we can get the right parts in place to get that resolved yeah social media is one of those things that perpetuates these problems and a lot of sense my perspective is simply this that people tend to get a little bit more powerful and a little bit more aggressive behind a keypad I mean then they would face-to-face with someone and also we use the words earlier an instantaneous society it happens immediately students could be sitting in the same room at social media back and forth or they could be on opposite ends of the country but it's still that instantaneous and they can see it in it right now right that's the part that it's probably the most challenging bullying has always existed there's always been the situations where someone's picked on and that kind of things

Keith: back in the day you had to occupy the same physical space for the bullying to happen

Dr. Jason Wright: and that's one boy at this point exactly it was a slower more methodical process but now the social media makes it instantaneous and I don't have to be in the same geographical location and the speed at which these things occur is the really challenging part but it's a matter of you know communication and knowing alternate strategies and and being able to address the deal with it getting the right players whether it's public safety whether it's counseling whether it's you know parents it's just getting the right parties at the table and addressing things as quickly as they can be addressed we referenced earlier a book study that we've done in this office this year the secrets of Disney and what makes that organization so successful and one of the lessons in that particular book is your problem is my problem if you've got an issue then I want to help you resolve that and and this kind of falls into that if you've got a problem as a student that you don't feel safe or you don't feel even comfortable I won't used to work safe but if you don't even feel comfortable that what can we do to help create an environment where you are comfortable and communication is the key communication is the key to making that work finding out where those things are taking place when are they taking place who's involved what's the root of the problem right it's a it's a very challenging piece it's a work in progress

Keith: absolutely are there any other challenges that we haven't discussed that face modern public education that we haven't touched on

Dr. Jason Wright: one of the one of the things that that we deal with often times is you know having to close school when we make those decisions

Keith: yeah so if anybody is listening recognizes your mellifluous tones because they've heard you on those auto calls saying school was closed because of this so yeah let that talk about that because and the reason I wanted to talk about this particular subject with you about describing the closing schools because I'm the I'm the media social media manager for Lee County and so when for example back in January there was talk of maybe some snow hitting like Southern Chambers County and so we put out the thing saying weather is supposed to be fine here we're gonna keep open and then the comments that rolled in about how we didn't care about the safety of kids like former co-host Kyle has told me it has helped that have tried to help me keep and keep in mind can I take everything personally sometimes I'm sure I'll get those I'll see those messages and I'm like her but I gotta remember that they're not going it Keith Claridy and they're yelling at you know into the void sometimes the aura can just be Lee County as an institution and so

Dr. Jason Wright: when you ask me the word other challenges yeah I try to tie this back to it is a challenge in the sense that when we as educational leaders part of leadership team make decisions recognize that any decision that we make is most likely not going to be pleasing to all right there are just a wide variety of perspective but the part that I want people to understand very clearly is that student safety and our employee safety and the safety of our stakeholders all stakeholders is of the utmost importance to us and that's what drives these kinds of decisions I'll tell you what we do not do we do not sit up here in the conference room and pull out our magic shiny penny heads we're going to close and Tails we're gonna open

Keith: that's right that's the shiny quarter you pull out

Dr. Jason Wright: we don't flip that coin it is one of those things that is a very complex fluid moving situations particularly with the weather we have a variety of things that we take into consideration first of all we have a very good working relationship with the Emergency Management Agency of Lee County that's typically going to be the starting point when we get the information they get that out to us hey storm front is coming as a matter of fact I got a message Saturday morning that there is a webinar this morning on the front that's coming in today I mean we've we constantly work through with with the EMA we work with Public Safety we work with other local school systems and and we all are in constant communication when it comes to making a decision about the opening or closing the school that's not something that we take very lightly the foundation of it is we're going to do what's safe and what we believe is right for students and employees and parents and all stakeholders but when we work with those agencies that I've named even transportation have to keep in mind whether meteorology is a science mmm there is no exact but we've gotten pretty good in today's time the technology available and the skills that our people have in those other agencies to relay information to us to make the best decision the specific January incident that you referenced Lee County was not in quote/unquote that shaded area when I say shaded I'm referring to the map yeah we were right next to it and one of the things that I've learned over the years and I preface again by saying it's a science it's not exact but one of the things that I have learned and working with these individuals is those shaded areas typically including include the it could be there's not going to be a direct specific path that a storm or a front may follow but if you're in the shaded area towards the edge of that that it's a maybe if you're outside of it there's a real good chance you're outside of it and that was part of the process for that particular one in January that we were outside of and when our neighbors are inside of and closing you know there has to

be a line somewhere and we felt very comfortable very comfortable a decision that we made there was no doubt that we made the decision that we thought was in the best interests if it's safe to go to school then we're going to go to school this past week then a couple of weeks ago now marked with our terrible situation that happened on March 3rd that was one of those fluid continually evolving situations as we would get information from public safety and from EMA that would help us make decisions we found out Sunday afternoon and I don't remember the exact timeframe just we're talking but let's say it was in a three o'clock time frame that the tornado came through within a matter of minutes we are already in communication with each other our leadership team checking on buildings checking on people we're getting some reports that we had to go verify these true or not true and within you know a half hour we've already made the decision there's no way we're gonna be able to have school tomorrow not knowing the magnitude of the storm no idea what's going on that we've made that decision so get that message out and then as information begins to come in over the next couple of days it's a it's truly a day-by-day decision more information that's being learned you know hour by hour we are using our facilities in that particular event you know one is a volunteer rescue facility one of stage as a media facility one has been taken over by Alabama power for their equipment another particular facility has been damaged in Smith's we're trying to evaluate so that was a very fast-moving situation where the information changed almost hourly that we were getting from from the officials we put a plan in place that we thought we might be able to get students back in school the following Monday you know midweek we were it was important to us to get our faculty and staff back in first we need a chance to have the adults process and talk through and deal with emotions and get bereavement counseling and how are we going to open school and what does that first day back that it look like it's very important to get the adults back in first with the national attention that this particular storm got and with the president coming you know that bumped our timeframe even more and so be it those are things that we need to do so sharing specifics of a couple of incidents that have happened recently I go back to those decisions are made to close school with a variety of agencies involved a variety of conversations that take place and we're always going to do what we believe to be in the best interest is we're never gonna put student safety as a secondary part of the decision-making process our transportation or roads closed you know Alabama Power how many customers do we have in our attendance zones without power all those things there's a lot of variables that go into it so

Keith: after the snow storm in last January we wound up staying closed for the rest of the week because of ice on the roads correct that's right so just the safety of we can't get it's not safe for kids leave there for us and the buses out to pick up the kids because ice

Dr. Jason Wright: while I live in a place of that particular storm that you know two or three days later I'm going to walmart that's business as usual for me yeah there are parts of our County that are still impassable it's not safe and we have to wait until we can get everybody moving in a safe direction while you know again I'm sitting in a nice warm cozy 72 degree condition unit there are some places in our county that still don't have power and still struggling through those things so it's a very comprehensive and talk geographically we're one of the largest counties inside of Alabama it's a it's a 35-minute drive from Loachapoka high school to East Smiths station Elementary School it's a big County yeah so there could be impact in one part of the county that's not necessarily impacted another and all those things are taken into consideration

Keith: what part do the emergency declarations from the governor play in maybe not the decision-making but in how we handle out afterwards

Dr. Jason Wright: those are significant if there is a declaration for state of emergency then by legislation school days that are missed do not have to be made up if there is not a state of emergency then we would be required to do some alternate instruction and find days to to have school so that is a very important component when the governor makes that declaration it gives us the flexibility to stay within our calendar you know we've had some conversations they were very short conversations but we have had some conversations about missing six instructional days with the events you know do we need to make that up and the outcome of that conversation was the life lessons and the other pieces are far more important than reading math and science on those days and and the because of the state of emergency we're not going to make those up but yeah the declaration is the piece that allows us that flexibility

Keith: because this past referring back this past January with the people up in arms that we weren't closing school because we weren't in the snow zone you know wanted to tell them if we close the school there's no emergency declaration that means your kid's gonna have to make that up that's from April when it's nice and pretty outside when they could be outside playing you know

Dr. Jason Wright: this one of those things it's not an arbitrary decision right there are a lot of players there's multiple conversations and there are many significant pieces and we're going to do what we feel is the safest thing to do and some will agree some will not and I accept that and and I appreciate that's part of the great part of living where we do the country we do you have a right to your opinion yeah it's okay

Keith: Just be nice to me people

Dr. Jason Wright: be nice to Keith he's a good guy

Keith: so what are some of the other awesome things at Lee County

Dr. Jason Wright: well you know I think we've hit on the biggest piece it's the people the this is a people business in the way that the community has rallied has shown support has shown the love has shown the connection that's really what makes this special I appreciate everything that the outside agencies have done that come in they've helped they've donated they contributed but it's our people that are right here in the Beauregard community it's our people are right here in the smiths station community it's our friends and partners and families that are in Beulah and Loachapoka and even Auburn and Opelika that have all pulled together and made I have a sticker on my desk that says Lee County strong yeah I mean that's that's been so evident that's that's truly I think the best attribute that we have that we can offer you know instructionally and while that's what we do professionally and that's really what this is about it's an educational conversation that community takes the forefront but to kind of close instructionally we want to continue growing professionally we've talked about a little bit in their conversation today about what what an effective classroom looks like how to deal with societal issues that we're facing and and I kind of close by I think your words were awesome things are going in Lee County it's that commitment to continually get better it is that focus on I think our vision over the archway of our door tradition and vision there's two key words we want to hold all of those things that make us special mm-hmm but we also want to have that vision to keep getting better and a commitment to evolve to grow professionally to as society changes embrace those changes and bring them into our classrooms and prepare students for that world as we said that doesn't exist yet yeah well

Keith: dr. Wright um with the with you and the rest of the admin team that we have in here here at Lee County I know that we're going to continue to be awesome but I'm just going to go ahead and tell you like I tell everybody else that I want you to continue to be awesome and I really appreciate you sitting down and chatting with me

Dr. Jason Wright: okay Keith thank you for what you do thank you for your time and effort and commitment to Lee county and thank you for this opportunity

Ukulele Music