

Wildkit Way Podcast: Season 1, Episode 3

Announcer:

Welcome to The Wildkit Way, a podcast that gives the mic to Dr. Marcus Campbell, the superintendent of Evanston Township High School. Join us on this audio journey as Dr. Campbell shares his stories and insights and has honest real conversations with people who make ETHS and our community the incredible place it is. Being the parent or guardian of a high schooler can be an exciting eye-opening and sometimes worrisome experience. Walking the halls at ETHS for students these days is quite different than 30, 20, even 10 years ago. On this episode of The Wildkit Way, ETHS, superintendent Marcus Campbell sits down with Evanston community members, two parents of ETHS students to gain perspective about their experience and learn from them as they navigate ETHS with their children. Let's begin.

Marcus Campbell:

Welcome. Gabriela Ramos and Steve Jones, two of our parents and community members. Gabriela is the parent of two freshmen who are twins, and Steve is a parent of a sophomore and a senior. So, welcome Gabriela. Welcome Steve. Tell us about your families and what does it mean to be a part of the Wildkit family?

Steve Jones:

It's been terrific. I've really appreciated everything the school's tried to do during the pandemic. And as a university professor myself, I have some idea what that was like, trying to make that pivot. And I think the school, it felt really good having a school that was attending not just to the educational needs, the outright curricular kind of things, but also the mental and physical health and wellbeing of students throughout. It's been a very different experience than my high school experience. And that's been a great learning thing. When I listen to my kids talk about it too, I've really appreciated their ability to talk about what goes on here and the kind of things that they come across every day.

Marcus Campbell:

Yeah. That's one thing that we really try to do is extend and build a culture of care for our students and families. And during the pandemic, we pretty much did whatever we thought we could do. We try to extend that same care now that we're back in person and we're having a bit of a normal school year. And so I'm glad that your students are feeling that the school cares and that we try to extend ourselves when we can. Gabriela, you've got two freshman students. Yes. how is that transition going from District 65 to 202? And how are your twins doing?

Gabriella Ramos:

It's been an amazing transition, actually. Like when my kids were, we first came to Evanston, my kids were probably in like third or fourth grade, and I knew from the time that they were in grade school that I wanted them to go to Evanston Township High School. I'm like, whatever it takes, like, we're going to stay in the district, we're going to stay at this school. Like this school has an amazing athletics department. Just everything about the school, I would hear from friends. I have lots of friends who graduated from ETHS, actually, and I didn't. But I wanted my kids to go to this school and they're finally here. It was kind of a little dream come true, actually, <laugh>. My one daughter is in wrestling and girls wrestling who knew she would wanna be a part of girls wrestling. Right. You know, my son, he's in clubs. He's, you know, doing film club, tech club. I think Evanston has just been great to my family, honestly. I just, I couldn't imagine any place else that I would wanna raise my kids. I've been around the country growing up and I came to Evanston for one year when I was in sixth grade, and I came back. I remembered Evanston. I wanted my kids to go to Evanston. Now we're here. They're living the dream. I'm living the dream. It's been very like a good experience. Good experience.

Marcus Campbell:

Happy to hear you say that too, because a lot of students don't know that every high school in this country's not like this: to have the kind of athletic program and the extracurricular activities that we have going on at the school to have a planetarium. To have all of the things that we have. We are very fortunate and very, very, very fortunate to, to, to be able to serve kids in that way. And by the way, to have an outstanding academic program here as well. So you both serve on the community advisory council that I pretty much started and you initiated this year with our communications team here at the district. And why did you agree to serve on the council?

Like, what's your goal for having conversation with a guy like me as a superintendent of 202? Like, what brings you here? Gabriela, why don't you start there?

Gabriella Ramos:

So I did quite a bit of volunteer work. I used to work for Northwestern and we did a lot of volunteer work with you know, raising cancer awareness, like in underserved communities and, you know, promoting cancer screening and everything. And I did work in, in the community in that capacity, but I haven't really spent a lot of time working with like my children's schools or the community, like within Evanston itself. I've worked in communities and, you know, the south side and everything, but I kind of wanted to see what was going on here. And, you know, my kids spend a lot of time here every day. They're here for hours at a time. So I wanted to see, I wanted to contribute. I wanted to see if I could make the cut, actually, for being on the council and then use that platform to kind of advocate for other families and other students.

Marcus Campbell:

Well, thank you for joining. You know, the council, you know, your voice has just been, you know, very important and the issues and the questions that you've been raising. So thank you for that. Steve, what about you? What was your goal in joining us in conversation?

Steve Jones:

Well, I was really active on the PTA at my kids' elementary school, and then with PTA council in Evanston too. And one of the things that I really enjoyed about it was being able to kind of synthesize what I was hearing from other parents and kind of serve as a bridge between parents and the school. And that's kind of been my goal here is to try to bring in that voice in a bit of a more synthesized way. I'm sure you hear a lot but it's coming from kinda all over the place. And I think having some focus where people kind of, you know, come. I think that's why it's great to have this council. To be able to kind of focus parents' ideas, concerns, et cetera and synthesize them, condense them and, and bring them over to you and have those kind of discussions.

Marcus Campbell:

Yeah. One of the things that I, it's worked for me in the census to be able to have a sustained, consistent conversation and building relationships with those that are on the council. I get a lot, you're right. And sometimes it's decontextualized, you know, I've been here a long time, so I know families and I know people and that kind of thing. But this is very good for me to be establishing, you know, personal relationships, to see all of you establish relationships with each other and really talk about what's happening in our school community, right? From our various vantage points. And so I really appreciate both of you taking the opportunity to, to, to serve and taking the time and, you know, we could talk, probably talk every week and still have you know not enough time to really get through all of the issues and the challenges and, and they celebrate the good things too of what's happening in the district. So last month we had some students to tell us you know to give advice to parents. And one of the things that the students said to us is that the parents show some empathy to their students and with their students as they navigate, you know, transitioning to high school and as they matriculate through the high school. And I'm curious, what are your thoughts about that? The idea of empathy and how are you supporting your students here at ETHS?

Steve Jones:

So that is so crucial. You know I had the good fortune of working at the University of Illinois Chicago with Roger Weisberg, who founded the Center for Advanced Social-Emotional Learning. And you know, one of the first things that I think you do as a parent, because nobody trains you in this, right?

Marcus Campbell:

There's no manual.

Steve Jones:

There's no manual and there's no, you go by kind of what you went through as a kid and what you went through as a kid is so different than what your kids are going through.

Marcus Campbell:

Absolutely.

Steve Jones:

So different. So you gotta listen. And kind of, the first instinct I think for most parents is to kind of hear a little bit and they go, okay, I'm going to, here's how I'm going to try to fix this. You know, but just the listening part of it is so crucial and it, I think you really need to kind of build that skill and have that opportunity to listen to them and then engage in conversation with them. And that is so not what my parents did with me. I mean, it's just generations, you know, and I think we're, I think we're getting better at this. But I think our kids can lead the way in this too. They're, they have so, I think greatly, taken on some of the ideas from social-emotional learning themselves and can teach us a lot about how to listen, how to support and how to be kind of partnering in their growth process through high school and not just kind of being, you know, quote unquote the parent.

Marcus Campbell:

Yeah. The student experience is vastly different. Last month's podcast, we were just sharing that, you know, they went to school through a once in a century pandemic, right? And have, are living in the world of social media and so many other dynamics that can make their experience very complex as well as trying to get an education through all of that. So I'm curious, Gabriela, what do you think about that? Showing empathy and how are you supporting your, your twins as they navigate a essentially a newer school or new school emerging out of a pandemic as freshmen?

Gabriella Ramos:

So the one thing that I can kind of tip that I can stress the most is validation. Validate their feelings. Validate, just giving the, showing them that, you know, you understand. Not even that, even if you don't understand exactly what they're going through, that you're listening to them. And then you can appreciate that they're sharing that with you. And I think cultivating that communication with your child is just so important. It's going to be something that you have to work on. It's not something that people know how to do immediately. You have to kind of train yourself and, and train your almost, you know, your relationship a little bit. That relationship is going to last. Your kid's not always going to be your kid. They're going to grow up one day. They're going to be, they're going to be an adult. You know, how you handle these situations, understanding them, their emotional health and, you know, their mental health is going to impact them as an adult as well. So we need to be careful and just make sure that, you know, we're validating their feelings. The world is vastly different than it was when we were growing up. We never had active shooter drills.

Marcus Campbell:

I think the most we did was like tornadoes or something.

Gabriella Ramos:

Exactly, fire drills, tornadoes. They're having active, active shooter drills and, and just with social media, they're constantly, constantly getting bad news sometimes. So we just have to be very sensitive to their emotional health and, and be a resource for them and encourage them to come to you. They can talk to you, you know, don't, don't judge how they're feeling, but just try to understand, listen to them.

Steve Jones:

And if you don't understand, you know, ask them for more, try to and tell them, right? You know, I don't...tell me in a different way or explain it. You know, try to elicit some more conversation from them. Because my, you know, my, my experience was always, you know, that was kind of a shutting down was, well, I don't get it. You know, and that was kind of end of story. And I think that's actually, you could use that in a positive way and say, well, I'm not really getting it. Tell me more. Help me out here.

Marcus Campbell:

Yeah. And so the school's been trying to adjust, right, to the world of this, you know, these threats and feeling so vulnerable, right? You know, students, their emotional safety and vulnerability. It can be compromised with regard to social media. And you know, with regard to you know, these mass casualty events that are happening seems own routine. And so the school's been trying to adjust and respond and put safety procedures in place. And what are you, so we've made a lot of changes. So what do you think of some of the changes that the school has made to support students, keep students safe or, you know, to really help

students get back on track after the pandemic? And Steve, you probably got a little bit of context for this question. What do you make of the changes at ETHS so far?

Steve Jones:

I mean, I think the efforts have been great. I think in some ways you always end up being somewhat reactive. You kind of never know what, what's around the corner. The social media component of it is so difficult. High school is tough enough socially, and now you potentially have the whole world looking at you. And when I think back to my high school experience, if I had that sort of lens focused on me from potentially anywhere really, I think I would've completely freaked out. You know, I think the effort the school makes to try to get the students knowledge about how to deal with these things, but also to keep channels of communication open with social workers, with teachers and staff with safety folks, I think that's a key part of it right there too. And then bringing parents into that conversation and that mix is crucial because so much of what goes on in terms of, I think how safe students feel is not just when they're here, but it's also when they're out in the larger community, too. Yeah. And so it's, that's a huge conversation ongoing.

Marcus Campbell:

Yeah. Gabriela, what do you make of this shift or the changes- like what your twins are adjusting to, even academically- after the pandemic?

Gabriella Ramos:

Yeah, so, well, since my, my kids are freshmen, I, I can't speak to so many things from last year, but I know this year it just seems to have like a pretty good comprehensive plan that you guys have in place to kind of, you know, cultivate a safe environment and make students and feel safe. And I appreciate that. I feel like Evanston Township High School tries really hard to make students feel safe and provide resources for students that they might, we might not have at other, you know, schools. My students take advantage of a lot of the resources here, which is great. And as a parent, I couldn't have asked for more. It makes parenting that much easier to be in the loop with how my kids are, you know, feeling, doing day-to-day, working with the teachers, having that open line of communication. So, I think we're going in the right direction. I mean, there's always going to be work to do.

Marcus Campbell:

Always work to do.

Gabriella Ramos:

I don't think work's ever going to, you know, there's not going to be anything else to do, but I think it's going in the right direction. And, you know, even having these conversations with the school directly and having the opportunity to have those conversations with the school directly. It just shows how dedicated, you know, Evanston Township is to making this happen and making the kids feel safe.

Steve Jones:

I don't, I don't intend to kind of put you on the spot with this but I'm going to put it a little bit on you here, which is, you know, how do you... How do you make a shift from being reactive to being kind of proactive? You know, are there some things that you could maybe see kind of for the future that you know. Or is it just this kind of race to keep up with, you know, what's going on out there in the world that kind of keeps impinging on our community?

Marcus Campbell:

That's a great question. I think it's always a little bit of both, right? You know, you don't really know always what's around the corner, so you have to respond to that. And I used to always, I tell folks there's a difference between being reactive and responsive. You know, reactive, there's really no thought. Responsive is: okay, how do we think through systemically, philosophically procedurally to respond to an event or a series of events or a context of scenarios? And we also are thinking about, okay how do we be proactive at addressing the mental health of the students, the social-emotional functioning of students? What needs can we anticipate, right? And to some degree, there are many sets of context and needs and services that we know we can provide. But then the students always will show us and demonstrate what they need and what they want, and then you have to respond to that. So it's always both. They're definitely... Last year we were anticipating needs

of this year that we were able to address. And next year, based on this year, we're already anticipating how we can be proactive at some other aspects of school being more inclusive and more responsive to how the kids are coming to us based on the last three years, because we really haven't had this before, right? We haven't had to respond to kids who've been through and lived through a pandemic and remote learning and all of the breaks in the sequence of learning and all of the stuff, right? And we're trying to figure out how do we continue to assess that? How do we continue to teach them how to self-regulate and ask for help and how do we continue to teach them conflict management, you know? And then so there's so much happening. But we're always trying to be responsive but also proactive based on the data that we have. And you know, we're kind of used to that, but how it shows up and what the it is and what it looks like, we don't always know, right? Because I still feel like we're building a new school and new programs and new approaches based on the consequences of the pandemic. And we might be doing that for some time. As we close. I just have a question. What advice would you give to future or Wildkit families or Wildkit families in general? What advice would you give to them?

Gabriella Ramos:

Well, I would definitely say take advantage of the resources that are available at the school. There's so many different departments and resources available for your family, for your children, for their mental health, (including) social workers. Take advantage. Learn what's available here. Also, try to get your kids involved. There's something for everybody here.

Marcus Campbell:

And if there's not "it" here, we'll create it. <Laugh> We'll make it. <Laugh>

Steve Jones:

Yeah. I can only really echo that. And, you know, and, and I kind of harken back to something you (Gabriella) said earlier about validating. You know, whatever it is your kids want to do, let them explore that while they're here. I mean, this is, this is a great place to explore stuff and figure some things out before you move on into the world, whether that's college or job or whatever it might be. You know, this is kind of a ground on which you can experiment a bit. And the degree to which you can support your student as they do that kind of stuff is going to make such an impact on their future. Because the older you get, the less experimenting you're going to be able to do. So look around at all the sports, the clubs, everything that's available and you know, try to help them out to choose some of that stuff and then support them when they do and support them if they stop right. You know, if they kind of go, well maybe that really wasn't for me. Maybe this other thing will be, you know. Yeah. Great. Go for it.

Marcus Campbell:

Yeah. Well that's great advice and thank you for joining me. Gabriela. Thank you, Steve. You know, you all have certainly given me perspective, so I hope that those that are listening could take something away from this conversation too.

Steve Jones:

Thanks so much.

Gabriella Ramos:

Thanks for having me.

Announcer:

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