Honoring Legacy: A Conversation with Kwesi Rollins on Lessons in Leadership, Activism, and Impact

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Welcome to the Parent Teacher Home Visits podcast, a space where we explore the power of connection between families and educators. I'm Andrea Prejean, executive director of Parent Teacher Home Visits, and I'm thrilled to bring you conversations with educators, families and community members who are transforming futures and improving academic outcomes by fostering intentional and systemic family engagement, join us as we delve into real stories, practical strategies and the transformative impact of building trust and understanding that with one home visit at a time, we can bring families and schools together, and when we do that, anything is possible. Today, we have the distinct honor of speaking with Kwesi Rollins, a member of the senior leadership team at the Institute for Educational Leadership. He's a former board member of parent, teacher, home visit, and a tireless advocate for children, youth and families for more than three decades, crazy, extensive experience includes deep work in community schools, early childhood education and leadership development, all underscored by his unwavering belief in the power of strong family and community partnerships. He's been instrumental in initiatives designed to foster cross sector collaboration, and has provided invaluable guidance to countless organizations and school districts, and we are especially proud to share that by the time this episode airs, Kwesi will be the esteemed recipient of the Parent Teacher Home Visits own Jocelyn graves award, recognizing his profound and enduring commitment to family engagement and educational excellence over the course of our conversation today, we'll be exploring crazy journey understanding his perspectives on the critical role of family engagement and student success, and gaining his valuable insights on navigating the current educational landscape. We have much to discuss, so let's dive right in. Welcome. Crazy. Thanks for having me before we jump into our conversation, I really want to take a minute to express our sincere gratitude for your long standing commitment to parent, teacher, home visits as a former board member, your guidance and passion have been invaluable to our organization. You've been a champion of family engagement throughout our distinguished career, and actually you and I both served on the first national board, parent, teacher home visit together, and so I look back fondly on that experience, and it is just with immense pleasure that we're recognizing you with the award this year, as many of our listeners know, it honors individuals who embody the spirit of Jocelyn graves. She was a remarkable parent from Sacramento. She galvanized communities to found parent, teacher, home, visit, driven by her unwavering belief in the power of families as partners in education, it celebrates those who like Jocelyn demonstrate profound passion for family engagement and a dedication to educational excellence for all children. We're so thrilled to be recognizing you with the Jocelyn graves award this year. So what are your initial thoughts and feelings about receiving the honor, especially considering your history with parent, teacher, home visit. It's

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definitely an honor, a significant acknowledgement, and it's funny, because as I read the first email indicating that I was going to be the recipient, is that, oh, wow, I was literally taken off guard. You know, we don't do this work for the for the accolades. I mean, I don't. I think all of us want to be appreciated for our contributions, but for me, I don't need a big public splash. I don't think everybody know that I'm so great. And so I was literally taken aback, because I know her legacy, and it's nice to feel like, you know you added value to an effort. And ever since I kind of came in touch with parent, teacher, home business for the first time, I've always been that kind of person, I was like, oh, there's some, there's some there, there. I need to work with these people. I need to learn more. Even the way I got on the board was kind of funny, because I had created a way to support parent, teacher home visits, to do some work and to come to a conference several of the staff and practitioners and the then executive director said, Well, you really should be on the board, because without even thinking about all of that, I basically had, you know, used some money I had in another budget to support parent, teacher, home, business, being a part of an important conversation, and that's board member behavior. But that's not why I did it. It just made sense, and I had a way to make that happen so full circle, you know, you take those kind of actions because they're the right thing to do, and then here we are, geez, 1012, 1314, years later, and those initial actions are now being recognized for the value that they added. So I'm proud of that, and I'm proud of that legacy, and I think that's the most important. Okay, we

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all remember Carrie, the first executive director of Parent Teacher Home Visits, and I think we have a lot to be thankful for her leadership and guidance when it was very small organization, but she knew when to tap in people like you who have a national presence and really value parent engagement, family engagement in school. So we are thankful that you said yes to Carrie when she first tapped you. You know, we know that your early career was and I think continues, you can correct me if I'm right, deeply rooted in community organizing. And I think maybe some folks don't know that parent, teacher, home visit was deeply rooted in organizing, of organizing families, parents, educators, to work together. Would you share a little bit about your early experiences in the field of community organizing, and how these may have shaped your understanding and the importance of community involvement? One

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of the benefits of being old and still in your right mind, you have a lot of stories. And if you're paying attention, there's a lot of connections there. And just this week, at a meeting a statewide Community Schools meeting in Maryland, I told an old story about really the trajectory I ended up on because I came to Washington, DC, I went to Howard University. I came to Washington, DC to go to Howard to go to medical school and become a doctor. And because I had to work my way through school, I ended up being a shop steward in the union organizing operating room technicians, battling the management, getting turned off the medicine. I didn't want to be in that hierarchy, dropping out of school for a semester, while I figured things out, going back, thank God I did that, and getting a BS in zoology and chemistry, believe it or not, but that put me on a different trajectory. That put me on an organizing trajectory, and I became an activist. I bought my first apartment in Tacoma park, or I should say, rented my first apartment, and found myself being vice president of the Tenant Association, and then being part of a city wide effort in Takoma Park, Maryland, and then ultimately in DC, to protect rent control. So activism was always kind of a part community organizing, activism using whatever energy I have to to

protect. You know, as a tenant. I needed protection as well, obviously, thinking beyond just myself and so all of that is really I mean, I'm a young man when all this is happening. I'm in my early 20s. I also become kind of another an activist around other politics. When the Klan marched on Washington, DC, I was part of a of a city wide response called people against racism, and the Klan that organized against them being able to come to the nation's capital and demonstrate, if you will, little by little, my activism really kind of picked up, and eventually a lot of that energy ended up getting channeled into youth development or community organizing and supporting vulnerable families in Washington, DC. And I ended up working in a local agency that has a new name now, but it was called the Alcohol and Drug Abuse Services Administration. And I was part of the Office of prevention, intervention and education. We were the recipients of the very first grant back then, the education law. I can't remember what it was called, but essentially title four of the education law was the safe and Drug Free Schools and Communities Act. So that's a long time ago. States got a certain portion based on their size, and then that was part A, and Part B was the governor's portion. And in DC, the governor's portion went to this agency, and this agency created an outreach program that was designed to do a couple of things, work with kids in the school in rough neighborhoods, work with their parents to get them into treatment and to support them when they came out of treatment. And I became the deputy director of that program, you know. So my field work was in the most dangerous neighborhoods in Washington, DC, when DC was the murder capital per capita of the United States, largely driven by crack cocaine related violence. In the late 80s and early 90s, I had offices in the worst neighborhoods, literally a converted public housing unit turned into an office, and I spent hours working with kids, working with community, etc, and that's really how I cut my teeth in terms of community work. So I already had kind of an organizing background, and I brought that ethos to the work. But I also developed the kind of skills one needs. We, you know, we talk about code switching or whatever. I also developed the skills that one needs to work with regular people and to show love for their kids. So all of that is before I ever got into doing any kind of systems work, systemic work. It was really honing those skills in rough neighborhoods, trying to be part of the. Solution. And in those days, we had different language, where we basically were trying to prevent adolescent problem, behaviors like drug and alcohol abuse, violence, work with families, all of that, you know, later I would go back to school and become a student, get an MSW So, and all of that work helped focus me on systems change. You know, the kind of things I wanted to do. So I bring kind of all of that to the table long before I'm working with multiple cities and multiple states and and working nationally, if that makes sense. Yeah, it

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does. I think sometimes people don't remember, or No, I guess know that the residents of DC are active activists all of the time, in a space that those of us who live in a state you know and have some control over, at least voting and representation, don't understand that DC residents don't have that representation at the federal level and Little control often over what happens in their city, for

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sure, and we're now in a period, and I know we'll get to that later, but we're now into a period where we had a little bit of control, but now, you know, with the current administration, would like us to have a little bit less control, but DC has always been subject to kind of the wins and experiment of folks in Congress and whoever is occupying the White House.

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So you touched on something, and I wanted to probe a little bit, you know, you talked about working in neighborhoods who are struggling. And there's often a belief that the parents who live there, the families who live there, are not concerned about their kids. Are not concerned about their neighborhood, you know, don't care about school, or, you know, all of those. And which really harkens us back to Jocelyn, who, you know, was really trying to fight that narrative, as well as fighting the narrative of blaming each other. You know, educators blaming parents. So, you know, how did you combat that? You know, what are your thoughts around? That, especially for educators, often, who don't live in the neighborhoods of the students that they teach, yeah and and are trying to confront their own biases, beliefs as we all are, what are? What are your thoughts around that

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you have to have some what we now know as an the executive function of perspective, taking right when you're in rough neighborhoods that have a lot of challenges, you've got a combination of the violence, overwhelming amount of guns and drugs under employment. You've got all these kind of concentrations of issues, and it affects every family differently. You've got families that are just trying to do their thing and just, you know, move along. You've got others who are directly in the midst of those issues and need extra supports. And when you work in those settings, you really do have to have a different kind of sensibility, because for me, I certainly don't approve of a lot of those behaviors, but I understand it, and there are bigger issues than people necessarily have control over. And of course, people have choice, but sometimes folks don't have as many choices as others and as many opportunities as others. And I never forget, this was a Staunton elementary school. Was the school that we worked with our first partnership on Stanton terrace. This is a public housing site that doesn't exist anymore, and I never forget going to talk to that principal, like many entities that have a program that wants to come into your school, and I never forget how this principal is a good man. He was an older black man, but you could tell he was just worn. He was just tired. He was just treading water, basically, and didn't really ask us a lot of hard questions. Didn't really he was just like, sure, we pretty much had run of the school, and our strategy was to cycle through the entire school throughout the course of a school year, doing a range of prevention activities and then also offering after school supports in our office, which was on their site, and then during the summer, doing some summer enrichment stuff. And so that principal would subsequently retire, and they brought in another principal who had a very different energy. I'll never forget, Doctor Clemmy Strayhorn. What a name, right? And and His thing was partnership, partnership, partnership. And He came, and he brought every partner he could find, and he was having graduation at the church across the street, because that was a good idea to loop in the community. I mean, he had a completely different approach, and we work well with him also. I focus on the principals, because I think teachers, of course, bring their own stuff to the party, but principals kind of set the stage for how we're going to treat kids, how we're going to relate to family, how we're going to behave in a neighborhood. And when you have kind of a, you know, I'll call it lackadaisical, not so much as a critique, but just as a reality, that that first principle was just kind of beat down, worn and just treading water, then it's no accident. That some of the staff is kind of having up and down uneven behavior. I'll put it that way, right, uneven approaches, and I contrast that to the next guy that came in. And you know, that shit got tight. That shit got tight. We love this community. He brought resources to the community. He got the parking lot repaved. That was a big thing. I mean, he got the playground refurbished. I don't know how he did all that stuff. It was just a very different environment. And I think

that's the thing we also miss about teachers. They need supports too. They need signals from their leadership that they matter. They also are affected negatively when the environment, when the school building, is a hot mess, who wants to teach in that environment, who wants to learn in that? You know? So all of those things kind of come together. And then again, you still have this backdrop where it's not a safe community, you know what I'm saying? You still got this major violence that's occurring. You've got to switch over from selling heroin on this public housing site to selling crack and a very different type of drug dealer, because track was largely, you know, crack was largely a young boy's game, and then you've got this influx of guns that nobody fully understands. So there's just a lot going on, and how you how you manage that, how the school stays a safe space for everybody, for the kids, for the students, for the teachers, becomes critically important. I was just lucky. I mean, for whatever reason, I just kind of thrived in that environment, and we had a good team. And that was, you know, like we weren't freaked out. We were like, this are Dude, this is our spot. We're gonna make stuff happen. We're gonna work closely with everybody. And I've just always just kind of had that orientation, you know, it may come from, you know, my my folks were active in, not so much in community, but active in their church, and through a lot of activities related to that. And so that was kind of modeled for me in terms of of my own attitude. Of you, you know, you give back. I've carried it everywhere. I've gone, you

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know, the churn and that violence that kids are part of, or part of the community where it's happening, and bringing that into schools and teachers and educators dealing and supporting students. You know, when you know that they're coming from a community where they may not feel safe, but they're certainly walking to school, right? They're certainly having to walk through that. You are a parent yourself, and I wonder, as you became a parent, did that shift your perspective at all? Can you think back to that time shift how you engage with families, or how you thought about engaging with family? This

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is another story that you may not know, because, you know, I am, in fact, a parent, but it's a non traditional route. Some years ago, I became a mentor through Big Brothers, Big Sisters, and that young man, I was matched with him when he was, you know, eight and a half years old and and that was just an interesting experience, because I was basically, as we talk about, theoretically, I was a caring adult in his support system. You know? I went to parent teacher meetings when his mom couldn't go. His biological father wasn't around. And as as is also typical for me, I follow through. If I say I'm gonna do something, I do it forever. You know what I mean? So, you know, we were matched when he was eight, and around age 1415, just started calling me dad. And at first I was not quite sure how to feel about that, because obviously, you know, Big Brothers, Big Sisters is a very specific kind of model, but I decided to embrace it, and now that boy is 37 years old. So and I am a grandfather, because he's got two kids, I mean, so we have been together all that time and and I think what really changed me is about that is being in youth development you certainly understand conceptually, this notion of caring adults and these ecosystems and these other you know, And that mentoring as a strategy is a good strategy, and we need to build that strategy up, right? But actually being a mentor, actually playing that role, actually, you know, the gift for me was I did have a chance to be a father figure, although in a non traditional way, it really just changed how I thought about all of it. It wasn't conceptual anymore. I mean, you know, he came from one of those kind of communities where there were concentration of struggles,

and his mom did two things that really put him on the right track. He got him in in band, and he played the tuba in a marching band in junior high school and high school, and she signed him up for Big Brothers, Big Sisters, and those two things, those two acts. And this is a woman who's good, woman who's always underemployed. She always had a job and never made enough money and never had any financial support. You have whole communities of folks like this, always kind of underemployed, always one bad decision or one bad stroke of luck away from being financially in trouble, right, and not having enough. US, but those two decisions put him on a right trajectory, you know. And I happen to be part of that story now. And my first board experience was Big Brothers, Big Sisters of the National Capital Area, first time I ever joined a board, and that's how I learned how to be a good board member. So a lot of my story around that is tied to mentoring, tied to Big Brothers, tied to community, so it changes everything I say, non traditional. I don't know that I would have loved him anymore if he was my biological child, you know? I mean, like, all of that is inconsequential, really, but at one point you realize, and I think parents realize that too, that you're getting much more out of it than the kids. People will give you all these accolades for being a mentor, like you're doing something. But the truth is, I got more out of it. I think, you know, or we certainly got equal amounts of of stuff out of it. It's an important relationship to the moment. I mean, my son in every way now, my emergency contact, my as

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you get older, that emergency contact,

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as you're talking, I was thinking it's a little bit of a cliche, but it really does take a village you just can't do. And we have never, if you look back, I think over the history. We have never done this alone. It has really been a single family off by themselves. We have almost always had some kind of extended family to be supportive. You talked a little bit about really trying to understand, I think, the community and families we have a lot of teachers that listen, a lot of educators who listen to this podcast, what are some key elements that they need to know? What do they need to strive to understand about the families that they serve? First,

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you need to understand, you know, who are your families and you know what's going on in their lives. Going back to my son's Mom, this was a hard working woman who tried her best, and she was active also, so she was, you know, maybe on on the end of the continued as a little bit more engaged in others, because she also became a band mom, and then she was active with the the marching band, and traveled with them and did all that kind of stuff. But I think when you understand where folks are economically like a lot of times, teachers have made, staff have made assumptions about families that aren't really fair, and they haven't really investigated, like taking the next step to find that. So is that really what this is? Or is there? Is there something else? I remember being in a room full of principals talking about chronic absenteeism years ago, because there was a top issue they wanted to talk about. And one and one of the principals made the kind of stereotypical statement, and part of it was because she had a unique school where most of her kids were, it was like a pre K to three schools, so all of the all young kids, and she made the kind of stereotypical statement that, well, you know, their parents don't value education, and that's why they don't send their kids to school, you know. So usually it was actually perfect for the exercise I wanted to facilitate right then. By contrast, you had another principal

who had a whole group of migrant kids who had weren't coming regularly, and they lived in a trailer park, and he was really curious about why they weren't coming, so he went and visited. So it was like, can you imagine you doing a workshop? This is the perfect contrast, the perfect set of conditions for learning, right? And he took the extra step. He went to visit. He talked to folks. He realized that their parents, because they worked in fields. Got up really, really early. Some of the kids had to take care of younger siblings. You know, it's the usual kind of story we hear about. And then he took the next step to figure out working with a local university and some other social services, a set of supports that could kind of help these help get these kids to school more regularly because they needed an extra set of supports, right? And I think that's the piece that sometimes educators, for a variety of reasons, don't quite get, don't quite understand, even going back to my example, which is, you know, 40 plus years ago, those public housing sites where, you know, it's easy to just write those folks off as not caring, and it's just not true, but you don't necessarily want to send your kid to walk through areas where random gunfire might go down, where every weekend is not crazy stuff that happens, there's a lot of complications, or you're underemployed and you've got a really weird work schedule and you're piecing, you know, two different half of jobs into three quarters of a job to make ends meet. So no, you can't come to the school at the hour because you're not a well to do parent that has control of your schedule. I have control of my schedule weeks out and and I think folks just don't understand that simple thing. You've got folks that are working at jobs. Jobs in certain places where they they don't know what their schedule is. You know, two weeks out, they can't control their schedule. They've they're trying to get hours, and they have to take whatever they can take. So it's, it's really the perspective taking, going back to the executive function, it's like, you know, as the Native Americans were famous for saying, walking a mile in another man's shoes, you need to understand what other people's path is and respect that, and not make assumptions that they are, whatever they are. And one of the stories I love to tell about some of the research around the home visiting model was just that, you know, the purpose of the study was not to measure bias and negative assumptions, but that one of the positive byproducts of home visiting was that teachers were less biased and had less negative assumptions about families. And it was, it is not like this big because they got an injection of of magic juice. It was just because they got to meet people realize, Oh, they're just like us. They've got issues, they've got challenges, they've, you know, they're trying. They love their kids. It's the beauty of the model.

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There's just that oxymoron of working poor, which I, you know, I just think is interesting and has so much to explore. We don't have time to do that today, right? But just even understanding that taking two hours off from work, it's not like there's leave that you can take, it's actually two hours of pay that you're not going to get. So really appreciate those comments about teachers really stepping into some of those shoes to figure out what is going on. When did you really first realize that families are not just recipients of information, but essential partners in student success? Can you share a key insight that led to this understanding, or an anecdote,

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I think, in my own experience, particularly around community organizing and some of the those perspectives where a lot of your approach is to really kind of do one on ones and find out what folks interests are and what they care about and what they love. And you realize that, I mean, you can

always find an extreme example, but for the most part, bringing that forward to education. You know, of course, parents want their kids to learn. They want them to do better. They may have, you know, they themselves may have had a bad experience with schools and school districts. I think that's the other thing that teachers don't always understand. Educators don't understand is that you for good or for bad, you kind of inherit the bad reputation of your school or of your district. You're part of that system, and you really do have to kind of take extra steps to say, well, all of that may have happened, but that's not who I am in this. But I think along the way, you realize that when you can find some common ground and appeal to people's self interest. You can really work with them. So I can't point to any one event. I think it's a combination of things. I think people want to be connected to something that's positive and that's going to move the needle or move things in a positive direction. You know, you learn that through things like my union experience, my tenant organizing experience. You know, not everybody wants to be on the front lines protesting, but people do want to be part of something that protects them and protects others. And you tap into that. It helps if you can kind of relate to others that people don't look that don't look like you or sound like you, you know, and that's across the board, because, you know, everybody has the ability to exhibit lots of bias and crazy stereotypes. So no, none of us are exempt from that, but you know, you've got to have the ability to kind of say, Okay, so that's just not that doesn't even make sense. Let me find out what's actually happening and not just take the shortcut of basic assumption about things, which, more often than not, is wrong, having worked with just a lot of regular folk, you know, having to work my way through college and work full time in a setting that where I knew I had more opportunity and I got to get focused here, but also I'm working with, you know, folks like, this is their job. I'm a student passing through, but this is their job. And, you know, like they're trying to do their job well and proud. That's how, that's why became a shop steward, because I was in a position to protect people who were being taken advantage of. All of those things I think, kind of contribute to an attitude around understanding where people are coming from. So for me, it's more like a cumulative inherited value system from my family, work ethic that I get, I think, mostly from from my dad. God, rest his soul. Just, was just a good man and a hard worker. The man works six days a week, and then. Takes two weeks of vacation to paint the house.

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That is not a vacation, right?

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But, I mean, like, though it's that, and that is a good church going, God fearing man, you know, so all those things kind of influence how what you bring to the party, you know? I think the other thing is, and I know this for sure, because my dad didn't finish high school, but came to have deep respect in every arena in his church community. Learn how to play bridge, you know, just all kinds of stuff. So you realize that some of the accolades that we want to put on folks that are placeholders for being worthy are not really fair accolades. He left the farm, went to the Korean War, to Brooklyn. From there, got a job, met my mom, built a life. So I come from a whole line, because my parents both grew up on farms in the south where all my aunts and uncles were just good, plain people, not terribly accomplished, and managed to do well. So I knew that that is workable. That's doable. You know, they had some advantages that a lot of our families don't have now, in terms of supports and other things, not the least of which is a living wage, right? But that's the other thing that, you know, I think we have to factor in so thinking

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a little bit as you were talking about sort of assumptions that that teachers have about families and parents as a probably shouldn't tell us about myself, but as a really young teacher, my mother was both of my parents, you know, part of the segregated south. Grew up during that time in Louisiana, and I was, you know, pretty young teacher, maybe second year or so, complaining about parents, honestly? Why weren't they doing whatever they were, you know, I needed them to do, right? What did I need them to do? It was really all about me, and it takes a while to get to a reflective place as a teacher. But I remember my mom saying, Did you consider that maybe they had bad public school experiences, and maybe they don't feel welcome coming to your school. And that actually, I could almost, in my head, point to that as a place where I started to kind of try and think through my own teaching and what it meant to be a teacher and how to engage families. So I just wonder about, I don't know that I was ever in the blaming game, or maybe I'm trying to make myself feel better about that time of my life, but I've heard you talk a lot about how we really need to reframe that narrative around parents and educators, that their relationships are often limited because they hold so many myths about each other. I think that is even more today because of you know, I was scrolling absolutely this morning on Instagram someone talking about schools. And as I read that, I thought, Oh, my God. I hope nobody else is reading this, because right, you know, the narrative really, really upset me and made me think, now they're really not gonna I mean, they're just adding to that narrative. So sometimes parents believe teachers don't care. Sometimes it's all too easy for teachers to default to parents don't care based on pretty shallow experiences. So what's really going on? How do we fix that? Or give us, give us your best thoughts on on how we might attend to that? Yeah,

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so that's a tough one, especially in this in this kind of political cultural environment now we have misinformation and bias and distrust of the other on steroids and amplified by social media. So it's a horrible combination. And how you do it, how you affect that systemically, is tough, I think, at the individual school level with the right combination of staff and a good leader and a principal, it's it's very possible, because I think principals do have the ability to mold the environment in a different way, and, frankly, to inject love into all of it. That's the other piece. And I say that not to be flip, but I think that being able to relate to other people and understand where they're coming from. Does come from having some kind of general compassion and love for people? Unfortunately, education, there's something about the way the systems are organized, the way the discourse takes place, the negative and narrow frames around it, where a lot of that gets lost at a micro level. You really do have to kind of take the reins and create a you know, as I listen to these to these principles and prep for a webinar in a couple of weeks, some of the unique things that they're doing to just really create a an environment where all that madness just can't permeate, because they're just taking steps with their staff. They're taking steps with community. They're taking steps with families and taking steps with kids to at least create a bubble in their buildings or in their immediate school community. Now, it's hard to do, and there are a lot of superintendents that are doing a great job at that. It is hard to do that, and. In an entire district level, and then you've got the whole issue of scale, obviously, like the bigger, the bigger the scale, the more likely it is to be a challenge to create it across the board. But I think that's that's the solution, and especially now, because so much of the messaging is just a negative time, and a lot of people are misinformed, and a lot of people have been sold a bill of goods around the reasons why

their life isn't like things are on TV, and a healthy dose of race and bias and distrust of the other is sprinkled on top of all of that in ways that aren't productive. And so we really are in a kind of I mean, we've had a lot of crises, but it is kind of a crisis moment, because all of that permeates education to the point where, for example, in the popular discourse, you've got a lot of folks who actually do think it's a good idea to get rid of the department of education because they've been sold to bill of goods that the Department of Education is what's wrong with education in Your community, and Department of Education has a set of priorities that you don't have, and then that's amplified on social media, talking about the tiktoks and the Facebooks and these other these other platforms, and you can't really blame the platform, but I mean, it's about where people get their information, and their news is not informing them. For me, it's very complex, because there's a lot of social forces at play, and we don't have control over most of them.

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Yeah, that makes sense. Yeah, it does. And I think you know, just to pick up on on the idea that this, these are complex issues, and we live in a space right now where people are scrolling and if you can't get to your message in the first three seconds, people have moved on. And so it often feels like there, there is very little space for people to have really deep conversations about the issues that are plaguing our society, making it hard for kids to learn sort of all of those pieces we at Parent Teacher Home Visits, believe in our model. We think it is a way for parents and families, teachers, educators, to really start to understand each other and understand that that child in the classroom. You know, we both want the best for them. But can you talk a little bit about your understanding of family engagement, and what are some perspectives that you have on the potential for home visit models, one like parent teacher, home visit utilizes, you

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know, as I think about all of the issues going on in education in this moment, part of the solution is better engagement of families, better partnership, deeper collaboration and partnership, but relationship with families and and home visits are a big part of that. You know, I'm not sure if you know this the nine or 10 years that I was on the board of Parents as Teachers, which is in the early childhood space, right? So that's home visiting, you know, the babies. You know, at the same time I was on the board of Parent Teacher home business. So so my also, I'm covering the entire spectrum. So I did nine years on both boards understanding the power of relationship and home visiting. So that's, that's the key to it all, is relationship and the home visit process, particularly Parent Teacher Home Visits, because I remember, I just remember being so struck the first time I was introduced to the to the model and the process, and that first opening question, the spiritual, emotional power of the question of, What are your hopes and dreams for your kids? When I heard that the first time, it just had such a profound impact, and you immediately know in your bones, nothing bad can come out of that conversation. You know what I mean. And to have an entire strategy and model kind of built around that ethos is just very powerful, and that's part of the solution. And I've had these conversations quite a bit nationally, a lot of superintendents, a lot of principals, many of whom believe that it's a good idea to engage families, but they have kind of fallen for the trap of this kind of false choice between rigorous instruction or and I'm reminded always of a story I heard from a superintendent in Alabama who said, quite simply, empty seats don't learn. Yeah. So how do we get the seats on empty? And we do that by engaging families. We do that by working with community. We do that by engaging students. There are no shortcuts to

that. You can't get to rigor. That's the false choice. You can't get to rigor if you don't have kids in the classroom, you know, and you frankly, you can't get the rigor if you don't have their families helping you as well. If you can arm parents with some simple things that they can do to help the learning, then you really got a brilliant one two punch. But that part is lost sometimes in this false argument around, what should I spend my $10 on? On as if it's that simple. You know, what should I invest in this or and somehow a lot of folks land on it's better to support rigor, it's better to import instructional methods, etc, than to do this other stuff. It's getting better. It's not quite there. Yeah,

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you've touched on principles, leadership in schools, superintendents, the enormous impact they can have on teachers, staying on families, being engaged. And I know that over your career, especially at IEL, you know, you have been working with principals and superintendents, so you know, what's your argument for them? Give us a little sense of what do they say to you when they're thinking about family engagement and how to engage families and spending part of that $10 which, yeah, real issue. I know when I think it's well, many people will say, I will not say that schools have every dollar and Penny that they need. They absolutely don't. We are starving our public schools, the thing. But yeah, and

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these are horrible choices, really, and every place is a little bit different in terms of their own local context. What I say a lot now is nine out of 10 superintendents, if not 10 out of 10, superintendents will tell you it's a good idea to engage families, and they have that in their strategic plan, and they have that as a value, as an espoused value, to quote a dear, dear friend and colleague, Michelle Brooks, but their decisions, their structure, their budgets, those things don't actually match. And it's in that gap between espoused values and practice that things get lost from my own career. You know, I see myself as being one that tries to help bridge that gap in a variety of ways. I think one of the things we learned early on, even when I got introduced to Parent Teacher Home Visits back in the days when MetLife was invested in doing the survey of teachers and survey of principals, and that informed our work, that the majority of teachers and the majority of principals thought that engaging families was important, but they also listed that as one of the top three things they didn't know how to do well. And I think that's still a factor. Maybe not as high, but I think it's it is still a factor. We've made a lot of strides there. You know, 1015, years ago, as you know, this was not even part of their pre service curriculum at any level, for teachers, for administrators, if they were interested in it, personally, they could take some coursework on it. But that's changing little by little, but we can't wait for that to catch up. That's the big gap, I think, and I think a lot of our support for family and community engagement is really working at a systems level, because we don't have the bandwidth to go terribly deep in individual schools. But even as we made the decision to create the district leaders network on family community engagement, because we thought that we could make a contribution with the folks who have responsibility for coordinating family engagement at the district level. That was a good kind of level of contribution for us to try to shape what systems look like and try to shape that message and so so a lot of our message to principals and superintendents, they're much more open than they were, but it really is to let them know this really is a false choice, this idea like you. Of course, we're not against rigor, but all the rigor in the world doesn't matter if you've got 30% of your kids chronically absent, so you can't avoid that issue. You have to deal with that issue. First, prior to COVID, we were finally making some strides nationally around absenteeism. A lot of that momentum got lost because of COVID, and then in the aftermath of COVID,

all these other things have contributed to our inability to kind of get back to where we were on that and then now, sadly, the political environment, the cultural environment for some communities in particular, has made that a new challenge. As you know, kids and families with insecure immigration status and resident status. Are afraid to send their kids to school. I mean, there's a lot of things that are now contributing to that issue. Whereas school is is an unsafe environment for a new set of reasons. You know, we're figuring out how it's going TO to play out, but school, you know, superintendents, principals, they've got to make some hard choices, and then they've got to support teachers in doing that. I think we still have to make that case with teachers as well, that having a relationship with your families or with a caring adult is going to help you going forward. I never forget how I felt when I went to one of my sons. He was probably in fifth grade, went to his mother couldn't go to the parent teacher conference, so I went. So I'm the caring adult sitting there with the teacher talking about this kid that we all you know, that we love. And this is a day when everybody was all freaked out in DC about this test and the standards and blah blah. And I really came away feeling like. Right? This teacher's not at all freaked out by this. She's cool, you know, I came away from that whole thing feeling good about that teacher and like I knew what I needed to do on my side, and that's an important dynamic, you know? So now I am an active part of the solution. That part is not always obvious to teachers, and not all teachers are comfortable. They may be more introverted. They're not comfortable forging a relationship. They need supports to do. They need opportunities to practice. We can't assume that a teacher is automatically comfortable forging a relationship with a family. So the that's a capacity that can be supported, that can be taught, that can be improved. But again, if we don't have that mindset, and even in leadership, and we don't understand that her or him spending time to create that relationship is going to pay dividends later, it's an investment, Mm, hmm, where everybody's going to come out better. That's the argument that folks don't understand that that's the return of investment. Is often thought of in financial terms, but this is really in relationship, connection terms, that's going to result in better achievement, better outcomes. And that's not always obvious. Yeah, people in leadership, you

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know, most of us, not everybody, chose to be a teacher because they valued education. They valued students, liked kids, wanted to do the best for their community, and in some ways family relationships, building those it's about giving you the space to do the thing that you love to do, which is engaged with students. So we've touched a little bit on the sort of complex place we are in history right now. It's a fairly challenging educational landscape, and honestly, I don't ever think that hasn't been a challenging educational landscape. May have been a little bit easier here and there, and we have seen potential dismantling of the Department of Ed. You've touched on that a little bit certainly huge retreat from diversity, equity and inclusion in all parts of our society, business, but certainly in education. We probably all heard about that teacher out in Idaho who had the poster, everyone belongs here. Their school district said they needed to take it down. Glad to see that community really pushing back on that. But the learning recovery from COVID, we have not moved past that, and I even feel like we're not even talking about it that much anymore. So we've kind of moved on. But comments you might have on sort of all of that your things that you've been thinking about, best advice, things for us, you know, to really chew it on together as a community. Yeah, it's

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a tricky time. You know, that's an understatement. You know, the results of the election were in the 101st 100 days, the activities of the first 100 day, all the promises, etc, tentative added that people voted for have been very unsettling for some communities, for some places, very unsettling. It's created a lot of fear and confusion, which is never a good context to be in. It's created a million questions with very few answers. A lot of it is stated intentions. You know, executive orders are really stated intentions. They're not law, but people don't know that. People don't know it's not that simple to dismantle the Department of Education, but I think the desired effect of just kind of shaking things up that some folks voted for and wanted is happening. Things are definitely shaken up. That's not really a positive situation for folks in communities that were already vulnerable and already had challenges. And so it's a really, it's a scary time. It's different in different parts of the country, because there are parts of the country that are largely shielded from some of that, or are in environments politically, where they're not on the front line, like they don't have to take down their poster that we love everybody or whatever, we seem so silly. But then there are other places where it's quite volatile. And in fact, many of those educators agree with some of those principles and actions. So that's the part where it's tricky. I don't I don't imagine it'd be very hard for me to work in an environment like that. And yet, we have teachers in those kind of environments and and, you know, mostly, like you said, teachers, that's not what they really signed up for. You know, they were always exceptions, but for the most part, they just wanted to teach and make a difference and be supported in doing so, and have a good feeling when they go home. And so a lot of that is kind of stripped away now, and the role of public education also is, is always kind of up in the air. So it's a really, it's a scary time for us. You know, as a nonprofit leader, the uncertainty is tough. As as the husband of a woman who is is not from this country, you worry about it at every at every level, which is tough, especially when you have a lot of. Responsibility as a nonprofit leader. You know, our own organization was one of the entities that went to funding freeze, stop. We couldn't get our money. It sends a chill, because you got a lot of responsibility. Now I, you know, I really worry about my own well being. I worry about my team, my staff, my organization. So so that reverberates throughout and yet you also, as a leader, have to have a positive message and hold space, you know, not let folks go down the rabbit hole of despair and fear, because we are, you know, and parent, teacher, home business, very much in that same lane. We are in the change business. So we have got to believe that we are adding value, that change is possible that what we're doing matters. That's the my constant message everywhere, if you don't have enough hope today, piggyback off somebody else's, because you in the hope and change business, and yes, the conditions are insane. If we're not doing it, who's going to do it? We have to do our part, and we have to, now more than ever, our most vulnerable kids and families and communities need us to deliver as best we can. That's my message now, and I, you know, I try to adhere to it. And personally, I try I control my content so I don't watch a lot of stuff. I don't read I read select articles. I can't even watch political satire all my shows I used to like because I can't laugh about this yet. You know what I mean? Like, I can't. It's not funny. I don't, you know, I can't watch that. So it's that's just me personally, because that doesn't, it doesn't help me get through so we've all gotta find our ways of of getting through it.

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Gotta find the coping mechanism that works, and a lot of that is us coming together, yes, and as what you said, now more than ever, like we need to be out there. Those of us who are involved in that change, you talked a little bit about finding your son through Big Brothers and Big Sisters, and I know that you've had a long relationship with them. There are a lot of organizations that are outside of the

traditional public education system, and I wonder what your thoughts are on, on how they can come together to support students, their futures, families, education, they're an

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important part of the solution. I mean, I think you know, you know, obviously you know the role that that I play in that we play in the community school strategy, you know, whole child stretch. Some folks use whole child strategy language. Some folks use place based strategies. But, you know, but all of that is at the end of the day, is really about folks working as closely together as they can to provide the services, supports and needs that that very often folks in well to do communities can take for granted. They're not. That's not widely available everywhere. And they are available if we work more closely together. They are available if we, you know, really deepen our partnerships. You know, going back to my earlier example of that elementary school stand Stanton Elementary, and the difference in an approach, from that first principle that we encountered to that second principal, who was clear, we definitely can't do this by ourselves. We gotta have every partner on we can find, and that's my job, to go out and find every partner possible to support our goal of supporting these kids and these families and and that really has to be all of our approach. That was the case even before the recent kind of political upheaval. That was the case. It's probably more so now, I think, and then we've got to not redefine but you know, for the most part, despite the federal government's influence over these programs. These are, these are local decisions. Is mostly local funding in most places. I mean, these are, we've got to work locally to educate people and to be involved and to help kind of redefine our priorities.

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I think you mentioned the sort of local funding of schools. I think there's such a misunderstanding of what the percentage is. If I'm correct, it's five to 8% that comes from the feds to these you know, it's a very small percentage, incredibly important, because we are supporting students who who who need extra support in those schools, kids with with special needs and others. But you know, I do really encourage families, teachers, educators, principals, to really get involved at that local level. What's going on in your school board, what's going on in your own department of ed in your state, and how are they making decisions about your own tax dollars to support students. So we touched a little bit on community schools, which has a which I'm hugely supportive of, and had the privilege of working as part of IELTS work on community schools in the past, but for maybe some of our listeners who aren't as familiar, you know. Know it's our approach around integrating academics, health, social services, Youth and Community Development, family engagement, sort of all of that together, and given sort of the context the challenges we're facing, what role do you see for community schools playing to shape a more, maybe more positive, more equitable future for students. I

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think that whether folks identify their their strategy as a community school strategy or not, when we think about community and needs of especially our historically underserved and more vulnerable children, youth and families, they need to have a access to a range of services, supports, resources, etc, that really only come when folks work together in a jurisdiction that, you know, we think about academic enrichment. Many of us who have, you know, families that have a decent wage and a lot of options, and they often complain about how many things their kids are involved in, all of which they pay

for, by the way, and how they have to drive their kids to this and drive their kids to that. And they make that sacrifice because they know it's good for their child development. They know it's good for their education. They know it's good for them to become a well rounded individual and so that those options are worth it. But at the same time, a lot of communities don't have those options. A lot of families and kids don't have those options unless they are, you know, on the on on a have a particular skill and a particular sport that gets other folks attention, and then they start drawing those, those supports, but, but, but for, but for just everyday, regular folks. They need us to work more closely together to provide those safety nets. They need, you know, adults to volunteer and read, read, the kids. They need chess clubs and folks to help manage that. They need a range of of thing that aren't that hard to pull off, but with some intentionality, you really can create, you know, better systems of support. It's easy to do at a smaller scale sometimes, and at a larger scale, it's sometimes easier to do when you have concentrations of resources, versus in rural areas, where you don't have as many resources to bring together, but it's possible. And so we've been, I mean, the majority I've been at il IEL is 60 plus years old, the college for community schools. We started with partners in 1997 I'm the longest serving staff member at IEL. You know, 20 in my 25th year. So the majority of my my time at IEL has been steeped and around the community school strategy, and we've been, you know, a major national voice for that strategy, and we deeply believe in it, and we've tried to do our in our own way facilitate deeper connections between that particular strategy and issue and other issues like family engagement, like youth with disabilities, for example, and to kind of raise awareness and to expand the collaborative table to take care of all those things. You know, one of the things that we learned during COVID, or that was exacerbated during COVID was, you know, the systems and supports for youth with disabilities just really weren't there in the same way and and what we also don't often know is that, you know, kids in poverty and kids of color with a Disability have historically been the least well served by systems, and so for many years, those issues weren't even on the radar of our community, schools, folks, same community, same kids, same family. So that's the other issue is like our families need us to work together to make it easier for them to have better outcomes across a range of indicators, all of which are important to us. Goes back to MCC stone, learn well, if you're not there because you've got a medical condition and you got asthma all the time, you need the housing department if you're in an apartment building, you know that has some kind of funding. You need the housing department to work on that. You need all of these different entities to come together. If you've got food insecurity, then you need various departments. You need to have your school district accessing federal funds and supports, which you know, questionable in these days, you know, with this new administration. But you need all of those systems to kind of come together to provide the services support. So kids are, in fact, you know, childcare huge issue. You know, in a lot of places, older kids are late to school all the time, or miss school because they got to take care of younger siblings, because parents or the parent has to be out of the house early to go to work, and that's not ideal. Nobody wants that to be the situation, but that is what it is, right? People are doing their best. When you have that happening in a concentrated area, then that affects a lot of students in the in the school community. So though there are community wide solutions to that, including transportation, childcare, so all of those systems. And then, of course, and this is where the danger of bias and assumption comes in, because if we just write that off as, oh, they don't care, instead of investigating and finding out, oh. So this is a transportation issue. Can we get this bus route change? This is the where the the rubber meets the road in terms of, you know, taking that next step past an assumption and actually investigating and you may not be able to solve every problem, but at least you are a little bit clearer about Okay, so this is something we got to all figure out

how to work on. Can we get a Can we change the bus route? Can we get another bus run? Can we get, you know, all these other kinds of issues? So, yeah, we've got to, we've got to work more closely together. I think the community school strategy is one of those vehicles for doing that. You know, a lot of folks have different names for similar strategies. I think that anywhere where people are figuring out how to manage challenges, it means that they are figuring out how to engage families and how to partner more deeply, regardless of what they call it, you know, and that's the that's the key. What Shakespeare said arose by any other name with smelling sweets. I don't care what you call it.

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I want that outcome, so we all have to work together. When I think about community schools, and you've touched on this is that these problems are not siloed, they are all connected together. And you and your organization around community schools has helped us see that for many, many, many years. And so applaud that. You know, as we wrap up before we go, how can people keep up with you? Where can they find you? Out there on social media. Yeah,

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you know, that's, that's that's been tricky lately as well. Because, you know, of course, IEL has its own set of platforms, and so you can mostly find us. I mean, we're really relying on LinkedIn a lot more now. I think we're I personally have transitioned away from Twitter for a lot of reasons. It's just not a safe space, and I actually my last my last tweet was to encourage everyone to find me on blue sky, because I'm not really on Twitter anymore, you know, hopefully folks will eventually, you know, migrate over. But in that sense, you know, I'm on on, you know, Blue Skies is a relatively newer platform, a safer a safer place. And I think a lot of a lot of nonprofits and folks are kind of moving to that. And then, of course, there's there's LinkedIn.

1:03:05
Well, it sounds like we should look for you on LinkedIn. And I have not opened an account on blue sky, although our organization has an account there, but I do follow you on LinkedIn and encourage everybody to do that. So we have had a particularly insightful and thought provoking conversation crazy, and there's some key takeaways that have resonated with me. We've heard from you about the power of community organizing your early days as a shop steward, and that as a strong foundation for building strong family community connections and the critical need to reframe our narratives about parents and educators to foster genuine partnership, we want to thank you for your wisdom on navigating this current educational landscape, how we support teachers in this vital work and the immense potential of models like parent, teacher, home visits, and then your perspective on these sort of urgent needs, facing our current educational landscape and emphasizing our need in the crucial role of community schools and the need for systemic change, really addressing these problems at a systemic level. And we take all of that as a powerful call to action. So from the bottom of my heart, friend, thank you for sharing your time, your expertise and your profound wisdom with us today. Your insights, drawn from decades of dedicated work, are truly inspiring. I know you started at five, so don't worry about that decades thing, and will undoubtedly leave a lasting impact for our listeners. We're so incredibly proud to be honoring you with the Jocelyn graves award, and this conversation is only deepened our appreciation for your tireless advocacy. Listeners. We hope this conversation with quasi has sparked your own reflections on the vital role of family engagement in COVID. Creating brighter

futures for our students. If you're inspired to learn more about how to build stronger connections between families and schools in your community, we invite you to visit our website@pthvp.org There you can find resources, information about our training programs and learn how parent, teacher home visits is working across the country to empower educators and families to become true partners. Thank you for tuning in to the parent, teacher home visits podcast. Join us next time for more conversations that explore the power of connection. Until then, let's all continue to build those bridges one relationship at a time.