

Evan Schneider:

Hi, Andy. How are you doing today?

Andrew Seabert:

I'm very good. How are you today?

Evan Schneider:

Good, good. Thank you so much for joining us.

Andrew Seabert:

Oh, my pleasure. Happy to be able to do this.

Evan Schneider:

Thanks. So can you tell us a little bit about your journey to your current work? What brings you to this work and what sustains you while you engage in it?

Andrew Seabert:

I've always been interested in art. I was always a fan of visual art. I studied theater for a little while in college and then found very quickly that I was not really happy with what I was doing. So I ended up leaving school, getting an Associates Degree in graphic design, following the artistic passion more than anything. Then once I got married my wife said, "You know, you'd be a good teacher." I said, "Well, I've heard people say that you should consider that." She was supportive and said, "Go for it. Go back to school." So I became a teacher that way. I went to Rider University and got my teaching degree over there. It was an eyeopening experience, especially as an art teacher and an artist because I became so much better of an artist once I started teaching and sharing all of that knowledge that I had out loud and having those new discoveries.

Andrew Seabert:

I was teaching art in Trenton. I got hired in the 2005-2006 school year right out of Rider to teach over there. I was at the high school ever since. We broke out into communities and I joined the visual performing arts community 2013-2014 school year. And then this past school year I ended up getting this opportunity to become the teacher leader. It's funny because it's brought me back to my passion for theater as well. And being able to work with the other arts, now we get to find new creative ways to integrate the arts into our core curriculum as well. It's been a very rewarding experience because the kids, I get to see them not only as students in the classroom, but I get to see them as little creative individuals in the art room and on stage and in the dance room or playing in the orchestra, the marching band. So that's where I am now. I'd say it's been a huge learning experience, but it's been a very good experience too.

Evan Schneider:

So for those not in the educational community what's the difference between being a teacher and a teacher leader?

Andrew Seabert:

It's a pretty strange difference to be completely honest. There's multiple teacher leaders in the high school, each community that we're broken out to. So TCHS has visual performing arts. We have STEM, which is science, tech, engineering and math. We have a communications academy, a restaurant and business academy, and health and medical professions now. So each one has a teacher leader. As an art teacher I was in the classroom teaching art, different classes, different content, specific classes in some cases. But with teacher leader I'm out of the classroom, which has probably been the hardest shift, being out of the classroom now.

Andrew Seabert:

But I still get to work a lot with the kids as well as working with outside partnerships, such as Princeton University, all the work we've been able to do with you guys and other community organizations as well and figuring out ways to bring them into the school to benefit our students and ultimately finding benefit for those community partners as well. Some of these kids are going to go out and eventually work with them or go to their schools or whatever the case may be. So right now my focus is really on that broader community aspect as well as trying to take care of my teachers and keep them sane.

Evan Schneider:

I bet that's a challenge right now with everything going on.

Andrew Seabert:

It is, especially not having the classroom. I don't get to see the kids every day. When I was in the school at least I still got to see them. So now I'm hearing everything secondhand, like "How's this kid doing?" I've been calling students just see how they're doing as much as I can with the phone numbers and everything, trying to contact them that way or via email or whatever and see how they're doing. But again, it's different when you get to see them face to face and you can see how they're doing as well as even the teachers. There're some teachers I hear from every day, "Hey, what's up with this? How are we doing?" And there's other teachers, I'm like, "Are you still out there? I haven't seen you or heard from you. Everything okay?"

Evan Schneider:

So how have you partnered with Princeton University and the Pace Center? What have been the most successful ways that volunteers and partners have worked with you?

Andrew Seabert:

Well, mostly my experience this year's been with what is now called TAP, the Trenton Arts Project. The partnership is through a former student, now employee, of the university, Lou Chen. It was really his initiative early on with our music students. They were working years ago in a small house. Then they expanded from there working with our kids, trying to teach them music. This year after Lou was brought on by the university, he said, "Let's expand this." So we met early on in the school year and he said, "Here's some ways we can potentially do this. We want to try and reach all of the arts in the visual performing arts community." And so we had Saturday classes that were going on where the university was busing kids over to the university for dance, for music.

Andrew Seabert:

We had just started on a mural. There's a chalk and a little bit of paint on one of the walls on the second floor of VPA where a couple of freshmen Princeton University students were coming over and working with some of our students to create this mural. Because our section of the building surrounds the theater, there's a few big empty walls where they couldn't put classrooms, obviously, so they were starting to kind of like, "Let's put some murals up. Let's do something special here." So the kids were sharing their knowledge of mural creation and painting with our students. There was a student-teaching aspect there almost. And then we had some Princeton students coming into work with our theater kids as well. And that's just this year. We were already thinking about how can we blow this up even more next year. And we're still thinking about that. It's just we got to think from a distance now.

Andrew Seabert:

But we did have Tigers in Trenton this year, which was back in February. Students from Princeton University were invited to join up, performing groups were invited to join up and come over and put on a show at Trenton Central High in our new theater. Our theater is state of the art. We went from having a cafetorium to an actual theater. So we were able to put on quite a show. We had a small audience. We're hoping to get more people in the future, but those that came all had nothing but positive feedback for the experience and they look forward to doing it again.

Evan Schneider:

As an employee at the Pace Center in Princeton, I had the privilege to work with Lou and Lou stood out among his peers as being especially committed to that project. Also, there's a lot of students like Lou that come through the Pace Center and we have to watch them move on to other things in life. So it's been a unique pleasure to get to hang onto him a little bit and continue to work with him and moving into working even more closely with him. So it's been really fun.

Andrew Seabert:

Yeah, he's a ball of energy. So I'm like, "Oh, I got to keep up with Lou." He'll text me out of the blue, he's like, "I have this idea!" And I'm like, "I'm still trying to keep up with the last thing you were on." But I'm like, "Let's do it. He's got some great ideas and he's a great listener. He's a great note taker. We'll get together and I'll just spew ideas and he'll write everything down and come back. I'm like, "Oh, yeah, I did say that." So things are good.

Andrew Seabert:

I should also say that Princeton has a relationship with some of the other communities at our school too. They have an amazing partnership with our STEM community. They have an [ArcPrep] course over there. They have their own teacher who is a student. I believe he's a student, a Master's level student through Princeton. He teaches our kids at our school. I gave him a tour of the theater one day and we talked theater architecture a little bit. It was a cool experience. I know that's a very positive, very strong, very well regarded program that we have at Trenton Central High through Princeton as well.

Evan Schneider:

I want to move into maybe some more of the reason for this podcast, which is to talk about, more generally, education and the COVID-19 crisis. Specifically what you're experiencing right now. Given what's going on, what is the most important thing that you think the world needs to understand about the impacts that this crisis is having on our youth populations and, in particular, what impact is it having on their education?

Andrew Seabert:

Probably the biggest impact... I think that we miss this when we're there, sometimes it even makes us crazy because we see the kids and we're like, "Why do you come to school, because you're not doing any schoolwork some days?" There's that social aspect of school that we miss. I've seen this even at home with my own kids. They gather not just to, in theory, learn but they gather as a place to find like minded individuals who become friends, who become girlfriends, boyfriends, best friends, whatever the case may be. All of that has been stripped away. I know there's still ways that they can interact, but it's not the same of being able to go up and see each other and give each other a handshake or whatever the case may be and laugh and sit and draw or whatever.

Andrew Seabert:

With that missing, I think that has taken a significant toll on the wellbeing of our students. I think ultimately it's that social impact. We also have the economic challenge because folks are at a distance. We can't always communicate to the same level that we'd like to with the students, whether it be just here is your classwork or even how are you doing? It's sometimes challenging to kids if their phones aren't working anymore, if they don't have internet access. We lose kids that way. Initially we had some ideas about that, but there's nothing set, especially now that we've been out for over a month and we have at least at this point until May 15th when the governor's going to make a decision. But yeah, I think probably the biggest impact for the kids is that social aspect.

Evan Schneider:

So I want to ask you a little bit about how would you define youth development theory and what does it look like in practice? How has or will this conversation about youth development theory shift in light of the current crisis?

Andrew Seabert:

Well, as far as the youth development, we try to find ways to not just deliver content, but make school an experience for everyone. We want them to not just feel like it's somewhere that they have to be, but somewhere they want to be. You've heard these ideas about teaching the whole child and that kind of thing. We need to consider them on their best days, we need to consider them on their worst days and how we're teaching to them each of those times. We're not just a production line. We're dealing with a lot of individuals and it's how do we strengthen that whole individual. And I think right now we can send our kids emails or worksheets or whatever, but that's not really going to benefit them to just have the content.

Andrew Seabert:

We try to teach a lot of problem solving skills and those things as well, especially in the arts where problem solving is so important. For them to be able to have those skill sets and still be able to learn those skill sets from a distance, how do you teach problem solving? How do you teach coping? How do you teach communicating and self-advocacy from a distance like this? What I found is some kids I'll get emails from like, "Hey, I haven't heard from this, I need this, I need help with this." Other kids, and even parents, we can't get any contact with. So you want them to develop these skills to be able to survive in the real world even though everyone's at a distance and not able to test those skills in the way we would normally do so.

Evan Schneider:

I want to talk a little bit more about that and the remote learning component to all of what's going on right now. What does that look like in real time? You mentioned having issues getting ahold of folks. Are there particular policies or structures that you think have positively impacted students who are doing remote education? And then what are some of the other limiting factors that you're seeing?

Andrew Seabert:

There's a lot of limiting factors to be completely honest. We can say there's the technical limiting factors and I think everybody's pretty much well aware of those. But for some of our kids, like I said, with school being a haven for them, we don't know about the wellness of those students at home. Are they in a safe living space? Are they in a place where they have heat for the cold days? For some, their education isn't even a consideration right now. They're just trying to get by. How are they eating? We don't know a lot of these things. I know there's a lot of food pantries and a lot of people trying to do a lot to help. So we've been trying to share as much of that information through websites and Instagram pages as much as possible just to try to get that out there.

Andrew Seabert:

As far as policies though, so much of this has kind of been on the fly. Had this happened any other time in history, we'd be all just sitting at home twiddling our thumbs. At least now we can say we want you to try these things. We want you to find a way to talk to your internet providers. I know Comcast has been a popular one [inaudible] free internet access. I don't know what the limitations are with that. We've tried to encourage students to talk to their providers they currently have plans with and contracts with. Don't be afraid to ask for a discount or for a delay of a payment or something.

Andrew Seabert:

But ultimately I wouldn't say that any one thing is fixing anything right now. I think tech is allowing us to try to keep things going. I'm sure there's probably plenty of limiting factors I haven't even thought of or the District hasn't even thought of because it might affect one or two people. Our school alone has 1,800 kids, so it's hard to think about the very minuscule number of kids who might have this one issue going on that we don't even know about. So again, most of what we've been trying to do is try to serve as many as we can and try to help as many as we can.

Evan Schneider:

Can you share a little bit about what Trenton Central is experiencing in terms of needs and what are some needs that you've heard of that have been identified?

Andrew Seabert:

I know it gets redundant, but finding ways to get them to connect to us, even for us to be able to reach them. We have phone numbers in our databases of numbers to contact, but some of those numbers have changed. At one point or another a parent may or may not have even said, here's the number you should try. So there's been a lot of teachers relying on one another. I created a Google Classroom just for my community teachers to be part of so that they can at least share information and say, "Has anybody heard from so-and-so?" Like, "Oh, yes, this person's been coming to my class. Here's a number you can try calling." So we're still trying to communicate with each other and with the other communities as well as with all the administrators.

Andrew Seabert:

We've been trying as best we can to try to cover as many tracks as we can. Inevitably one or more of these teachers has had some kind of contact with some of these kids. Some of them are just friends with other kids so we've even been asking students, "Have you heard from so and so because I know you guys would hang out together in school?" I've gotten numbers that way too. The big need is just making sure all of our kids are okay. Are they still there? Are they okay? How do we get in touch with all of them? Because like I said earlier, they're not aware that they can find ways to reach out to us. They can use Instagram. They can pick up the phone and call the District number and maybe still be able to get somebody that way.

Evan Schneider:

So I've been asking a lot of guests to do this. It's not necessarily the easiest thing, but imagine yourself in a post COVID-19 world where we can all move around again and things like that. In terms of education, will it be the same as it was before? Will things have changed? What's going to be different? What do you think we'll learn from this whole crisis?

Andrew Seabert:

This is purely me guessing. In the short term, in the next couple of years I think, as much as it pains me to say so, gatherings are going to still be very limited. So much of what we do requires gatherings, whether it be Friday night or Friday, Saturday football or a show in the theater or something. I think we're going to have to be spreading people out and limiting the crowd we get or finding ways to televise these things or stream these things instead. That might become a reality, at least in the short term. I don't know. I think more teachers will be comfortable using technology in the classroom, so that's probably going to be a benefit in the long term. I know for a fact there's teachers I've taught how to use Google Classroom over the past few months. Just yesterday I was saying, "Oh, here's how you share your screen and zoom to somebody." So I think there's going to be benefit that way. They're going to find new creative ways to teach in the classroom.

Andrew Seabert:

But ultimately I think a lot of it's going to be up in the air for the next couple of years. I think we'll get back to a little more normalcy hopefully, where they can say, "All right, just fill that theater. Pack it as full as you want. Sell as many tickets as you need." At some point we're going to need to do that just to find some normalcy in our existence again. But I don't see it happening as quick as some people might want it to happen.

Andrew Seabert:

I don't want to jump on soapboxes or anything because this is the kind of the question where you could do it. Going forward I think preparation, communication are going to be really important. If something like this were ever to happen again I think there'll be more of a policy and a plan going forward and we'll find ways. Maybe we'll do a better job of keeping track of students' phone numbers, a more updated database and that kind of thing. I don't know. But I know everybody's trying the best they can right now. At the state and local level there's a lot of guesswork, but there's a lot of people that are trying to at least say, "Try this. Give it a shot." They're being flexible with their expectations too. For some it's really a challenge.

Evan Schneider:

So we've talked a lot about some of the struggles that are going on right now. I think it's really easy for folks to feel anxious, feel worried, see all the negative aspects of being quarantined in your house and all that stuff. So I've just been asking all my guests to share a moment of brightness. What gives you hope right now in this moment?

Andrew Seabert:

I guess knowing we'll go back at some point, knowing I'll get to see the kids again. We'll have a school musical. We were two weeks out of having our first school musical in a couple of decades when this happened. Right now there's a set for the Wiz totally built, not painted yet, but totally built sitting on the stage just waiting, like, "Please use me!" We definitely want to put that to work. So there's knowing it'll happen again. We'll get there. We'll get to that point. We were outside of this high school for five years while they were building this new one. It just opened this year. So it's painful that it happened this year that we're out of it again.

Andrew Seabert:

But we waited those five years, we'll wait a little bit longer. We'll find ways to keep doing this because it's what we do. Ultimately we try a positive spin. I can sit here and talk to you at this time a day. Instead of being dressed up in a button down shirt and everything else, I'm in a sweatshirt and hat and say, "We'll get there. I'm not sure when, but we'll get there." The only hard part of it is knowing that I might not be able to be there in June to send this senior class off the way we normally would. But we'll find a way to get through that too.

Evan Schneider:

Well, Andy, thanks so much for your time. It was a pleasure to get to know you and talk to you a little bit. It's really helpful to hear from someone who's got their boots on the ground what's going on. So thank you so much.

Andrew Seabert:

Oh, it was a pleasure to do this and thank you for the opportunity. And yeah, I just keep telling my students, "Stay positive. I know it's hard some days, but there's other days it's going to be very easy to stay positive and we'll get there."

Evan Schneider:

Thanks.

Andrew Seabert:

Thank you.