

Wildkit Way Podcast: Season 1, Episode 6

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Announcer (00:03):

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.

Community in the classroom. What is it and why is it important on this episode of the Wildkit Way, ETHS superintendent Marcus Campbell sits down with ETHS teachers, Ilma Lodhi, and Kamasi Hill, along with social worker Britt Bodkin, to discuss what it takes to build community in the classroom post pandemic, and why a sense of belonging is vital for student engagement and student success. Let's begin.

Marcus Campbell (01:01):

Well, welcome and hello everybody. Welcome. This is Dr. Campbell, and welcome to the podcast, the Wildkit Way podcast. And I am just so excited to be with some ETHS staff today. It's my pleasure to speak with two teachers: one of our newer teachers in the math department, Ilma Lodhi and one of our veteran teachers Dr. Kamasi Hill <laugh>. And we're also joined by Britt Bodkin, a social worker in the special education department. How y'all doing today? <Good. Good. Thank you.>

(01:35):

So, Dr. Hill and I would say we've been in education for a while and the both of you are newer educators, and I'm just curious as to how you're thinking about our industry these days. Given we're here post pandemic, per se, and we're talking about healing and coming back together and trying to build community. So from your various perspectives and roles. How, how are you viewing where we are now in our, in our field and in our industry? Ilma, why don't we start with you.

Ilma Lodhi (02:14):

Sure. So you bring up industry. It is a good question because I have a different context before coming through here. So I used to be an engineer before I joined as an educator, and that has helped kind of in the space of education now post pandemic because being an engineer, there's so much collaborative designing and the idea of working together is necessary for survival in, in many classrooms, but definitely a math classroom where everything is so isolating. And so that's been really important post pandemic, where we're-all-in-this-together attitude really translates to even something as simple as a worksheet or thought process. We do a lot of partner collaboration. We

do groups for collaboration. And so to see students design their way through math is really important to me in my classroom. And it feels like we've kind of put in some work to get rid of that void in math of feelings and humanness is, and it allows for connection. So bringing in different industries into the math classroom has helped.

Marcus Campbell (03:08):

So I imagine your math class is not like students in roles, you know, just kind of putting your hair down and doing work. What's your classroom look like?

Ilma Lodhi (03:17):

So more discovery based where we still get to the same concept that the textbooks want us to teach, but there is some challenge of like, I don't know how to do this. Let's figure it out together. And then there's enough previous knowledge and shared knowledge that students are bringing from outside of the classroom to figure it all out. And then at the end as a group, there's a discovery moment of like, oh, got it. This is how it works. Where can we apply it? And does it offer me anything outside of this classroom? So changing the game up on math a little bit.

Marcus Campbell (03:41):

Cool. Doctor, what about you? What about for history?

Kamasi Hill (03:45):

You know, it's interesting. So I, you know, I have a couple of courses that I teach. I think with, with, in, with regard to African American history, you know, the pandemic is an interesting metaphor, you know, because you know, African American history is a, is a contested space, you know, where you're talking about, you know, black people who have felt the brunt of oppression and at the same time have been able to, you know, execute a level of agency to demonstrate their sense of belongingness, you know, in, in the space. And so, you know, the, the, the pandemic kind of serves as a metaphor for that in, in many respects, you know how does one feel present in the world yet shielded from the world, you know yet trying to reassert themselves in the world.

(04:36):

So I've, I've been able to kind of use, you know, the pandemic as a metaphor for helping students in re-engage in the, in the classroom and in philosophy. You know, one of my electives that I teach, it's been a great thing to examine as, as well, because so much of philosophy is thinking about thinking, it's very individualistic. It's like, how do you approach the world? How do you view the world? And how do you go into self and view and come back out, you know? And so the pandemic is, you know, is has been a teachable moment in many respects. And it's also an existential moment because, you

know, it creates this, it, it has created a and reminded students of the need to belong in community. And they, and they see how it feels, right? Not simply, you know, from an abstract perspective. They feel it, as we say in philosophy, existentially, they're very existence. You know, they were, they were challenged by, you know, this idea of, you know, being shielded from the world. And so to reenter the world and come back as a, it's been, it's been a, a teachable moment and I've been able to use that in the class and, and have students, you know, kind of think about that.

Marcus Campbell (05:52):

Britt, what about you? How are you using your role to reestablish a sense of community coming back from such a difficult time?

Britt Bodkin (06:03):

Thanks for asking. So I work at the Day School, which is a small community, which I love because I think we can really go narrow and deep with each other in a small space. And I think to your point, there's such a recognition about the desire for social connection. And I feel like the pandemic offered a lot of opportunity to understand more about what they need. Because when there's an absence of something, it can help somebody understand what they're missing or what they maybe had more and organically or naturally, and how that changes when something shifts. And I feel like the value of that belonging and understanding the need for connection and the need to feel like you are a part of something is so significant. And I, especially for students who are navigating emotional disability recognizing that that social relationship and that understanding of themselves and what they bring to the table is so valuable and that they feel like they are seen and they are heard and they are loved and they are known, which is, I think, true for all humans who desire that.

(07:07):

And I think recognizing I love working in a school because there are different talents and perspectives that come to a table to work together. And so if we physically can do that in a space with each other we can see who really steps up in different ways in the community to support each other. And so I think being curious about what people bring in every day, both with maybe what they feel just being within our space, but also recognizing that covid impact from my perspective is still very present. You know, there's still unearthing skills that may have been not as often used or recognizing that needs may have changed based on what happened in that, like the deeper season of it. And so I think, and also just sharing joy, sharing time to be able to be together and appreciate one another and laugh with one another and really prioritizing that human connection so that people feel like they can show up and have the capacity to learn and grow and practice things vulnerably even more.

Marcus Campbell (08:09):

Yeah. What I think I hear from all of you is like, you are, have worked to shift to rehumanize your space, right? And I'm wondering how have you in your own roles, rehumanized yourself by coming back to schools which are very institutional in dehumanizing spaces, right? That's what schools have historically been. And I think one of the things we have tried to do as a school is to rehumanize our students, rehumanize ourselves and try to humanize ETHS, which is difficult. But how have you embraced this idea of rehumanizing school in this point in time? I'm just curious as to how, and it may not even be instructional or, but like, just how you're showing up and, you know and how you've adjusted your own perceptions and thoughts about approaching your work. So have you done that? Anybody can jump in. You like call on somebody <laugh>

Ilma Lodhi (09:13):

So I can start. I think the concept of humanizing is huge. I'm going to say this again because a math classroom really asks you to park all your feelings and identities at the door. Yes. Like when you're coming in, you have to be almost robotic. You have to prove your success in an expected way, and that's how you complete the day.

Marcus Campbell (09:28):

And it's like math, right? People don't see math as humanizing that. Absolutely.

Ilma Lodhi (09:31):

Oh, absolutely. And so that type of space has caused so much damage and trauma, especially to black and brown students. And that's what I want to shift. And that requires humanizing all parts of it. So not just the content but me and then also my students. So to start and model it has to come from me first. And some of the techniques I have are just practicing radical vulnerability. I really believe that when I show up with my vulnerabilities, that makes me human.

Marcus Campbell (09:54):

How have you done that? Ilma?

Ilma Lodhi (09:56):

Talking about stuff that's hard in my life that might be personally hard about things that are institutionally frustrating for me to work out, but naming why I have those hardships. Does it have to do with my gender? Does it have to do with my race? Does it have to do with bureaucracy? And having an honest front for students is important because they'll share their stuff if I'm sharing mine. But if I'm keeping myself in a, in teacher mode now, bringing up the whole of me, then they won't bring up the whole of themselves in my

classroom. And just something very small is like, if I have my pictures in my classroom, which I do, students ask me, who is that? Where is that? Where is that one from? But that's not my classroom. So I asked all my students to bring in pictures of themselves and their family and their pets and their childhood photos. And so they're all around my wall. So it's something really small and I don't think people might think about it that much when they step into my space. But I remember in my high school, teachers had frames on their desk, but where's the kits? You know, they don't get to put a frame on their desk, they have nine other classes. So something as simple as that is, this is your space and I want you to take up space just like your photos and your people do.

Marcus Campbell (10:52):

That's awesome. That's awesome.

Kamasi Hill (10:54):

You know, I think for me, one of the things that has helped is block scheduling mm-hmm. <Affirmative>, because coming back into the classroom, I get a chance to take a little bit more time and let the space breathe before we jump into something. And teaching history, you know, we're teaching death, <laugh>, you know, destruction, anger, you know, war, I mean, you know, so these are some very heavy topics. So what I've intentionally done in the, in, you know, the first five, 10 minutes of class, you know, most classes I center you know, joy and pleasure as, as a teachable, you know, kind of, you know, lesson. And I ask the students to enter into the space by, you know either using an entry point activity, like, you know, looking at some aspect of popular culture, a music video, a song, fashion, dance, you know and we talk about, talk about it in relation to the lesson.

(11:55):

So it's not disconnected from the lesson, but starting off with joy and pleasure and, and a space where students can enter is has been a very, you know, good way to kind of reorient and recenter students to understanding that not all of life is just about existential dread, right? Mm-Hmm. <affirmative>, you know, there's some, you know, there's some, there's some things that we can do as individuals and as, as and as a school community and as a classroom to remind ourselves that there, there's some things that are fun and pleasurable, but also at the same time that you can learn from. So, you know, that's the way I've done it.

Marcus Campbell

Yeah. Mm-hmm. <Affirmative>. Yeah. Britt, what about you?

Britt Bodkin (12:39):

So when you asked that question, I thought about how in my social work training, excuse me, there's a lot of conversation around being a blank slate and showing up so that, and I understand some perspective of it, if you, you want to do the best you can to allow people to share whatever they want to share with you and not have assumptions about how you may think about what they're sharing of that nature. But there was a big emphasis of like, you walk in as this blank slate to then receive whatever the other person may be sharing with you or need from you. And I learned, especially navigating the pandemic and previous jobs I've had, like, that doesn't work <laugh>, you know, I think there's a, it's important to have boundaries and recognize what can and can't be shared with students or you know, being intentional about the focus being on their growth and development.

(13:25):

And I am still a human walking into this space every day and how can my humanness be present in a space to honor someone else's humanness as well? And one thing I think about is I actually used to not be open about my queer identity in previous jobs in other districts. Because you know, I learned like, oh, that could be a deal breaker for some people. They might not want to work with me, whether it's colleagues or students or families. And I'd hear a lot of things about people who are uncomfortable about the queer community. And I'm like, well, there it is, then I can never be honest because I'm here to show up and support students and what if they don't invite me in for that reason? But then when I came to ETHS I was like, I'm not doing that anymore.

(14:07):

I want people to know who I am and I think it actually will be more beneficial if students and families and colleagues know who I am. And I've been so grateful because I feel like students have been more honest about themselves because I'm honest about myself in that way in particular, or just being able to have so many opportunities to be a part of planning the LGBTQ plus summit or being in different spaces with students. We show up with so many parts of who we are and there can be such tension, at least in my own experience, about trying to hide certain parts or try to navigate certain parts that you, that I may expect people might find uncomfortable when the reality is if we can be curious about each other, learn from each other we might find windows and mirrors about each other's experiences that help all of us grow and understand. And I think that it's just, it's valuable to learn how to cultivate aspects of yourself by being yourself and knowing who your people are. And that only happens when you can show up as who you are.

Kamasi Hill (15:13):

Yeah, I think that windows and mirrors, you know, a metaphor, is extremely important. I think for me, one of the things that I try to help students understand is that the varying ways that we show up in spaces, there are a myriad of ways that we show up. I mean, we have multiple identities, and those identities are malleable. They're fluid, you know, they evolve. And so, you know, it's important for me to, to say, you know, to help students understand, you know, and to give them a peek into my own journey, right? To, to share things anecdotally from my own life to let them know where I was 20 years ago, 25 years ago. And yes, I was teaching 25 years ago <laugh>, and, and I think even professionally I've been able to be transparent with my students and say, this is where I was when I first started off as a teacher.

(16:11):

I'm at a different place. What I shared with them is that, you know, most teachers are bi-vocational. Yeah. You know you know and it wasn't until I came to Evanston that I didn't, I didn't have to actually work another job mm-hmm. <Affirmative>. So, you know that's not necessarily the case in many other school districts. So but what that, what that has done is that I've been able to take those bi-vocational experiences and bring them to bear upon my professional experience here. You know, everything from, you know, filmmaking, you know, to, you know, to promoting and, you know, to all of these other things, writing and lecturing and all these other things that I've been able to do, I've been able to bring that to this space. So for me, it's about being transparent with students and helping them understand my own journey and hopefully encouraging them to, to open up and to, even if they're not aware of where they are, because, you know, a lot of students are just trying to figure themselves out at any given moment, and they're not even necessarily aware of the multiple identities that they are, that they're, that, that are emerging within them.

(17:12):

So I think for me, that transparency is important to help trigger, you know, maybe something within them to, to explore themselves. Yeah. I appreciate that. Emma, what about you?

Ilma Lodhi (17:20):

Yeah, I'm just going to add a little bit more to what Dr. Hill said. I think the fluid identity piece is something I want to just add on. We're working with students at such a developmental age where if I had to state a goal regarding identities mine in our shared space and there's, is to just help them figure it out as much as they can and provide a space for that, whatever that may look like. And the reason for that being is coming from

a South Asian perspective or a DACY perspective yourself is a part of a big equation. It's a part of a big community. And so everything is rooted in that. So the idea of self-love or self-care is a very western concept to me. It's a very American concept, sometimes rooted in white supremacy. So I want that because I'm used to that, to, to turn into community care and community love.

(18:05):

And so to teach students that you got to start with identity. Who are you, who are your people, who are your stories, who are your feelings? And then from there we can build this community care and community love. And so identity comes first. You got to know yourself as you change, as you develop. And maybe you haven't figured out some pieces and maybe we can do that together, but maybe just the problem solving that's occurring in our class will help you figure it out later. Like, I'm not there forever. I also don't have all the answers. So that piece of turning self-love and self-care to community care and love is like my whole goal in my educational world forever.

Marcus Campbell (18:38):

I love that you just said that and I love that reframe. Right? You know, because we've been talking about solidarity, we've been talking about healing as a school, but I love the frame that, you know, this is about all of us mm-hmm. <Affirmative>, right? It's not just about one of us, it's about all of us. And so I really appreciate you sharing that in that way. What are you wanting your students that you work with to take away from you? And in this time, like what should they, what should they be taking away? What do you expect them to take away from you? Emma, you just kind of referred to it as this community love thing, which, well, let me just pause and say this. I love that we're having this conversation, right? And we have not prepped for this, right?

(19:19):

This is who you are as individuals. And I was with some folks this week and a lot of schools aren't having this conversation, right? We've come from such a traumatic, you know, and it's not all about the pandemic because we were talking about some of this stuff before the pandemic. But you know, just naming what we've been through as a community and how do we heal as a group, how do we come back and how do we make sure that our students are okay? Some folks aren't having this conversation. And I just love that the three of you unprepped, you know, come into this, this, this space and are able to have such a genuine, sincere conversation about solidarity, love and healing. So I just needed to name that, you know, because that is who we are as a school. I mean, it took some time to get here and I know we've had a lot of work to do because a lot of a conversation that we do have about healing and solidarity is steeped in whiteness and white supremacy. But I just love that we're having this conversation in

this way. So now that I've gotten off of that right? <Laugh>, so what, what, what do you want your, your, your students that you work with to be, to take away and it may not be, you know, quadratic equations or whatever it is, it really is, you know, but I'm curious like what do you want them to take away? What should they be taking away?

Kamasi Hill (20:33):

I want my students to understand that they have agency mm-hmm. <Affirmative>. I mean that's really, really what I want them to be able to understand. And I think, you know, a part of that is, I was, it's interesting because I was sharing with one of my classes this morning. I said, you know, I remember when I was in high school I would get up, I would go to school and there was no electronic device that I had access to. I mean zero Walkman, maybe <laugh>. I had a walk, but there was nothing that was distracting. And I said, you know, what's interesting is that I'm teaching you and I have no frame of reference. Mm Yeah. For what it means to be someone who's born in the 21st century and who was raised in an, in an environment and an era where you, you, you don't know a world without electronic devices. Personal electronic devices mm-hmm. <Affirmative> viewing the world through a lens, you know, that, you know, like, you know, literally a lens. Right? And so I said a part of it is for me is learning from them. Right. You know, you know what I'm saying? Like, I want to know from them how, how do they, how are they able to manage and have a successful way to secure their own identity in a world where they're, I don't want to say assaulted because that's maybe it's too harsh, but they're inundated with all of these images and, you know, and messages constantly.

(22:05):

For you to be able to come out of that <laugh> and say, this is who I am in the midst of the, you know, the wilderness of all of these things that are constantly coming at me...salute! Because I can't, I just cannot relate. I just don't have as, I didn't have as many competing forces, you know, that were trying to vie for my attention. Right. And they do. And the fact that they're able to, to navigate all of that and still come out, you know, sane and then have to come out of a pandemic as a teenager, like, look, I learned from them as much as they learn from me. And I'm amazed that they're able to kind of navigate all of that. Yeah. and I know they have their challenges, don't get me wrong. So I'm not dismissing the reality of that, but I'm just amazed at the resiliency of these young people and I'm inspired by that.

Marcus Campbell (22:50):

Yeah. This is definitely a different time. What do you all think? What, what do you want your, what do you want the students to take away with? Britt?

Britt Bodkin (22:55):

I appreciate so much of what you said. I often say to my students, you are the expert on yourself. I'm here to walk with you, to learn with you. Because at the end of the day, I want them to know their own internal resources and how to seek external resources. How can you know yourself in a way that you know how to take care of what you need and how do you know yourself well enough to know who you need to reach out to, what places you want to be, how you want to invest in the world around you. Because at the end of the day, it's you who's traveling with you. And I hope that students really feel a sense of belonging to themselves in each other so that they know how they want to flourish and grow and that they are valuable. That they have so much to contribute just by being who they are and showing up as themselves. And that there's possibility for evolution. You know, I want to hold hope with my students that even if there are times that are challenging right now, you have made it so far already and you have so much capacity to keep going, to keep healing, to keep teaching, to keep learning, to keep growing because the world is wide. And so I hope that they can hold on to what they already know and what is yet to come.

Marcus Campbell (24:05):

That's awesome. Yeah.

Ilma Lodhi (24:08):

I think two words come to mind for what I want my students to walk towards. One of them being confidence. I feel like my content, again, math and also the education system at large can really tear down student confidence. Confidence. And so I want to be a part of rebuilding that, but I want my students to find that in themselves with the way the curriculum is turning out with the way our discussions are. So I want them leaving kind of proud of themselves and however they showed up in that space. I think that there's real power in witnessing and viewing yourself grow in that direction. And the second one being I really want them to be imaginative. I think imagination is so stunted, maybe, probably what you're saying Dr. Because we're, our eyes are right in the phone all the time. The answers are always right there. And so our imagination seems to have stopped at a young age. And we need that so bad as our students, our agents of change is, well what do you imagine and how can we change the system? Like, I want y'all to be revolutionary. So change the whole game. Change the game in my class. How should we learn? Change the grading system. We're not going to talk about grades on this podcast. <Laugh>

(25:08):

How can we change that? Because outside of this class, we, y'all talk to me about change. This part angers you. This part frustrated you. You can't stop watching that

same video that seems to be hurtful. So what do we need to change? And, they're large systems. Maybe it's policies, maybe it's the system and all this stuff takes place in my class just because we're showing up as humans. Yeah. But in order to do that, we need an imagination that's vast. And imagination that's been hurt through all of our educational learning because we've been told no or we've been told to stop even simple things like doodling. So to have students grow in imagination is like the core for, for any change in my opinion. And that's where I'd like us to go, including myself towards, it's hard to imagine what you don't know.

Marcus Campbell (25:49):

Especially coloring within the lines too, right? Mm-Hmm. <affirmative>. So as we draw to a close here, what do we do differently? What can we do differently? I hear you on the imagination, right? What can we do differently? What should we be doing differently from your perspective?

Britt Bodkin (26:06):

I think similar to what you're naming, having a space of flexibility is really important. And always remembering what our why is behind what we do. And recognizing that we can all change things as we learn more. I love working in a school because I think it honors the fact that we live in an evolution. Students get older, developmental things change. Also our world changes. So our classrooms need to change or the way that students needs show up changes or where their thriving may change. And so how can we both find a way that makes sense for all of us to work together within this wide community and be mindful that we can change, we can reflect, we can grow, we can, we can respond differently. We can try something, learn from it and do it similarly or different and be thoughtful about who's speaking up to say what needs to be changed and how it needs to be changed. Because I do think there's no one right way, you know, that's a white supremacy culture belief and it's not helpful. Yeah. Because there's so many possibilities of how to evolve and how do we really keep our finger to the pulse so we can kind of grow in that way together.

Kamasi Hill (27:09):

I want to go back because you said something about, you know, agency revolution. You know, like I think for me, I'm, I'm, I struggle especially in the, in, at the tail end of my career with the, the kind of through line of reform resistance revolution, right? And so for me, what I would like students to do is find their place, right? Because we need all voices. We need revolutionaries, you know, we even need reformists. You know, we need people who can work within the system and we need those who are going to resist. And so for me it's like find, find where you fit in the spectrum and, and, and allow those who can encourage and inspire you to, to do that. We need to be pushed, right?

We need those revolutionary voices to push us out of our comfort zone and say, no, this, this entire system needs to be interrogated and changed.

(28:18):

And we need those who say, okay, you know, I'm going to put my energy and my effort into this one space to reform it because I can make it better. Won't necessarily be revolutionary, but I can make it better. And then we need those who are pushing us to say, no, we need to resist this. And so for me, that's kind of the, if I were to draw, you know, a line of, you know, where, you know, change needs to show up or what we could be doing, that's what I would say is to, you know, teach that to our students and also like, find our place as well.

Ilma Lodhi (28:49):

My short answer is, listen, I feel like the kids know how to ask and know what they want and sometimes their answers are wrong, but let them figure it out and we're there with them. We don't have all the answers. So the short answer is just to listen.

Marcus Campbell (28:59):

Yeah. Well I just want to say thank you because this I think captures the sort of a snapshot as to where we are and how we're evolving as a school and where I think many schools should be evolving to unfortunately a lot aren't having a conversation, but I'm glad that we are. And I just want to say what, given your perspectives, I just want to thank you and everybody else who shows up with these things on their mind. I know there are a lot of staff that do mm-hmm. <Affirmative>. So thank you for your time today. Ilma, the grading, that's a whole podcast, <laugh>. That's right. But I really appreciate all of your time and effort and the love that you put into our kids every single day. And thank you all for being here.

Ilma Lodhi (29:50):

Thank you for having us.

Marcus Campbell (29:52):

Thank you all.

Announcer (29:55):

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