

I think that a lot of the strength of the Envision Learning Partners are their coaching staff and their ability to develop really close relationships with our school, and with our staff, and with our administration to really just be the best support system

It's about wanting to provide our students with a culture of success where they're constantly striving for excellence; where they're constantly wanting to become these future citizens in a 21st century world. Where they can seek out their own problems and really solve the issues that they want to solve.

We visited an Envision campus, we witnessed the defenses and we saw what growth and what strength and what skillsets students were able to visibly demonstrate for us, and it became this thing that we were like, "Oh my goodness. We have to go back, and we have to show this to our staff, and we have to push ourselves to make sure that our students can do this."

Because we know our students can do this, but we as educators are not giving them the right tools. We're giving them the content knowledge, but we're still not making it all the way there. To make sure that what we're doing for them, as educators, is really educating them to survive and be successful outside of high school.

Just having someone who's real and having a team of people who, when we have questions; when we encounter our issues with trying to implement our model, ELP is great in terms of working with us to just be problem solvers together.

There's lots of different things that Envision Learning Partners has done for our campus that really addresses our needs, in the very traditional educational experience that has been ... what our school has mostly been working with. It's been a really great pairing.

Teaching to defense is very much a break from traditional teaching. You have to change your way of thinking in being a traditionally, classically trained teacher. That's hard to do, but Envision Learning Partners really do come in and show you that it's not impossible. You just have to reframe the way that you think teaching should occur, and reframe and rethink about what you can do to help your students learn. It doesn't just have to be you up at the front giving them all the knowledge. It's you asking them questions to help them understand and figure out what they need to be learning.

[00:13:00]

Once I shifted from this, "No, we need to learn all the classic literature and write really in-depth papers to more real world and more experiential ... No, this is why you need to learn how to write." It caused me to have to rethink what it meant to be an english teacher. That was my challenge.

Interviewer:

That doesn't sound easy.

MaryAnn:

[00:13:30]

It's hard, it's very hard. I'm actually a social studies teacher by heart and by passion. I taught social studies before I taught english, and it's hard. I just literally want to stand up there and dump all of my knowledge and all of my expertise, and for what? For what purpose? It doesn't teach them anything. It doesn't help them investigate. It doesn't help them become passionate about the things that I love.

I found my passion, so how can I tap into the things that they're passionate about to help them go find the answers and seek and solve the things that they're passionate about, and solve the problems that they want to solve. It takes a lot, and it's exhausting. It is, but it's totally worth it.

[00:14:00]

Interviewer:

Going through that process, for you as a teacher, do you feel that the Portfolio Defense process has helped you become a better teacher? How so?

MaryAnn:

[00:14:30]

Oh, absolutely. Because it helps me stop and reflect. One of the key parts that we as a school have put a lot of effort and energy into but still haven't quite figured it out, is the idea of reflection.

Internally, I am a reflector. I'm constantly seeking feedback and looking for advice and tips to constantly grow my own self, my profession. A lot of what we do with the Portfolio Defense, is teach our students how to become reflective.

[00:15:00]

I really feel like the best way to teach my students that was to model it for them, and for them to see what reflection looks like and why reflection is so important. Because perfection just doesn't ... that doesn't happen, nothing's perfect. We have to be okay with doing something and then not being afraid to go back and look at it because it wasn't what you thought it was going to be, or it didn't turn out the way that you thought it would.

[00:15:30]

I think that that's a really key component of how good of a system Portfolio Defenses are, because it requires students to be reflective. By being reflecting, you grow, right? By being reflective, you grow. That's really the important thing that we are trying to make sure that our students are doing, is to be reflective, because they then start to recognize their own growth, which I think is really important.

[00:16:00]

Interviewer:

Let's see. You said so much good stuff in there. Whoa. All my paper, like check, check check, check, check.

Speaker 4:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

Let's see.

[00:16:30]

How has Envision Learning Partners, would you say, empowered your school and your teachers to make the model ... the portfolio defensive their own? To customize it for you guys, your school.

MaryAnn: I think one of the most noticeable things that the Portfolio Defense has done for our campus is actually a really positive change in our culture. Our culture wasn't, you know ... A couple of years ago our culture wasn't terrible, it's just that it didn't seem focused. It didn't seem like we had a common goal, a common initiative that we were really trying to collaborate with each other, and really try to support each other in achieving a goal for our students and for our campus.

[00:17:00]

[00:17:30] With the Portfolio Defenses, the culture of our school has become this living thing that ... we see a purpose. We see a common goal that we're all working to achieve. Which is making sure that our kids are ready for the day after graduation. I think there's a lot of short-sidedness in education that ...

[00:18:00] We prepare, prepare ... to graduation, and then what? Does it stop? What do they do next?

[00:18:30] We weren't asking our students. We weren't asking that of our students. With Portfolio Defenses, we are constantly requiring ourselves and our students to think beyond, right? To think, "What's next? Where do I go? Where do I take this to the next level?" Because there is a next level, and I think in education that's where a lot of the shortcomings are, is that we're not thinking forward. We're not thinking, "What are we doing next?" We're not thinking, "Where are we going next?" We're not preparing for what's next.

[00:19:00] I think that that alone has helped shift our culture on our campus in a very positive way. We are constantly thinking, "Okay, so I'm ... " And being very intentional with, "Okay. We're doing this for this purpose. We're doing this to make sure that our students are able to do this. We're providing them with these skills for this end." I think that that has really shifted and brought a lot of collaboration and a lot of unity around a culture of success.

Interviewer: I know that was a lot of loud stuff.

Speaker 3: I think it's ... you can probably ...

Interviewer: It seemed like most of the important pieces were okay.

Speaker 3: Yeah.

Interviewer: Some of the stuff had ...

Speaker 3: Yeah. Given the way the last one was cut, with the music and activities ...

Interviewer: I think it should be okay.

[00:19:30]

Speaker 3: ... we should be able to ...

Interviewer: Yeah. We have [crosstalk 00:19:32] enough good stuff.

Speaker 3: Yeah.

Interviewer: There's so much good stuff.

Speaker 3: Yeah.

Speaker 4: That was a lot of really good stuff she just said.

Interviewer: Yeah, because there were, like ... I was paying attention because I heard the noise ...

Speaker 4: Yeah.

Interviewer: ... and I was like, hopefully it's not happening right with the key things she was saying, and some of it was kind [crosstalk 00:19:45] of during it, but a lot of it was not. So I think we're okay on that one.

Speaker 4: I was noticing the same. Yeah.

Interviewer: Are they out in the hall?

Speaker 4: No, I think they're right next door and they probably, or ... It sounds to me like someone just finished a defense.

Interviewer: Oh. They were applauding.

[00:20:00]

Speaker 4: Something like that.

Interviewer: Okay.

We did talk about the scaling. Do you think we covered enough about that?

Speaker 4: Yeah. I do. I do. We talked about being in a big school, and she really talked about the difference between ...

Interviewer: A big school and a small.

Speaker 4: Yeah. [crosstalk 00:20:15]

Interviewer: I wonder if there's ...

Speaker 4: We talked about your teacher practice, [crosstalk 00:20:20] which was great.

Interviewer: Yeah.

I don't want to beat a dead horse in the [inaudible 00:20:22], but I think it's important, maybe ...

Speaker 4: Yeah.

[00:20:30]

Interviewer: Maybe there just some sort of short sum-up you could say about it? About how you didn't think it was possible. Your hesitations or concerns ahead of time, and then that obviously there was some bumps in, or ... there was some learning, some challenges, but that in the end you guys have done it. To kind of give that message ... Thinking about the other schools who might think that it's not possible, and you're like, "Look, it's possible." [crosstalk 00:20:52] I don't know how to put that question.

Speaker 4: Start with, "One of my concerns before [crosstalk 00:20:57] I started this process is doing this [crosstalk 00:20:59] at a school ..."

[00:21:00]
Interviewer:

Yeah. At a school, and it's 2,000 people ... Yeah.

Speaker 4:

"And now I ..." You know.

MaryAnn:

Sure.

Speaker 4:

All right. I don't want to put words in your mouth.

MaryAnn:

Sure.

I think one of the wonderings in bringing a model like Portfolio Defenses was the issue of scale. How do you bring a very personal experience for individualized students with a team of teachers, when you have 2,000 students?

[00:21:30]

It was daunting. It was one of those things that was like, is it possible? Can we provide a space where we can run defenses for 550 students knowing what our staff limitations are, what our space limitations are? Can we come up with something that will provide the experience that we need to give our students?

[00:22:00]

The answer is yes. The answer is absolutely, you just have to be very creative in the way that you solve the problems on your campus, and think about the limitations that you have. Just be really crafty with the solutions that you come up with. I think that we really did do something that a lot of the people on our campus thought was impossible. They were like, "There's no way that we could do this."

[00:22:30]

I think, with a school like ours, and with the staff, and with the culture of success that we've started to now promote and support on our campus, we couldn't not do this. So yeah, we figured out a way to make it happen and we did.

Interviewer:

Great. That was exactly what ... looking for.

Speaker 4: I would love to hear you tell what it was like to watch your students that day in March give their defenses.

MaryAnn: If I do that I'm probably gonna cry.

Speaker 4: That's good.

[00:23:00]

Interviewer: Yeah, so just think about that [crosstalk 00:23:01] ...

Speaker 4: Tell Eric.

Interviewer: ... and I think the context of people who are watching, or hear, who don't know what's going on, be that, you know ... After three years ...

MaryAnn: Sure.

Interviewer: You know, "We just had our first Portfolio Defense," and then you can talk about what that was like.

MaryAnn: Sure.

[00:23:30] In working with Envision Learning Partners, over the course of three years ... When we finally got to our benchmark defenses, I think one of the things that was most impactful was when I got to see my own students, who I taught as a teacher, and just getting to celebrate with them the growth that they had made in just two short years.

It's amazing when you challenge somebody, and they ... Oh my god, I told you I was gonna cry ...

[00:24:00]

Interviewer: [inaudible 00:24:01] Do we have a tissue?

MaryAnn: Yeah. Sorry.

Speaker 4: It's okay.

Interviewer: No, no. It's fine.

Speaker 4: We have [crosstalk 00:24:23] ... It's not going to stop this thing from [00:24:30] [inaudible 00:24:28], but it'll do the trick.

MaryAnn: I think I cried the entire day on March 10th.

Speaker 4: I can see that. I can imagine. Isn't that how you know you're doing something right?

MaryAnn: True.

[00:25:00] There's like water still in my eye. Okay.

[00:25:30] I think the most empowering thing was watching three years of work come into fruition, where you see a kid who has been told repeatedly that they're not successful. That they're a statistic, and that they will continue to be a statistic. You see that ... You tell them that you will support them the way that they need to be supported and you watch them surpass their own expectation of success. You watch them become the success that you know that they are. It doesn't have anything to do with you, but it has to do with the confidence that you instill in them, and it's so powerful. So powerful.

[00:26:00]

[00:26:30] Interviewer: What does that mean to your community, to experience those defenses?

MaryAnn: I think for the community ...

Interviewer: Take your time.

[00:27:00] Your school community.

MaryAnn: I think for the school community, it's more about teaming up together to do what we need to for kids. I think it's about camaraderie. I think it's about a support system and a support network. Knowing that being in education and being involved with educating a child, is hard. It's hard work and you can't do it alone. We have to do it together, and creating a community where everyone understands that and you can see it; you can physically see it in a defense.

[00:27:30]

Coming together, where you have community members actually sitting on panels where you have teachers; where you have students sitting on other students' panels. You create a community where there's a student standing in the front of the room that you are all there to support, and they know that you're there to support them, and you've created an environment where that becomes the expectation. The community is there for you. We're there for each other, and I think ...

[00:28:00]

Again, it goes back to the culture. It goes back to this culture of success and accepting nothing less, and accepting nothing less from our students. Then you will be successful, but we'll be here to make sure that you have everything that you need to become successful.

[00:28:30]

Interviewer: Let's see. You said so much good stuff.

I guess maybe if you could ... I mean, I think we've carved most of the stuff. If there's anything ... Thinking about the teacher, or the school. Let's say who is not working with Envision Learning Partners, and maybe they're thinking about whether they want to or not.

[00:29:00]

What do you say to other schools in that process?

MaryAnn: I'm trying to think of how I want to say this.

Why would you not do this? I think, it's just, the way in which we prepare kids for the future has to be about what's going to make them successful, and how are they going to benefit from the education that you're providing at your school? How is that going to help them be successful?

[00:29:30]

[00:30:00] One of the things that you can do is provide them with these authentic learning experiences that really are going to challenge them in the ways that they need to be challenged; both academically, but also skills-based, and provide them with that experience that will prepare them to be successful in the future.

[00:30:30] I think that it will feel scary, and it will feel terrifying to create a brand-new system and a new thing that's such a break from tradition, but it's so important to just remember that we got into education to educate.

[00:31:00] Our purpose and our job is to make sure that we are providing our students with what they need to go out into the world, and to embrace their dreams and to achieve their dreams. So we have to do all we can to make sure that they're ready and prepared to do that.

Interviewer: Having been through three years and seeing it firsthand, why would you recommend this for other schools ... Envision Learning Partners.

MaryAnn: It's a unique way in which students can do something meaningful and build relationships with teachers in a very meaningful and positive way that supports academic excellence and supports personal growth. I think when you put those two things together, that it yields amazing results. It provides a community and a support for students and for staff to constantly grow themselves as people to make for a brighter future for everyone.

[00:31:30]

[00:32:00] Interviewer: Okay. Anything ... Final words you're able to say about Envision Learning Partners in your experience?

MaryAnn: Just to thank them for ...

Speaker 4: I'm sorry, can you just say that you want to thank Envision Learning Partners [crosstalk 00:32:16] so we get the name in it?

MaryAnn: Yes. Sure

[00:32:30]

I would just like to thank Envision Learning Partners for providing such a solid support, and a solid coaching experience and valuable partnership, in general. To embark on this very large project that we've undertaken and for just being a really amazing thought-partner in coming up with really creative solutions to help solve the problems that we have on our campus, and coming up with some really unique and innovative ways to continue to shift education.