

Episode 31: Interview with Amanda Peyton Transcript

Becky Lewis Welcome listeners and welcome back Blake. Thank you for being here Co-Hosting with me again, Blake, and I am really excited to continue our conversation around parent and family and engagement.

Blake Turley Thank you Becky, I'm so happy to be here with you again.

Becky Lewis And I'm really thrilled to be welcoming our guest for this episode, Amanda Peyton. Amanda, thank you so much for taking time out of your busy day to be here.

Amanda Payton Well, thank you for having me.

Becky Lewis So Amanda, to give our audience some background information about yourself, can you tell us a little bit about yourself and the work that you do in education?

Amanda Payton Sure, I'm coming to you from McDowell County schools in the southern coalfields of our state, we are a small district, very rural. We have a little less than 3000 students and in my current position I am the administrative assistant to the Superintendent here in our district. That's kind of like an umbrella, I oversee the universal pre-K program, all federal programs, and school improvement with a focus on our elementary schools.

Blake Turley Well, thank you for sharing that Amanda. We know that all schools were closed when the pandemic hit in March and when the 2020-2021 school year opened up in September of this year, schools looked different from County to County between remote, blended, and in person instruction. Can you tell us about how McDowell County has been able to provide pre-K instruction from September to now?

Amanda Peyton Sure, we of course did our enrollment a little differently last year. We did some virtual enrollment activities to try to get as many students still committed to the program as possible.

We were really concerned knowing that, pre-K is not required and we were concerned that families, with the pandemic, would be very fearful and would look at where pre-K is not required and say I'm not going to send my children to school. Our family developmental partners from Head Start and our teachers were making calls with families so that we could spread how safe that we were going to be through them through any means. We kept posting it on social media, talking about our safety protocols. We purchased bucket hats instead of, you know the masks for our little guys, that are just kind of like rain bucket hats with the shield that goes all the way around. And we talked to them about how we're going to reduce the number

of students in our learning centers. Your child will have a buddy and that will be the only child that your child will visit a learning station with.

So if we're going to the block center, or if we're going to the dramatic play center, and we talked to them about cleaning that we would clean in between each visit, so if you are my buddy and we go to the dramatic play center, that center will be cleaned before two other kids come in and we just really talked about our deep cleaning of our classroom and how we were going to keep them safe and we were shocked about the number of parents that then said, hey, if you're going to take it to this level, then I feel safe they're going to stay in that core classroom and they're not going to leave that classroom, then I'm going to send my child to school.

Of course, we did have families who said they were not feeling warm and fuzzy right then, and they didn't want to put their children in school, and they opted to do a blended model. We're calling it a hybrid model, where children can come to school for reduced number of days, but then we're actually having online visual distance family learning and what that looks like is mom's on the computer with child or grandmothers on the computer with child, teachers in the classroom with her assistant and they are teaching families at home, skills and strategies to use when the child is not at school. So, for example, one that I sat in on that was a great example and one of my model examples is that the teacher was rehearsing and going over modeling with the family on the words tall and short, focusing on that important vocabulary that we study in pre-K, and so her activity to the family was to go and get five different toys out of the child's bedroom or toy box and bring them back and to practice sorting them from tall to short. So they're actually teaching families, if you're not in our classrooms these are the activities we would be doing in class, so let me show you how to do that at home, so that's really worked out well. So we have our on campus students who can come to school four days a week and then we have our blended hybrid model, which is reduced numbers of days where the families feel comfortable, and then we're actually teaching them the distance family engagement activities online together.

Blake Turley Yeah, I love that. I also love how you talked about partnering with and modeling for families. In what ways have teachers supported families to help them partner in their child's education? I think you talked a little bit about that.

Amanda Peyton Yeah, with this year with the pandemic, I think the distance family learning that's been new to us and that is something that our teachers are saying we've got to continue this. Pre-covid we were inviting families of course into our open classrooms and that's where we would share those kinds of ideas and modeling for them. But we can do it so much more now with distance family learning, and they're even talking about recording some of the sessions so that families can just have a library to go to pull from, and so their little minds keep working and keep thinking you know, even after the pandemic we don't want this distance learning to stop. Some of the other things that we've done for years is having family projects in

the classroom, which I know all of our great classrooms across the state do that where families come in and they participate in the learning with their child. We have family training opportunities and those have happened for quite some time.

If we're doing a car seat training where we try to bring other providers in and we have very limited providers in our area, we try to open the doors to our pre-K classrooms pre-covid so that you know birth to three can come in there, parents to teachers, our speech and language pathologist will do some trainings for all of our families, so just trying to really make that classroom a hub for learning for parents and for students. Some of the other things that we've done is to just teach families that it's going to take that village. That we don't need you to drop them at the door that we want you to kind of be with us and go with us on this learning journey.

We had traditional parent teacher conferences prior to Covid, and now those are being conducted on zoom virtually for all our families regularly and so each marking period or just when we need to have a conference, a celebration, or if we're concerned about something sharing that data or our target. Those right now are taking place over zoom.

Becky Lewis I think that's amazing and I love that your teachers want to continue building that library of videos for parents. That's one kind of out of the box, nontraditional approach to parent engagement. Are there any other activities that you can think of, or events or approaches that your teachers have developed that are very creative and nontraditional to increase family engagement?

Amanda Peyton Sure, I've got a list of them. I wanted to be sure to share with you that we have spent so much time and energy with the collaboration with Head Start and we are fully collaborative. We have 13 classrooms, twelve of those classrooms are within our schools. We only have one standalone Head Start Center, but we've opened our doors and we've said head start come on into our buildings, take advantage of our great spaces and our outdoor playground areas, and then so the students can build those relationships together. So when you look at a classroom, you can't tell if it's head start funded or if it's Board of Ed funded and I think that we're really proud of that in McDowell that we have that collaboration. I don't make a decision about a classroom unless my core team, which is members of both head start and Board of Ed, can make those decisions together.

Um so we've kind of developed a lot of training. And again, including everyone, assistants and teachers and bus drivers on what is family engagement and what it is not, and what's parent involvement. And they get it. They understand that when you are involved, you are friends, you know each other.

You're kind of going about this together and saying, yeah, we share a common bond. We share that child. I'm going to involve you. I'm going to invite you to lots of stuff, but when we're

engaging, we're in a partnership. We're working towards a goal. And I always do the activity with my families and with my teacher staff. When you're involved with someone versus when you're engaged to someone. And then they kind of get it, it is kind of is easier to understand those two vocabulary words and we take that into the classroom. So if we're engaged together, we're partners. We are setting goals. We are sharing data or sharing resources, and it's kind of like that improvement cycle that we just kind of keep coming back together and moving towards our standards. And so that's the first thing is to make sure families understand the standards. You know what is my child supposed to be learning? What is appropriate, what is developmentally appropriate at this time?

When you start focusing your work with families on that, they see the importance of pre-K so your attendance improves. So before, pre-K always had a hard time getting students to attend regularly where it's not required, now that families see the importance of this work and they know this is where my child is supposed to be by the end of pre-K, this is how my teachers want me to help at home, it helps their attendance and attendance is really not a problem for us anymore.

Of course, we have enlisted the help of Freddy, Freddy the Frog and he's our mascot. He is just our pre-K mascot but he follows the students to kindergarten for the first couple of months and so it helps with transition. They students see him all during pre-K and when they are threes and when they are fours. And then when they go to kindergarten, their friend ready Freddy comes and visits for the first couple of months so that it is a familiar face. They have breakfast and parades and celebrations with ready Freddy and then here he comes back to me in kindergarten so that really helps. Ready Freddy is all about attendance, but our families know that they tell me all the time that that Frog gets them in trouble because if they wanted to miss a day of school and go to Grandma's house early in North Carolina, or Tennessee, or wherever the kids will say but no ready Freddy will miss me or I'm going to miss my attendance parade, and ready Freddy is going to lead the parade or maybe ready Freddy is having lunch with us today so I've got to be at school so ready Freddy helps with attendance and helps families really understand that importance of attendance.

Some other things that we have done is our porch visits prior to school starting. Our pre-K teachers and their assistants, we treat them as a team. They go out and we make sure those first five or six days of school before the students come on the calendar year that we allow time for our teachers to go out and do porch visits. So, they do not go in the home for these. These are quick. Just get to see your face, get to see your name, you know, to kind of let the parents know any important information that will be happening and some events that they'll have at the kickoff at the start of the school year, but you know, they just go and just say, hey I'm the teacher, I'm looking forward to seeing you, and it kind of breaks the ice for the child to get to see that teacher at their house or on their porch, or on their curb, and those are really

important and we take books with everything that we do, so they give them free books and leave those with them and it's usually always some getting ready for school kind of books, so you know getting ready for pre K or the night before preschool and things like that so that the families can share.

If it is OK, I'll just continue down some of the other things that we've been doing.

Becky Lewis Absolutely.

Amanda Peyton Another one of those is our K clubs, so it's super important for transitions for our pre-K students to be comfortable when they go to kindergarten and here they build that really strong relationship with the pre K teacher and assistant teacher and then they're going to have to transition to kinder and that's one of the first transitions for that child to ever to have to understand. So, we have what we call K clubs. They happen over the summer and it's a mix of pre-K students and kindergarten students and pre-K teachers and kindergarten teachers. So, you know, most transitions happen during the school year before summer starts. These are taking place over the summer and we are buying tons of resources. The schools set them up and they can have up to three over the summer and they focus on really important things like you know, the school and like I know one last year did a travel theme where they had a passport, and they went to different areas of the school because you know, pre-K students we have family style meals in the classroom so they don't spend a lot of time in the cafeteria. So this teacher thought it was important that she had made passports and every part of the school that they visited they got a stamp and then once they finished their passport and they got back to the classroom they celebrated, and so whatever the theme is that the schools decide to do the importance of it is that we have kindergarten students there, we have pre-K students that they knew their pre K teachers have built relationships with them. They get to see the kindergarten teachers that they're going to have coming up the next year and then they all kind of build that solid relationship together, so our K clubs are always a lot of fun. Our other grade level teachers get jealous because they want to do them too but it's something really special when you see everybody there together, kind of collaborating and transitioning and doing what's best for those children.

Becky Lewis I mean, do those K club sound phenomenal? And I am sure that your teachers and students get so much out of the way those transitions are built in, but I want to shift our attention to your home visiting program, I know that this is a big part of the work that you do in McDowell. So, can you tell our listeners some more about your program?

Amanda Peyton Sure, we're going into our 7th year of our home visiting project; it has grown so fast it's kind of like a Chia Pet. We started out with pre-K teachers and were the only teachers in the district that were conducting home visits for years simply because of the head start standards in that we knew that family engagement was important. And so, in the whole

idea of home visits is just something that I saw worked in pre, K and we knew we needed to extend that out. Uh, we did not know how far that we could extend that program, but our goal was to get to grade 12, but we weren't for sure how teachers were going to take on this new idea of family engagement. So, we started with pre-K, Kindergarten, 1st and 2nd grade teachers.

So, the first year we did a PK- 2 project and I went begging for people and we had funding to fund about 25 people to pick ten children in to 2 visits throughout the school year. And that was about the funding that we had, and our goal was let's start small and let's build this. We don't just want to say hey go out and do home visits. We need to really create a training so that families are comfortable when we come to their home, they're inviting, and they accept us and they understand what the program is about.

But then, how do we train our teachers not to judge families? And how do we train them to go in to listen to listen and not to listen to respond. And how can we not look like we're coming to tell them everything that they're doing wrong? But how do we go in to build that partnership so that we can support that whole child? So we created a training. It's an amazing training. It's mentally exhausting, but it needs to be that way so that when we go in we don't have that educator lens on. Uh, we go in to really figure out where that family is and not necessarily to fix them, but to figure out where they are and then what can we do together to help that child succeed? I mean we can't fix all the problems going on in the home, but what we can fix on what we can impress upon is our classroom and that learning of that child so that's our visits, the first one is a hopes and dreams visit and we developed it that way to, you know, tell me what are your hopes and dreams for your child and to let the child see the teacher and the parent talking and building that relationship right in front of their eyes. Asking the child even at three and four you know what do you want to be when you grow up and start having those future conversations, and you know many times that are three and four year old, we get police officers or dancers or football players and we tell them absolutely you can do anything you want, you just have to come to school and Mom or grandma or whoever is sitting across the table, we're going to work together to make sure that happens.

So then we follow up with a thank you postcard or a phone call and then we go back for a second visit and the second visit we set a goal with the family. So, in pre-K you know maybe our goal is to recognize letters in our name and then we share with the parent's strategies and we show we take our manipulatives, whatever we're going to leave with the family to work with for the next couple of weeks at home on that standard. And that starts to, you know, really strengthen that relationship and that engagement, that partnership we always take books. And we take books and we share books and we try to build home libraries and everything that we do so they get to pick books from the teachers bag and get to keep those at home. And then the relationship between the child and the teacher are so strong when I know that you know as

a teacher, I've been to your home, I know what your house looks like, I know what your dog looks like, you know, and this student feels super important because Miss Amanda took time to come to my home and I got to see my mom or my grandma and Miss Amanda sitting on the couch talking at my house so that relationship and that respect for the child to the teacher and that relationship just seems to really blossom.

Becky Lewis Amanda, in light of the pandemic and all the changes that we have gone through, how has this impacted your home visits?

Amanda Peyton This year we're having to do those digitally for safety reasons, and that's been one of the worst things I think about the pandemic is we've had to adapt the home visiting project and we're doing it, and our teachers are doing it well, but there's nothing like you know someone inviting you into their home and, you know you don't have a badge, you don't have a pen, we don't take in paper. We don't want to look threatening in anyway. We just want to listen, and we just want to meet them on their turf and parents share a lot with us and you know we respect that and we keep that confidential but it really opens our eyes more into how we can help those children.

Blake Turley Absolutely and I love that. I think home visits are so important to establish that initial connection and to show parents that you were invested in them and interested in what they're doing and you're interested in their child. And I think that's so important. I love that you talk about the difference between being involved and being engaged with families. To me, that's such a crucial concept to talk about with teachers, and I agree. See, that being engaged means forming a true partnership because that partnership is what we need for children to thrive in school. And you shared many creative and interactive engagement activities with us, but what have you found is the best way to engage families?

Amada Peyton One of the things I hear from our teachers more and more is to understand poverty and in McDowell, it's everywhere. We have generational poverty. We do have some situational poverty. You know the mines shut down or different things happen within the family structure., but you really have to know who your people are. And we are in a customer service based, you know organization like it's not a one size fits all and we continue to tell our teachers that we will try our best to provide to you trainings after trainings and opportunities to learn more about your families. One of the things that we do is we conduct family structure analysis each year, and our title teachers assist classroom teachers with this, but our classroom teachers and their boots on the ground they know their families, they know their students after they do home visits they learn more about that family structure, but you know, we need to know how many single moms do we have? How many grandparents do we have? How many just other adults do we have that are raising children? And so once you see that structure then you just have to keep on, just like peeling the layers off. But if the family structure analysis has been probably one of the best things that our principles, are teachers, I know that I use that data a

lot to figure out, you know, do we need a single moms club, you know, is that some kind of training that we need to do? We have the data broken down by classroom, by grade level, by school, by district, by programmatic levels so that you know you can really know who your folks are and try to work from that but and I think the best thing is until you know who your clients are or who your customers are, who your families are, it's going to be hard to serve them, and then I think the second fold of that is to understand what our families are facing and understand the trauma that's going on in their lives and I always do a training with an iceberg and explained to the teaching staff, you know, you see what's above the surface and you know, sometimes they're big icebergs, sometimes they're little, but it can be so much bigger under everything you can't see, and that's what we can't fix, and like I told you about the home visits, you know we train them, you can't fix it all. But if you know what's going on, it allows you to make that child more successful. You can build more supports, more scaffolding. Maybe we help them get youth mental health services so that the child can have someone to talk to and get those therapeutic sessions. Maybe it's you know they're having a lot of dental problems, so we have smiles that come in from West Virginia University and some dental students who help. Maybe it's that the parent has trouble reading themselves and has a hard time understanding all the materials and manipulatives, and maybe that's why the parent doesn't come to our parent project nights or parent project days in pre K whatever that it is below that surface of the iceberg, there's so much more going on, so I think training your staff on what is family engagement, who are your families and then figuring out what's going on below the iceberg that really allows you to support that child, and until then, if everything is 1 size fits all, we're just going to paint pumpkins today, that's not family engagement, that's involvement, and I think you really have to train folks to know the difference and to be aware and start working towards engagement.

Blake Turley Home visits are a window into the child's world, so I think teachers can learn so much from families and that is the time that we can take to see. Like you said, what's underneath the surface and then have empathy for what families are going through. This helps determine what else we can do for families, whether that is connecting them to outside resources or something else. It's just so important like you said, and I agree, so um training your teachers to know this and understand is very important.

Amanda Peyton Yeah, it's not something that they get, you know, in any college class. You know, it's kind of like where we're trained as teachers. You know everyone going to sit in perfect little rose and everybody is going to come and they're going to want to learn to read, and they're going to want to be there. We can't do it alone, you know, we work with our parents as teachers group here in our district. Our West Virginia birth to three, they are always willing to jump in to be with us and we try to share resources and it's nothing for the head Start office to call me and say, hey, I need some books or parents as teachers to call and say, you know, hey, we're going to do a role in read and do you have anything that we could use? When

we do signups and things, we invite other resource providers so that they can also help captivate that audience and share whatever that they have to provide just to try to make everybody supporting that family. Because many times they have multiple children or other things going on that we can't support but there are other providers out there.

Becky Lewis Thinking about all those different parent interactions and involvements that your teachers have done throughout the years, can you share the most heartwarming or a positive story of a specific teacher family interaction that you can recall?

Amanda Peyton OK, and I'll talk about a home visit. I totally believe that for me to be able to support a program, I have to be out there doing it with my teachers. They need to see you supporting that and I think many times when we get into a certain positions and things you know people don't have time and that is one of the most important things I think that I can do is to tell my teachers, hey, call me, I want to go on a home visit with you, my Superintendent, the same thing. I told my teachers when we were doing our training, emailed the Superintendent and ask her if she would like to go on this home visit with you because there's nothing more important than you know being right there, doing the work and learning as your teachers are learning. So, I had the pleasure of going to a home where there were two children and one in elementary school, one in high school. We've expanded our home visiting project now all the way to grade 12. So, if you were a pre K through 12th grade teacher or assistant teacher, social worker, graduation coach, whatever position that you're in we have invited them to join in on the project.

So I went with a high school teacher and she was going to do the home visit. She invited me to go and I jumped right on that. So again, there's two students in the home, there's an elementary student and then there's a high school student. This high school student was a student who had some learning disabilities, and he had some struggles in this teacher had really tried to connect with this family and tried to do all that she could do to make this child feel successful. He was very shy, he didn't like to talk, he was just and we called him our turtle. He would just kind of go in his shell and didn't want to talk about his hopes and his dreams with the teacher for years. So, when we invited the secondary teachers to come on board, this was a teacher who jumped on it, and so we go and she tells me ahead of time, we knew our audience and we knew our customer. We knew it was going to be a grandmother. A mother wasn't in the picture at that time and grandfather we knew lived in the home and we knew there was a younger sibling, and that's really all that she knew about the family. So when we got there, we learned a lot. We learned there were some medical problems of the grand families. We knew that one of the grandparents worked and had a really hard job and had a job that she wasn't there a lot. So primarily the grandfather did a lot of the raising of the grandchild and to him you know he sent them on the school bus. You know, he made sure they got up on time and he sent them on his way. So we just sat down and 30 minutes turned into an hour, turned into an hour

and a half and we were still there learning about struggles that this particular family had been through and struggles that I don't know that I could have gotten through. And then by the time that we were wrapping up the little boy who was a secondary student, he decided that he was going to start, you know, sharing, and he shared some of the things that he had been through and some struggles that he had had with his parents and how fortunate that he was, that he was being raised by his grandparents. And then he shared with us his hopes and dreams. Never before had he ever talked about you know, getting into criminal justice and getting you know wanting to go into that career track. Never before had he talked to the grandparents about wanting to go to college. That just wasn't something that they had talked about that they had shared, and so the success story is that the teacher pushed, the teacher found resources connected him to colleges connected him with the counselors at the high school so they could do what they could do to try to get him into a program and he is still in a criminal justice program today and just about finished up. So that's kind of the power of a home visit is, you know, it lets people see, hey, you really do care and you've come to my house and you've taken time to come out of your busy day to come here. You must really care, and you know whether they're three or whether they're 18, I think that that is so powerful that it allows you to see that you are a real person, that you do care and you're taking time to come here so maybe I might trust in you a little bit more and build a relationship with you and I think that that little boy's future changed because of that.

Becky Lewis Oh, I think that is so great and you hit on so many amazing points that I know the educators out there listening can relate to when you're talking about the grand families because that's a big thing here in West Virginia about grandparents and great grandparents raising grandchildren and having those conversations and learning those struggles and then for you to make the point of you being the leader and going out with your team, that is so great and we need more of that in the education world.

Amada Peyton Absolutely yeah, we we're sitting at about 42% of our students in McDowell overall, or being raised by grandparents. And, you know, we say all the time thank God for our grandparents and their structure and their support system that we don't know where our children would be without, uh, we just have to know and realize that you know we have grandparents of all ages.

And so we have, you know, grandparent clubs, we call them the second time around club where they're raising their grandchildren. And you know, just trying to meet their needs, because their needs look very different than a traditional, you know, mom and dad. So I'm just trying to really figure out who you have and tailor everything that you do to meet their needs.

Becky Lewis While we are coming to a close on this episode Amanda, I just want to thank you again for coming on and sharing with us. There has been so much information that I know our listeners are going to take away from.

Amanda Peyton Well, thank you for having me and you all are welcome to come to McDowell anytime.

Becky Lewis So I want to ask you one final question before we end our conversation. So what is 1 tip or piece of advice that you could leave our audience with that's focused on family engagement?

Amanda Peyton I would just have to say, get to know them yourself. If you're an administrator and you're planning things, go on home visits. Just sit down and talk to families and ask them how you can better serve them, you know, I meet with my parents a lot in pre-K and take time to get with them but across all grades and if you don't have the support of your families, I mean really you're working in isolation and it truly does take a village. I think that old adage, you know we know it, we say it but I don't know that a lot of us believe in it and we can't do it alone, so until you think, get out of your comfort zone in your box in education, we worry about standards and assessments and all that data, but we've got a powerful force on the other side that if we got them together as partners we could do amazing things and we could really raise those expectations so I think that my biggest advice would be know the difference of engaging and involving. You have to involve families. You have to do the family nights you have to do the book fairs and all those kinds of things, but, you know we took a time and we listed all of the things that we invited families to do at the school and we made lists, and Becky and Blake, we had chart paper after chart paper per school of all the things they invited families to, like read to me day whatever that they were, where we just we came. We were interested in signatures. We wanted signatures on the sign. And that stuff is okay, it builds climate, it builds culture, but it's about when you know the story behind that signature. When you know that person and you have got them helping you and helping their child succeed, that's engagement. So we told them spend less time planning all these involvement things you know cut him in half and cut them down to a third and then plan one or two really strong engagement support systems for your families like home visits or you know parent teacher conferences that are positive and regular, or maybe you know some porch visits or something like that, distance family engagement, but don't spend all your energy involving them, Yeah you have to spend time engaging them too. So I think knowing the difference, taking a look at your school you know are we doing 20 things a month that we're not really getting anything out of except some signatures? Could we do one engagement piece that's really going to, you know, help children succeed and maybe spend more energy on that. So I think that would be my takeaway for everybody is just to kind of really look at what you're doing. Is it engaging? Is it involving? Could you do less involving and more engaging?