

Listen. Create. Motivate.

Professionally curated podcasts on
School Readiness, Attendance, Extended Learning
and High-Quality Instruction



Episode 42: Interview with Weston Kieschnick

Becky Lewis: Hello fellow educators and welcome to episode 42 of the West Virginia leaders of Literacy Podcast. I'm your host Becky Lewis and joining me as my co-host this month is Brittany Fike. Today. We are continuing our conversation around positive student teacher relationships. and joining us in this exciting conversation is educational expert Weston Kieschnick.

This is the West Virginia leaders of Literacy Podcast, where we engage in educational conversations to strengthen early literacy in West Virginia. Are you ready to become a leader of literacy?

Hello listeners, and Brittany welcome back! I am so excited today to be wrapping up our episode on talking about positive teacher-student relations.

Brittany Fike: Thanks, Becky. I am so excited to be here and to be continuing this important conversation and with our very special guest.

Becky Lewis: Yes, we have joining us today, Weston, Kieschnick. Weston is an award-winning educator., best seller, TEDx speaker, coach, husband, and father. He is also the author of *Bold School* and *Breaking Bold*, and has co-authored, *The Learning Transformation: A Guide to Blended Learning for Administrators*, and the creator and host of "Teaching Keaton," one of the most downloaded podcasts for educators and parents on iTunes.

Weston, thank you so much for being here with us today!

Weston Kieschnick: Ladies, thank you, Becky, Britney. I appreciate it. I am excited. Let's geek out. Let's nerd out a little bit about kids and relationships and teaching and all things teaching and learning I'm in.

Brittany Fike: Yes, we are so excited to have you here. I'm super excited for our listeners to get to hear from you to discuss importance of positive teacher student relationships.

I do have to admit I kind of feel like I'm checking something off my bucket list by getting to have a conversation with you. So, I'm super excited!

Weston Kieschnick: Super kind of you to say for as excited as you are. I'm excited to be here and I appreciate the kind words. And yeah, it's just, it's always a pleasure to get the chance to talk to other educators who are equally as excited about doing great work for kids. Probably the best part of my job, and so ladies, thanks for sharing your time with me.

Brittany Fike: Definitely, I think we would agree, so I'm just going to jump right in and we have some questions for you that we're excited to hear you discuss. And my first question for you is just in your words, what do relationships mean in teaching and learning?

Weston Kieschnick: Yeah, so relationships are a cornerstone. They're the foundation for everything that needs to happen in a healthy classroom, school or district culture. Relationships is a word we use all the time in education and we talk about relationships, relationships, relationship.

And we have to gain an understanding that you know so often in schools we talk about, you know, achievement gaps. I don't think we have a lot of achievement gaps. I think we have a lot of relationship gaps for kids and so we have to understand the single greatest gift that we can give a child is. It's not more content, it's not more stuff. It's not more assessments, it's a relationship with a caring adult who believes with relentless tenacity in their ability to succeed.

And so, when we start to think about relationships and the role that they play, they're pivotal. I would argue, every single one of us on this podcast right now could trace any success that we had back to a relationship with an adult who believed in us and took the time to nurture and teach and mentor us.

And so you know, the good news is we all have the opportunity regardless of our roles in education to be that person for kids and the beauty of it is it costs us nothing. There's nothing that we have to buy. There's no curriculum that we have to have. There's no, you know, like all we have to do is make sure the behaviors of master relationship builders and those habits show up day after day and they're visible to kids.

Becky Lewis: Yeah, and I think that's one important theme that is going through our education system right now, especially in the wake of COVID. It's just being that one caring adult for children because we do know how important

relationships are and that they're the foundation of everything that happens in education and the world in general.

Weston Kieschnick: Yeah, Becky. I'm sure I'm not alone. I'm sure many other parents experienced like when my kids were home during the pandemic and we had to school from home. It was the thing they missed. There was a moment where my daughter had had been home and she for whatever reason like she just looks so sad. And I was like Charlotte, is everything OK and she just started to cry and I was like honey what's wrong? She's like, "I don't know. I just feel sad. I miss my teachers. I miss my friends, you know."

So it's like those relationships, I think we discovered really quickly were the things that people were really, really hungry for, and I think we're all realizing our kids need. They're not periphery elements to a great educational experience. They're at the core of everything that happens, and you know when. I think about what kids have lost, in terms of the relationships that they've be able to build with adults and in their peers over the course of the last 17 months. I'm excited to get them back to that!

Becky Lewis: Absolutely, I completely agree, and we know that it's been challenging because of COVID, but there's been challenges prior to COVID with relationships and educators.

So what are some of those challenges that you have seen the most when it comes to teachers building relationships with students or just developing them organically?

Weston Kieschnick: Such a great question! I think one of the challenges is sort of like the self-assessment and the self-reflection that we all do around relationship. So the and I talk about this in, *Breaking Bold*, the research tells us over and over. We tend to over self-assess in just about every way we see ourselves, and it's a defense mechanism, right? And so when we think about like hey, how am I doing it?

Building relationships with kids when you ask most teachers around the country, they will tell you. Great, I'm crushing it at building relations with kids and they're half right. The problem is a lot of us are really great at building relationships with kids, but the problem is we all seem to be building relationships with the same

group of kids, and there typically are kids who are easier to love, and we know who these kids are.

But the problem is we've got this massive sub, you know subset of kids who feel uncared for and unseen because we're out here thinking like, yeah, we're crushing it, it building relationships with kids. But the challenge is it's not all of our kids, and if we're going to be serious about education, educating for the whole child all has to mean all. And we have to take a look at those kids who are really hard to love sometimes and ask ourselves like do they have a relationship with an adult? And more often than not, unfortunately the answer is no. You know 414,000 kids were surveyed by Gallup at one point in time across 569 schools in 32 different States and they were given a number of prompts to respond to and one of the prompts they were given was, you know, I have an adult who cares about me as an individual.

And across 414,000 kids, only 48% of kids said yes. You know, and here's the thing like, I know they're not right. I know how much we care about kids, but we have to take an honest look at their feedback and understand like what good is it for us to care about kids if the way that we care about them is invisible to basically half of them.

Brittany Fike: That's such a good point Weston, and you know in the work that we do, we talk about this a lot. We help provide teachers with strategies to make sure that they're reaching all those students. "You know with some simple ways you can make sure you are making contact with all students on a regular basis," and you provide some really great strategies that we were able to talk through with our listeners on our last podcast episode to help them do that. Those came straight from your book, *Breaking Bold*, so we appreciate that.

Weston Kieschnick: Yeah, I appreciate you. You know I, I think people really do underestimate the bridge that a variety of instructional practices can create between us and kids and one another you know. Like if we're like people know who have seen me speak before like I'm an advocate for explicit direct instruction. You never get to coach that out of our nation's classrooms, but an explicit direct instruction isn't a bad strategy. It just got a bad reputation and it became our only strategy right?

And so the challenge for us is like how to create? How can we execute on a reciprocal teach? How can we do a Socratic seminar? How can we engage kids in problem solving teaching? We know that a variety of instructional practices helps cultivate relationships between us and kids because it allows them the opportunity to engage with the teacher with the content and with one another. And that's sort of the golden trifecta of great teaching and learning. Like if those three things are happening, then you can bet that kids are having the opportunity to build relationships, and that's what we want.

Brittany Fike: Yes, and kind of talking about instruction and you know what these positive teacher student relationships mean. We know that before the kids can learn anything, like you say often in your book *breaking bold*. We need to make sure that the kids are OK and so you talk a lot about that question, “Are the kids OK?” Could you share with our listeners a little bit more about the story behind that question?

Weston Kieschnick: Yeah no problem. So that comes from when my son was born. So I talked to people all the time about the book, *What to Expect When You're Expecting*, because any new parent it's bananas, any new parent is advised to read that book. So much so that I can ask, I can ask a room of 1000 people to say like hey you were all advised to read a book before your children were born.

Like what was the name of the book and they all told me in unison, *What to Expect When You're Expecting*. And so I of course read that book and it made me afraid of things that I didn't know I needed to be afraid of, right? So it said all kinds of things like, you know, hey, consider having. One of the things that suggested was consider having a playlist in music playing like in the birthing room when your child is born. I was like, oh God, I didn't know like children are supposed to be born to a soundtrack like OK like that's the thing I need to worry about.

And then you know there's a whole conversation of like you know to have an epidural or not to have an epidural, and you know, Molly told me I, I'd make a joke all the time. My wife is half Puerto Rican and half Irish, so she's a tough and in verbose lady, and so I asked her about the epidural thing I was like hey, what are you going to do, and she was like I'm not going to have an epidural. And I said, I think that's a bad idea. I think you should have all the epidurals, frankly.

So we're going back and forth on that and then you know there's the birth plan you're supposed to write out in the back of the book. And so we filled that out really diligently and the day that my son was born, I'm not going to say who somebody forgot the iPod, right? It might have been me and so that like good news ever, it was still born to a soundtrack. It was called screaming, screaming and swearing by Molly Kieschnick. It was a beautiful song, right? Original track and so like he like, I forgot the iPod. Molly ended up having not one, but two epidurals, right?

And I was like, oh man, we're going have to talk about this later like she's going to be upset about that and then, last but not least, I handed our birth plan to the nurse when I walked in the door and she giggled a little bit and I never saw it again, you know, and so, like in the midst of all this chaos I remember talking to our doctor, Doctor Stallworth, who was this great old doctor and I swear had the same birthday Moses had. He'd been around forever. And I was like Doctor Stallworth like. We don't have any of the music and you know, like I don't know what happened to the birth plan and Molly had a couple of epidurals. She didn't want to have any epidurals. But she decided to have him. I was like everything like chaos.

And I remember he just sort of grabbed me by the shoulders and he was just like hey I need you to do no like Molly is doing great and we have one job and that is to make sure this child is OK. And I've thought about him. I thought about that like 1000 times over the last 17 months because everything around us has been chaos and nothing has gone according to plan and in the midst of all the chaos and in a midst of all the noise, I think it's important for us to reconnect with this notion that we have one job, and that's to make sure our kids.

And the hard truth, and ladies you know this, like a lot of our kids are not OK. A lot of our kids are not OK and we have to be clear about what they've endured because what they've endured is not adversity. It's trauma they've endured a trauma and adversity and trauma are different. Adversity is something you can sort of bootstrap your way through. Trauma leaves a scar and it requires time and healing and really positive relationships in order to overcome and so that's what we have to be dialed into.

Becky Lewis: Right and a lot of our students we can connect with them because we've also had to experience that trauma too. And we can kind of be in this together and making sure that everyone is OK. But I know that there are going to be educators out there that are resistant and they're going to say it's not my job to make sure that they are OK. It's my job to focus on academics. So how would you approach teachers that kind of have that mentality?

Weston Kieschnick: Yeah, it's an unfortunate mentality, but it's a byproduct of our climate, right? It's a byproduct of the educational climate where everything is tested and only the things that are tested matter. And God, I hope I hope that one day we're going to be able to move beyond this nonsensical notion that, like you know, our assessments are the end all be all.

Um, I hoped it would emerge following global pandemic. But when you look at how quickly those state assessments came back, I was just like man, like we didn't learn anything apparently, and so that's really frustrating for me. I know it's frustrating for a lot of teachers, but you see, you know the Becky, the mentality you're talking about is a byproduct of that culture where what is assessed is what matters. And there are certain things that just don't have metrics.

There are certain things you just can't assess for. There are certain things that won't generate numeric data. Relationships is one of them, and so we just we have to strike a better balance in our field of saying like yes, OK, we're held accountable to these assessments. I get it and what we also know is that influence lives in the place where we build relationships.

You know it's not enough that kids leave us having learned something when they leave us, they're going to have felt something, and the thing that they feel can't just be failure the thing that they feel can't just be frustration. The things that they feel is they have to feel cared for and they have to understand what it feels like to care about other people. Because if you know if we leave and all they can do is, you know they complete a proof, but they don't know how to talk to the person next to him. Like what the hell are we doing? You know, like then we've talked about losing the forest for the trees.

Becky Lewis: Right, and I think back to educational experiences where I've been in classrooms as a student. And I can remember those teachers that I had those strong relationships with. It didn't matter how I excelled academically at the end

of the day as an adult reflecting on it. It was all about that relationship that I had with that teacher.

Weston Kieschnick: Yeah, you know I ask people all the time to recall their most influential teacher and nobody ever says like man, Miss Davis could work a graphic organizer like nobody's business. Like nobody says that ever. Nobody says like, man, I'll tell you what like Mr. Winner Socratic seminar game was bananas, right? Nobody ever says like you know man Miss Jones like I got such a good grade in her class. No one ever said that and I've asked 10s of thousands of people and that question no one ever said anything like that.

They always talk about relationships. This person cared about me. This person believed in me. This person authentically listened. Like those are the things people say.

Brittany Fike: Yeah, definitely, and I think here in West Virginia we're so fortunate because we do have leaders to, you know, share the message that we know that the social and emotional well-being of students and their physical health and safety is of the utmost priority along with academic learning. You know that the two go hand in hand. And you can't have one without the other.

Weston Kieschnick: No you can't. And Brittany, you all in West Virginia know this better than perhaps anywhere else in the country. Because I've done so much work in West Virginia. And I think people underestimate, you know everyone knows, like yeah, kids get up and they go to school. But like hey in West Virginia like there are so many kids who eat two-thirds of their meals or potentially all of their meals during the course of the day at their school. I don't think enough people have that awareness like OK, why is that?

Well, because you know, like the physical and social emotional. Wellness of a child has to be addressed first before you can teach them anything. And in West Virginia I feel like you all know that better than anyone, given you know how much of the child rearing you actually do with kids from time to time, right down to the basics of just like making sure kids are fed.

Brittany Fike: Yeah, exactly and you know you mentioned when we were first starting to talk that it's one thing to try to build these relationships with students.

Once we get them in our classrooms, but we have to do it in a way that they fill, and that's important to them and that they can make sense of. So how do we make sure that we're making those relationships visible to our students.

Weston Kieschnick: Yeah, so in order to do that, we have to distill what we're talking about when we talk about relationships, right? That word relationships lives in the macro. It is a very big word with lots of lots of different interpretations, and so it's what we it's what Molly and I tried to do in breaking bold is try to distill a big concept, like relationships into recognizable and replicable behaviors because again, like if you can distill it. Then you can teach it if you can teach it, you can replicate it, and if you can replicate and teach it then you can improve upon it and that's what we wanted to do with relationships. Because again, there's this misperception that people have that they're crushing it at relationships, when they are for part of their kids.

And so what we tried to do is really distill relationships and say like OK, if you are good at relationship building, you're good at these things. You understand the power of perception, right? That everything we do, everything we say, everything we wear, everything we post online sends a message to kids about who we are and what we believe. You know, you understand vulnerability. You understand compassion, you understand, trust, you, understand belief.

In kids I mean like take John Hattie's work. John Hattie tells us like belief in kids has an effect size of 1.44. Or, you know, when we believe in kids, they can grow more than three academic years over single years' worth of time. Why is that? Well, not because it changes a child behavior, but because it changes hours, right? When we believe in, kids will ask harder questions will provide longer wait times for them to respond, we'll gain greater physical proximity in classrooms to kids who we authentically believe can succeed and so...

It's one of those things where if we can take a good, honest look at our behaviors and say OK, how am I doing and then, if we're willing to ask kids as well, right? If we're wanting to take a habit like creativity because we know that creative classrooms or highly relational classrooms and ask kids like, hey, how am I doing? Like, do you get an opportunity to ask questions in class that don't have a right or wrong answer right, do you get an opportunity to talk about things that you're that are in the wheelhouse and of things that you're interested in in class?

And if they're telling us yes, then great. We've created a creative culture in our classroom or in our school, but if they're telling us no, it tells us immediately that this is a place that we can work on and that will subsequently help us to build relationships with kids. And that's worth our time. That's worth our effort.

Becky Lewis: Well, in your book, *Breaking Bold*, me and Britney had the pleasure of talking through some of the 12 habits of relationship building. We knew we couldn't get through all of them just for the sake of time, because they're so detailed. But when we're thinking about those 12 habits, are there any of the habits that you have kind of noticed are lacking more in classrooms and in school buildings that you've interacted with than others?

Weston Kieschnick: Conversations about vulnerability. So vulnerability is a habit that shows up. Uhm so I love ladies. Are you familiar with Brene Brown's work at all?

Brittany Fike: Oh yes, we are big lovers of Renee.

Weston Kieschnick: Yeah, yeah, so that's the three of us all together. I love Brene Brown's work. I would tell any of your listeners if you're not familiar with her work. Go watch her special on Netflix. It's an hour well spent.

Uhm, so Brené Brown is the world foremost researcher on shame and vulnerability and she defines vulnerability as uncertainty, risk and emotional exposure, right? Uncertainty, risk and emotional exposure, and I think we have to understand as educators. That is a place we asked children to enter into every single day. We ask them to enter into a place of uncertainty to learn something new of risk to like. People underestimate the amount of risk it takes for a child to put a hand up in class. That is a massive investment of social capital, especially as kids get older, right?

And so like we ask kids to enter into places of uncertainty, risk and emotional exposure. To share out things about themselves, and it's not a conversation we have with them. We just expect that they're going. To do it, and then when they don't, sometimes we get real upset about it.

But what we don't realize is that we haven't stopped and paused to have a conversation with kids so that they recognize that we understand the

vulnerability that we're asking of them, and to be able to label the feelings that they're feeling to say, like, hey, you have a lot of feelings going on, right?

Now inside like that is a feeling of vulnerability. Let's talk through that and let's work through it because it's a thing that we need to overcome. If our kids are going to be good learners, but it's a thing we just bypass because we ask them to do A, B, and C, oftentimes they're willing to do A but not B or C, and then we get upset and then we just institute all these sort of like punitive punishments and that doesn't move the needle at all for our kids. All it does is make them hate school.

Brittany Fike: Definitely, and you know, I think a part of that too is having conversations with our students about the why like why this is important, why it's important to be vulnerable, and to be able to. Open yourself up and to build these relationships with your teacher and your peers and you know other adults in your life and so kind of you know keeping that in mind.

What are some of the positive implications that we can talk with our students about and with our fellow educators that building these relationships has outside of the classroom.

Weston Kieschnick: So building these relationships will help our children in almost every facet of their lives, right? Not just academically, but it will help them socially and it will help them long after they've left us. I think we have all encountered certain adults who have not sort of been able to exercise, flex and develop the muscles that come with relationship building. We've all encountered these people. We've all met these people who are a bit stunted when it comes to relationship building.

For any of you listening right now, and if you're thinking like, I haven't met any of these people like spoiler alert like you might be this person. OK, like we've all met these people and so I think what we need to recognize is like if you take a look at people who are not just really successful, but people who are just really happy people who are just really happy really enjoying their lives, you'll find that the common denominator is relationship building.

Right, and so there's a study I referenced often that came out of Harvard University. It's the longest ever longitudinal study on happiness. And what they discovered? Spoiler alert, right?

Happiness is directly linked to the quality of the relationships that exist in our lives and what they discovered is that loneliness kills, like literally, loneliness kills. It is more harmful than smoking. It is more harmful than alcoholism, like loneliness kills. And if we don't give our kids the skills that they need to build these relationships over time, what we'll find is they grow up to be lonely adults. And man like OK great if they performed well on their state assessment but they grow up to be lonely adults and as a result they die earlier than they should have. And I know that sounds really dramatic, but that's what happens when people are lonely, right?

It has a really negative impact on them physically. Like the man we, we haven't failed, or we haven't succeeded. So, I still coach high school football right? I love it. I love it so much and one of the reasons I still coach and one of the reasons why I love to coach with the head coach that I coach with is whenever people ask him. Uhm, hey, how's the team this year? Because people always you know poor guy can't walk through a grocery store without, hey, I was a team this year, right?

His response is always the same. I don't know. I'll tell you in 15 years. Right, it's always his response and I love it because he explains, like hey, I'll tell you in 15 years, because that's when I'll know whether they're good. That's when I know whether they're good fathers, whether they're good husbands, and whether they've been good friends and all of those things have to do with relationships, so he gets it right.

Everything that we're doing right now. So many of the things that we focus on and we put value on a really short term, but the implications for all of our actions are really, really long term and we have to think about those too.

Brittany Fike: Yeah, I love that. I think that's such a powerful response and I think what you said is true. And you know, we can relate to that ourselves as adults. I know the I am the happiest, probably, and healthiest I've ever been. And I think that's a direct result of having the strongest relationships at this point in my life than I've ever had before.

Weston Kieschnick: Yeah, yeah Brittany, I'm and I'm so glad you feel that way. Because a lot of people learned during the pandemic, like oh man, like my relationships are unhealthy relationships because so many people were forced to go home and be with people who were there is like oh man like we do not have a healthy dynamic where people went home there was like oh man, I'm lonely. Like I'm realizing all the relationships I have or people at work. I hope it's allowed people to sort of prioritize those relationships because you know, Britney, you're right. Like when you realize like man, I'm really happy you can trace that happiness back to those relationships.

Becky Lewis: Well, we're winding down on time and this has been such a great conversation and I could stay and listen to you all day talk about relationships. It's just so engaging and I know our listeners are going to find it that way too. But we kind of always end the show with asking what is 1 tip or piece of advice that you can leave our listeners around relationship building.

Weston Kieschnick: Be a good listener. Be a good listener, especially when it comes to building relationships with kids. Oftentimes kids are giving us feedback and all we have to do is just like pause and listen to be able to hear it. Sometimes kids will give us feedback and our temptation is to get defensive. If our temptation is to explain why not, our temptation is to justify our temptation is to explain potentially why kids are wrong, or why, because they're young that there.

Their viewpoints are invalid, and I think we need to sit that on a shelf for just a little bit and be OK to listen to the things that our kids are telling us while recognizing. Now, like I want to make it clear to everyone like I'm not advocating that we should. Hear what kids are telling us and then take their word as the gods, honest gospel truth.

That's not what I'm advocating for, but I am advocating for us to pause and listen a bit and not to be so dismissive of the things that they're saying, because, again, a lot of our kids, especially now, are not OK and we have to recognize that the things that they're saying the behaviors they're exhibiting that may not be super desirable. They are symptoms of a larger problem, right? It's the behaviors are never the problem. The behaviors are the child chosen solution to the problem, and so like, let's listen to that. Let's pause and before we get really upset. Let's

recognize that kids are trying to tell us something, and if we open up our ears and open up our hearts a little bit, we can hear it and we can be at our best for kids.

Becky Lewis: Thank you so much.

Weston Kieschnick: Thank you all so much. Thanks for thanks for doing this podcast. Thanks for just being out here in the field and just talking to other great educators about great work we can do with kids. It takes all of us. It takes all of us, you know, and I you know, it's a thing that I say at the end of almost every keynote that I give like I'm so grateful, to educators, I'm one of those people that lose my life to really great educators.

And I'll continue to advocate for the work that we do. I'll continue to shout it from the mountaintops. Education is not broken, right? Anyone who says that is an idiot like education is not broken. Our schools are not broken. Our children not broken. Their teachers are not broken and if anyone needs evidence of that, like look what happened during global pandemic, right? Look where people lined up for help, it was outside of our nation schools.

To our earlier point, you know Britney liked to make sure their kids were fed, but not just fed physically to make sure their kids were fed physically and academically and emotionally and look what's happening right now. People cannot wait to get their kids back into our schools because of the amazing work that we've done with them up to this point, we have to remember that.

Becky Lewis: For links to all the resources discussed in this episode, and for additional information, please visit our website at [dot US forward slash leaders of literacy](http://dot.usforwardslashleadersofliteracy). Click on podcast and click on the show notes for episode 42.

Want to learn more about being the leader of literacy? Be sure would like and subscribe to the podcast. So you don't miss a single installment.

In the next episode, I'm going to be joined with my co-host for the monk, Samantha Statler and Brandy Turner. The focus of our episode is going to be centered around partnering with to build early literacy skills in our youngest learners. You won't want to miss it! Thanks for listening!