In this episode Jayme is joined by Mary Ann Cunningham Florez, program manager for Fairfax county Virginia public schools adult ESOL program, her previous positions include director of the adult education professional development center of DC learns, program coordinator with the Arlington Virginia Education and Employment Program, and assistant director at the National Center for ESL literacy education. In this conversation on ways teachers and administrators can thrive in challenging times, Mary Ann offers insights gleaned from her wealth of experience working with adult ESOL practitioners across the U.S. Let’s join them now.

Jayme
MaryAnn, it's my pleasure to welcome you here.

MaryAnn
Thank You Jayme, I'm very excited I have a lot of respect for the Oxford products, and I’ve known you for a number of years, so I'm really happy to do this.

Jayme
How are you doing in these interesting times?

MaryAnn
I’d be remiss if I didn’t say a little stressed, a little concerned, a little watchful. There are a lot of things going on in the world today and I think personally as well as professionally we’re waiting to see, I mean we’re taking action but we’re also waiting to see how things are changing and when you’re unsure which way that change is going to go, it’s a good idea to be mindful.

Jayme
Yes for sure. I think, because I know you’re a bit of a one woman band.

MaryAnn
Oh let me correct you there, because I just had a week at work where I cannot tell you how much I appreciate the staff is small but mighty, and I’ve just been through a week where I was reminded once again that it’s the amazing people in our field, both in terms of their talent and creativity and their commitment.

Jayme
That's wonderful to hear, so will you describe a little bit what a program manager does?

MaryAnn
Well I am the program manager for a pretty considerable adult self ESL program here in the metropolitan area of our nation’s capital, and we serve between five and six thousand enrollments a year, so it’s a lot of people. Fortunately for us we see a number of our students coming back to us, so we’re happy with that and happy to see them come back. As a program manager it’s my job to be a steward of everything, so I’m doing budgets and monitoring finance and looking at curricula and making sure that everything we are teaching is best practices and we’re planning PD. And right now I’m managing the moving of several of our locations to new locations...

Jayme
So perhaps what I should have asked you is, what is it you don’t do the list would be shorter?

MaryAnn
Yes, it’s like a mom-and-pop shop, you’d open the door in the morning you turn the sign to open, and you deal with whatever comes through the door and sometimes that’s a challenge and often it’s joy, and those are the moments we live for, or sometimes the joy is actually just dealing with a challenge successfully.
MaryAnn
It’s dealing with a lot of the new rules and regulations and guidelines, most people get into the field of adult ESL because they want to teach language, they don’t get into it necessarily to fill up forms or to have to suddenly shift gears to incorporate yet another new focus for what they’re doing. And I think most teachers inherently want to improve what they’re doing, because they know that by improving their skills they’re going to be supporting their students better. But sometimes it is difficult to see the direct connection, between the changes that are rolling through the organization and what they’re doing in their own individual classroom with their learners. And I totally understand that because at the administrative level I mean we experienced similar things, we see something cross our desks that says you need to do something you haven’t done before or stop doing something you were doing before, and we go through our own processing of that at the administrative levels.

Jayme
So what’s a skill that you have that allows you to cope with that, maybe knee-jerk I don’t want to do this or why are we having to do this which is I think quite human and has nothing to do with whether we’re in education, I think it’s a human condition.

MaryAnn
Absolutely, because like change is difficult and I think in most cases your first reaction is to have some level of resistance to it, and that’s just like you said very normal. But I love that phrase tolerance for ambiguity, because I think more and more that capacity to be able to tolerate times when things aren’t a hundred percent clear is very important, because when you’re transitioning there’s always going to be those periods where it’s not a clear path, and even sometimes when someone presents it as a clear path it isn’t really, you’ve only maybe gotten one perspective on it. And as a manager who’s a little bit in the middle of things, you may be handed something from a person above or beside you, and when you pass it off to the people that you work with there’s a whole different set of feedback and reactions that you’re going to experience, so being able to be comfortable at least a little bit in that space is really important.

Jayme
Do you have any practices that you’ve put into play to help you manage the feedback, because from my perspective the teacher has the same type of transfer going on?

MaryAnn
I agree, I think the older I get the more and more it becomes apparent to me that one of the best things to do is just stop and give it all a minute, because I think we all do naturally have knee-jerk reactions to things. I think we move in a very fast paced world, so we’re constantly striving to go to that next step as quickly as possible, and I think professionally, interpersonally even if it’s just a moment to stop yourself and make sure that what you think you heard is what you heard, and that even though this reaction or this feedback may not jibe with your personal perspective or the way you expected it to go, then that’s okay and take a moment to do whatever you need to do next, whether it’s clarify or rephrase or regroup a little bit personally or with the other person, I think that’s immensely important. I also think that idea of assuming the best is incredibly important, I think we see that in life all around us right now, it’s very easy to assume that whatever feedback you’re getting if it’s not matching your perspective or your expectations, that there’s something wrong, that person is somehow either on the defensive or on the attack with you. And so I just feel that that’s so important and when our students are living in stressful times, our teachers are living in stressful times, our administrators are living in stressful times that’s kind of one of the biggest gifts we can give each other, both personally and professionally.

Jayme
Well, I’m thinking that from the classroom perspective, teaching the language that would allow a learner to learn the skill in any context, but to be able to say give me a minute to think about that or I’d like to clarify could you say that in a different way or are you talking about I mean all of that type of the nice sentence stems or language frames that we could provide, that’s actually not a bad concept to share and meeting with teachers because that also gives us as teachers the language to use in our meetings. And I think again we’re teaching adults, we’re adult learners all these layers of correlation to what we’re doing, what we’re doing, what our learners are living is something to take note of.
MaryAnn
Absolutely and the interpersonal relationship, the communication, the ability to manage different perspectives, to give feedback all of those kinds of things that we want to see people do in order to be successful in an employment situation, are things that are coming up in the classroom anyway. So there’s every reason to take advantage of that and be able to highlight those experiences in the classroom, so that students can take it away with them. And often I think to make that exclusive connection for them, about the importance of taking that away with them, that it’s not just words or phrases to be used in the classroom but this is what you can use above the classroom in the workplace, in your life, and maybe ask them how.

Jayme
And for me it’s so much of that relevance also carries over into the collaborative work that is so much a part of the 21st century workplace, and it’s certainly part of the academic and civic world for learners, and yet we have interpersonal learners, we have learners who don’t value interaction.

MaryAnn
Yes absolutely, now we can do some of those things that help learners think about what their preferences, what their biases, what their challenges are if you work from a place where you’re familiar with yourself, and you have at least some understanding about how those pieces come together to create your reactions and your interactions that’s very important. But I think maintaining an open and curious mind or demeanor so that you try things, before you make a decision that well this isn’t going to work for me.

Jayme
So in the theme of an open, curious mind if you had only one area of the field that you could explore more, what would it be?

MaryAnn
Absolutely and the interpersonal relationship, the communication, the ability to manage different perspectives, to give feedback all of those kinds of things that we want to see people do in order to be successful in an employment situation, are things that are coming up in the classroom anyway. So there’s every reason to take advantage of that and be able to highlight those experiences in the classroom, so that students can take it away with them. And often I think to make that exclusive connection for them, about the importance of taking that away with them, that it’s not just words or phrases to be used in the classroom but this is what you can use above the classroom in the workplace, in your life, and maybe ask them how.

MaryAnn
I think one of the fascinating things for me right now is what I feel is almost a dichotomy between the idea of language learning, and the fact that, researchers told us that three to five years for social language, five to seven or eight years to really start being proficient in more academic level language. And the fact that we’re looking with the workplace, we’re looking at these more short-term trainings, the kind of things that will get people through a workplace training very quickly or a job oriented training very quickly, and get them out there and working. And I’m just really curious how those two are going to work together, I am a lover of language and to me it’s a process that unfolds over time. I’m so curious how that’s going to all work out, we’re combining this sort of more quick and hit the ground running approach on one side, with this process that we know takes some time.

MaryAnn
There are so many challenges out there, students are stressed and they’re coming into our classroom stressed, and teachers have to be really good at knowing how to deal with stressed people. One thing we’ve been doing is encouraging our teachers to take part in I think they called it something like mental health first aid class that offered in partnership with some of our local community service and social service organizations, that previously have been geared mostly towards social service providers, dealing again with very stressed people, but we’ve been encouraging our teachers to participate when they can.

Jayme
What a great idea, because they can do the survival skill of building community, but how do they deal with that stress that’s underneath that community.

MaryAnn
Well one of my favorite writers T. H. White and the once and future king said that, and I’ll paraphrase, but he said that the best thing for being sad is to learn something. And I’ve always really appreciated that and that has always stayed with me because I think it’s not just when you’re sad but when you’re frustrated, when you’re maybe a little lost, when you’re a little bit of drift. Learning something new can open up things, it can help you focus, it can give you new energy, so let’s all definitely keep learning I think it’s really important.
MaryAnn

Is that a good takeaway? I think that’s a good take away.

Jayme

That’s a beautiful takeaway; I think we have to end there. Is there anything that we haven’t touched on that you feel like I’d really like to make sure this comes into the conversation?

MaryAnn

I definitely want to say that I think our field is made up of an extraordinary group of people, and we may not get to celebrate that enough because I think the creativity, the dedication, the skills that teachers in adult ESAL have are amazing. I just hope we all celebrate that, because I think we’re often also people who beat ourselves up for what we didn’t do.

Jayme

Okay, so thriving means celebrating who you are and what you do.

MaryAnn

Yes, and when you’re at that cocktail party next time and someone says so what do you do, lead with I have the most amazing job in the world and I get to work with the most inspiring people in the world.

Jayme

Well I feel the same way having had this conversation with you, so it’s been a pleasure talking to you and I’d like to encourage our listeners to look for your work with the Kayla briefs. Also the new American horizons video series and actually just googling MaryAnn Cunningham Florez will get you a plethora of materials to look at, thank you for having an adult ESL conversation.

MaryAnn

Thank You Jayme, I really enjoyed it.

Announcer

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