

Karen ([00:12](#)):

I had the privilege earlier this year of joining Ron Berger, a senior advisor to EL Education, and Margarida Celestino, a graduate of an EL school, on a SoLD Alliance panel. I was structuring the panel by Ron and Margarida's discussion of both EL's intentional focus on culture and how Margarida's EL experience was supported by her engagement with other community partner organizations. In this episode, we'll dig in more deeply on each of these themes, starting with a discussion of why EL has such a deep come commitment to team building for youth and adults, and an equally strong commitment to challenge these teams to explore their communities.

Ron, I want to start with a sentence that you ended with, which I thought was very powerful. Your sentence was, "The student culture of the school is never ahead of the adult culture." You're using language very specifically about adults and adult culture. Very often when we have these conversations, we talk about teachers. Who are these other adults that you're talking about, and how critical is it that all of them are engaged in this behavior and shaping?

Ron Berger ([01:17](#)):

Karen, I really appreciate your push on that, because I think it's essential that we not limit this to teachers. From a student experience, every adult in the building matters. The bus driver matters, the person who greets them at the door matters, the secretaries in the office matter, the assistants, the counselors, the nurses, the custodians. Everyone in the building, if those people are also not modeling the courage and passion, kindness, respect that we all want to model in a school, it has a profound effect on students. I think we should always think of the school culture as the staff culture, not the faculty culture. We should always include full staffs when we work together to become better people as models for that.

Karen ([02:02](#)):

Margarida, I want you to chime in here. I'm so glad you're with us. In that SoLD interview, you talked a lot about the importance of your teachers and teacher relationships, but can you talk a little bit about these other adults that Ron was just mentioning?

Margarida Celestino ([02:16](#)):

Thank you, Karen. With me, I do agree with Ron, talking about besides just teachers being present, other staff members do change the experience that a student has overall. I personally had a very good relationship with our school nurse and it was nice to see that someone besides my teachers cared about me outside of the classroom. She didn't care about my grades, she didn't care about how much I spoke in class, she was just solely there to make sure that if I had any concern is about myself, if I had any worries or any questions, I was able to go to her as an adult. That is because she was very inclusive of every student and she was nice to everyone and didn't exclude students who didn't speak up. She would come up to us. That's something that, as I always say, it's important that sometimes adults start the conversation or adults just make the first move because students need that.

Karen ([03:09](#)):

Did you experience this adult culture, this intentional adult culture, as different from in your earlier schools?

Margarida Celestino ([03:16](#)):

Yes, it definitely felt different. That, I say, especially because of the multiple backgrounds that I grew up in, if I have to compare how teachers and just staff members, my relationship between old teachers and staff members back in Africa or in Namibia, where I grew up, it is very different with the ones I'm experiencing in America. It was very different with the one that I experienced in middle school versus my highest school, Casco Bay High School. That was because they acknowledged that their students are important, they acknowledged that their students mattered, and they genuinely cared. That's the reason why I say it's different, because I never really experienced that until I got into high school.

Karen ([03:55](#)):

Ron, I'm curious how you make this happen. I know we've had this conversation before, but it remains a big question for me. We talk about professional development for teachers and setting aside time for teachers, but we don't talk about doing this with the whole staff. You talk about EL as a professional development organization, focused on all of these adults. How do they find time? How do you get all of those people working together and seeing themselves as critical parts of a community?

Ron Berger ([04:23](#)):

That's a great question. Margarida's experience, Margarida's an incredibly courageous student who's gone through all these different places. She ended up in an EL Education high school and EL Education has a big push on making sure we build what we call a spirit of crew, a spirit of teamwork, of looking out for each other among all staff members of a school. That's really hard to accomplish, as you say, Karen, time wise.

The high school that Margarida attended is a regular public high school in Portland, Maine. It's not a charter school, it's within the regular school district, but we had to negotiate with the district to make sure that we could get staff members together and have those conversations about the kind of human beings we want to be with our students and how we'll make sure that every student's identity is honored in the school, how we make sure every student feels that he or she or they belong in the school. That means that we have to have some hard conversations with staff. We have to discuss race, we have to discuss gender identity, we have to discuss sexual orientation, income issues, because if staff can't talk about those things with each other, how can they help students talk about those things? It really is a focus on staff crew in order to create the conditions for good student crew. I think we need to make sure that all staff feel empowered because they're all making a difference in student lives.

Karen ([05:45](#)):

Do you have people in the building, when you're talking about all adults, who may have expertise, whether it's professional expertise or life expertise, that's relevant for the students? As we're looking for all adults to be experts, how are we really making sure that we're tapping into who's in the building with us?

Ron Berger ([06:04](#)):

I would say we would start, Karen, with exactly that, because there are, in every building, staff members who bring expertise in culture, in human understanding, in backgrounds. Those might not be the teachers, they might be anyone else in the building that can add to that. If we have those conversations as a whole staff crew, we can find out people's assets and who can bring those strengths to that culture.

I also think it's sometimes important to bring in outside experts. It's hard to talk about race, it's hard to talk about gender identity, it's hard to talk about sexual orientation. There are many

organizations who specialize in leading faculties and staffs in having those hard conversations. I think it's really important that we do that.

Karen ([06:48](#)):

Margarida, we've heard this word crew, tell us what crew is, what it meant to you, how crews are set up. What is this critical grouping mechanism that seems to be so central to EL Education, and certainly seemed to be so important to your experience?

Margarida Celestino ([07:02](#)):

Crew is a group of about 13 to 15 students that were randomly put together in the beginning of their high school, their freshman year. Each student stays in the same crew throughout their whole high school career. Crew is just a really important group throughout the high school career because every student that has graduated has at least one really close friend from their crew, someone who's lifelong in their life.

Karen ([07:28](#)):

One of the other things, as I listened to you, that you thought was powerful was this idea that you get to go out and have projects and expeditions in the community. I think one of the things that you said was that actually helped you better understand and be motivated to do the learning in school, the fact that you actually got to go out of school. Can you give us an example of what that kind of an expedition or project is? What does that look like?

Margarida Celestino ([07:52](#)):

Within crew, we didn't just sit in a classroom and talk about ourselves or talk to each other. We did different multiple team bonding activities. In the beginning of our freshman year, at least at Casco Bay, we go to an island and stay there for four days and three nights. It's the beginning of freshman year, you don't know anybody, but you're still sharing tents. It's just an interesting experience because you just learn the process of trusting people that you've never seen in your life. You become vulnerable, which is something that is really important, especially as high school students.

Every year we do have expeditions. Our first expedition was actually called Build Community, where students went out, as freshmens, they went out and focused in specific neighborhoods and talked to people that lived within those neighborhoods and asked questions like, what would you like to see in your neighborhood, how would you like your neighborhood to be improved? Our culmination was based off the responses that we got. We made little projects and tried to envision and make that vision come to life. It was actually part of our geometry class, where we turned those ideas into three-dimensional projects. It was a way of building communities trying to see how different citizens within a neighborhood wanted to see a difference or wanted to see improvements, we were able to make that as freshmens.

Junior year too, we had an expedition called Public Policy, where we had high school students actually questioning policies that were made, policies and systems that we're living under. I feel like it's a good opportunity to just come out of my own bubble and be like, "Oh, I'm actually in the real life world. There are things that are happening outside of this small little high school."

Karen ([09:35](#)):

Those were incredible examples of how you took these expeditions out into your community to really meet individuals you wouldn't otherwise have met and learn from them. Then in turn, bring that back and bring that into your own self-reflection and your own understanding of where you live.

Ron, talk a little bit about the history of putting this kind of an idea together, both the idea of crew, the idea of crews basically going off on expeditions outside of the school. Talk a little bit more about these community projects. Where did this idea come from, where did the idea for EL Education, come from and how have you perfected it over the years?

Ron Berger ([10:10](#)):

The goal of EL Education is to change school from being an individual school work to a team sport. When I was in high school, when I was Margarida's age, my role in high school was just to do well myself, to get good grades and to get myself into college. If my peers did poorly, it wasn't my responsibility. In fact, it would maybe help me because my class rank would be better. There was no so structural motivation for me to help everyone.

For Margarida, it was a very different place, because Margarida's role in an EL high school was to get all of her crew mates and classmates to success, to make sure all of them got into college, and 99% of them did. That wasn't just the teachers, it was Margarida and her peers helping each other. There's a sense of this is a team sport. That came, Karen, from the idea that when you're on an Outward Bound course and you see the top of the mountain, your job is not to get yourself to the top of the mountain, it's to get your whole crew to the top of that mountain. That's our vision, that school could be that way too.

Karen ([11:16](#)):

How does that overlap with the community places and spaces where you might have spent your time when you weren't in school? I remember from the very end of our last conversation, Ron mentioned that you had a long relationship with Boys and Girls Club. How did those kinds of places fit into this conversation?

Margarida Celestino ([11:34](#)):

Through the library, I was able to join clubs that were outside of school. I made connections with people that were not necessarily my guidance counselor or my teacher within the classroom. I made connections with people that helped me with my essays that were meant for school, but they were not my teachers, they were not my tutors, they were just at the library. I actually made a really good connection with one of the teen library staff members who helped me be part of the teen council that the library had. Through that, I was able to improve on my leadership skills outside of school, which is something that I know a lot of students do not get opportunities to do.

With the Boys and Girls Club, it helps a lot of immigrant kids understand and learn more about scholarships, what is something that a lot of us still need to be like educated on, we still need help filling out those scholarships. I remember college visits through the Boys and Girls Club. I did school visits with my school, but through the Boys and Girls Club I was able to expand my options and I was able to visit even more colleges and learn more about different colleges that were even outside of state that I wouldn't be able to learn within the school.

Karen ([12:43](#)):

Margarida, I'm curious, you talked incredibly about the continuity of experience in high school. When did you join the Boys and Girls Club? How long were you with them and how much was that also a different, but continuous, group of relationships with peers and adults?

Margarida Celestino ([12:59](#)):

I actually joined the Boys and Girls Club before going into high school. I was able to not just get help from just the middle school Margarida, but they helped me grow as the high school Margarida, because I remember my freshman year, they held a mini class that was already talking about college essays. I know that as a freshman, not a lot of people are really thinking about college, but I remember that that class is what really motivated me to think more about college, look at my options and start thinking of life after high school, even though I was just a freshman. I know that if I had to depend on school, I was not going to join a class that was talking about college essays in the beginning of a freshman high school girl.

Karen ([13:46](#)):

Ron, talk a little bit, as you're looking at how EL plays out across the country, what are you seeing as other variations on the roles of, and the connections to, these other kinds of places that are really set up for learning and development to happen? How do they fit into the mix? It's kind of the equivalent of we're not just talking about teachers, we're talking about all adults. We're not just talking about the school as a focused place of learning, we're talking about these other institutions, libraries, and youth organizations, and rec centers, and sports leagues, and museums. How do they fit in?

Ron Berger ([14:19](#)):

In a few ways, Karen. I love your vision, Karen, because the vision that you and your organization brings forward is that we have to be a great web of support for kids in school and out of school, because we don't know which are those things that will be most instrumental in a student's life. I know for you, Margarida, school was super important, but the Boys and Girls Club was as well for you. For some students, outside organizations become one of the most important things in their lives.

A big shift for us at EL, Karen, is to stop seeing the teachers and the faculty of the school as the only experts that can help a student grow. We think of the teachers as the coaches, as the coordinators of student growth, but for every expedition, we bring students out to find experts in the community and we bring experts from the community into the school.

Karen ([15:11](#)):

Ron, you mentioned that, and Margarida, I know you gave the valedictorian speech, as I understand, to your class, which was amazing, and Ron, you mentioned that 99% of the class is graduating and moving on. That must mean that they're well prepared. We haven't talked about academics in this entire conversation, but clearly something was going on that these young people were not just engaged and connected and learning about their identities and building out their full selves, they were also becoming very well prepared. Can you just give us a little bit about, we often hear is it either/or, did we focus on the social and emotional or did we focus on the academic, how did that really work together?

Ron Berger ([15:51](#)):

Well, Karen, it is a crazy thing that we think of this as a trade off, that we focus on the social,-emotional health of students or their identity and their sense of belonging and their character, or we focus on their academics, because the science makes it so clear that those things are interdependent and that every

parent already knows that if your child does not feel that she belongs, does not feel respected and valued in school, she's not going to do well. That those things, that confidence and a sense of belonging and a sense of being valued, are a foundation for doing well academically.

It's not a coincidence that a school like the high school Margarida just graduated from not only had 99% of students graduate on time and 99% of students get into college, most of whom are low-income students, many of whom are students of color and many immigrants, like Margarida's family, but that has been their graduation record and college acceptance record for more than a dozen years since they opened. Every single year for about 15 years, that school has got 99% of students into college. It's working academically. It's not a trade off. It's by building an environment that kids feel safe and cared for and where they look out for each other that we can push academically.

It's not just the adults pushing, I think Margarida could speak to this, but the students are pushing each other as well, that there's a positive peer pressure in those schools, where students are supporting each other, but also pushing each other to succeed academically.

Karen ([17:27](#)):

Ron, I know that you have been working at this for many years and I work with many schools, but as we have this opportunity coming out of the disruption from COVID and coming out of the urgency of us really being able to do this better and with more schools, how do you take this to scale? What's the next step that we need to be doing to really help schools and communities across the country understand the role of adults, all adults, the role of schools, the role of these community partners? How do we get this message out there and how do we really do the hard professional development and courageous work? How do you get that happening?

Ron Berger ([18:07](#)):

Well, I think that we're all so busy in education and in community support work, Karen, that it's hard for us to slow down and rethink the paradigm of what's here. I think we need to rethink public education in some basic ways. When I was born, fewer than half of American students graduated from high school, most students dropped out, most students. That was not considered a big problem in the 1950s because it was assumed that most students didn't need to finish high school because there was good jobs in industry and in trades and students could get good work. Not everyone needed to finish high school and go to college, that was not an issue.

It's a different world now. That industry is not in the United States anymore. We now have the charge in public education to make sure every kid has the option of higher education, as Margarida just said, but we haven't rethought what schools look like. Schools are still set up to sort students so that only a few of them would go on, and they need to be set up for the success of every student. I think every teacher and every school leader goes into this profession with a noble purpose, I think every one of them wants to help kids succeed. It's not the fault of the teachers or the leaders, it's the structures that they're having to live in that keep us rushed, that don't allow time for daily crew meetings, that don't allow staff time to plan to work together, that don't allow staff time to connect with the community and to tap into that web of community resources, the time for school members to meet with outside youth organizations, the time for students to get out of the building and do that work.

We need to loosen up and decide if we want every kid to succeed, we need to rethink some of that bureaucracy and allow schools to connect to a broader wealth of community resources and support. If we expect every kid to succeed, school can't look the same as it did in the 1950s. It's a different world now.

Karen (20:07):

What you all have described, the kind of things that you want schools to take time for are often the kind of things that happen in summer, for some kids, not for all kids, more for affluent kids than for kids from lower income families and communities. What should we do to help people understand that these kind of learning experiences that you're talking about, we do make time for them, but we actually make time for them when schools close. Margarida, can you talk a little bit about your summer?

Margarida Celestino (20:37):

Yeah, I've always tried to keep myself busy over the summer, but I've had other peers who didn't do anything in the summer, they would just work or just stay at home. But I've kept myself busy because my school always provided opportunities for the summer, Boys and Girls Club always gave me opportunities for the summer. The library always was open and always there was something happening for the summer. Not a lot of people have the opportunity to do that, not everyone has transportation to get to those places. Going into school and being able to do those things at school is very different than being able to do it at your free time, because not everyone has the same access to the same resources and not everyone has the same time outside of school to be involved.

Karen (21:26):

There are so many phrases in education about expanded learning and extended learning and extended day and whatever. You talked about this pressure of time, how do we really think about time differently as we're looking at the day and the year to make sure that schools really have this time to blend with community in a different way?

Ron Berger (21:45):

I do feel, Karen, that for equity reasons, we have to build some of that time into the school day for students to make those connections. I can say, knowing Margarida's life a little bit, that there was a point where she was working three jobs at the same time. Because of her family's economic circumstances, she was often working 15 hour days in the summer and then a full-time job almost when she was also in school. The idea that she's going to have the freedom outside of school to make those connections is something that only wealthy kids can often have.

We need to make sure school is a place that also makes those community connections for our kids that they can pursue later, that helps them get internships, helps them get jobs, helps them know who else in the community they can connect with, helps connect them with the Boys and Girls Clubs and the libraries and the youth organizations, because if we truly have this new charge in America that every kid should have the option of post-secondary success, we need to create time in school to make sure every kid can see all those opportunities for community support.

Karen (22:50):

I really couldn't have said it any better. You've really wrapped this up, bringing it back to this fundamental question of equity and the responsibility that we have in our public education systems to make sure this broader set of opportunities that you've described is available to all and not just what we do when school is out. I really thank both of you for taking the time to talk with us today and look forward to seeing you again.

Ron Berger (23:15):

Thank you for hosting us, Karen.

Karen ([23:17](#)):

Thank you so much.

I'll leave you with a dual challenge and a reflection for today's episode. First, how can you intentionally build your adult culture foster student culture you're aiming for, and who are you currently not including in that work that needs to be looped in? Second, how can we take Ron's charge and consider the equity imperative of ensuring community connections and opportunities are part of our system of learning and schooling rather than what we do in the out of school space? What inequities are created in your community by the current system of school after school and summer, and how might you blur the lines in a way that increase access and opportunity?

Speaker 4 ([24:03](#)):

Please visit our website and YouTube channel to view the panel that sparked this episode, to hear more of this conversation, and to learn more about EL Education. Join us for episode three, as Karen talks with Atyani Howard of the New Teacher center, and Carlo Ramirez-Truse, who leads the organization's youth advisory council.