

100% Future Episode 6 Transcript

Road to 100% The Future of Public Education

Podcast Home: <https://www.100nm.org/100-future>

This transcript has been edited for clarity.

Intro [00:00:01] There's no reason for people in a society as wealthy, resourced, and technologically advanced as this one to not be thriving. Every crisis we are exposed to hourly is completely predictable and preventable. If we connect to a shared vision of everyone thriving, surviving the day is just not acceptable anymore when we know that thriving is actually possible. Welcome to the 100% Future podcast where Dr. Katherine Ortega Courtney, Dominic Cappello, and me, Rubina Cohen, as your host, share insights, action plans, and inspire you weekly to take bold action in designing thriving communities for all.

Rubina Cohen [00:00:50] Welcome back, everybody. We are back in the studio with Dr. Katherine Ortega Courtney and Dominic Cappello. Today's topic is the future of public education. This is a big one. This is really important. I mean, they're all big ones, right? But public education, I feel like, has been this looming topic for so long. But, it is important in so many different regards as I have kids that are in the system right now, it matters even more to me right now, but then I just see so many people who are struggling, so I'm really excited to get into this topic with both of you. Welcome back to the studio.

Dr. Katherine Ortega Courtney [00:01:29] Thank you.

Dominic Cappello [00:01:29] Thank you.

Rubina Cohen [00:01:31] Okay. So, one big question. How are these first years set up for students to fail or succeed? ...I guess it's the first five years, is what I was hearing.

Dominic Cappello [00:01:46] Yes, we're talking about the first five years of a child's life, not the first five years of their time in elementary school.

Rubina Cohen [00:01:53] Okay.

Dominic Cappello [00:01:55] So just to be clear for our listeners, this is an unusual way to start talking about fixing public education because we're talking about all the agencies that have to be working to prepare the child to enter public education.

Rubina Cohen [00:02:14] So we're talking about early childhood.

Dominic Cappello [00:02:16] Yeah, and before. We're talking about mom and baby Tara leaving the hospital, the maternity ward, going home... and (the first question is) is Tara okay? And, of course, is her mom. Okay. And if there's a father, is (her) dad okay? And a grandparent? But is the household safe? And little Tara. Little Tara needs to be safe. And again, we're going back to our favorite term, the social determinants of health. Does Tara and her family have access to the ten vital services for surviving and thriving that represent the positive social determinants of health? If little Tara lives in a community where there are all kinds of resources, there's medical care, mental health care, food security, housing security, and transportation, little Tara and her family are going to do much, much better than those families who do not have those services. And if little Tara has access to early childhood learning programs, little Tara is going to be really ready to enter school. However, we know, at least in our state of New Mexico, where we survey families and ask them, can you get to these services, maybe half the population is struggling to get to the services for surviving as well as parent supports and early childhood learning. So when we talk about the first five years, you've got to get

these services in place. This is before they enter kindergarten. And so, I don't know if the term is *ironic*, but it's interesting, that to fix public education it has to be everyone else but public education (leaders). Now, when we start talking about what happens in kindergarten going forward, yes, public education leaders play a huge role. But, we've got to get everything fixed first and then we can talk about how to design the schools of the future that are safe places, nurturing places, and can be centers for learning.

Dr. Katherine Ortega Courtney [00:04:35] Yeah. And I just want to add that those services are super important, but the home environment that a child lives in is super, duper important. Early childhood trauma completely impacts the whole trajectory of brain development. So, if a child is brought into a home where that child is in a fearful state all the time, that impacts the way the brain develops. And that is going to set that child up for living in a constant state of fear and anxiety and other issues, which is not conducive to learning in school. So, just like we were talking about with child welfare, all of these systems interact with each other. And it's not just up to public education to fix public education. It is all of these systems working together to make sure that from the get-go, from that very first moment home, those kids are in a safe and healthy environment.

Dominic Cappello [00:05:34] And I would add that the partners in this are not only the people who are leading the ten vital services for surviving and thriving, it's the people leading city government, leading county government, obviously leading local school government. Everyone has a role in this. So, this is not an exercise in finger-pointing. And as you know, or as we know, there are always lawsuits about public ed not serving students. They are very they're important and they take us back to (the question), is the school working for all of our students, especially our most vulnerable students? But what we don't want to get into is finger-pointing, because as Katherine has said, it requires everybody working together on every level of government to make sure that one school works well for 100% of students.

Rubina Cohen [00:06:31] Amazing. Okay. So both of you mentioned...Katherine mentioned trauma and how that affects brain development. And then Dom, you brought up how lack of access to services really impacts the students' ability to be educated in school. So how do ACEs-related trauma and adverse social determinants of health impact students?

Dr. Katherine Ortega Courtney [00:07:05] We touched on this a little bit...as far as the brain's readiness to learn. But it's super important to understand that humans, in general, when they are in a state of anxiety, or fear, or stress, we are not taking in information. And what we know, based on the number of children growing up with adverse childhood experiences, and the number of kids growing up with a lack of access to services. Many of our students are in one of these (emotional) states at school. So, unless we address that, these children are not going to sit there learning math. They're sitting there worrying about what are they coming home to that night? Is dad going to hit mom again? Are we going to be evicted again? Are we going to move again? Do we have food tonight? A kid who's sitting there worrying about that is not going to do well in school, by and large. And that's the reality that many of our students face. And that is something that the schools are not set up to address. We can talk about making schools trauma-informed, which is absolutely important so that when teachers see that they know what to do about it, they can recognize it. But, unless schools are set up to really address these needs, like being able to refer families to the services that exist that can help them, we're not going to see the kind of change that we want. We're not going to all of a sudden move from a school where the kids are struggling academically, to where the kids are doing great without addressing these root causes of why they're struggling in the first place. And we haven't seen a lot of conversation about that yet. But I do think that we're making progress and understanding what is the root cause of why our schools are struggling. It's not because the teachers aren't doing a good job. It's not because of the curriculum. It's not because they're not trying. It's because we're not addressing the root cause of why our kids are struggling in the first place.

Dominic Cappello [00:09:11] I'd like to add that I'm sure our listeners were thinking, well, let's talk about the future of public education. That must mean curricula, that must mean instruction, that must mean teaching, and the quality of our teachers, and that's all true. And the good news is there there are 100 years worth of data and research that can guide educators and are guiding educators in terms of what works, in terms of teaching literacy, math, science, or the arts. We've got this (research) and our schools and our teachers... they're ready to always be looking at the latest research, what works in terms of teaching. But none of that matters if half the kids don't have a stable food supply. None of that matters if a quarter of the students have four or more adverse childhood experiences. So the good news is this—we know what to do. We know there are models that we can talk about in a bit in terms of providing schools with the resources to be able to address all the issues, whether it's academics or social-emotional learning. But we have to get schools to understand that just as they have a bullying

prevention policy and a gun violence prevention policy, they have an HIV prevention policy, all our schools have to consider taking on an ACEs prevention policy and an ACEs treatment policy as well as a policy related to families that don't have services. Schools know how to make policies, and then once they have policies, they can put the programs in place with community support. So I think that's the future of school. It's the research, it's the data, it's being willing to confront something that's really hard to talk about. And yet, the solutions are right in front of us.

Dr. Katherine Ortega Courtney [00:11:18] And I just want to share that one of the most touching talks I've ever done was right when *Anna Age Eight* first came out and we were just talking to anyone that would let us talk to them. And I was invited to talk to a group of school bus drivers in Santa Fe. So the thought was, oh, we have to tell them, we have to teach them what the kids are dealing with. They don't know about this reality that our kids are facing. They got it more than any other group I've ever talked to. They were like, I see these kids coming to school. Most of them already carried food for the kids. They just bought it themselves and were handing it out. And so those at the frontline working directly with the kids get it. We just need to figure out how to get those resources into the school. The understanding is there, the will is there. And it's like we keep saying, it's not that big of a leap to put all of these resources in the schools where we know there is a need.

Rubina Cohen [00:12:26] That makes so much sense and thanks for sharing that story. That is really beautiful to know that the bus drivers already got it. They're hearing those stories, seeing these kids every day, and they just get it. So, one of the things you're both saying is that these students must survive before thriving, right? And so, what are some of the models for school-based health promotion? I know you started to get into it a bit, but are there existing models?

Dominic Cappello [00:12:59] Yeah, the great news is we have so many models that are working across the nation, if not across the globe, right? We don't lack models in terms of looking at how we make sure that that school environment is going to support 100% of students. There are a number of models and we could talk for hours about these...(but we'll) only talk for a few minutes. We could talk about school-based health centers. This brings behavioral health care, medical care, and dental care to not only students but to their family members. So this is huge. And we know from our surveys that many families cannot access healthcare. So, by putting it in the school where students already exist and their families will go, you can really do a lot with (addressing healthcare) disparities. You can really, really make health care accessible to our most vulnerable families. You can also do a model. I'm not sure if do the model is the right way to say it. You could implement the model of a community school. A community school is a... it's really, in many ways a philosophy, a philosophy that a school is a learning center for students, for their families, and for the community. Everyone is welcome. These are environments that have extra staff, like a community school's director who works in alignment with the school principal to make sure that vital services can be identified. They can refer families to these services if those services exist in the community. There's always a big "if" here. We have to be really careful what we say. "... and we'll refer families to services". That only works if services exist. And as we've said throughout the podcasts, there are many places where services are not available. However, in a community school, there's a lot of research and lot of models to look at, and they are being implemented in New Mexico and across the nation. And so, we can look at community schools, we can look at school-based health centers. And then there is the (Family Resource Center)—and these have been in place for many, many decades. They're often a special room that a mom or dad can go to and meet with a staff person to talk about any issues they may have. These (issues and meeting needs with services) could be expanded. With the Internet, obviously, a lot of services, including behavioral health care, can be beamed in. Right? With telehealth or models like that. So when we talk about our ten vital services, most of them could be made accessible as web-based. And so, if you had a family resource center or a service hub, you could design a special room in the school that was really this amazing place. That would be a place where parents can really get all their problems solved. So, we have three models that are available today for schools to take on.

Dr. Katherine Ortega Courtney [00:16:24] And I want to give a shout-out to some of our 100% (initiative) counties here in New Mexico that are just doing it. They're not waiting for policies to change. They're not waiting for anything else to happen. Otero County, for example, they put washing machines in their schools so that kids can do their laundry and get clean clothes. And they used feedback from the high school students (who said), "Oh, I don't want people seeing me do that." So they put it in a different building and it's open and (has) earlier hours, so there's no stigma. They have clothes closets where kids can come and get new clean clothes if they need some, (also) food, whatever they need. So

there are models out there and there are schools that (say) we're not going to wait for systems to change. We're just going to start doing it on the ground. And I think, amazing. So cool.

Rubina Cohen [00:17:12] So cool. Very cool. Okay, so there's that's as an example of people doing it. But there are issues that we're dealing with outside of what's happening within the schools or what students are dealing with right now. We're currently dealing with shortages of people to do the work, right? We're having teacher shortages. We have healthcare provider shortages. What will it take then? What do you guys think? What will it take to get to a new vision of school with some of these looming things that we're dealing with?

Dr. Katherine Ortega Courtney [00:17:50] I think that it's so important to acknowledge that being a teacher is a heroic career, and it's okay for a kid to want to grow up and be a teacher in the same community they grew up in. And (the) same thing: to be a social worker and... to be a health care provider in their own communities. And that's something powerful and incredible. And I think there are some great programs that are going on. I know there's San Miguel County (that) has a medical program where they're getting high school kids into that field with the idea that they want to come back and be a healthcare provider in their own community. Same thing with teachers. I think what's really, really important is that we need to resource the schools in such a way that the teachers can teach and not have to be social workers and therapists and all of the things that they currently are, trying to address all of the student's needs. We need a system where those bus drivers don't have to be the ones who have to buy food out of their own pocket to provide for the kids. So, how can we resource the schools with social workers, healthcare providers, and teachers so that each one of those people can do the job that they set out to do instead of doing all the jobs and burning out and leaving their jobs because it's too hard.

Dominic Cappello [00:19:05] I remember (and it was) many years ago here in Santa Fe, I was invited to a talk at a fifth-grade classroom (in) a public school. And the same day, I was also invited to talk at a private school. And these schools were only two miles away from each other. But they might have been in different countries because when I went to the public school, there was this wonderful teacher and she was managing about 25 students. And it was I was in awe of her how she was able to keep control of a room. And as we talked (as a classroom activity and I facilitated) activities that had to do with being safe and being healthy. Then after I did my activities, I talked with (the teacher) and she said, "This is really tough. I've got to tell you, five of my students have severe emotional challenges and... we're trying to link them up with help, but it's very difficult. Also, of course, parents are involved, but I have to keep those five kids under control. And that's really hard work. I'm alone in this room. I don't have a teacher's aide. I've (also) got five kids who are superstars and... they're so eager to learn and so ready. I've got to make sure they're not bored. I have to keep almost giving them independent study. And then I've got the middle (group of students) who are... open to learning. They're (all) in fifth grade." But she says, "I have to manage three different groups and it's really hard. Often, there is no time for a school break or even a lunch break for me." She goes (on sharing), "I'm doing crowd control...as opposed to teaching." And this was an amazing teacher. This is someone who was doing phenomenal work. But I left that classroom and I went up the hill to a private school and...that was a very different experience. That classroom had a teacher, a teacher's aide, and three parent volunteers, and there were about 15 students. And it was calm and it was tranquil. And the students (were) very engaged and very focused, very communicative. And it was a very different environment. This was a teacher who had a lot of support in a beautiful, very well-resourced classroom. I took a tour of the school. It was a state-of-the-art school. It was beautiful and it was very inviting. And I have to tell you, it was night and day to go to these two environments. So, when we wonder what is the vision of the school of the future? Well, we can look at private schools. They've got a great vision and they have resources. So we don't have to wonder how was this (well-resourced school environment) done? How could we do it? It's being done in every county. There are beautiful private schools everywhere we can learn from. And yes, will it take more resources to upgrade public schools? Yeah, and it will take working differently. But if the kids are the number one priority in the society, then it's really simple. We put the resources where they're needed so that 100% of our kids do well.

Dr. Katherine Ortega Courtney [00:22:42] And that'll save money in the long run. At the end of the day, if that's truly what we care about and do, we will save money in prisons, we will save money on unemployment, we will save money (on) behavioral health issues, all of those things. So, investing early, investing in kids, even if you don't care about kids (public education), it's still smart business. So, I think that's definitely the way to go.

Rubina Cohen [00:23:06] Excellent. I love that new vision. And we talked a little bit about this in our vision boarding podcast. And so we are going to end it here. I love that you guys were here today to talk about this important topic. And we will be back in the studio next week. Thank you both again so much for being here. We'll see everybody next week.

Dr. Katherine Ortega Courtney [00:23:29] Thank you.

Dominic Cappello [00:23:30] Thank you.

Rubina Cohen [00:23:33] Join us on the road to 100% New Mexico Initiative at 100NM.org to learn more and get access to the podcast show notes. Want to stay more actively engaged with the movement? Then follow us on [Facebook at 100PercentNewMexico](#) and on [Instagram at 100percentnm](#). Until next time, let's take bold action to create a 100% future for all.