

Interview; NTC Alternative High School, Wausau, WI, July 11, 2019

Speakers:

- Sherry Holly, Alternative Education Administrator, DPI
- Marjorie Bock, Program Director and Student Advisor, NTC
- Kristin Van Der Geest, Program Director and HSED Instructor, NTC
- Angie Lloyd, Director of People's Services, Wausau School District
- Brooke Schindler, Dean for General Studies and Alternative High School, NTC

Holly: Today we wanted to bring a group of people together that have a model alternative high school in the Wausau area that serves the community and some of the feeder schools into NTC. So what motivated you to start the program?

Bock: Thirty-two years ago, there were a group of administrators from the Wausau School District that felt that they needed to have an alternative for those students who were not successful. And because of the compulsory attendance law and that students had to be in school until age 18, they had a vision 32 years ago that there had to be something that needed to be created. So they created a program in partnership with NTC to operate an alternative high school program for at-risk youth under the 118.15 statute.

Holly: Did you model your alternative school after a specific program or school?

Bock: If I can remember back then, I was in the program, but I want to say that they may have visited a couple of alternative programs, although in 1987, I don't know how many alternative programs were out there. It started as a night school with just 40 students.

Holly: What is your vision and philosophy?

Van Der Geest: The LIFE philosophy is our umbrella philosophy right now—LIFE standing for literacy, inspiration, fundamentals, and empowerment. That drives what we do, how we deal with our students, behaviors, curriculum, all those good things. We like to provide a family atmosphere where students feel safe and welcome at all times. And as far as behavior goes, we are firm but fair. We don't reward poor behavior, and we want students to become their best selves.

Holly: So how is your school governed? Are there advantages and disadvantages to this way of governing? How much decision-making power do you and your students have? I realize you have a partnership with the school district and NTC.

Schindler: So from a partnership standpoint, there is an agreement between NTC and the Wausau School District that outlines the responsibilities. NTC's portion is focused on curriculum and the instructional pieces to 105 students. We like to think of them more as slots that are available because if students complete in the middle of the year, we will open that spot back up to another student that is in need of an alternative solution. We work pretty closely with the Wausau School District. To make sure that needs are being met, we meet on a quarterly basis, but I would say on a weekly if not daily basis are in communication with associate principals and other staff members at the district to make sure things are firing on all cylinders.

Holly: Have you started down a path with something, for example governance, and realized you needed to change the plan? It could be curriculum. What's something that you started out thinking that's the road you wanted to go down and then you realized that you had to change the plan?

Bock: I think initially, 32 years ago when this program was created, most of the curriculum was packet. The kids would come in, they'd do three hours of packets, and they'd go home. I think that obviously after many years having new people come in the thought was that we need to be doing more than just packets. We need to work with these students that they walk out the door with skills that "How do I survive in society?" "What is my plan for the future?" All of these factors. As every year passes, you're ever-changing. And I think you have to do that in order to be successful. But as I said, starting from a packet program to a lot of cool stuff.

Schindler: Yeah, we kind of pressed "pause" last spring to talk. We got our Wausau School District people and our NTC people around the same table and said, Let's reflect on how things are going. And if we had a magic wand, what would we do differently? That's how we arrived at that new LIFE framework that guides the things that we do here. It was a wonderful conversation with all voices being heard, focused on providing students what they needed to be successful. One of the biggest things I think came out of it is the resurrection of life, and reinvigoration I would say, of the life management piece of our program. We all want our students to be successful once they leave the building, and in order to do that, skills like nowadays they would call "adulting" are really needed.

Holly: How did you know what your local community needed and wanted? And how does that play into your vision?

Bock: I think it's constant communication between the district and NTC Alternative High. The needs are constantly changing, and we're depending on other community resources (police department, that type of thing) to really keep us up-to-date with what's going on in the community so we can respond.

Bock: And I'd like to add to that. I think the beauty of this program has been that the partnership between NTC and the Wausau School District. The Wausau School District has given us a lot of autonomy truly to be the best program that we can be. And I am grateful through all the years that it has been such a strong support. That's huge.

Holly: How did the community feel about the school at the beginning and how has that changed over time?

Bock: I think that the community doesn't always know that we have an alternative high school program. In fact, when we bring community members in, they'll say, Well, I never knew this program existed. And I think they're quite surprised when they're able to see the program and see what we're doing. I think the more community members know about us, the more they are willing to do for us as well. That's what I've experienced.

Holly: I've noticed you have a lot of partnerships with the people around the community so I think that probably as over time someone else hears about you and becomes excited and offers their support. I'm very impressed with that.

What things did you have to take into consideration to be successful?

Van Der Geest: I think that Margie and I have worked together for a long time. And I think like any good educator, you're constantly reflecting and refining what you do. We have a lot of experience, and all of it has been with at-risk teenagers—so over 60 years between the two of us. We're really old. Anyway, just that we realized that punitive wasn't working. It's the connections to kids. It always comes back to the connections to kids. We've been through all of the trainings of different ways to deliver curriculum and all kinds of the new things that come around. We know that the core of it all is connecting with our students and keeping the students as the focus. That is probably the biggest thing is that things are student-driven. The students we are here to serve are our biggest focus.

Holly: So some of the people who might be listening today are just starting out. What were your biggest concerns about starting this school and how have you addressed them over time?

Bock: I think one of the biggest things right now that we continue to do is try to fight against that stigma of "at-risk students." So I think in 1987, it was maybe "all those bad kids going over to night school." Where now we're in a perfect time with looking at different ways to educate students that it's not just "at-risk" or the kids who couldn't make it somewhere else. It's just that they need a different learning style. So I think constantly educating the community and other people about that rather than just saying it's "those kids" who can't be in our schools as very imperative.

Bock: I'm always very excited to share our school with whoever wants to step into our doors, and time and time again, when they come through, you'll hear phrases like, "I had no idea," "this is so impressive," "I just thought it was those kids that were skippers or just wanted to party all the time," and they really have their socks knocked off when they see the projects and products that these wonderful young people can produce.

Holly: Great, that piggybacks off the next question. What kind of learning environment do you have, and how does the educational space impact your learning environment? And what are important things to consider when putting a school or program together?

Bock: I think as far as learning environment, the most important thing is I think the kids feel that they are a part of something. I think that's what gets them to continue to keep walking through the door every day. To me, that is probably one of the keys to success is that the students feel that they are a part of something, that they have a voice, and I think that's huge.

Van Der Geest: I think that there's always a balance in school and in life. You know, students need the structure, but we also need to be flexible. The students are such unique individuals with unique circumstances. As long as we are always willing to listen and meet their needs based on ... it is constantly changing. And I think our environment is a really cool atmosphere for that family feel, and that we'll work it out, you know. Whatever the situation is, we'll work it out.

Holly: I'm going to go off script a little bit. You were a school within a school, and now you're at a separate site. What are the advantages to both of those?

Van Der Geest: We were a little saddened when we left the main campus at NTC because it's a beautiful facility, and all of our things were there—the testing center and those kinds of things. The benefit? I think the biggest benefit is the ownership of it. This is OUR building. This is where we belong. And when they walk in the door, this is their space. We have very little vandalism, and we have students who feel comfort here.

Bock: Yeah, I think it was really important that a physical space was created for these students instead of just sticking them somewhere and making it work. That's often how alternative programs begin, and for the kids to feel that ownership here and not just feel like they were just tossed off to the side is incredibly important.

Van Der Geest: I think that for a lot of students that we serve, knowing that they would be first-generation college students too, there may have been some hesitation or uneasiness about walking in the doors of a college every day, too. They were already feeling like they didn't fit in the high school, and they never could see themselves at a college. So this building really offers an opportunity for them to feel like this is a clean slate, new opportunity, and it's their place.

Holly: What are potential costs such as rent, insurance, staff salaries, and how did you secure the necessary funding?

Schindler: That's a really good question. Our program right now operates off of a contract between the Wausau School District and NTC. We start off a formula that begins with the state rate and then go from there. There are pieces that are provided by the Wausau School District, such as a full-time special education teacher and a half-time social worker. And then on the NTC half, we provide the remainder of the staffing, rent, and those sorts of things. So based off that original contract, we cover our costs.

Lloyd: And if I can just put in a plug for the State. The state rates keep increasing but our budgets for public education do not for the most part, and that has been a struggle. So we had to eliminate summer school this past summer, which was really difficult for us to do. But we're constantly looking for that balance, too, of like where can we take more money from our budget and put it into alternative options.

Schindler: Likewise, NTC is also a state-funded entity so as budgets tighten, some of our staffing has really had to adjust from primarily full-time permanent employees providing education here to more of a hybrid model of some permanent employees and some part-time instructors.

Holly: That's really helpful information. How do you recruit potential students and staff members?

Bock: Well, the student piece I'll speak to. We actually do have some parents who have went through this program, and when they come to high school, they're like, Yup my child's going to go there. So it is an option for some parents. We meet quarterly to look at the students that our associate principals constantly have a running list going and are talking to the families about different options for students who are lacking in the credit area or just need something different. So it really is the counselors and the principals finding those kids first and then us bringing recommendations to this group. And then we all kind of have a say in "Is it going to be a good fit for that child?"

Schindler: In terms of recruiting staff, of course, when we have a position that is open at the high school, we are looking for individuals that have an at-risk background or at least an interest that would align with the population that we serve. To, I think, maintain high standards, we like to see the DPI licensures that align with the instructional area that they would be providing instruction depending on where the opening is. And, in the past, we have collaboratively interviewed potential candidates as they came in.

Holly: What does a typical day look like at your school?

Bock: Students arrive. We have two sections: a morning section and an afternoon. Our morning section runs from 9 a.m. to 11:40. And there are two small breaks, two five-minute breaks in between. They

have three classes per day. On the credit side of the house, there are five academic areas that meet Monday through Friday. And in the afternoon the section runs from 12:30 p.m. to 3:10 p.m.

Holly: Do you have a strategic plan or framework? How often do you revisit and revise your programming?

Schindler: As we mentioned earlier, we had created an action plan based off of our compression planning session that we had last spring. That LIFE framework—literacy, inspiration, fundamentals, and empowerment—came out of that and really guide what we do. Typically when you implement the new vision, you come back and revisit it so since we had just started, we took some time at the end of the year to look at the initial objectives had been met. And then we'll bring that back again next year. Usually we reference it during some kick-off meetings that we have with the Wausau School District and across the quarter in meetings, take a peek at that.

Holly: Who are the stakeholders and partners that make your school successful?

Van Der Geest: We have so many. We're so blessed to have just a grand support from our community. Everything that the Wausau School District wants us to do in terms of curriculum, as Margie had mentioned earlier, allows us to make this a really special place for students. But the community partners that serve us as well and serve our students ... it's a long list.

Bock: You know the Wausau community is truly a very giving community, and there are people that want to help and want to be there. The opportunity to be able to tap into those resources and referral process, however that may be ... But we really have had an abundance of community support.

Van Der Geest: And the more we ask, the more is bestowed upon us. It is incredible how generous people are: International Rotary, the Women's Community has been fabulous, Peaceful Solutions, A Neighbor's Place. It's just a long list.

Holly: And NTC, too?

Bock: Absolutely.

Van Der Geest: We are lucky enough to have a wonderful foundation at the college. And as our students at the alternative high school look to make their next step in their educational journeys, we are very proud to say that our NTC Alternative High School students earn the most scholarships in comparison to all of our high schools within the NTC district.

Holly: What did you think was going to be a problem that turned out not to be a problem when you started your school?

Bock: I'll speak to the cell phone policy.

Holly: OK, that'd be fine.

Bock: We decided we're done with the cell phones, the drama, all that goes with that. We have our students for a very short time every day, and we thought it was going to be anarchy and we were braced for it. Honestly, I thought "Oh my gosh, the end of the school year is going to be" And it turned out to be not so bad so that was a surprise. And I think that gives us the energy to really think about making

changes in the program. “Maybe it’s not as bad as we think it’s going to be.” You know, I think it’s all about your approach and how you present it to the kids as well.

Van Der Geest: We try to keep our short amount of time (we have about 2-1/2 hours a day of contact time with students) We try to keep our classroom time sacred. This is our time. This is our learning time. That sort of thing. We present it that way. It’s that important to us. That sort of thing. Readmittance meetings. We didn’t think those would work, instead of suspending kids, having readmittance meetings. They have worked. Being firm and fair and honest with students has worked out beautifully.

Bock: I think one of our focuses this year that we would like to strengthen is truancy. How are we going to navigate around that? What do we need to do as a staff to get the most truant kids, to get them here and give them their credential? So I think that will be a big focus of ours this year as well.

Holly: Is there something you didn’t consider that turned out to require more care and attention than you may have given it?

Van Der Geest: When we started the needs surveys—we give students needs surveys a couple times a year—and when we started getting honest answers and a compilation of what our students’ needs were, we were pretty blown away by how many needs weren’t being met above and beyond the academic needs. And our staff—really, really everybody—was willing to pull together and reach out for resources and take time out of their daily lives to pull things in. None of that would happen without an incredibly dedicated staff who’s willing to do those things, too.

Bock: And I think that we realize, too—the Wausau School District, NTC, the alternative high school staff—that food, shelter, and clothing is ultimately the basis for success for the kids. The education part of it falls into place when those other needs are being met.

Van Der Geest: And students knowing that we care enough to help them out with those, not just the physical needs but the emotional needs and all of those things that lends to the family atmosphere that lends to their buying into the whole thing, trusting us more. And if they trust us more, they will do more in class as well. It is all connected.

Holly: What’s something that has surprised you about the school, the students, or the teachers? I know you mentioned the community, but is there anything ...

Van Der Geest: When I think about being surprised, it is during exit interviews. We have students do exit interviews and answer some questions. And when they tell us the things that make an impact on them, those are often quite surprising, oftentimes because it’s the simplest things that make the biggest difference, I guess. Although our students are all completely different individuals, they are collectively some of the most creative, brilliant, inspiring people. And once we have the opportunity to remove those barriers for those kids, the possibilities are endless. They blow us away. Their potential, when they actually can tap into it, it just blows us away.

Holly: This is my final question: What are you most proud of and what areas are you trying to strengthen?

Van Der Geest: We’re trying to strengthen truancy. We have AODA issues as always, and that’s another thing that... certain staff members are doing seminars and things, and trying to figure out how we can support students who suffer addictions or have those things in their families in their daily lives that they

have to deal with. I think that we are most proud of being willing to do the hard work to help lift kids to their potential. It's not easy. It is really, really a tough job. But once we started communicating and supporting one another as a staff, the synergy was palpable, and we're riding that wave for as long as we can.

Holly: Is there anything anyone else would want to add about something you're proud of or anything you want to strengthen?

Schindler: I'm always most proud of our students. It just amazes me some of the hands that some of our students have been dealt and the achievements they make as a part of our program. We have students that are earning college credits while finishing up their high school credentials. We have students that are doing both of those things AND holding down a job. We have some students who are doing all three of those things AND parenting. It's just incredible to me that we have completers with some of the life situations that they come out of. One of the things that I'm hoping that we can continue to strengthen is an issue that all schools face, and that's just addressing those mental health issues that are going on. If I had a magic wand and a jillion dollars, that's what it would all go to.

Holly: Well, thank you for taking the time to show me your school. I was very impressed. I think you have some lucky students and communities to be able to access these resources. That's all for now.