

Episode 3

The RISD Podcast intro: Connect with us and listen in; it's The RISD Podcast. This is the season of thanks, um, and thankfulness. And I think, you know, we just are on the heels of our Thanksgiving break. And that is a time where as a community and as a family, we pause and we make sure everyone around us knows all the reasons that we are grateful for them. But I believe every day we have an opportunity to be grateful and to be thankful for the organizations, the supports, the people around us that make a difference. Absolutely. And today, yes, Dr. Goodson. Yes. We have an opportunity to express our gratitude to an organization and to members of our staff that are so giving of what they do, their resources, both human fiscal, um, to make a difference in the lives of our community and our families. And I am proud to, welcome to this month's RISD Podcast, the Network of Community Ministries and our Family Support Services team. With us, I have Abbie Kauffman from the Network. Hi. I'm grateful to be here. Thank you. We're so glad to have you. Um, and from our Family Student Services Center, I have Vanessa Montez and I have Joe Miniscalco that are a part of the RISD family. Thank you for having us here. Very Appreciative. Gonna be a great conversation. Well, we're gonna start talking a little bit about the Network and so Abbie, we're gonna start with you. Right? Can you share a little bit, you know, the Network of Community Ministries has been a part of the, um, Richardson city of Richardson community for a long time. Yes, it has. We were founded in 1985, um, actually when our faith community came together and realized that we were more powerful as one entity serving our community rather than each, um, individual faith entity or nonprofit, um, trying to meet different needs. And so, um, out of that came network. So we have 37 years of history serving Richardson and the 14 zip codes within RISD. That's amazing. So your services are not limited to just a geographic region? Absolutely not. So our geographic region aligns perfectly with the RISD boundaries. So that includes Dallas all the way down to White Rock Lake, little bit of Garland, and our Richardson service area. Now, Abbie, you are new to the Network family. I am. So tell us a little bit about your background and what brought you to this position and, and why are you excited about what's ahead? Of course. So I am a lifelong nonprofit professional. That should have been a given. I was that high school kid with all the community service hours and clubs and all those extracurriculars, but managed to find a passion and a career in social services. My, my heart is with people and helping people. Um, and I am a Richardson resident myself. So the service delivery and Network truly impacts my neighbors and my personal community. Uh, my daughter, when she gets a little bit older, will be an RISD student herself. Yeah. And I am actually, um, a spent some time in the RISD system as a kid myself. So this is my home, this is my community. Um, and to be able to serve my community in this capacity, um, is just, just truly a, a dream. Um, not the title, but the work that we're doing for our neighbors. I cannot wait to have your daughter a part of our family, but until then we get her mom. And we're so grateful for that. You might regret seeing those words. She's a little bit of a handful at three. So she, I have no doubt. She's amazing. You know, many of our, our, uh, listening audience may not have ever needed the Network's assistance, or maybe they have just read about the Network, um, you know, on a website or maybe just, you know, heard someone talking about it. But can you share specifically like what is the mission of the Network and, um, what, what is it that really is in the heart of the organization and what you hope to accomplish? Of course. So our mission is one of my favorite parts about our organization, and it's to care

coach and empower our neighbors to an improved quality of life. And I love each part of that mission statement to care. When people come to Network, it may not be their best day, but you're gonna find a caring, welcoming staff member or volunteer who wants to hear your story and is there to help, um, to coach. We're gonna work together. Yeah. Um, and that's so, so critical. And, you know, feeling then the next step of empowerment that I can do this. I can take ownership, I can go on, um, to that improved quality of life. And I love the also idea of quality of life because that looks so different for so many people. Um, so for example, one of our programs serves our seniors community. Mm-hmm. I see a lot of times mission statements on self sufficiency. It's really hard to be self sufficient when you're a senior, right? Maybe with some type of, um, health condition that prohibits you from being in the workforce. So we want everybody to have an improved quality of life where they are in their life. Our mission really focuses on, uh, three main areas of service delivery and then some other fun things that we do. Uh, it starts with basic needs, and that's what most people know Network for is our incredible community market, which is, um, a client choice food pantry where neighbors can come in and shop just like they would in a grocery store. And they have the power of choice in taking home groceries that meets their family's needs, their dietary needs, maybe their religious needs. And then of course, our mobile markets, which go to six different RISD schools. And we're so proud to partner and bring food to those campuses with you guys. We also do, uh, have a clothing closet on site. So, um, you know, if groceries are hard to come by, clothes probably are too. And so same thing, it's set up like a thrift store where our neighbors can come in and shop and make the decisions for their family. Do they need cute dress for prom this year, right? Mm-hmm. do they need a warm winter coat? Um, and they can pick in their size and in our fitting rooms, make sure it fits and feels great for them. We also provide utility assistance mm-hmm. um, and rental assistance because we know that people, um, can't be, have an improved quality of life. We're on a path of stabilization without a roof over their head and lights on and running water and heat and in the winter or air conditioning in the summer. Um, from there, we wanna take it a step further. We offer stabilization programs where our neighbors have the opportunity to meet with a stabilization coach one on one and work on resume or budgeting job development skills. And through our partners, we're able to offer things like GED classes Yeah. Or ESL classes. Um, so again, on that path to an improved quality of life. Um, our seniors, like I mentioned previously, we do all of that, but in a very targeted way, including home delivered groceries because we know transportation might be a barrier for a lot of different reasons. And then health and mobility Exactly. To be a challenge. Such a big challenge for our seniors. You know, if you have an cataracts, how can you comfortably navigate the best system or get behind the wheel of a car? Um, we also provide handyman services. We want people to stay in their own homes for as long as they safely can do. So we all wanna age in place. We don't wanna be bouncing around. It's familiar for us. So if we can help rebuild that shed or install smoke detectors or those arm rails in the shower, we've got a team that we can deploy to do that. And they're, they're really incredible. And then we also have some great fun kind of one-off programs like our afterschool art program, which is open to any student in RISD Tuesdays through Thursdays free of charge that we partner with a great nonprofit called Central Arts to do. And then we do one-off programs like supporting the Backpack Bash Yes. With Invite. And we're so grateful. Oh, we love it because our neighbors need those services. Yes. And so, um, partnering makes us better, better together.

And, um, toyland right now where our neighbors who are shopping our clothing market or our community market are able to come in and shop for toys. So it's, it's really a comprehensive, um, service delivery organization. And what we don't do, we try and find partners who can do for our neighbors. Yeah. So, um, we don't like to say no, we like to say we don't do this, but let me call my friend who does. And having RISD is part of that is so critical in meeting so many of our community's needs, I'm blown away and I can't imagine that the majority of our listeners, when they hear that they also aren't inspired. Um, and one of the things I would want everyone to know, um, I've had an opportunity to observe and, and to, to be a part of, um, what it, what the Network does for our community. And I am always in awe of how an individual will come in. And like you said, it may be on a day when they are low or when they're feeling sad or when maybe they're a little angry. But having the support of your team, who always has that right thing to say, has that approach of, of just love and surrounding them with love, and we're here to lift you up. Everyone leaves with such a feeling of support mm-hmm. and, um, integrity. Mm-hmm. Um, and that they shouldn't be ashamed. Yes. Like, it's, it's just an incredible thing that you do. Well, thank you. If a community member says like, oh, wow, I didn't realize though that was all that they did. How can I support, how can I get involved? Um, what would you suggest for them? There are so many ways to support, um, Network and our community and our neighbors. So, um, we know not everybody has financial resources to become donors or to help stock our food pantry, but as you're cleaning out your potentially pantry at home and you come across that pasta, that's still good. But maybe your family's not going to eat it. Please. We would love that donation to our food pantry. It makes such a big difference for our neighbors. As you're cleaning out your closets, we will always take your clothing donations. And if we can't use it, we have recycling partners or other thrift partners that we can send it to. So it's, it's not going in the trash. It's, it's being repurposed somewhere. Um, volunteers are always needed. The gift of time is such an incredible gift that people can give. It takes over 80 volunteers a day for Network to provide Wow. Our services in the community. And we have volunteer shifts in the morning before work, after work, or even on Saturdays that would be in our community market, our mobile market, our clothing closet intake, calling on our seniors just to say Hey, and check in on how they're doing. Um, so those are all great areas to plug in a network. And then also just being an advocate for Network in our community. Yes. If you know someone who's in need, knowing our name, knowing our website, knowing our phone number, so you can make that warm referral. And we, we can pick up, you know, where you can't do, that's, that's our job. Or talking about us in your house of worship or in your community groups. You know, the more people who know about Network services, the more of our neighbors who need our services are able to be served with that dignity that we wanna provide. Thank you for sharing those, those easy. Like, and some of those are really easy things are to do that I can make a huge difference. They are. Um, I, you know, as a, as a community, um, we have always partnered with the Network, but I think our partnership really, um, rose to the next level during the time of the tornadoes mm-hmm. And as the Network was kind of like our right arm for many of our students and our families at a time when they didn't know what tomorrow was gonna look like. Um, and from that very tragic and difficult time for our community really developed this commitment on behalf of Richardson ISD and the Network of like, we're in this together. Yes. Um, and through your capital fundraising campaign, you were in a very small facility that you were quickly outgrowing. Now you're in a

new facility. Tell us where that is. Yes. So we, um, left our Sherman Street location where we called home for many years, and we're now on the corner of International and Collins. Um, so 1500 International Parkway, and that's, uh, zip code 75081. Um, and it's, we made sure as part of that capital campaign, we had a Dart bus stop put there so all of our neighbors can access that. Um, and we love to welcome our community in our hours are Monday through Thursday. Mondays through Wednesdays, we're open till eight to four 30 Thursdays. We stay open till 7:00 PM And then on Saturdays, our community market is open from nine to two. And we open our clothing closet the fourth Saturday of every month. So we know everybody's schedules might look different. We wanna make sure that you have a time to get to Network and get our services, um, that works with your schedule. And a part of that, when you moved into the new facility, I remember the Network, um, having a collaborative conversation with the district that said, we are, we, we think we have the spot. We have found this place where we know we can continue to grow and thrive. And we have a part of this that what if, like, what if there were some of Richardson ISD services that we know our families access? What if it was a one stop shop? And the district was like, yes, please. Yes. Um, and out of that conversation, um, the ideation came of let's, our student services team, our counseling team, our newcomer team that welcomes and greets newcomers from the, you know, to the country and to Richardson ISD and provides them with the, the tools that they need to the district. We said, let's put these things together. Um, I wanna, I wanna kind of end with you before we transition to our internal team. But Abbie, why, why was that something that the Network was even open to? And from your seat, how have you seen that to be beneficial to those that you serve? Of course. So the Newcomer Center is such a great partner to have on our campus be it's truly when people are coming to the Newcomer Center, many of the things that they may need, um, as part of their student services or if we're welcoming them to this country Network is able to provide. And it's as simple as our RISD staff saying, welcome, here you are. You know, let's talk, let's get you enrolled in, you know, maybe your child needs some clothing for school. Yeah. Yes. Or maybe, um, you know, you arrived in this country a week ago and we're just now, you know, you need groceries on your shelves and we share a door. Yes. We don't even, you don't even have to go out of the building and around, you can walk through a door right into our facility and a Network staff member is ready to take that warm handoff. And so it's just this continuity of care for our students and for our families that is so impactful. And we are constantly looking for ways just to, you know, make sure that we're serving the RISD community so robustly, um, and making sure that the services we're offering in our facility, or partnering to offer in our facility, um, really, you know, benefit our RISD student population, which is so diverse and comes from so many different places and backgrounds and so many ways. So we just constantly striving to provide that culturally competent, um, link between RISD Yes. And our social services. I, that, that just, it, that connects with me in, in such a deep level. And, and we have shared, I think in our very first podcast episode, you know, we're the fifth most diverse district in the state. Mm-hmm. Um, and our diversity is, is both in faith, it is in our demographics, it's in our economically disadvantage. Um, and to know that we have a partner like the Network, um, that is there to serve all, you know, every child, every day. And a part of that make means making sure that they are fed, that they are clothed, that they have the school supplies that they need. One thing that we have at Network that is so incredible is an educator's pantry. So if you wait a minute, I, I know not of

what she speaks, what is an educator, what is the educator pantry at? So if you are an RISD teacher, we have a special space reserved just for you both at our Network headquarters on international, and on our mobile market. And we have snacks. We know every kid gets hungry. So it doesn't matter what school you are at, we want you to know that you can come, you can shop once a month, get up to 10 pounds of snacks to keep in your classroom. Yeah. I hope you're ready. And we've got everything. Okay. You, I, I, I'm dying. This is amazing. We've got everything from Gogo. Squeeze it, you know, for those little kids who maybe want smoothie to salted almonds for those more sophisticated pallets. I had a teacher in from Berk measuring out a whole bunch of Poptarts the other day. Cause her kids love poptarts. So we want our educators to know that we wanna support you in your classrooms as well. Um, regardless of what school you're at, regardless of what your students socioeconomic need might be, don't spend your money on snacks. Come to Network and let the community take care of you in that way. That is absolutely incredible. Come on over. I'll show it to you. It's not, it's not a big cabinet, but it's stuffed! Get your Goldfish! I hear a bunch of footsteps running right now. Once the listeners hear this, we're gonna hear tires peel out the parking lot, head right over the Network. Yeah. I'm blown away. Okay, cool. Once a month. 10 pounds. Yay!

I wanna shift a little bit and talk to our internal staff. Um, you know, we often in the community may have heard that we have a newcomer center. It used to be located off of Belt Line and Dr. HR, you know that, that building with the big blue roof, right? I do know that building. Yeah. That was the former newcomer center. Yes. And now it is in this beautiful building alongside the Network, but many people may have driven by that every day, or maybe when they were dropping off their kids at RHS, they saw that, that blue building, but had no idea. Maybe They thought it was a daycare. It looked like it looked like a daycare building, Which it's soon going to be our employee daycare, by the way. Yes. Um, but see what I did there? I saw what you did. That was a great transition. Thank you. But I wanna talk a little bit about what the Newcomer Center is and what does it do. And so Vanessa, can you talk to us a little bit about that? We See families from, um, countries such as Afghanistan, central America, new to the state. And so we have the opportunity every single day to make a difference in when it comes to their enrollment. And then as we consult with the families, they're there for language testing. We discover sometimes if they need an affidavit, we refer 'em to the affidavits office or personnel. And then we have a lot of families, especially the ones for our new who are in need of clothing, food, and so mm-hmm. So that's been, you know, a blessing for our families. Um, many times as we hear their stories, yes, we discover that, hey, there could be potential students who have been displaced. And some of the stories have been very traumatic. And so we have the counseling supports there. It's been great for our families to be able to get the supports they need. It's one stop shop, Dr. Hr. Can you imagine, you know, you are coming to this country, um, from another

place and, and you might be, you know, escaping from a situation that was dangerous or, um, you know, maybe experienced some trauma. And you are coming into Richardson ISD and you're enrolling and you know nothing about American schools. You know, nothing that, nothing About the, the educational system at all. No. And so to have someone like Vanessa and her team that will walk me through everything from what is my language, what campus am I gonna be served on in order How to complete the enrollment documents? Yes. That, you know, you have vaccinations. I mean, you say like, there are so many parts of that. And to know that we have a team, and then if I'm also brand new to the country and I'm, you know, trying to find a new place to live, all of that. Right. To know that I don't have to go to five different buildings mm-hmm. mm-hmm. to get the supports I need. It's all in one place. Most definitely. Um, in years past when we were into different locations, and so our families would come to us, we would do the initial identification and then testing, and then we would go, the family would have to go to a different building to get an affidavit. And sometimes they really didn't need an affidavit. So many times we have families who cannot make it too physically to our building. So we collaborate with the transportation department and their rain transportation to pick up the families at their home campus to bring them to us. This year we've been very fortunate to be able to provide backpacks. So especially to our refugee students, when they come in and we finish the process, we provide a backpack with school supplies. And so it's just seeing that smile and appreciation is just the greatest fulfillment. Last year we were given the tool of the interpretation on demand services. Yes. 76 languages Yes. Are spoken in Richardson ISD, Uhhuh, we called Interpretation line. It's on demand. And families feel very included. You are providing them with, okay, it's gonna be okay. Yeah. Here are, this is the way that we're going to help you. This, there's a level of dignity in both situations and Eliminating a barrier. Exactly. Mm-hmm. we're, we're taking the barriers outta the way so that you can focus on what's most important, which is getting your family to the, the most important next step. Whether that's housing, whether that is a meal mm-hmm. or whether that is a backpack with school supplies, that is one less thing that that child or that mom or dad have to worry about. And, and making sure that they know that it's gonna be okay. And I love, I'm so thankful, I know that they are so thankful to have that sense of security from two different entities that are really that closely connected. Absolutely. That's what's so great about, about what you do. Joe, I wanna talk to you for a minute. You are the, um, chief Executive Director for student services. Um, can you start by talking a little bit about all of the different things that maybe are, uh, under your umbrella and that you serve and support? Sure. And I just wanna say, I know the listeners really can't see our faces, but during this whole conversation, everyone is like really smiling about that, you know, know when you get to talk about, uh, the things that you do for others. I mean, I think that give back is really, you know, and take my word for it. Everyone is smiling, you know, big grins on our face, but you know, it's like if you've ever bought a home, right? Mm-hmm. you walk into a model home and, and you're really looking for it. Like the ideal setup. Yes, sir. Like our services center is really that ideal setup. So when families come in, we really are practicing what we talk about in student services. And that's Maslow before Blooms, right? Yes. What does that mean? Talk, Talk about what that looks like philosophically. So you heard Vanessa and you heard Abbie talk about the support that they provide families making sure that really some very basic needs are taken care of. Right. We're, we're getting fed, we're making sure we're getting cloth that we have housing. And really

being able to accomplish that first really allows our families to then move on to that academic focus. Right? Yeah. So like our services center really, and student services, that's, that's kind of the, the phrase that we live by. So in our group, and Vanessa and Abbie had talked about when someone walks through the doors and that's their first experience with an American school setting, we get to identify what their needs are. And, and much of that counseling services, uh, is in our department. So we basically identify do you have some real needs from a, from a clinical standpoint, right? Do you have some mental health needs? Do you have some physical needs? We provide that direction resource just like, um, you know, Network does. And we try to provide those services. And we have some of that that we provide directly in student services through counseling services. And so that's one of the things that we do. Vanessa had mention, uh, had mentioned affidavits. One of the things that we, we really try to, uh, support our families understanding is, you've gotta come to school Right? School is a safe place, and you've gotta come and we're gonna take care of you while they're there. So we build this understanding with our, at tendency and truancy process of coming to school. We can't teach you if you're not here. So getting them, uh, to really be attendance and making sure they understand of attendance, especially our little ones, our pre-K and our kinders that come in. Uh, so that's really important. But many times families come and, and, and again, they may be coming from countries that are war torn, that have children that are experiencing trauma, and some of their behaviors come out sideways. Right. And so we have behavior specialists that are there to provide support to parents and really identify how to coach them and provide them support on behavior, uh, strategies while, while they're in our newcomer center and doing the enrollment process. Right. Um, we also have, gosh, there's so much. We have prevention, programming mm-hmm. that if we have, uh, through our conversations, families that may have some addiction issues, uh, and have some needs, then we can provide them direction and support and really information and then resource them out to, uh, uh, individuals in our community that may be able to serve them at a different level. And I know we, we've spent some time talking, you know, directly about some of our refugee students, but I think it's really important that our community listening knows that what the Network does, what our newcomer center does, what our family Support services center does is not just Yes, absolutely. We, we address the needs of our newcomers, but we have families across the district Oh, absolutely. Who have a myriad of different needs and, um, need supports, um, that, that the Family services center, you know, helps support. Um, I know one of the things that a lot of community members, when I share with them, you know, we have over 900, uh, miss Mont, you mentioned earlier, McKinney Veto and, and our community may not know what that means, but really that is a law that was passed to support students who, um, may be in a place of mobility or homeless. Right. Um, and in a, as a district, we serve over 900 homeless students. So can you talk a little bit about what you do to support, um, those students and their Families? Absolutely. Yeah. I, I think that is one of the gems, you know, when you think about the work that we do, uh, Lori Shaw's our director. She's our student welfare director. And her and her team. When a student comes in and we know that they are either doubled up living with someone or they're, you know, truly homeless without a home, uh, she just immediately swoops in with a team. They meet with a family. We try to connect them with housing. You know, one of the things that we always find is if they're challenged with housing, many times they don't have transportation. You know, we provide them dart passes. We actually do provide them

physical transportation if there's a need. Uh, Curtis Jenkins, he, he's on the team. And if you know, Curtis, Curtis is one of those guys. If, if someone needs a ride, he's out there supporting. Yes. Uh, a person getting, uh, not only transportation back and forth to school and or to, uh, you know, to, uh, our center, but if there's a need to get somewhere else to get service, uh, we're also providing that support. So yeah. Supporting our homeless families with over 900 families in our community. I mean, that is a, that is a major, uh, part of what we do. We heard from Abbie a few minutes ago, kind of the hours, the times, how, you know, an individual or community member can engage with a network. Can you share with us, if I am a family that needs support from the family, um, services center, how do I know where to go? Who do I contact? How does that process work? After they complete enrollment, they're scheduled an appointment to come and see, uh, for language testing or for an affidavit. And so, and that process is how we determine what additional supports they may need. Okay. So really, if I, if I'm someone, I'm gonna really probably my first, my first go-to person's gonna be at my campus. And then that campus is gonna help connect me to, whether it's on the student services side or on the newcomer side. That's how then I'm going to engage. Right. Ex. Exactly. Yeah. Most of the time, our families really go to campuses first. They know that, you know, they, they find the school that's closest to them, right? They, they go to that campus, and the front office staff knows that they send 'em to the one stop shop. Right? They send 'em right out to the family services center. Uh, we then work on the enrollment process. If they have needs, we direct them to the Network and we try to support them, uh, you know, in that fashion. But, you know, our campuses, you know, we dialogue with them regularly about that need and about that process, that flow. Uh, and then we, you know, we try to communicate information. You know, we put out publications in the community that make sure individuals know that where we're located, right? Because, you know, we've changed addresses as well, right? So we're super glad to be, you know, out on international. But, uh, you know, we've done our fair share of communication too, so that information is out in the public as well. And really, you have, uh, what I love is that you're very accessible. So, uh, the flexibility of times you really work with our families so that you are there, whether it's, they might need a little bit of an early morning appointment, or maybe they need an early evening appointment. You all, uh, you know, really flex to be able to be available to the families when they can get there. Yeah. I think that's super important. I think it's one of the things that's funny when I, and I'm early riser, but when I walk in and I see Vanessa in there, and she's been in there for hours, you know, or one of her team members, and then, you know, when, when folks are packing it up and, and the lights are still on in our office, you know, it's just one of those things, we're gonna be there until, uh, until our families don't need us. When families aren't able to come to us, we go to them. And so we, last year we went to where a lot of our refugees, uh, students were staying. And we went to them, we did the process there, we gone to the campuses to do the testing. Families are able to build that trust with us. And so many times they just come back, they have a question regarding their, oh, um, transportation or lunch. And every single day I get phone call. It's like, oh, I have an issue with my child's schedule. How can I make adjustments? And so they come back. All three of you really are connectors. Yeah. Um, you, you are a connector to one another between the Network, the city, the school district, the fact that we are committed, the Network is committed to going to them where the need is, whether it's to the mobile food truck where they pull up to a campus. And again, that robust grocery store kind of concept, you know,

it, it's provided right there on a mobile food truck. And, and parents and families can go and select their groceries and have them and take them home that day. Um, or the fact that we go to the apartment complex and we work through the enrollment process or education on, Hey, this is how you check your child's grades. Yeah. Just all of those things. You, you all are willing and don't expect that everyone has to come to you, but we go to them, right? Mm-hmm. that's just an incredible philosophy. Yes. I really could probably talk about all of the services and supports of both the internal district family as well as our Network family for a, a really long time. Because I think we've really only hit the ice, like just the tip of the iceberg, right? With all of the ways that we support, because we also, you didn't even have a chance to touch on all the ways that your team goes into campuses and supports teachers and supports principal. That's a whole other pot. That's a whole other, that's a whole other pot. That's a whole nother episode that we will do. Um, but again, I, you know, I started this segment with just a reminder to all of us of what it means to be grateful. Um, and that, you know, we should never, uh, we, we recently lost a staff member and a student, a part of our RISD family. And as I attended both of those services recently, both of those families really impacted me with the message of we can't take every, any day for granted. And we can't take a moment to say thank you to those that we love and that we appreciate. Um, and so I wanna take this moment on behalf of, you know, as the person who leads this district and our leadership team, to thank each of you for loving our kids and our community so much. We have 37,000 kids, and we have, you know, hundreds and thousands of community members who maybe at that time they can't say thank you. So on behalf of them, I say thank you, um, on behalf of our school system, we are better because of each of you. We are stronger and we can support every child every day because of each of you. So, Dr. Hr, are there any closing words from you? The impression, the, the lasting impact on the lives of these families? Everybody in these families, you may not see the result of it, but just know that you are making a difference in the trajectory for their entire life. And not just for their, their immediate lives, but for the rest of their families, for, I mean, for generations to come, truly. And it's because they had that moment to connect with someone. They had that moment to feel cared about and to see that it was gonna be okay. And you may be the first face at the newcomer center or at the Network that has communicated to them, we got you. You're gonna be okay. Not only are you go, are you gonna be okay? Let's go. Let me show you how you're gonna be, okay. Let me help you see that it's gonna be okay. Not just now, but in the future. That's a game changer. That is the, that is a generational impact. And so, but you don't always hear it. You don't always get to see it right away. So just thank you on behalf of, again, as, as Ms. Branum said, of all the families. Um, and thank you for doing such a great job, because it is making a difference. It is going to change lives, and that's what we're here for. So just, and we know that's what you're here for too. So thank you so much. Well, thank y'all for joining us today. Appreciate you and know that you have, you know, all the support that you need in Richardson ISD.

Our next segment of The Richardson ISD Podcast is actually gonna be co-hosted with me today by a special guest. And that is one Dr. Matthew Gibbins. Um, Dr. Matthew Gibbins is a part of our cabinet team. He is our assistant superintendent for administrative services. And one of the reasons why I have asked him to help co-host today, number one, Dr. HR is out of town. But most importantly, Dr. Gibbins helps lead our special education services, our our special student services program. And this work is near and dear to his heart. So, Dr. Gibbins, uh, introduce yourself to the RISD Podcast family and tell everyone a little bit about yourself. All right. Hello everyone. Yes, I am Dr. Matthew Gibbins. I make Tabitha call me that anywhere we go. Yes, he does. Um, he's not making that up. Not, not really. So yes, I've been in the district, I think this is my 23rd year. I was a special education teacher, was a behavior specialist, a principal, assistant principal, and then have, has have been in the central office for a while now. Uh, worked in the special education department, loved it. And then, um, had some roles as, um, overseeing some elementary schools. And, uh, yeah, this is, uh, I think I'm just finishing up my full first full year as the Assistant Superintendent for Administrative Services. So loving every minute of it, a highs and lows included. And just really glad to be here. Thanks for, um, letting me be Dr. Goodson's backup. Well, we are glad to have you. And I cannot tell you how excited I am to talk to these amazing leaders today. I had, um, you know, how you have had experiences in your career where you, you hear about something and you think you understand something, and then you go and you experience it, and it's kind of like a life changing moment. Mm-hmm. Yes, ma'am. Well, the topic that we're gonna talk about today was one of those moments in my leadership journey. Um, things that I understood about what does it mean to include, belong, provide belonging, understanding differences and strengths of, of individuals. I thought I understood that and I thought what that meant, especially as a former principal. But it wasn't until, um, six years ago when I was invited by our guests today to come experience, um, a program called Understanding Differences, in which, um, and, and I'm not, I don't wanna give up too much information mm-hmm. cause I want her to, to describe it. But I had this immersion experience where after, you know, two hours of my time, I left with a different perspective and a different moral imperative about what work and what opportunities we need to provide to our general education students. Yes. And helping them understand how to better support and love and include maybe our, our students that have some, some special differences. And so I've been waiting for the opportunity to have them on our podcast. And I would like to, um, introduce to you Hollis Owens. And Hollis is our to be like me founder. And you heard I just mentioned understanding differences, and she'll kind of talk a little bit about the journey of understanding differences to, to be like me mm-hmm. Um, but she is the founder and CEO of this amazing organization. Um, Hollis, welcome to The RISD Podcast. Thank you. I'm so happy to be here. I'm glad to have you with

us. I cannot wait to hear from her. We also have with us today, and I thought it was really important for the audience to hear, um, and you may not know this, but it is special education, um, week as well. And so we're celebrating our special education, um, educators. And, um, this topic is near and dear to her heart. So our executive director, I've invited Katie Barrett. Hi there. Glad to be here today. Katie Barrett. Also a longtime RISD educator as well. So we're glad to have her. She is. And then, um, one of the other really important voices on today's segment is from a principal, cuz I think hearing and experiencing this as a leader of a campus and the reflection she heard from our campuses. So I was so honored that she said yes. Um, I'd like to introduce Becky Stevens, who leads White Rock Elementary. Welcome, Becky. Thank you so much, and thanks for having me. Ho we're gonna kick it off with you. First, tell us a little bit about what to be Like. Me is, who is it for? Just give us a little bit of background information To Be, like Me is a disability awareness program, and we are educating school-aged children about disabilities. And our goal is to create more inclusive communities through personal connection with our leaders who live with disabilities every day. Why was this so important to you? What, uh, what was a part of your story that created this passion that you have and this commitment you have about providing this for kids? Well, I actually wore a medical hat for 18 years. I'm a physical therapist. And so it was really working with my patients and their families through physical therapy in various areas where I heard many, many stories about the barriers that exist in the community for people with disabilities. So these are barriers on airplanes, in restaurants, out, just various places out in the community. And they weren't just physical barriers mm-hmm. like no ramps or, you know, couldn't get through a doorway. They were human barriers. Yeah. So barriers of communication and inclusion. Uh, you know, when I experienced understanding differences, um, and I'd love for you to minute maybe to talk a little bit about that journey, um, but when I had the chance to be immersed in understanding differences, um, again, I thought I, I academically knew what it meant. Um, in looking at a student's individualized education plan to have autism or maybe a student who was diagnosed with dyslexia, I thought I knew kind of what that meant. But it wasn't until I was immersed in the simulation, which, in which I had a different perspective. So talk a little bit about the design approach. What is it, what would a student experience when they come to be like me? And why was that experience so important to you? Okay. Are you ready? Yes, I'm ready. Okay. So, understanding differences is, was an amazing program. Uh, we would go to different elementary schools in R I S D and set up stations mm-hmm. either in the library or in the, the gym. And students would rotate through seven different experiences. Mm-hmm. So we talked about, um, mobility differences, deaf and hard of hearing, communication challenges, autism and sensory processing, blind visual impairments, um, learning differences. And it was really through those experiences that kids, as you said, really understood, at least for a little bit what it was like to live with a disability. So I was a part of, uh, understanding differences for about four years. And it was really hearing from the students mm-hmm. hearing them ask questions Yeah. To PTA members or volunteers who were leading each of those. Right. Uh, rotations, kids were asking questions like, we'll, do people who are blind dream in color or in pictures? And our volunteer would say, well, I don't know, you'd have to ask someone who's blind. Right. I can't answer that question. Aren't kids amazing? Mm-hmm. like, that's our kids are. So we sometimes underestimate that these are, you know, 10, 11, 12 year olds and that that's the, like, that's the level of wonder that they have. Like, what, what does this

mean? Does someone dream in color? Like, I love that question. And, you know, Hollis, I I was gonna, uh, tell you, I was able to be a part of one of those understanding differences sessions, uh, a long time, not a long time ago, but back, um, a few years ago. And we did that for the Bergner High school football team. And we had the varsity athletes go through that. And it was a, and I was able to be a volunteer, you know, to help set up some of those. And seeing the football players' reaction, you know, these big tough football players and just the questions they had and some of the emotion that came out of that as well, because some of them had siblings who had had special needs or just, you know, were, had challenges. It was a really moving experience. And I remember that very vividly of just like, we've got, we need some urgency around this. Yeah. Like, we need to continue this moving forward because it's such important work. So kids would have those questions and you would be like, the, the volunteers would say, we need, you know, you need to ask for someone. And so that kind of spurred you to, to do what? Correct. I, I realized, you know, this, this is a journey. Um, I realized that each of our rotations or experiences need to be led by someone living with that disability mm-hmm. nothing about us without us. Right. Uh, they really needed to be the ones answering those questions and telling their stories. And we know that empathy really comes from hearing stories and to truly understand. And we, we didn't want students to feel sympathy. We didn't want them to feel sorry for individuals with disabilities. We wanted them to feel empathy, so feel with them mm-hmm. rather than feel sorry. And so I knew the model needed to change. I knew that we needed to, you know, have leaders there. That's what we call them and to be like me. And so, uh, the model did change. Um, at least for me personally, I started a nonprofit to be like me. We got our 501C3 in December of 2018. So next week we celebrate our fourth birthday. That's incredible. Congratulations. Thank You. And with, to be like me, our, all of our experiences are led by people living with disabilities. And it has been a remarkable, unbelievable shift. Uh, these kids do not feel sorry. Uh, for our leaders who live with disabilities, they truly find, uh, common ground with our leaders, which is what we want, and really build friendships. They learn about how to support their fellow students who have disabilities because, you know, one in five students lives with a disability. Yeah. It may not be visible. Right. But it's very prevalent in classrooms. And so when students come to a to be like Me field trip, we start with an introduction mm-hmm. And then we divide the kids into five groups and they rotate through five different experiences. And each experience is led by one or two leaders living with a disability. So the five experiences include an airplane experience called fly kind airlines. And in that experience, they're immediately taken into an overstimulating situation. Bells are ringing, babies are crying, uh, there's air blowing on them. Uh, a flight attendant is giving gate change information and it appli information. And they're also holding a handheld maze that they need to complete before takeoff. I'm getting stressed. You just Talking. I am too. I'm like about This. I need a minute. Yeah. My heartbeat is elevating. Yeah. And you know, some of these kids have never experienced quite this much stimulation. And whenever a lot of input comes in, a lot of input, mainly hearing and and touch. And then once everything turns off, our leader with autism stands up in front of the airplane and says, this is how I felt every day at school. Mm-hmm. And the kids are just, whoa. That's, you know, profound. And sometimes we have students raise their hand and say, I have autism and this is how I feel every day and this is why I need quiet in order to learn. Or, you know, so, so that's just one of our experiences. We have a day in the life experience where we talk about

mobility differences. We have assistive technology, uh, where our leaders who are blind and visually impaired or deaf and hard of hearing or even have limb differences. Right. Talk to the kids about the assistive technology they use where they really don't skip a beat. Mm-hmm. And then our fourth experience is a classroom experience where students learn about, um, dyslexia mm-hmm. and, and communication challenges like stuttering. Yes. So some, some disabilities that are in the classroom, but many times they're invisible Or they have a preconceived notion around what, what, what that is like dyslexia, you know? Right. Dyslexia just doesn't have one certain, uh, challenge for students can have many, many different ones. And so kind of breaking that stigma, that barrier. Correct. That's Great. And then our fifth experience is a cafe experience where students sit with at least four of our leaders at different tables and talk about their favorite books, their favorite movies, and find commonalities with our leaders. And so it's about finding common ground and that is such an important life skill. Oh my goodness. Yeah. With anyone you meet, uh, with a difference. You know, we're all different and so being able to make friendships by finding common ground is so important. And so, so once they rotate through those five different experiences, we come back together and we talk about what they've learned. Uh, we give them a bookmark to take home on one side it's the alphabet and sign language and on the other side it's a braille alphabet. And we encourage them to take, take those bookmarks home and talk to their families about what they've learned. Yes. Because we know that empathy, a lot of it happens at home too. So the more we can spark those conversations at home, the better. Mm-hmm. that I just like I, every time I hear it, I just, I have goosebumps. And I want to, to really insert Becky right here. Um, I, I know as a principal you attended, um, with your students. Tell us what students you took, what grade level. Um, tell us a little bit about your experience and then maybe share some of what you heard your students reflecting why they were getting on the bus to go home or maybe even some of the conversations that they're still having. We've taken fourth graders to the, to be like me field trip, um, in facilities for the past two years. Um, and I got to go on the trip last year with our fourth graders and experience all of the stations and just their awesome facilities over there. Um, our kids got so much out of it, um, to the point where we have families and even staff members going to events there on the weekends, um, that they have often and they've gotten involved, um, just because of the impact that it's made on our kids. Um, they provide such a good safe place and safe space for kids to ask questions. Mm. And kids ask great questions and sometimes you can worry about what they're gonna actually ask. Cause you don't wanna like accidentally insult anybody or be offensive. Um, but it's such a safe space to ask. And, um, And isn't that when learning happens though, and sometimes you that like the intent may not be to hurt or to harm, like I legitimately just am wondering about something Exactly. To be able to ask that and push through maybe what might be an uncomfortable conversation. Exactly. And they just open the doors for that. All of the leaders do. Um, and they're more than happy to talk about any, any piece of their disability that, um, the kids ask about. And also it's, it was really interesting, um, in the classroom setting. We heard from a man who has a pretty severe stutter. Mm-hmm. his speech fluency is, has just been a thing his whole life. And he, um, did a great job speaking to the kids. Um, and their sweet good hearts kept a couple of the little girls in particular in this group that we were in, kept trying to finish his sentences for him because they were, they were trying to be nice and like helpful and um, it was such a good lesson cuz he so gently was like, okay, and if there is somebody who stutters like

this, they don't always want you to, to jump in and start finishing their sentences. And they were like, oh, you know, it was, it was such a good, They Had an a thing for them to learn. Yes. Yes. What if your boss finishes your sentences? I would never do do that. Don't listen To him intervene. You just let that go. Okay. So you always let that go. I'll let that go. Mm-hmm. always let that go. Um, and then the another really impactful station for um, our campus was the flight. The man who had autism, who presented, I think made just such a great impact on our kids because autism is really prevalent in our schools and every kid knows somebody with autism. Mm-hmm. he did a great job kind of upfront saying, this is kind of how I needed the audience to be right now and here's why. Because I might get distracted if you're like wiggling around in your seat or making noise or something. And then they all, you know, better than even for a teacher or sat so still and we're so respectful. But I think, um, the conversations that we had after the trip about that in particular were so awesome because they have classmates with autism and they're like, I finally get why things need to be this certain way for him. Right. Or for her, When I do something, it might trigger something that I never knew it had that kind of impact. Exactly. And how it really is probably difficult to be, um, in a class of 22 kids with all the noise and just the stuff going on. Um, and here's how I can do my part to help my friend. I love that. Get through, you know, our math block or whatever it is. And so, um, those conversations were just so, so beautiful. Um, and I have countless examples from the leaders that we got to meet and um, hear from they all, it is just the best field trip I have. Um, our teachers came back, said this, we have six fourth grade teachers that went on the field trip last year and this year came back and said, that is the best field trip we could ever go on. Yeah. Like it is just so impactful and it's that true learning that they're doing. Yes. Cuz they're getting to experience it. And one thing too is that when there is a student with, um, you know, more of a severe disability in the classroom, we do try to, you know, teach the kids about it and, you know, not necessarily like in such a personal way, but just to kind of give them some information up front so they know how to handle certain things. But I think this was so cool for them, um, to see it in such a different way and to see it in adults. So, um, one little boy who has autism after he was finished with the airplane, um, part and he actually didn't sit through the, all the sensory stuff either. He came in when that part was over to hear the talk to and he was so encouraged and he really, he's a kid that really gets it. Like he owns it I have autism. And um, he was so encouraged to hear from the man who was speaking on that because he was like, I could do this one day and I could go help kids understand it. And ooh, that makes me wanna cry. It was just really awesome to, to see the personal connections that were being made. What I love about it and what, when I had an opportunity to, to experience it was there are times when, um, I think whether it's in the community or whether it's inside our classrooms, um, we tend to not have those conversations. Um, it tends to be a topic that we just, we don't know. We may not always have the right words. We don't know how to describe it. Um, and we don't really, uh, we, we don't really know how to just like, let's really talk about like, what does this mean? What does it sound like? What does it feel like? Yes. Um, how do we as friends support others who, who are different? And, and being different doesn't mean that it's a negative thing or it's a deficit, but that it, there's a difference and let's, let's celebrate that and what can I do, you know, how can, what is my part in, in in that inclusion? And um, and I think that's what I love about this experience is that we're not afraid to have that conversation. And our kids, like you said, they have a safe space and they have permission to maybe say something that

they're wondering about. Yes, exactly. And they're, you know, they don't have to worry and to be like me about being offensive or anything. Cuz the leaders are just so good about explaining everything. Someone with a visual impairment, she read in braille, I think from little women, I can't remember which book, but I think it was little Women and she, she read, um, to the kids and they thought that was like the coolest thing they'd ever Right. Seen in their lives. And they were like, I wanna learn how to read braille. Like, that is so cool. You know, it is like a skill that they wanted to do. And so they look at this as such a cool positive thing. Have you Been able to thank, um, and it's okay if the answer's no, I'm just processing here live on the air and RISD podcast Um, but I'm no pressure. No Pressure, no Pressure. Um, have you thought anymore about like, so they have this experience in fourth grade and what are some maybe things that you're making sure the fifth grade or when they move to sixth grade, like how do you keep that conversation, um, and that kind of, that that aha that they've had that that move that, you know, that, that opportunity to feel something. How do you keep that going even when maybe it's a year that they don't have a field trip? Yeah, that's a really good question. Um, it almost makes me wish that all of our teachers could go on the field trip, even if all the kids can't. Um, we Might be able to make that happen. So fifth grade teachers would know what questions to ask to the fourth graders who were on it. Um, but we do, our counselors went on the field trip as well and so they do, um, have a lot of personal interactions with the students. If something does come up, like with a classmate or something like that, our counselors loved the experience, had to be like me. And so they will bring backup things. Um, they'll bring things back up from that field trip. They also have so many resources online, um, and those are really helpful. They have like pre resources to use before you go on your field trip and kind of talking about it. But then there's a ton that you can use afterward. And so if there's a particular need on your campus or in your classroom that you really would like some, um, even curriculum for, I mean they have everything there on their website. Hollis, can you tell us a little bit about that resource? And, um, even maybe I'm a, a parent and my fourth grade child has gone and I wanna learn more about how to continue those conversations at home. Can you talk a little bit about that, that website? Yes. So our website is to be like me.org and we do have online lessons at no cost. We are actually about to launch our updated website because as you know, in this space, things are constantly changing Yes. In terms of terminology and, um, some of the advances. And so first tweak in January, possibly we're gonna launch our new website, but all of our leaders are continuing to give the information through video. Oh, wonderful. So frequently ask questions, tell me about chromosomes mm-hmm. um, what does that mean if you have Down Syndrome, what does it mean if you have Williams Syndrome? You know, so what does a chromosome deletion, what is having an additional chromosome mean? So we answer all those questions on the, on the website so that you can continue the learning. The other thing I would like to say is, uh, there are some great kind books about kindness and inclusion mm-hmm. And so we also offer books, suggestions and recommendations. I love that. And our leaders are the ones who say, you should read this book called Just Ask, um, if, you know, if you're interested in learning more about what it's like to have a mobility different. Yes. And our leader explains why they like the book and what they will get from reading that book. So not only do we have curriculum, we also have book recommendations. So, And I would really, um, encourage our families and parents to check the website out too in the resources. Cuz the lessons don't have to be, um,

necessarily just in the classroom. Right. But we have a couple people in my family with autism, and so we've used some of the resources with my own sons at home and they're awesome. I mean, they, they extend the learning so much. There's like steam activities on the learning's, like all kinds of different things on there. So it's great for families too. I love that. And thank you for your commitment. I know. Um, and, and our community may not know, like sometimes having a field trip, it can be a lot Um, ensuring the safety of our kids and the transportation and, you know, all of the, we, we do not take that lightly. And so thank you for your support in making this happen. And how many sections do you Have of six? So we, we actually take two field trips. they Have to do it two different days Over there. Um, and typically I don't go on like every field trip, but I loved the Understanding Differences program every time I got to experience it. And so I was really looking forward to seeing how it had shifted and evolved and it is phenomenal. Can you tell us how long it's been around and kind of how did even understanding differences get started in Richardson Issd? Well, it was really Alicia Post who started, uh, the Understanding Differences program. I believe she was cleaning out a closet and found some equipment, some simulation equipment in a closet. And she asked someone, what is this for? And they said, oh, well we've kind of stored that away, but it's some equipment to simulate disabilities. And she brought it back. She pulled it out. She was kind of the mastermind. Um, is, Was Alicia a staff member or a community member or what was She is a parent. Okay. Uh, she, her, uh, her son has autism and she's very passionate about educating others about disabilities. And so she was really the one who started understanding differences. Her enthusiasm for this type of education really fueled my passion. So Alicia really is the one who started that program and I'm, I'm forever grateful for her and her vision. What I love about that is, Alicia, you and I know even members of our, our, um, council PTAs was involved in, in, you know, helping schedule and help, helping move the equipment, helping set up the equipment, helping facilitate the rotations as you described. And so, again, there are so many things that would not happen, um, in this district without amazing community leaders like our parents. And so, Alicia, if you are listening, thank you. And thank, um, our other PTA members who planted the seed for what now is to be like me. That's incredible. Mm-hmm. So thank you for that nod to, to Alicia and that team. I wanna shift our conversation a little bit because we've up to now been talking a lot about our, our gen ed students and how do we support our gen general education students who maybe don't have a learning difference to understand those that do. And, but, um, I'd like to shift the conversation a little bit to Katie. Um, and Katie, you help lead our special student services. Tell the audience a little bit about what, um, you know, when you lead that department, like what are the things that you all help support? Oh my gosh. Um, so many things. Our special Student services department, um, supports the full continuum of special education needs. Um, we also support our students who have services through 5 0 4 section 5 0 4 plans. And so we support, uh, uh, not to minimize that or generalize it. The whole, um, foundation behind it is individualized decisions, right. And, and, and plans for students. But, um, I, I could say we have a, we support students all the way from the allergic to bumblebees. And there's a, a health plan in place to support that under section 5 0 4 all the way to a student who might need support in a residential facility or a nonpublic day school because their needs are, are quite significant. And, and that's where their needs are best served. So, um, and then everything that falls anywhere within that continuum, How many students? Around 5,400 students who are served through special

education and, um, upwards of about 4,500 students who are receiving supports under section 5 0 4. And then in terms of a staff, what kind of, what size staff? Oh my gosh. It Take to Leave, um, And support So many. And I pulled those numbers. Dr. Gibbins and I were looking at the, and kind of celebrating some of the recent district-wide, um, professional development trainings that we pushed out. And that number came, um, jump in if you're remembering better than I am, but it was 987 I believe staff. Wow. Teachers, therapists, um, evaluators that we touched on that district-wide training day. So in some capacity, that's about the number of staff members we support on the day, Day to day. That's amazing. And Katie, some people might not realize too, um, what's the age range of students that special education Services, I'm glad you brought that up. We support students from the age of three all the way up to 21. So we have kiddos we're supporting before they're in traditional school age, kindergarten. Right. And then we have students who we support in transitional programming after graduation or after that, um, senior year. We provide supports in that Transition Program. Why is a program like this something that is important and better understanding and, and supporting our students who do have a disability or who have a learning difference? Oh My gosh, how much time do I have? How can we sit here all day? Yes. Um, I, I think you guys at the table know, I'm not sure if everyone in our ISD knows, but prior to being in this position, I was a campus administrator, so I I can kind of, as Becky's talking, I'm going, oh, yeah, I remember that too. Um, so I, there is so much benefit. Um, one of the things that jumped out listening to Becky even just describe her fourth graders experiences, um, just reinforcing that concept that fair doesn't mean the same for every student. Um, it's like that old kind of story you hear some teachers do where they call every kid up and put a bandaid on their elbow, but your injuries an elbow, yours is your knee, yours is your head. Did it help everyone that we put a bandaid on your elbow? Right? No. Because everybody needs something different. And so when our students, particularly our gen ed students are sitting in these to be like me sessions, and they're realizing, oh, this is how this gentleman felt in school. Well, I have a friend who has autism if he feels like that he needs different things than I do. So I'm gonna stop wondering why he gets so many more breaks than I get, or why he gets to have what a gen ed student might perceive as a toy in his desk when it's really a fidget item that helps manage Right. His, um, experience in the classroom. And so I think that, um, building that sense of empathy or that broader understanding that everyone approaches their learning differently and has different needs just helps embed the right learning in every classroom for kids. If students can have some empathy and understanding about a classmate or about a peer. I mean, I, I think you kind of alluded to this earlier, Dr. Gibbins, but if you've met one kid with autism, you've met one kid with autism, no two or alike. Right. But if you have some general understanding as a peer, if I have the general understanding that a student with autism has the high likelihood that lots of sound and lots of activity in the classroom's going to be overstimulating, then as a, as a classmate, I can do my part to Right. Minimize that. Or I can be sympathetic and or empathetic and understand when that other student needs more or something different. Right. And I think that's huge for supporting inclusive practices in our classrooms. Just having our general education students understanding and, and, and empathetic to the needs of all. And, and if I can add, I just wanna say that I think also the students learn that they also, everyone has sensitivities. You know, some of the kids going through our program understand, you know, I'm actually, I have a hard time learning when there's a lot of noise mm-hmm. right. Or, you know, that's just an

example. And we ask all the kids, does anybody know what flight number we're on? Does anyone know where we're going? Mm-hmm. and the students, you know, no, I have No idea. I didn't pay Attention. And then we say, well, can you, does your classroom ever get noisy? Yes. Okay. So do you think if your sweet teacher is trying to teach you something and the classroom is very noisy, are you gonna learn that information based on what you've just experienced? No. Mm-hmm. And so they also learn some important lessons in terms of, you know, what their brains need in order to learn what their, or what their bodies need. And something that keep kept coming to my mind when you were talking Katie, is, uh, the term like empowering atmosphere. Mm-hmm. in the classroom where students with disabilities or with differences or with sensitivities are empowered to, to speak up, um, to, to say and share how they're doing and, and what's going on. And also be able to not be ashamed or, you know, be afraid to talk about that these are the things that I need. And a teacher now having the, you know, the education and having experienced some of that understands why that's being said and is able to accommodate. You know, that's When as and as a friend, um, I have now been given the language to know how to have that conversation with you. Um, oh, are is is it too loud in here? Like I, I, I now have been equipped with knowing how do I, um, it's okay to say That to you, the invitation to ask the questions. You referenced the book. Just ask, I think you said or ask me about it. Um, I, we participated our, some members of our leadership team were on a panel last spring, I believe it was for Universal design and the concept around that and just, I mean, we were equipping adults with understanding, two of the panel members were individuals with disabilities. One was a gentleman who's blind and one was a, a young lady kind of shortly out of college who, who uses a wheelchair and, um, accesses buildings through all the, you know, handicap accessible ramps and things like that. And she said, don't be afraid to ask. You know what, I would absolutely love you to open that door for me because I can do it, but it's a whole lot faster if you ask or ask me why my legs are giving me difficulty. But I'm still able to use my arms to push that button and access the door. Just equipping our students with the comfort level of it's okay to ask. There's a way to do it. Right. There's a way to be respectful about it. Absolutely. But just ask your friend what they need or, or, or why they need that. That indirectly contributes to the, the sense of belonging for our students with disabilities. They don't feel any different than any other student. They recognize that everybody has their unique abilities and needs. And mine just for example, might happen to be that I use a wheelchair, but now that my friends are asking about it, I don't feel so isolated or different. Don't than everyone else. We want to be seen. We just want To Belong. All want to. Yes. I love that. Um, Hollis, I know a lot of our, our ID schools are, um, participating in to be like me, but what are some of the other, um, maybe school districts or organizations that are participating? Well, we've had schools drive two hours, uh, away to come experience the program. Um, a lot of leadership programs around the state are wanting to participate, and so we, we try to accommodate those students. But Just to be clear, we always get first. Yes. Yeah. I notice on the camera our ISD gets Full ate that and, uh, we, so we have two locations now. Oh. Thanks to RISD. Uh, we have, uh, we are at the Tolleson Family Activity Center in Dallas. And there we, you know, we're right in the middle of Highland Park there. So we do see a lot of, um, schools in the Park Cities area at the Tolleson and in some schools in RISD, if that's a closer location. But on Fridays we're at Network of Community Ministries. And so it's, it's a lot closer for the R I S D schools to attend. So I would say that, you know, between

RISD and the Highland Park area, we also do a lot with, um, CTE programs. Mm-hmm. uh, so pre-health care groups. Yeah, that makes sense. High school students who are interested in going into healthcare. Uh, we worked with RISD last year and this year, uh, with our CTE program. And then DISD is also participating those, those pre-health care students. So, you know, it, it's our, our really, we've seen our target groups include fourth and fifth grade, and then those pre-health care high school students. So I would say those are the, That's Amazing. Mm-hmm. Well, um, if, if someone in the audience hears this and either maybe they are a person that might have a similar personal experience, either in their family or personally they have one of these, uh, differences, or, um, I may have a gen ed student and, and I recognize the impact it has had, how can I help support this? Is is, can I volunteer? Um, can I donate? Like how can I support to be like me? Yes. We always need volunteers. We, cuz our, our volunteers help shepherd each group to each of the experiences. We are fortunate to have high school students who need volunteer hours to come help us sometimes, but we always need volunteers. Um, Jesuit is, uh, we're, we work with Jesuit and they, uh, we are one of their main projects and so we feel very lucky to have those boys. Um, but really, uh, on our website to be like me.org, uh, there is a space to contact us and get in touch with us and, uh, let us know how you'd like to be involved. Uh, we also have a big orange donate button on our website so you can donate. Um, but I would say that if you are living with a disability and you would like to serve as a leader mm-hmm. we would love, we always welcome new leaders. We have about 45 leaders on staff right now. Half of them choose to be paid employees and half want to be volunteers. And so I'm really proud of the fact that not only are we educating these students about disabilities, uh, we are empowering and employing our leaders who live with disabilities and they are finding purpose Yes. In their work. And so we are a family and I think if, if we had our own space, uh, to a home our own space where we could do lots of programming during the week, that would just be fantastic. So I would say if you have any hints for us in terms of a a to be like me space, we would love to hear that. Um, you can reach us at hello at to be like me.org and we will answer promptly. So thank you for that. And, um, you know, this is one of my, kind of my commitments and the principals know how passionate I am about this experience. And, um, you know, why we sometimes have to make difficult budget decisions around where we're going to spend our dollars. This is one where I have, um, such a belief that every dollar is worth it and the experiences and the outcomes for our students as a result of this, um, we get paid back tenfold, um mm-hmm. And so it's, it's, it's just an incredible experience. You wanted to add something? Well, You talked about impact. I would like to, to talk a little bit about Impact program. Yes. Go please. Um, we do collect pre and post data from our students and teachers. And that has been so amazing to see, you know, our kids gain so much knowledge about each of the areas of disability. Um, but it's really also the subjective thank you notes. The, I mean, I, I just brought one file of thank you notes with me today. Um, one particular note, I'll just please Read it. Yeah, Read it. Mm-hmm. here's one. Uh, I learned so much about people with disabilities. I really enjoyed my time with you and I learned so much. I connected really well with everyone, and this is something I will remember for the rest of my life. I can't thank you enough for the special time I had with you signed by the student. And then in looking at the teacher data, um, it's, it's amazing. We 30 days af after kids experience the program, we ask the teachers about the climate of the classroom, you know, know what has changed. And 75%, I have it right here, 75% of all the teachers who attend with their

students say that the behavior of their classroom is greatly improved and their ability to work in teams. That's awesome. Mm-hmm. And, and I just love that. So empathy and reading lots of articles about empathy, it is the most important quality of any leader to have. And so we truly are changing the future because these kids are learning empathy and they are going to be our future lawmakers. Business owners. Yes. Architects, Educators. Educators. Mm-hmm. mm-hmm. And so we, we truly are making Change, like you said, even just tapping into those, um, prehealth care students, right. They're going to be in an environment where inclusivity and understanding and supporting people with all types of differences will be critical. And so we're, we're planting those seeds that will impact all of those industries, not just the current classroom, but just building that skill or that, um, character trait really of empathy is going to benefit beyond the classroom. When I, when I think about, um, the graduate profile, yes. A lot of, a lot of community members will ask me about, well, how do you, how do you ensure that a student will graduate, um, with, with these skill sets that you want out? You know, yes, content knowledge and all of those are foundational, but these other skill sets like empathy, um, you know, being able to collaborate and work with others. How do you, how do you teach that? Well, sometimes it's not that you just teach it, it's you provide experiences and you immerse them and you provide time for them to reflect and, and, and talk with one another. Um, that's how, how they learn and grow. And because of, to be like me, it's, it's one more opportunity that we have to help our students grow in their graduate profile. Um, I, this, I truly could talk about this for like Ms. Barrett, like you said, for a long time. Um, because it is, it is truly, again, and, and when I look back at my career, um, and one day when, when I'm ready to retire, you know, this will be one of those experiences that I point to and say it changed me as a leader and it changed how I prioritize. Um, what I want for every student in Richardson ISD And so to Hollis, thank you for being that individual who didn't just, um, talk about something, but you actually put something into action. Yes. To change the trajectory. You wanna say something? I can tell. Well, I wanna thank you because you believed in us. You said, yes, I wanna do this for all these, for all for our fourth grade students. And to me that just says so much about your leadership. And so I'd wanna thank you for believing in it. And, um, I love our district. I have four daughters all in R I S D, and I'm just so glad that we have a leader like you. And so I want thank you for that. Thank you. Absolutely. I all of that. Right back to you, Becky. Thank you as a principal for supporting this. And to Dr. Gibbins and, uh, Ms. Barrett again, you know, you, you support our students, um, who, who need that voice and need that advocacy and you love our kids fiercely. And so thank you for your work as well. Um, this has been an incredible segment and incredible episode, um, of The RISD Podcast. And until next time, don't forget, I'm always here to serve and support.