

Eric Neal:

Welcome to the State Support Team 11 Podcast. I'm your host, Eric Neal. Today, we are joined by Scott Varner. Scott is the Executive Director of Family Engagement at Columbus City Schools. Welcome, Scott. How are you?

Scott Varner:

Boy, for a school year that started off with so much uncertainty, I would say we are managing well here in Columbus City Schools. Thank you.

Eric Neal:

It's great to hear. We're happy to have you with this today. Tell us a little bit about yourself and how you came to work in Columbus City Schools?

Scott Varner:

Yep. My background was really communications. Over the past 25 years, I've been fortunate to work at the city, county, state levels working with mayors council members, county commissioners, governors, even some of our members of Congress. Really sharing that story of how the public sector supports our communities.

Scott Varner:

Now, I'm in my eighth year here in Columbus City Schools, my eighth school year, and much of that time previously was really focused on communications, shaping and sharing that message about what's going on in our schools, what our district leadership is doing?

Scott Varner:

But in 2019, we welcomed in a new superintendent, Dr. Talisa Dixon, and really she saw a need to intentionally focus on the engagement of our families. Communication often is those messages going out, but engagement, boy, that's not just communications, but it's about that connection. It's that two-way conversation, how we move people and families into action.

Scott Varner:

Boy, in 2019 Columbus City Schools created its first ever Department of Engagement, and I moved from leading communications to really being part of a team leading our engagement efforts, how we engage our families, align our community partners and really grow those resources aimed at serving our families.

Eric Neal:

Yeah. You do hear a lot about family engagement. It's really encouraging that Dr. Dixon saw the importance of that and has allocated those resources. The Executive Director position in the Family Engagement is new. Was that really the thought process for her was just let's put the resources and people and time and effort into it because it is so important?

Scott Varner:

Exactly, and I think I feel honored to be that Executive Director of Family Engagement. As old as our district is, I'm not sure if anyone's had that title before, and I think that really goes to what you said about that intentional focus on family engagement.

Scott Varner:

I know in many other smaller districts, smaller than ours, family engagement is wrapped up into, boy, an administrator who wears many other hats or part of what teachers and principals do. I feel honored that we have that unique title and the ability to focus in on that.

Scott Varner:

But with that kind of uniqueness really does come that responsibility to redefine what family engagement meant here in Columbus. Our district is embarking on a new five year strategic plan, and one of the core priorities of that is authentic engagement. It's right up there with whole child focus and academics and equity.

Scott Varner:

We've been real intentional about calling it authentic engagement. Not to say that engagement in the past was anything less than, but really to make clear that we understand that how we engage our families really had to change. How we think about the ways that we engage them from the district is no longer the same. We need to meet families, as we like to say, where they're at.

Scott Varner:

Sometimes that's where they live, where they meet, where they worship. Sometimes it's at the times that work for them, so not just after school or before school. Multiple ways, multiple formats, most importantly, multiple languages, and it always needs to be repeated and repeated and repeated again, and always with a bit of grace. Because just because a parent can't attend maybe an afterschool conference or an open house doesn't mean they're not engaged, and it sure doesn't mean we're going to give up on engaging them.

Eric Neal:

No, that makes a lot of sense. Like you were saying, parent engagement in the past was this kind of thing. You had your open house and hey, we invited people, we engaged. Now it feels like parent engagement touches almost all of the work that's happening in the district. What are some of the connections to those other departments and the work that they do?

Scott Varner:

Oh, you're not kidding. I mean, I think from, boy, academics to athletics, from staying healthy to even just staying in school, we know that the more we can get parents engaged and involved in their child's education, boy, the more opportunities for success really open up for that student.

Scott Varner:

Really, as part of our intentional focus on this authentic engagement, we've really prescribed to the research-based work, that impactful work of the National Network of Partnership Schools, the recognized national work of Dr. Joyce Epstein out of John Hopkins University. We have great partners with the Ohio Statewide Family Engagement Center at Ohio State, and of course our state support team.

Scott Varner:

All of those engagement priorities, those identified best practices, actually are built into our board policy, and really a key focus of our work is to really help our schools, the principals, the teachers, the building leadership's teams to really identify and strategize family engagement and the opportunities that they use in their buildings.

Scott Varner:

Here's a great example I always point to. We often hear about Muffins With Mom or Donuts With Dad. A lot of schools do that, and that is a great starting point to engaging families, to getting them in. But part of our work is we pushed buildings to maybe think of it a little differently. So, instead of maybe Muffins With Moms, it's Muffins and Math With Moms or Donuts and Definitions with Dads.

Scott Varner:

We want to align those engagements with those academic priorities that are in a building. It's how we add that little extra so that we are engaging our families in a way that also aligns with our primary mission, and that's giving our young people all of those academic supports.

Eric Neal:

That's really encouraging because that is a difference from, like we were talking about in the past, what was really more communication which is like a one way thing. I'm giving you some information, which is important, people need information. But to that actual engagement of involving them in not just what's happening, but in the actual working with the students, and that's something.

Eric Neal:

I'm a parent of school-aged children, and even though my wife and I are both educators, my wife teaches at Fairmoor Elementary, so shout out to Fairmoor Elementary for Columbus City Schools there. But we, even being educators, there's still times where the older they get some of the subject matter is more difficult or different things.

Eric Neal:

Having that school connection where they're involving you deeply in the work that the students are doing, that's the kind of stuff that can really pay dividends and show the students how important it is because it's not just the teacher saying it. It's not just someone at home mentioning something. It's everyone involved in it together. That's really encouraging that you guys are doing stuff like that.

Scott Varner:

To really give families not just the resources they need, to your point, to be able to continue that learning at home. But also to really let families know that they are the best advocates for their young person. We truly believe that every parent wants to see the best for their child. They want to see that child given every opportunity at success, so how do we engage them? How do we enlist them to be those advocates, to give them the tools so that they can be a part of developing those educational programs?

Scott Varner:

Boy, far too often, we know that in so many families, there's so much going on. There are so many challenges to overcome that sometimes you just need somebody to say, "Here's a place to start." To welcome them into a building, to give them those resources and tools so that they can be a part of this effort.

Eric Neal:

Yeah, yeah. It's really, it's a partnership, it is. Yeah. I love that. One thing that you guys are doing that really stood out to me is the Parent Ambassador Program. What's the Parent Ambassador Program and how many Parent Ambassadors are there right now?

Scott Varner:

Yeah, it started long ago as our Parent Consultant Program, and I always like to think of that which really was kind of a parent volunteer program. Identifying a few individuals in some of our buildings who often were going above and beyond and working with a building, and then offering them a very modest, very modest, stipend to assist with the building and be that parent consultant.

Scott Varner:

But we changed the program to really think more of it as Family Ambassadors. Recognizing, first off, that for many of our young people, it's not just their parent who are part of their support system at home. It might be a grandparent, aunt, uncle, other family member who's there, and so we wanted to make sure we were including the whole family, but really thinking through how do we provide those supports? It really, the Family Ambassador Program is at the heart of this new Authentic Engagement strategy in our district.

Scott Varner:

Thanks to the investment of ESSER dollars, that's those Federal Elementary and Secondary Emergency Relief Funds. Some of those Federal Recovery Act dollars that came into our district. We are now set to have at least one Family Ambassador in every school. When you consider that we're a district with 113 school buildings, that's a pretty big investment.

Scott Varner:

Plus, we're adding additional ambassadors in buildings where there are unique populations, such as maybe an additional Spanish speaking ambassador in some of our West Side Schools where we have a larger Latino family population. In all, we plan to have as many as 130 Family Ambassadors, and we're doubling the work that they can do so that they are doing more and there are more of them.

Scott Varner:

I'm really excited about one of the initiatives that these Family Ambassadors are going to lead. It's something that we're calling Check & Connect. Far too often, the only time a parent gets a call from the school is if there's something wrong. It's the attendance or a discipline issue. What if we just called parents and asked, "How are you doing?"

Scott Varner:

I think one of the lessons, boy, that we really learned from the pandemic is that home stability can sometimes be very fragile, and that the needs of our families at home can quickly derail any kind of academic advancement that our kids are having at school.

Scott Varner:

Our Family Ambassadors are about to launch this Check & Connect initiative where every week, every Family Ambassador will make 20 calls to families just to check in on them, 20 calls every week to 20 families just to ask, "How are you doing?" To offer support if somebody needs it. If somebody says, "I'm worried about rent or how we're going to make sure we have food all week," our Family Ambassadors can connect them to those great community resources that we have. Whether it's to the food bank, to Lutheran Social Services, those other outlets that have information about the assistance just to really support what they do.

Scott Varner:

Think about it for a minute. I'm not a math expert, but if we meet our goal to have 130 Family Ambassadors, and if they're all making 20 calls a week, that's 2,600 calls every week to families just to check in on them. That's more than 10,000 a month. We think that's going to be pretty impressive as a way just to make sure that our families know that as a district, we're here to try to help them and connect them with the resources they need.

Eric Neal:

That's really impressive because it feels like this shift from the old. Like when we were kids, you had the class mom and she might come in and make some copies or just whatever the teacher really needed. To this intentional, probably with training and support, idea to help meet those whole child and whole family needs that you're talking about.

Scott Varner:

I think by checking in with them just on this regular basis, it'll give our district an opportunity to get a temperature check of what are the issues facing many of our families? Often, we get the question of, "Have you ever done a survey to ask what families need at home?" We don't necessarily need a survey anymore. We're going to be calling 10,000 families each month and we'll start to see what issues are truly rising to the top that our families are facing?

Scott Varner:

Then that's where we can look to our great community partners. We're so fortunate here in Columbus to have great community organizations who want to step up and help our families. They just need to know where the help is needed? Well, hopefully after 10,000 phone calls each month, we'll be able to look at them and say, "These are the top issues our families are facing. Can you help?"

Scott Varner:

Again, as we know that if that home stability is there, boy, that's another added way in which we give our young people every opportunity at success.

Eric Neal:

Oh, definitely. A survey will tell you a certain amount of things, but it's not the same as that human connection and that phone call where you may discover something that you weren't even trying to find out by having that. It is that richer, deeper, real, actual connection. That's really impressive.

Scott Varner:

I think it takes it from, as you said, communication, which is often that one way, sending information out to that two-way engagement, that interaction. Simply just asking somebody, "How are you doing?" Then listening to what they say, as opposed to just an email saying, "If you have a problem, call somebody." This is, I think, more engaging and I think it's going to produce some great results. We're so excited about this initiative.

Eric Neal:

That's great. CCS has an incredibly diverse student body. Can you talk a little bit about the ways that the district connects with those families, like the ETSS Liaisons, for example?

Scott Varner:

Yeah. Here in Columbus City Schools, it's roughly about one in six students come from a home where English is not the primary language spoken. Think about that, one in six families. On top of the ways in which we think about engagement, we also have to think about language. We have to think about different cultures and how they have a relationship with public education.

Scott Varner:

It was definitely something that we had to think through to overcome, and as we like to say, do it in an authentic way. Again, part of meeting families where they're at is making sure that you're speaking the languages that they understand, and visiting the neighborhoods where they are.

Scott Varner:

We've been very fortunate, again with the investment of some of those ESSER dollars, to invest in a great partnership with Ethiopian Tewahedo Social Services here in Columbus, everyone knows them as ETSS, to develop these bilingual engagement liaisons.

Scott Varner:

Now, let me first say, we have an amazing English As a Second Language team here in this district. Those are the folks that work directly with our students and teachers. They are the first place in which we engage our students and our teachers in those different languages. But these bilingual engagement liaisons, I kind of see them as supplementing that work, being able to actually go out, meet with our families, address some of those non-academic barriers that may keep young people from having all those opportunities at success.

Scott Varner:

We definitely saw this during the pandemic. We knew that during the pandemic, there were a significant number of students where English was not the primary language who were not engaging in the work that they did. They simply weren't engaging. So, we started this Bilingual Engagement Liaison Program. We started, actually, with six. We had someone that was named at Spanish, Somali, Maay Maay,

Kinyarwanda, Arabic and Nepali, and it was really their job to connect with the families of these disconnected students.

Scott Varner:

What we found is that those families couldn't really overcome that language barrier to understand how to help their child connect. And so they went to homes, they went to mosques, to churches, to places throughout those communities to meet directly with families. Many times, even meeting in their home or through maybe Zoom, and we were able to bridge that divide.

Scott Varner:

We really zeroed out the gap between our students who, where English is their primary language, and our students where English is not. We zeroed out that gap, and I think that really showed that if we are intentional and authentic in reaching out to those families, again, give them the resources and support to be able to help their student at home, they'll do it. They want to make sure that their child has that access.

Eric Neal:

That's great. It really is showing the district's commitment to reaching all families and doing whatever is necessary to make sure that everybody's connected. The pandemic has been a learning experience for all of us in education. You guys found a way to stay connected with families through your Virtual Family Engagement Sessions. What was that experience like?

Scott Varner:

Yeah. This is a personal pride for me, talking about our Virtual Family Engagement Sessions. Think back. Prior to the pandemic, if there was a conversation that we needed to have in our schools with our families, we'd often hold after school meetings or have an open house inviting all the families to the gym or to the auditorium.

Scott Varner:

But for those of us in education, we know that attendance to some of those things aren't always reliable. Boy, during a pandemic, you couldn't do it at all, and so we did. We turned to Zoom and we began a series of what we called our Virtual Family Engagement Sessions every Tuesday and Thursday night from 6:00 to 7:00, right on Zoom.

Scott Varner:

I host these sessions, that's why it's very personal for me. But we had our district leaders, we had experts throughout our schools really share important information and updates. We saw a large number of families join us to hear those important updates. Then it grew, and we began to have some of our community partners come on and share about the resources that they had for our families.

Scott Varner:

Again, the numbers grew. Our families really appreciated having that, and we continue to get great feedback from our families. These sessions have really grown to be a regular part of our authentic engagement strategy and outreach. We've had more than a hundred of these sessions, and each time we regularly have between 50 to 60 families who join us to hear that information.

Scott Varner:

Some of our sessions attract 100, 200, 300 families, again, depending upon the important information, and we record them, and we put them on our website, and we actually often get feedback from somebody who says, "I went back and watched last week's virtual session to hear this information, and I want more."

Scott Varner:

We know that, again, if we give our families those opportunities and we think a little different, no longer trying to have all of those in-person sessions, thinking about different times, it compliments, supplements, and really creates a very authentic engagement strategy, and we're really excited about that.

Eric Neal:

That's great. It sounds like you guys just have so many amazing things going on right now. If people would like to know more about the work that your department does, where should they go?

Scott Varner:

Well, we've made it easy. All you have to do is go to our website and type in engagement, or you can go to ccsoh.us/engagement and it takes you right to all of the authentic engagement strategies we have. We also made our email easy. It's engage@columbus.k12.oh.us. If you want to join one of those virtual family engagement sessions, again, every Tuesday and Thursday from 6:00 to 7:00, you just go to again, to our website at ccsoh.us/rsvp, R-S-V-P, and you can sign up to attend one of the sessions.

Scott Varner:

I always get a personal thrill because I will be out at some of our schools meeting with teachers, meeting with family members, and they will often say, "Hey, I think I watched one of your virtual sessions" and they're so appreciative of those opportunities. We've tried to make engagement really not just a core part of what we do as a district, but make sure our families know it's something reliable that they can depend on too.

Eric Neal:

That's great. Well, Scott, I want to thank you again for joining us. It's been a real pleasure.

Scott Varner:

Thank you, and we really are excited about this year and the ways in which we're making sure our families are involved in education.

Eric Neal:

All right. That wraps up this episode of the State Support Team 11 Podcast. If you'd like to know more about us and the work that we do here at SST 11, go to our website, SST11.org. Give us a call at (614) 753-4694. Or hit us up on Twitter. We're at SSTRegion11. If you'd like to get a hold of me, I'm at E-R-I-C-N-E-A-L@E-S-C-C-O.org. Until next time, I'm Eric Neal. Thanks for listening.