

Dr. Ricky Gibbs: The work of educational leadership in itself is tough, but it is life changing. So I tell folks all the time, "just because something is tough doesn't mean that it's not worthwhile" because I will tell you this work is worthwhile, but you have to find balance if you're going to be successful in it.

Mindy Wisman: Hello and welcome to Working Well. A podcast series with a diverse group of educators from across the country discussing how to improve the wellbeing of the workforce. I'm Mindy Wisman with the National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments or NCSSE. In this episode, NCSSE training specialist, Melanie Goodman speaks with Dr. Ricky Gibbs, an elementary school principal in Nashville, Tennessee. They discuss the importance of self-care, having boundaries, creative adaptations to pandemic challenges, processing trauma, mindfulness and more. But they begin their conversation talking about the role of school leaders as decision makers.

Dr. Ricky Gibbs: Before 9:00 AM hits, most school leaders have already made at least 50 to 100 decisions. The day of "decision making" starts as soon as we wake up and we pull up that attendance report and see the number of teachers that are out, we have to start making decisions on how do we ensure that the school can still operate successfully? So by the time nine o'clock hit, you've made 50 to 100 decisions, and your day just continues on. You couple that with curveballs thrown once your scholars show up, because every day the students show up in the building, there's a "wow card" effect. So you don't know what kind of trauma, anxiety, depression that your scholars experienced the night before that they're bringing into the school building that, and you don't know how that's going to manifest. So you're thinking about, "okay, how do I address that?" How do we address the issues that the adults will walk in with? Most people think, "well, they should be professionals. They're getting paid", but they're still human.

There's still that aspect of we have good days, we have bad days, and while some of us can regulate our good days and bad days, others can't. Then you also think about the parent aspect, you think about the community aspect, and then you think about your central office demands, getting reports back. You're really just trying to figure out how to balance all of the demands without hitting that burnout point. Because the sad and scary part of school leadership, and we see it every year, there are school leaders who they resign and just walk away from the profession, or they get illness and have a stroke, a heart attack. When you see it, you just tell yourself, "how can I find a balance so that way I don't fall into the category like some of my colleagues have".

Melanie Goodman: You were in the field, you were already in this work before you came to this school, so you knew what you were walking into, right? I mean.

Dr. Ricky Gibbs: Yeah, absolutely. I knew the job description. I have found a balance in my life, and that balance simply is I create boundaries when it comes to work and home. I have two girls. I'm a girl dad. I believe that you have to have time where you put work down and you just take care of you and the ones that love you. But the

one thing I don't compromise. I have to find time for the gym, because I'm a firm believer that in order for you to be mentally strong, you must be physically strong. You must find balance because just the work of educational leadership in itself is tough, but it is life changing. So I tell folks all the time, "just because something is tough doesn't mean that it's not worthwhile" because I will tell you this work is worthwhile, but you have to find balance if you're going to be successful in it.

Melanie Goodman: Just maybe a couple of examples for what were the biggest challenges that you found you were having to deal with when the pandemic came on and then immediately following.

Dr. Ricky Gibbs: Post pandemic, dealing with the seen and unseen trauma that both adults and students were carrying. Everyone was so concerned with learning loss and are our students falling behind academically, and there was such a huge focus on making sure that we're doing everything that we needed for students, both academically and social-emotionally, in some spaces in education. We failed to realize that our teachers, our secretaries, our principals, our cafeteria workers, custodians, all the people who do work in the school building, they were carrying trauma as well.

Children reflect the adults that they're consistently around. So when we have adults that have experienced untold trauma and they are right back in front of students, they have a way of projecting that trauma onto students unbeknownst to them, but it's something that it's still is getting pushed out. That was one of the biggest hurdles of trying to identify when our adults were going through those tough times and finding ways to support them because we knew that if our adults were not successful, there's no way that our children could be successful.

Helping our staff feel comfortable again, education, especially, I'm an elementary educator and as an elementary educator, we're always up close with the kids. We're right there in their face. We teach sounds, so we have to tell you, "look at my tongue placement". So we were so used to being up close and personal, but nobody wanted people up close to them. It was hard to get educators to overcome that hurdle when it came to just getting people comfortable at that point.

Melanie Goodman: So one of the things that happened after the pandemic or during the pandemic was things that were breaking apart were also creating openings for new ideas and some innovations, and schools and other industries for that matter, were finding new ways to adapt and new ways of doing things, there was a "try anything that works" kind of attitude, did you see some of that or do some of that in your school, or are there a couple of-

Dr. Ricky Gibbs: Oh, absolutely.

Melanie Goodman: I'm sure you did a ton of it, but I mean, what would be two really major kind of highlights?

Dr. Ricky Gibbs: Because we serve a student population that was over 90% economically disadvantaged, we were forced to find ways to connect with families when they were not connecting with us internally, we called it, we said we had a little street team, and they were a team that if there were three days in a row that a child did not log in, we would send our street team out. We have a concept that our superintendent pushes towards us every day. It's called "every student known", making sure that every student has what we like to call "that grandma experience". That grandma experience, when you're a grandma, you don't think anything. Your grand babies can't do anything wrong, they're special in your eyes, and you're not going to take anything other than that. So "every child known" gives every child that grandma experience. It gives them that cheerleader to ensure that somebody is always checking in on them. So we would send our street team out to ensure that all of our students stay connected, because you oftentimes heard those stories of, kids aren't logging in, and we were not going to subscribe to that.

We knew that if we were not proactive, we would possibly lose a lot of students. Most of the students who were not logging in were your economically disadvantaged students. They were at home by themselves. Their parents had to work. So we said, "you know what? We were not going to let that happen to any of our scholars". So that street team went out, and if you had those three days that you missed, it wasn't going to be a fourth one because we were knocking on the door.

Once it was post covid and it was about getting students to school. We shifted that thought process and we came up with this idea, We call it the "Warner Exchange". We know there's a lot of families that have just experiencing tough times financially. We had a bunch of community members who were willing to support this idea. We created a school store. Inside that school store, we have shelf stable items, cleaning products, feminine hygiene products, baby formula. It's not a food pantry. You don't just come and shop whenever you want. We base it on student attendance each day.

Our scholars show up to school. They earn five "Warner bucks". Those "Warner bucks" are tallied and that at the end of the month that parents can come shop. What we realized was we were trying to incentivize students to come to school, but in the elementary tier, a five-year-old doesn't decide that they're going to stay at home and nobody can do nothing about it, it's an adult issue. So we said, "how can we create a system where it encourages families to make sure that their child comes to school while at the same time being able to help them out, take care of some of their basic necessities?"

We truly believe that education is the great equalizer, and education can change lives, but if you want to end generational poverty, you want to end generational hopelessness. You want to truly change a family tree. You don't do that through

handouts. You do that by ensuring the youth receives a world-class education, and for us, the only way that we can ensure that our young people are going to receive that world-class education is if we have them in school to make sure that we're able to provide that, and the "Warner Exchange" is a concept that we started post pandemic that ensures that our scholars get to school every day.

Melanie Goodman: And it's still going strong?

Dr. Ricky Gibbs: Still going strong. We tell everyone that this isn't a Warner Initiative, it's a community initiative. We're truly looking at community building as we not only support students, we support families, but we also support our educators every day.

Melanie Goodman: So are there other things that you've seen or you've taken note of that maybe other schools are doing things that they maybe did during the pandemic that now will kind of stay that way? Like others that you've seen?

Dr. Ricky Gibbs: We're connected in a network of schools with a nonprofit, BeWell in Schools. It's a nonprofit that teaches mindfulness and the power of the breath as a way to self-regulate through self-regulation and co-regulation, because then there's an adult that helps with it as well for students and adults. We started the implementation and then we ended up really digging deep during covid, but it became integral part of our work. Having a staff member who, when a child is dysregulated, who can help them get regulated through co-regulation, but also teaching our scholars how to self-regulate so that way that they're able to put the best version of themselves forward. So it's something that-

Melanie Goodman: So you've sustained that work. So is that just students or are there teachers participated in that as well?

Dr. Ricky Gibbs: That's students and adults.

Melanie Goodman: Well, it's interesting because that leads me right into my next question for you, which is that essentially what we were hearing from other educators, there's been a lot of focus on staff being responsible for their own self-care and wellbeing, and when the really important work that needs to happen is more systemic work, is institutional work about wellbeing of the entire workforce.

Dr. Ricky Gibbs: I would tend to agree, but I tell people, "somebody has to own it". Leaders must own that work. It's not about telling people that, "hey, you need to make sure you take time for yourself". Oftentimes, you have leaders that say that, but then when it's time for individuals to actually take time for themselves, they'd be like, "ah, but we have an important deadline". If we're going to say that we need to actually walk the walk, if we're going to talk the talk, how are we systematically putting things in place that shows everyone self-care is critically important, but also it's how we're showing care for the entire organization. Do we have systems put in place that if a staff member just needs to step away for 15, 20

minutes, do we have a system in place that we can cover that person where they don't feel like they're being a burden on a colleague, that we systematically take pulse checks to find what kind of pick me up the staff needs?

Ultimately, when we talk about the field of education, we have what I call peaks and valleys throughout the school year. In August when school starts, that's a peak. Everybody is at a hundred. We're ready to welcome everybody back. We've decorated classrooms, but by the time October comes, we've dipped down. You just keep going at up and down. The only way that you're going to really find organizational care as if leaders of the organization are systematically putting things in place that care is what needs to take place versus just saying, "hey, self-care matters", but then as soon as someone's ready to take care of themselves, it's an inconvenient time. I think we have to make sure that we're having a systematic approach to that. It has to be something bigger than just having treats for teachers. Do they know the resources in place that they need somebody to talk to so that way they can ensure that they're taking care of themselves holistically?

Melanie Goodman: Are you able to be responsive to teachers who want to change it up and do things differently that foster a little bit more teacher autonomy that then leads to what I'm suggesting here kind of makes for wellbeing and feeling more purposeful in the work?

Dr. Ricky Gibbs: We believe in teacher autonomy, but we also have to be realistic that we work inside of a system. I just so happen to work in one of the 40 largest school districts in the country. There are set curriculums and things of that nature. I tell my teachers all the time, "we know that we must teach Tennessee standards, that is a non-negotiable, but after that, the way you implement, that's when you can show your style. That's when you have that teacher autonomy. How can you make learning fun? How can you make learning exciting, and how can you put your own style into it?" We're teaching a generation that has grown up with social media, so we don't have an infinite amount of time to hook students, so we have to figure out a way to hook them early, get them excited, and then keep them there.

Again, this is where teacher autonomy comes in. The way that I'll hook a student might be different than the way that you hook students, but if we're both hooking them and we're both getting the work done, that's all that really matters. Just because you give teachers autonomy doesn't mean that they don't need support. Oftentimes, we think that if we give somebody autonomy, we need to just kind of let them do their own thing. The autonomy says you come up with the ideas to make the learning fun, but also as the educational leader, I'm still standing behind you saying, "how can I support you?"

When we talk about keeping teachers in our profession and not burning them out, most of our great teachers want to be in settings where they feel seen. They feel valued, and they feel heard. So having that teacher autonomy gives them the ability to feel valued and feel heard, but actually going to that

classroom and supporting them makes them feel seen, and you have to have all three if you're really looking at supporting and keeping teachers.

Melanie Goodman: And are you having good success at retaining?

Dr. Ricky Gibbs: Yeah. We sit at about a 95% retention rate each school year. Most of the time, if we lose a teacher, it's because they are having a baby and they're going to stay at home or they've gotten a promotion. I believe in growing leaders, so I don't want a group of teachers who just want to stay at this one school and teach for me for 30 years. I want you to live out your full potential and reach all your goals. So that's something that when we sit down and we talk to teachers, "hey, tell me your career goals", and we work to support them to ensure that they're striving and moving towards those goals because again, that's another way to help your staff feel valued.

Melanie Goodman: I wondered how, I kind of have a sense of it from what we talked about already, but if you wanted to be specific in a couple of instances that what you're able to do in that vein for your workforce beyond teachers like paraeducators or support staff in schools.

Dr. Ricky Gibbs: Our paraprofessionals and secretaries, let's group them into one and the same. I try to make sure that I meet with them at least once a nine weeks to just reinforce those are individuals who we genuinely don't pay their worth. While we believe teachers are underpaid, our paraprofessional workforce is significantly underpaid. I try to make sure that I meet with them to not only speak life into them, to let them know that they're valued and it comes from the leader of the school, but also to take time to hear if they have any concerns and find out things that they need.

I think I know what they need, but then when I asked them, it turned out to be what I consider practical stuff that we do for teachers all the time that we don't necessarily do for paraprofessionals. So they were looking for more professional development time in the day where they can collaborate with other paraprofessionals to find out, find strategies, what others were doing with children to experience success, because some of our paras have certain students that are thriving, others have students that are struggling, so they're wanting to have that time to collaborate, and oftentimes we think about collaboration as something only our certificated staff, our teachers are doing, but our parents are asking for that same kind of time.

So we've had to be creative with our scheduling because obviously most of the time our parents are wall to wall with students from the time they walk in to the time they leave. We've had to be creative and say, "well, okay, we can't do it two times a week like we do for teachers doing planning". But it actually showed me the level of commitment and dedication that they have to ensuring that some of our most vulnerable students, they're working with students who are in our special Ed population. So to see them wanting to be their very best for those scholars, I mean, obviously it pushed me to say, well, if y'all are going

to put forth this extra effort to be great, I need to do what I need to do to ensure that there are structures in place that allow you to get together so that way you can better your skills.

Melanie Goodman: And they're responding really positively, I guess. It seems like-

Dr. Ricky Gibbs: Oh, absolutely. Absolutely.

Melanie Goodman: It's really like a slam dunk.

Dr. Ricky Gibbs: Yeah, and it helped cut down on, I would say miscommunications happening and little things spiraling. We went from a school that had two special Ed teachers and two paraprofessionals, so a really small caseload to a school that has 13 paraprofessionals and four special Ed teachers. So because we have a significant larger number of paraprofessionals as well as special Ed teachers, and again, it wasn't an idea that I necessarily came up with by myself, but it was just listening to what my people need and then figuring out the best way to support them.

Melanie Goodman: How to support it. Yeah, that's great. What would you want to recommend or say to your colleagues, your fellow principals out there that they could be doing right now to support and stabilize their workforce and ensure their overall sense of commitment and economy and wellbeing? All the things that we've talked about.

Dr. Ricky Gibbs: Find your quiet leaders. The ones who sit in your staff meeting don't have to speak, but when you're getting ready to say something, everybody kind of cut their eye at them and look, and if that person is in agreement, everybody's in agreement, but if that person looking like "we not doing that", then everybody shuts down. Find those movers and shakers. Bring them together and ask them some questions about how you can support your team. You're going to get some feedback that you were not intending or things that you hadn't thought about because when we only go to the same people for the pulse of the school, we get the same information. But when you go to some of those movers and shakers who aren't that loud voice in the room, but has a significant impact, you begin to really hear some things that you want to hear, but you also hear some things that you don't want to hear.

But as a school leader, if there are things that are happening that you're not comfortable with, you have to figure out that way of how you're going to fix them. If you're truly looking at being successful and supporting your people and ensuring that their mental, physical, and spiritual wellbeing, you can't take it from the approach as the leader that everybody in this school works for me, I believe that you have to have the inverse thought process and believe that you work for everybody in the school. So when they're not successful, you're not successful.

Angela Davis penned the thought process of "I'm no longer accepting the things I cannot change. I'm changing the things I cannot accept". So if you can't accept your staff not being well, if you cannot accept the adults in your building not being the best version of themselves each and every day because of trauma, anxiety, stress that our profession tends to put on us each and every day, I challenge you as school leaders to be that change. Create the systems to support your people, and that's the way you'll move that school forward.

I pride myself in telling my teachers "I'll never ask them to do something that I'm not willing to do". If I ask teachers to split classes sometimes and take on extra students, if there's a situation where I have to step in or my assistant principal has to step in, well, we have to do that. What we can't do is sit back in our office while everyone else is out there doing the work of changing lives. If we're not willing to step in too, so we never ask someone to do something that we're not willing to do. Doing that builds greater sense of community, but also gives our teachers a greater respect for us as leaders because they know we'll never leave them by themselves.

Mindy Wisman:

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