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FULL TRANSCRIPT:

Karen Marklein: Hello. Welcome to Ayers All Access brought to you by the Ayers Institute for Learning & Innovation. This podcast is a chance for us to help you access compelling people, current topics, practical tips, and innovative solutions— all related to the field of education. To find out more about this podcast and all the work of the Ayers Institute, check out our website at AyersInstitute.org. You can also find us on Twitter and Facebook at [@AyersInstitute](https://twitter.com/AyersInstitute).

Thanks for joining us this week for some real-life school stories. Joy, love, kindness, and empathy are so important in our school buildings and within our school communities. It's also important to remember that teachers need to be upheld as valuable assets within those communities and that each teacher is an individual on a personal and professional journey. So, today's stories will focus on the humanity in educators.

I'm Karen Marklein and I serve as the director of programs for the Ayers Institute. Today, we will be talking with Lance Forman, Director of the Educational Leadership Program at Lipscomb's College of Education. Lance is a former elementary school teacher, assistant principal, and executive principal in Metro Nashville Public Schools. Lance is a great friend to the Ayers Institute, and we are so excited to have you today.

Thank you for talking with us about this important topic.

Lance Forman: Thanks Karen. It's nice to be here today with you to talk about something that's really important, which is going back and looking at the humanity of teachers, of kids, of educators. I think we have forgotten that. We've become so engrossed and focused on some things that obviously are important. And we've forgotten that it's okay to have fun and laugh and enjoy school! And also to— as leaders— to recognize our teachers and what they are going through in their own lives.

Karen Marklein: Absolutely. I could not agree more. You know, we really do miss our focus on what's important. So, I wonder what stories you have to tell us about.

Lance Forman: You know, there's a few that I'd like to share with you today. And I think, take it from maybe a student perspective, or maybe as a teacher, and maybe also tell one about a school leader. You know, I think about our roles as educators, as teachers. And we just become so focused on, obviously,

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data and instruction and improvement and outcomes. And all those things are critically important, of course.

Karen Marklein: Sure, sure.

Lance Forman: But sometimes we get so focused on that that we forget just who is that we are working with. These young minds! And I remember one of my first years— It was early on in my career. My principal, she asked our team (at the time this was practice, but we don't do it now)— But we were grouping kids by their level in reading. They would change classes for reading groups. And she'd asked me to take on our fourth grade struggling readers. And so, I was like, "Yes." I said, "That sounds great. I would love to do that."

And so, I had about 22 or 23 kids every day that would come to my class from different classrooms. And all of them were reading on different levels. Some of them reading on first grade level. To, maybe, fourth grade. But most of them were struggling and they were reading below grade level. And this school year there was a big focus on writing in our district, so we had this writing assessment. And I was determined that, number one, we were going to improve our reading scores. All my kids are going to be excellent readers by the end of this year. But also great writers. And so, I developed this program in my classroom to focus on this writing assessment.

So, every week we had the same protocol. The same process. I would start off Monday morning and say, "You'll never guess what happened to me!" And that was the prompt. And they'd come to the carpet and I'd tell them some story. Half the time it was made up or embellished. It was always partially true. But the point was that I found that my kids could they could tell a story really well, but they couldn't put it into writing. You know, if you say, "Okay guys, great. Now write that." Their minds would go blank. So, I wanted to model telling the story. Then we would go through from that point to our model how's it drafted. Then I would model how to do, you know, corrections. And we do writing conferences one on one. Then we do a final draft. And we had this big thing on the wall called "our student spotlight." So, every week I'd choose somebody to highlight their writing and we would talk about it. Give them high fives, you know, stickers. And this is a big deal.

Karen Marklein: Sure.

Lance Forman: My kids were pumped about this, you know. I mean, we had on the back wall in huge letters, 'writing assessment.' We had the student spotlight. We had writing tips on the wall; big chart. We even had a countdown to the writing assessment: we'd pull off every day we'd come in and tear off one of those your numbers. That's one more day we're going to knock out this test, right? So, this is a big focus.

And here we go. It's time for the test is in the spring semester and all my kids— they for an entire year we done this exact same thing every week. And this day, like they always do, they come the hallway. They're lined up on the hallway. And give him high fives as they're coming in. Fist bumps. Were gonna knock out of this test today.

You know I should probably tell you about one of my kids in my class. His name was Muhammad, and he's just a sweet kid in the world. He was learning English as a second language. So, you know, he's kind of quiet in the classroom. Sweet kid, but just, you know, he was shy. I think he was nervous because he

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didn't have a grasp of the language. Right. So, he didn't always answer questions in class. But he tried real hard. He always worked hard.

And remember, in this day of the test, all my kids walk in and he comes Muhammad. I give him a fist bump. He's smiling big, "I'm are you good this morning I'm not knocking this test." And I say, "Great that's what we're all going to do. Right." And so, they sit down, take this test. And I had taught them, if you finish, you're writing on the test, you can pull up a paper, you can draw, you can read, you can write, but you can't talk until I call time. They do tests. I see kids doing their proofreading. I see Mohammed's writing until the last minute of the test. I'm thinking, "Well, he must be really writing hard. He's going to great." Because our goal was to get a five. That was that was the goal. Everybody's going to get a five. Five was the highest mark. We all wanted fives.

And so, after the test, I call a time. Muhammad at the last second pulls out a piece of paper, writes a note down, folds it up into his pocket. I call a time collect test. And now the office, right? And the kids are leaving for recess. And I'm on cloud nine. I thought, we have just annihilated this test. I mean, I'm going to be on the news and you know, high fiving from my principal and what a great job my class did. Right. And this is going be amazing. And he walks past me. He hands me this note. And I'm like, "Oh, this is amazing." So, I hid it. They leave the class and I pull out the note. (I still have the note in my desk, in fact, in my office.) And the note says, "Mr. Foreman... (this is from Muhammad). Mr. Forman, you are the koollest teacher in the howl world. I hop I got a five on that writing thang today. See you later. Muhammad."

It was this moment of just crushing defeat that I felt in my classroom. There's just massive letdown. How in the world can he misspell the word hope? A high frequency fourth grade word. How did he miss that? You know, "writing thang?" We've been calling it a writing test for the past 180 days. I was so frustrated. I just couldn't believe that he would do that. And it was that moment— talking about humanity— that I missed the really important lesson. See, I had turned this test around for my kids and I had turned it on to me. Because it changed from being about my kids improving to about Lance having the highest scores in the school. It changed from my kids learning to write real well to Lance being recognized for his work as a teacher and getting all these accolades. And I Missed the important part.

It wasn't about the writing test and it wasn't about the score or five. It wasn't about all that. It was about Muhammad, a shy kid who had the courage to come to me and write a letter to me showing him that he had worked hard. I missed that. And I always tell my students that here at on campus that, you know, when you're a leader, don't forget those lessons that you'll see around you. And recognized the humanity in people and their struggle and their hard work. Because it's really important. Yes, writing is important. But knowing those small stories, you're also really important to us as teachers and leaders.

Karen Marklein: Absolutely. I can almost see sweet little Muhammad.

Lance Forman: Oh, yeah, I know. Right.

Karen Marklein: Writing that note to you. And being so happy that he had pleased you.

Lance Forman: Absolutely.

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Karen Marklein: But you know, it's interesting to me that we're talking about stories and you started the whole thing by saying, I got my kids telling stories. You know, it's the power of the story. It's so important.

Lance Forman: Yeah.

Karen Marklein: Okay. So how about another story?

Lance Forman: Well, okay. So, you know, that one was kind of fun, right? And it's funny, but also there's of a lesson there. You know, I was teaching a class this past spring semester and the students in this class had to job shadow school leader. They also had to have sessions with this person to ask them questions about school leadership as it pertains to school management of funds and finances and human capital resources. And so, I was reading reflections from this last mentor conversation of one of my students.

And the student asked their mentor about teacher management and human capital management and what does that look like and how do you how do you manage that? And talking about, you know, teacher attrition and, you know, hiring practices and recruitment and all that. And in this reflection, the student wrote that the mentor stated that she had like 12 teachers having babies that year and going on maternity leave. And what a struggle this was. And how terrible was that I have to find interims and new hires in this market of no teachers. And it was really negative. It was just almost kind of like, "How dare they leave this school and have children and families." And I was reading that reflection. It just hurt because I thought, how in the world do we get to a place in education where we are not happy at somebody is starting a family? How are we at a place where we're not happy for them? Yeah, it's gonna be hot on the school. But, so what? They haven't had kids.

Karen Marklein: Yeah right.

Lance Forman: Yeah, we've missed that. And it's almost like we turn it into a business, you know? And with just simple end-product goals. And we missed the humanity behind that.

You know, I had a teacher one year. She and her husband were trying to start a family. And they had gone through some things and had chosen to adopt. They were going to adopt stateside, and I'm not sure how much know about the process, but— when you adopt internationally, also, it takes a long time. And there's a lot of steps there. But when you adopt stateside in the U.S., it also takes a lot of time. But you can get to the very end step where you actually are going to meet your child and the mother can choose to not give the child up for adoption. And that can be really difficult for families who are trying to adopt— to get all the way to the end and then it not work out.

And so, she and her husband had been through that. It was very traumatic for them. They had gone all the way to the end of this process and then the mother who they were trying to adopt from chose to (in the hospital)— chose to keep this baby. And I'll never forget, I was on my front porch one Saturday afternoon. And my wife was going to the store. I was just kinda by myself, read the news. And my phone rings and it was this teacher. And she called me, and she said, "Hey, we've been matched with a child who's going to be born. And she's in Hawaii. And so, we have to be on the plane, like, Wednesday morning." This is in a few days to go adopt her." And so, what that means is she's going to be leaving the States in three days. And she'll be, at that moment, will be on leave for the next, who knows, I mean three or four months. Right?

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And so, when she tells me this, my reaction in my mind is like, "Wow, that's awesome." But she went right from, 'I'm going to be adopting a child' to almost in tears of her classroom. "How am I going to get someone to cover my classroom? I don't have any plans written." And she was worried about who am I going to hire for the classroom; for my children in my classroom. The interim position and how long will that take to get posted. And all these things that she was so upset about. And I was like, "Stop." That's what I said. "Just stop talking about that." I said, "You let me worry about that. You go enjoy your baby with your husband. Just stop worrying about that, you know, who cares? You know, just go and forget that. That will all work out. We'll be fine. You go to Hawaii." Now, now inside— I was like, "Oh, my gosh. What am I going to do?" I'm in a panic. Cause how am I going to hire an interim at this point of the year? And what am I going to do? And, you know, I was panicking as a leader. But she didn't need to be feeling that panic. You know, she needs to be happy. And she needs to know that her principal supported this 100%. And, you know, to not worry about the job. Worry about your family! And, you know, we've lost that.

So, I was reading that student's reflection in class: that we just, you know— How have we lost this perspective of our teachers and their lives and what they're going through? And I think that we can really, when we talk about retention of talent in this new landscape we have of a shortage of teachers, how much better we would be as school leaders to retain talent if we would simply recognize their humanity and their struggles and their life and what they're going through. And just simply support it and be happy for it.

Karen Marklein: Exactly. Yeah. And just think about the support like— I was thinking about 'joy over job.' You know, the joy that this woman was feeling it. The reality that 'I'm going to go meet my baby.'

Lance Forman: Yeah.

Karen Marklein: But the heaviness of this job. And very often I think it's the people who are attracted to the job are the caretakers of the world. Of course, she's going to think about her students and all that. But how kind of you to just uphold that and say, "Hold on. That's my worry. You know, that's not your worry. We'll work all that out."

Lance Forman: Yeah. Yeah.

Karen Marklein: All right. So, do we have one more story?

Lance Forman: I can give you one more.

Okay, so we talked about, you know, a child perspective of their humanity, and also a teacher, too. I'll share one— a personal one from myself as a principal, as a school leader. You know, so my wife and I, it took a seven years to have our first child. So, it just didn't work out for us for seven years. That was very difficult, you know, and there's just lots of things that go along with that and lots of emotions. And so, seven years, finally, we're having our first child. And it was the day when we're supposed to go to the doctor to find out if it's a boy or a girl. Right. So, it's a big moment, right? It's a big moment in all parents' lives! The ultrasound, you know, and all that. And so, I had to give a very direct orders. My wife, I shouldn't say orders. I should say directions. To be at...

Karen Marklein: I say, 'persistent encouragement.'

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Lance Forman: Yes. Thank you. That's very good.

Karen Marklein: Yes.

Lance Forman: I was I was told to be there at 3:15pm. That's when it was going to be... You know, to be there. It was going to start at 3:30pm, right? So be there early— because she knows me. She knows I'm probably going to roll in at 3:30pm if I don't have the early time on my mind. And so that morning, she told me again, "Don't forget, you've got to leave school a certain time to be there by 3:15pm." So, I had realized, or I sort of calculated, that I needed to leave my school (which was about 27 miles from where we're going meet for the doctor), I needed to leave by 2:30pm to get there on time. I that was my drop dead. I've got to be in the truck leaving the parking lot at 2:30pm to get there on time.

And so that morning, a girl (a student) walked into my office. She was one of three siblings. It was a kindergartner, a second grader, and a fourth grader. So, 5, 7, and 9 years old. So, the child who was 7 came in my office. This is a 7-year-old 2nd grader, about 11 o'clock. And she walks in and she was kind of upset. And she'd been crying, and she said, "I think my dad's gonna be dead when I get home."

And that was really concerning— I think to hear that. I just think, "Wow, that's really... well... Let's talk about that. Why do you think that?" And she proceeds to tell me the story about how she and her two sisters (again, 5 years old, 7 and 9)— Well, she didn't know what it was, but it she was describing (I knew what it was). She was describing her dad having a heroin overdose in the bathroom in house that morning. And she described: they walked to the bathroom and he was, you know, passed out in the bathroom with his sleeves rolled up. And she described the scene of the needle in his mouth and he had blood on his head where he hit his head on the floor. She said that she saw "black Play-Doh" on the sink— which I know is heroin, right? And she sees this. They all see it. And then the bus honks outside. And they thought, we don't want to miss school and be late. And so, these three little babies ran out the door to get on the bus to come to school.

I mean, just imagine that for a minute, like.

Karen Marklein: Right.

Lance Forman: To see your dad, who's obviously not in good shape in the bathroom. And the bus honks. And your first thought was, "Oh, we're going to be late. We got to go." And so, they left to go on the bus, come to school.

Now, imagine it's 11 o'clock. For 3 hours. She been carrying that with her. For 3 hours. Imagine that. Three hours in the classroom, trying to do your work, your math, your reading, all that kind of stuff— for 3 hours holding that in. And finally, it came out to the teacher and she had her come to me.

So, I obviously call, you know, DCS and I call the police and tell them what's happened or what she told me. And then 1:00pm rolls around, and there's no response from DCS and no phone call or follow up from the police, either. Okay. So then here comes 1:30pm, still no response. Now we're at 2:00pm in the afternoon, no response. So, I called DCS back and said "What's going on. We dismiss at 3:00pm. I can't send this child home to her dead father in the house." I call the police: "If you please just go check on him at the house. Just go figure out what's going on." So, at 2:25pm or 2:30pm or so, the police roll up. Now remember, I have to leave at 2:30pm. They come to the school. And they say, we got somebody

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who's at the house right now, trying to get in the door. And there's two officers with me in the school with the kids and with me. Still don't know if he's alive yet or not. At this point. And so now I have to make a choice.

Because, I didn't tell you— This day, my assistant principal was not there that day. She was at a meeting with the district.

Karen Marklein: Oh my!

Lance Forman: So, I'm by myself. So, I have to make a choice. Do I leave and go take care of my family? That I obviously care for a great deal? Or do I stay and take care of this family? That I also care for a great deal. And no matter which choice I make, I'm going to disappoint somebody. Like, somebody's going to get let down. You know, if I stay at the school and take care of these three little babies, obviously my wife going to be really upset at me and be let down that I miss this big moment and building for seven years our life. And if I go to the appointment and leave these three girls by themselves at the school, and what if their father is dead? Or what if he's not dead and then they have to go into state custody and I'm going to miss and not be there for that. And how this will be so traumatic for them. I will let them down. And it was just this massive decision. This weight on my shoulders. Like, what do I do?

And so, I say at the school until about 2:50pm, and then I'm texting my wife telling her "I'm on the way." (I really wasn't thought.) Thinking, I can speed down 40 and make up 10 minutes. You know, so finally, (long story, short) our P.E. teacher was admin certified. And so, once I realized that, I was told that he was still alive at the house, that good, she can take care of the rest so I can leave. And I left the school. Obviously, I was late to the appointment and they waited for me. But, you know, those are the things—

When I think about the humanity of educators, and it's important for school leaders to check on their teachers. Right? I mean, know what's going on in their lives and take care of them and support them. Like the one who called me about that about her daughter being born in Hawaii. Right? Just support it. I think, too, that teachers and parents of the school and faculty need to understand, too, that the principal is carrying a pretty tremendous weight on their shoulders. It's not always just like district pressures and budget pressures and policy pressures. It's this kind of stuff. Trying to figure out what to do with your own life and the life that you have a school. That's hard choices to make. And so, there's a great deal of humanity there that we tend to overlook. And leaders burn out just as fast as teachers do. And so, I think that this support of humanity, of people is a two-way street. It's not just principles supporting teachers. They've gotta support each other for us to stay in this really difficult profession. You know?

Karen Marklein: Absolutely. Well, I love these stories that you selected. You know, the humanity of the children in our care. The humanity of the teachers that leaders have the care of. And then the humanity that teachers need to show to their leadership. So important! All these layers. I'm just thinking all that through.

So, what do you think this says about just leadership in general? What can we learn from this?

Lance Forman: You know, I am often asked by students, you know, what's the most important thing about being a school leader? Like, why what's the most important skill or strategy or whatever? And, you know: is it budgets? Is it H.R. management? Is it... My response is, "It's followership." Like a

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followership is the most important thing to being a school leader. Because if you're following— I mean, if you're leading and no one's following, then you're just taking a walk in the park. Right? I mean, you've gotta have people who will follow you and listen to you. And it's really a delicate balance. Because you're not you're not pushing them to follow you. You're modeling the behaviors that you hope to see out of them and empowering them to make decisions on their own that will then create a followership.

So, there's some things you can do for that. I mean, there are some simple things.

I mean, number one is simply just recognizing their humanity and knowing that that they are also human beings. And just supporting them.

Changing your language from a simple... I cringe. I hear somebody say, "my teachers, my school, my AP, my secretary, my building," because that's a language of ownership. Right? I mean, and just a simple shift into from "my school" to "our school, our secretary, our teachers, our building." It sounds so simple subtle but that simple little shift— those small, little steps you take— can create a culture of care in a belonging in your school.

The power of the handwritten note. I think we've forgotten that. I wasn't the best at that because, you know, they'll at time get the best of me. But I try to write handwritten notes because I know how I felt when I when I got them from my principal or my boss. And so, I would write notes. I'd stay late in the evening or at home, and I write notes. I get there early. So, I have them on their desk when I got to school a day. And I'd see notes I had written taped to the wall next the desk for the whole year. One year we were on vacation at Orange Beach and I needed write notes. And this was, I think, during fall break and it had been a tough start to the to the year. So, I wrote everybody— all faculty and staff; wasn't just teachers, it's your secretaries it's your assistants, your custodians. Everyone got a note and it was mailed to their home. I didn't think anything of it, but they saw that it was postmarked from Orange Beach, Alabama, and that was even more impactful for them. Because they're like, "Wow. He took time out of his vacation to write me a personal note." I mean, that's really important. You know, taking small strategies.

I was talking to a principal who we have visited his school a number of times. And, you know, they have something called "tap in / tap out." And he mentioned to our students one time, (I just think this is really important) that "an escalated adult can't possibly de-escalate an escalated child." Right? So teachers: we all have things. We get stressed out, we escalate, things happen to us. Right? I mean, it happens to me, too. Just have a bad day. And when that happens, they can send a text to this group text and say, "I need a break just for 5 minutes" and somebody is coming. It's the principal, it's the AP, maybe it's the school secretary, it's the coach. But somebody is coming in the room for 5 minutes, to let them go take a breather, to put water on the face. Whatever they need to do just to get themselves ready to get back and be the best for their kids?

So, these small little things— I think we can do to recognize our people in the school and make them feel appreciated. You know, I think this all comes back to what I call the 'gray area' of leadership. When you're faced with difficult decisions, you may have a policy that guides that. But even the policy can be kind of vague. Is there?... There's like, no, "Okay, this happens, so do this" or "You're faced with these issues, then make this choice." And the best school leaders are the ones who can navigate that 'gray area,' the area of which there is no clear path forward and make the best choice for the kids and the teachers in their school. And to be able to do that means recognizing the personal struggles and the humanity that we all go through in our in our lives.

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Karen Marklein: Absolutely. I wish that our— I know this is not a visual medium, so I know that people can't see you. But just the passion that you have talked about— talked with— about this topic today. You know, your hands are moving and you're smiling. And, you know, it's really important. So, I can see how this is really a focus for you. And I am I'm certain that you bring out the best in those that you lead. So, it's very exciting.

Lance Forman: Thank you.

Karen Marklein: To hear all this. Lance, thank you so much for being here and thank you for all your work in education.

Lance Forman: Well, thanks, Karen. Thanks for having me.

Karen Marklein: And to all our listeners, be sure to check out the show notes for this episode where you'll find links to helpful resources and anything we've mentioned today. I hope you've been encouraged and inspired by Lance's stories. You can find more episodes of Ayers Institute podcasts at <https://podcast.AyersInstitute.org>, on Apple Podcasts and anywhere podcasts are found.

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