JFY*Net* Podcast – January 2020 – Origins of JFYNet*Works*

With Gary Kaplan, Executive Director and Greg Cunningham, Blended Learning Specialist

***GREG**: Welcome to the inaugural podcast from JFY Networks. In today's episode, you'll hear from GARY Kaplan, executive director JFYNetworks, as he discusses the origins of the organization it started in.*

GARY: It was started in 1976 by a group of people led by a gentleman by the name of Fred Youngman.

***GREG**: How the nonprofit has adapted through the years.*

GARY: In order to support people to get through those programs, which required quite a bit of reading and math, we had to come up with academic support

***GREG**: And his view on the future of education.*

GARY: So, college is not going be 12 years of high school. Two years of one sort of college, four years of another sort of college.

***GREG**: JFYNetworks is a Boston based non-profit provider of blended learning programs to schools. JFY's blended instructional support programs, build skills and help raise individual and school performance measures. The JFYNet Blended Learning Program brings online assessments and curriculum into the classroom and works with teachers to provide individualized instruction to help students achieve measured, skilled gains. JFYNetworks has a long-standing history in the city of Boston As GARY explains:*

GARY: JFYNetworks was originally called Jobs for Youth. It started in 1976, by a group of people led by gentleman by the name of Fred Youngman, who was from New York. He was in human resources business and he had started Jobs for Youth in New York to help out of school youth find jobs. Now, this is 1976 when dropout rates all over the country were 40% 50%, you name it 60%. And kids everywhere were out of work out of school. On the streets.

There was federal money that could be gotten to do youth programs. And curiously, or maybe not curiously, it was Department of Justice money that was available. And it was, the idea was to keep urban kids off the street so that they wouldn't get into trouble, and the way to keep them off the street was to help them find jobs.

So that's where the money came from. Fred came to Boston to start a Boston branch of the jobs for youth program that he had started in New York many years earlier, in the 1960's. The agency would require them and put them through something called job Readiness training, which had to do with how to find a job, how to dress appropriately how to behave, how to get places on time and basic things like that, which are still part of the general job readiness employability curriculum.

Well, that went on for quite a while, starting in early 1977. By 1985, Fred was ready to retire. The agency was going very well. It had a good funding base, and a lot of a lot of support all over the city. And Fred wanted to retire, eh? So, they had to find somebody to replace Fred. The board decided that I would be a good person to take over from Fred. So that was 1985 July 1985. I've been here ever since

In 1985, the economy was quite different from what it is today. Manufacturing was still a major employer, and there were many jobs, like stacking mufflers and warehouses and things like that that did not require a high level of skill. Manufacturing, for the most part, didn't require a high level of skill, not anything like the way it is today. But things were starting to change. And from around that time around 1990 onward, the size of men of manufacturing as a component of the Massachusetts labor market just went straight down. And manufacturing is a good bellwether for the measuring the kind of skills that are required.

***GREG**: It quickly became clear that the driving force behind educational needs was going to be the U. S. Economy. GARY and JFY quickly adapted.*

GARY: As the economy started to change and as Massachusetts as the economy became more focused on high tech biomed and biotech and health care and higher education, what we know what everybody now calls EDS and Meds. The skill level required by those employers, of course, went up dramatically. So, it was okay in 1985 to have a high school diploma. By, I would say, certainly by 2000 if not sooner than that, it was no longer sufficient to have a high school diploma.

There are lots of statistics that that you can easily find about this. The one that I like to throw out is since the great recession of 2009 and [20]10 that when we lost millions of jobs after the recession, starting around 2010 and 2011, things started to pick up. Employment started to pick up and millions of jobs were created. After the great recession, 90% of the new jobs created went to workers with college degrees. If you look back to the late 1970's, the number of jobs available to high school graduates or less has actually declined in the American labor market. So just those two numbers, 90% of the jobs since the great recession have gone to college graduates. And since 1979, the number of jobs, not percent, number of jobs available to people with a high school diploma or less has actually declined. Those two graph lines show you what the nature of the economy is.

So it comes to…so in around the 1990's, we were beginning to realize as everybody was, that things were changing and that the sort of rudimentary skill training that we were doing at that time, it wasn't going to equip people to participate in any meaningful way in the economy that was developing right in front of our eyes.

So, we started to I think about what we could do and what we thought. We thought two things. The first thing we thought was, Well, if this is an economy where things like biotech are going be the dominant employers, maybe we should see if we can train people for biotech, for that

industry or for whatever industry is going to be a major employer. But everyone sort of knew at that time that biotech was going be one of them. The other thing that we thought was, you know, if we're going try to train people for industries like biotech, they better have pretty good skills. Because if you don't have good reading skills and you don't have good math skills, how are we going train you for something like biotech, where you need very good levels of skill in both language and math.

So, we developed training programs that were tailored for specific industries and the 1st one happened to be biotech. We went to…we sat down with a couple of biotech companies and with a university, and we analyzed the job with skill requirements for jobs for lab assistant jobs, your lab technician jobs in biotech. We actually mapped out the skill requirements by going into the lab and sitting with people and asking, "What is that? What you doing? What skills do you need to do that?"

By spending a whole lot of time doing that inventory, we came up with a skill, a concrete skill profile for a couple of job categories in the labs. And it was it was quite successful, for it ran for several years until, eventually the funding ran out.

Well, then we did other fields. We did financial services. We did environmental technology so that right on through the through the 90's and into the 2000's. Meanwhile, in order to in order to support people to get through those programs, which required quite a bit of reading and math, we had to come up with academic support because even if somebody had a high school diploma. This is the actual tested skill level, or the actual functional skill level was probably not adequate to read a hazardous waste handling manual, for example, which I couldn't even read now.

So, we had to come up with some academic support. And in order to do that, I'm now talking about the late 1990's, we turn to instructional software because if you had 40 or 50 people who were applying for one of your job training programs and you had to provide reading and math skill building for them, it wasn't really functional to sit down and talk to them individually, you had to figure out a way to do it without having to hire 50 tutors.

So instructional software around that time late nineties early two thousands was already getting pretty good. We began using some reading and math software, and we were able to get substantial gains in reading and math levels over the over the course of a few months.

Well, we took a look at MCAS and saw that it was very understandable. A List of math, skill standards and a list of reading and writing skills standards not different, or not much different from what we have been doing already. So, we thought we thought, you know, we could give that a try,

We did. We did some work on our curriculum alignment so that it matched what was on the MCAS, which in turn came directly out of the state curriculum standards, which have been put together during the 90's after the Mass Education Reform law was passed in 1993.

So, we started it in the first. The first attempt that we made was at a school that had a very high failure rate, in fact, that it was 97% failure rate in math. So, we took a deep breath and plunged in, ran the program. So that's how we got to where we are now.

There was a kind of a philosophy behind it, which was having done job training and having done very successfully for a long time, we realized nonetheless that if you're doing adult job training, meaning over 16, 16 to 24 years old, job training is very intensive. It's a five day a week program. It usually lasts at least 15 or 20 weeks. Sometimes it's a whole year. It's very expensive. And it does, if it's successful, it does place people into very good jobs. Even back in the in the late 90's, we were placing people in environmental jobs that started at $60,000. So that's great. But you can do, maybe 50 trainees a year. You can't really do 100 because the classes have to be small. They take a long time. The skills are very well, very defined. You just can't do large numbers.

So as we were watching this move along and doing 50 or 100 or maybe in a fantastic year, 150 and then meanwhile, we had started to do the MCAS program and we were looking at those numbers, which started at a few 100 pretty quickly were at 1000, 2000, 5000, 10,000. The MCAS program was very low cost because we were doing it in high schools. We were folding it into the regular curriculum so that they would take some time out of their regular math or English class and do the MCAS these specific MCAS preparation curriculum. So, there was no…there was very little cost. The cost was really just the cost of the software, which is negligible.

So, we were looking at a situation where we had a couple of hundred students a year doing a very intensive job training program, which was very, very productive, but very small numbers. And meanwhile, on the other side of the ledger relegated 10,000 kids getting themselves into a higher level of language and math proficiency for very low cost.

And so, in my thinking, I was sort of back to the 1985, thinking, What's the better use of resources here? We've got all of these kids, thousands of kids who, if they don't get their skill levels up to a level where they could if they wanted to go on to college or other postsecondary training. If they don't get their skill levels up to there… up to that level, they're not going have… they're just not going have very good luck in the labor market.

So, what's the better use of resources to try to do something about these tens of thousands of kids who need to get their skill levels up so that they can have a post-secondary career? Or to continue spending a lot of money on these 10…or couple of hundred people for whom we're doing a very good job in getting him into the labor market at a really viable level. But you can

only do 100, or maybe a 200 year. So, are you going do the hunting of a couple 100 or are you going do the 10,000?

And obviously, we made the decision that the most the more efficient use of resources was to go for the 10,000 so that those kids, as they continued on for the rest of high school and in to postsecondary life, would have the skills to go to college or go to other, some other form of training. And that's that was the reasoning behind our eventual discontinuation of the job training programs and our focus entirely on high school academic support. Help kids develop better skills and position themselves better for post- secondary training and the labor market.

***GREG**: The blended learning specialists of JFY Network's help students increase their skills directly in the classroom. These increased skills lead to gains and school wide increased MCAS scores, as GARY explains…*

GARY: That's where we are now. We are still doing MCAS preparation. And that, of course, has become has taken on another whole life cycle because of the new MCAS 2.0. And we've also pushed a little farther into college readiness, which I'll come back to in a in a minute, getting kids prepared for postsecondary education or training. And that requires a little bit of discussion about what does that mean? And we have also begun to do early college, which means bringing college courses into high school so the kids can actually take college courses and accumulate college credits while they're still in high school.

These two things college readiness and, uh, early college reflect a substantial change in thinking, in government thinking, about education and its relation to the labor market.

***GREG**: With limited funding, educational organizations have to prioritize where and how they will be able to do the most good. GARY explains how JFYNetworks adapted while making these types of decisions.*

GARY: So we made our decision that the best thing that we could do with the resources that we have is to start in high school, get the reading and math skills and the language and math skills up, as high as we can, using the MCAS as our measurement tool and then keep going and get kids into a position where they can qualify for postsecondary education, which for a long time in Massachusetts and many others, most other states that has been measured by another test called the Accuplacer. Then, in the last three years or so, the stars of aligned in such a way that we can begin to set up college courses in high schools for the kids can actually take college courses while they're still in high school.

And, of course, in order to do that, they have to have the skills. So, we're kind of back to where we were 20 years ago.

Okay, here's the…now way pretty much can agree that postsecondary education is necessary in order to, in order to be viable in the labor market. You can argue, is a four-year degree necessary. Is a two-year degree sufficient? Maybe some kind of technical training is sufficient.

But even if you look at the requirements of any kind of technical training course at a school like, Wentworth or at a community college and you open the manual, you will see instantly that the reading skills and the math skills necessary to do that technical training course are far beyond anything that you're able to do.

And so, to get students ready to be able to do that requires some requires some teaching, and some training. Well, that's where we are now.

***GREG**: Education is constantly adapting and changing in order to create and provide the best practices for students. GARY shares his vision of what education will look like going forward.*

GARY: So, in 20 years, we have been able to increase MCAS scores. We have been able to reduce achievement gaps. Employers are finding it very difficult to grow because they can't find the workers. So, you can approach it from a social justice point of view, or you can approach it from a strict economic point of view. Whichever way you come at it; we have got to get all of our kids up to a much higher level than we ever thought we had to before.

We've been able to do that both at the MCAS level and at the occupational level, and now we provide academic support to help kids to handle the early college courses. The way that we do that, I'd like to say that it's some kind of black magic, but actually, it's pretty obvious. We have a curriculum and we develop a curriculum that is aligned to the standards that are in place, which it's the same statewide curriculum standards that were developed back in the 90's and have been revised continuously.

And by the way, the state standards on which all of this stuff is based. The standards were developed by teachers. They were developed by some bureaucrats in Malden or even worse, some bureaucrats in Washington. These standards were developed starting in the 90's by hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of Massachusetts teachers in every subject area, who spent all of their summers, and all of their vacation time, developing the standards for every subject area at every grade level. These the books of these standards are about an inch thick at each grade level, and they're continually revised.

So, the point that I'm making is that the curriculum standards that all of our discussions are based on these standards were developed by teachers. When we go into a school, we train the teachers ourselves, and we support them throughout the year. We learned a long time ago that if you just hand people on operations manual and log them into the software and wish them luck, the they're probably not going have a very good time with your program.

You have to train them, and you can't train them for eight hours at the beginning and then walk away when we train for a couple of hours at the beginning. But then we go into the classroom and work with them on a continuous basis throughout the year, not every day, but at least once every couple of weeks, sometimes once a week, sometimes more than once a week. But we

provide constant ongoing support, supervision, help, advice, coffee, doughnuts, whatever it takes to keep them going.

And then we have a continuous data feedback. We're looking at the reports. Software produces student performance reports every minute, so you can follow exactly what students are doing minute by minute. If you want to. There's no there's no such thing as four weeks into the course, you give a quiz and you realize, *Oh my God,* uh, a bunch of kids haven't learned anything. You find that out four days into the course with our system.

And when we find that out, we're right back in the classroom with the teacher and sometimes with the student trying to figure out why this isn't happening. And sometimes the reason why it's not happening is that the student doesn't have the underlying skills that are necessary to do the algebra or geometry curriculum that they're supposed to be doing.

When we find that that's the case, remember, we're on line here, so if we find out that the reason why the student can't do three times the quantity five x minus Y, is that he can't do three times five, then we just close out the Algebra, we pull up the menu, we scroll down to multiplication. We hit the button, we go back to multiplication and we start back at that point, and that's the kind of adaptability that you have if you're in a good and comprehensive online program.

So, we have that constant, data driven feedback that enables us to continually examine performance data and adapt the instruction to what the data are telling us about what the student needs. And that's individual, as you could do that student by student, because the reporting is student by student, so that that feedback loop is really the core of your progress that we're able to attain. If you don't have feedback, if you don't have measurement, if you don't measure it, you can't manage it. So that's what that's what we're up to now.

And from where we started in 1976 to the present time, what we do has certainly changed a lot, but the purpose of what we do really hasn't changed at all. It's still about helping what we used to call disadvantaged youth, prepare themselves for a viable future in our economy and also for a viable future as knowledgeable citizens of a democracy. The two things are two sides of the same coin. We did it a little bit differently with a little different age group 40 years ago, 30 years ago, but we're doing…we're doing the same thing with a somewhat younger age group now.

I think you could still, you could still call us Jobs for Youth if you wanted to, but we prefer JFYNetworks because it's more inclusive. We maintain the JFY is part of the name, but it's really a network of schools, of software, of support, the support that we provide and the total collaboration of schools' employers.

***GREG**: In order to prepare students for the job market, GARY points out that high schools will not be the only institutions which will need to adapt.*

GARY: Students [are] taking college courses at younger ages. So, college is not going be. It's not going be 12 years of high school, two years of one sort of college, four years of another sort of college that's going to break up. It'll be you'll probably still be 12 years of high school. But a couple of those years will start to bleed into college level work, and you'll have, as they do in some states already now, like Texas, you'll have a substantial number of kids leaving high school after 12 years with an associate degree. Then it'll be a question of what's next. So, there'll only be two more years to a bachelor's degree.

So, you'll have. You'll have people earning bachelor's degrees in 14 years instead of 16 years. I think things will start to get more job specific, and the question of, "What kind of a degree you have?" is not going be the question. It's going be, "What skills do you have?"

However, if anyone thinks that even now that vocational training is easier than academic training, they should go take a look at some vocational schools. There's no there's no easy path to employability anymore. If you're you know you're going to be an electrician's, for example, open an electrician's manual and see if you can get through two pages of it. The reading skills and the math skills involved in every occupation are just going way up, and that's of course, accelerated by the infusion of artificial intelligence and machine learning.

More and more of the jobs that used to require human intervention are being taken over by essentially robots. What it means is that you're going to have to learn new skills constantly. You're going to have to be continually getting are getting retrained or retraining yourself. That means you've got to have a sound foundation of language skills. You've got to be able to read. You've got to be able to understand what you read, and you've got to have good math skills. You're going to have to be able to compute. You're going to have to be able to understand mathematical processes because you're going to need those two basic skills, language, skills and math skills in order to continue to retrain yourself.

If you can't retrain yourself, you're going to be out of a job. I think you know lifelong learning is a term that's been bandied about for quite a while. It's correct. Long learning is where we're at now, which is another reflection on the structure of the education system. It's not 12 years of high school, four years of college and you're done, you never have to open a book again. That is not the way it's going to be at all. You're going to have to open a book every year or so to learn some new skill.

***GREG**: The United States wants a leader in education now has some catching up to do, as GARY points out…*

GARY: Our performance measurements nationally have been flat and slightly declining for five or six years now. Internationally, it's more alarming. On the international tests like PISA and TIMSS. We decline every time these tests are given. 20 years ago, we were number one on all the international tests. Now we're number 17 number 20 and every time a new one comes, a

new set of results comes out, we slide down a few more notches, not because we're getting less skilled, but because the rest of the world is getting much more skilled.

So, in an international economy, where it's all about, it's really all about the skills of the workforce. If the skills of your workforce are declining or are not competitive. then your economy is in jeopardy, and that's kind of where we are.

What we're doing at the high school level, trying to build the foundational skills that enable students, to keep going to finish high school to get some college credits to go on and finish some kind of post- secondary education. But more importantly, to put themselves in a position to be able to maintain the pace of lifelong learning as the economy changes right under their feet.

We have to do a much better job back in high school than we have been doing on, you know, and people will say with good reason. High school is a bit late in the game. You should have been back there in first grade. Yes, it would be better if we started in first grade. It would be better if we started before that. But high school is the last chance for most kids and for kids who are not…40% that we just measured…of kids who had by 10th grade aren't at grade level. You can't just write those kids off and say, Well, we'll do a better job with the third graders. You have to do something with those kids because they're the next the next cohort of our workforce.

High school is not too late. There is still time in high school to make significant gains in skills. And if we don't do that in high school, remember that high school is the last stage of free public education. It's…for low income kids, high school is really the last chance. If we don't if we don't do something, if we don't help them develop their skills in high school, once they're out of high school, they have to start paying for it. And many are not going to because they can't. So high school is really where the rubber finally meets the road, and we've just got to do the best possible job we can at that level so that everybody walks out of high school with 12th grade reading and math levels.

***GREG**: We hope you've enjoyed this first podcast from JFYNetworks. If you have any questions or comments, we hope you'll navigate to our website www.jfynet.org We also invite you to follow us on Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and YouTube. Thank you for listening to this podcast. This has been a production of JFYNetworks.*