

JFYNet Podcast – JULY 2020, Partner School, Kingsman Academy Public Charter Presents in Washington DC

GREG: *This month's podcast features excerpts from a presentation by Kingsman Academy Public Charter School in Washington, DC, a JFYNet partner school.*

The presentation to the DC Public Charter School Board took place on June 20th. It featured SHANNON HODGE and KENNESHA KELLY from Kingsman Academy's leadership team, and DOUG FINN from Marzano Resources. The topic was competency-based learning, a model being adopted by Kingsman.

As the presenters explain, shortly after the school's opening in 2015, the Kingsman staff and administration realized that their operational plan was not serving the needs of their student population as they had thought it would. So, they went back to square one and spent the next few years redesigning the school from the ground up. The current move to competency-based learning is the final step of their rebuilding process.

This podcast was created by JFY Networks, a Boston based nonprofit provider of remote learning programs to schools, students, and parents. JFY's individualized, self-paced curricula help raise individual and school performance measures by maintaining grade level skills and combating learning loss. JFY provides online ELA and math curricula aligned to state in college standards from grade six through high school, with personal support online and via phone from friendly learning specialists like yours truly. For JFY Networks, I'm GREG Cunningham.

SHANNON HODGE is the outgoing executive director of Kingsman Academy, and shares the motivation behind this new educational design for Kingsman was their desire to create a program around the students they serve.

SHANNON HODGE: In the months and years that preceded Kingsman Academy's opening, the city dealt with serious questions about whether and how charter schools could serve students who are Kingsman Academy's target population. Students who are over aged and under credited, students who have attendance and truancy issues, and students who have emotional and behavioral challenges. I believed then, and I believe now that both sectors should be evaluated in part on how we educate these specific students.

When the Kingsman Academy founding team applied for a charter in 2014, we did so with the understanding that the road ahead of us would be difficult. But we had no idea what we were facing. We quickly realized that the school we planned on paper, would not work for the students who walked into the building. Our academic program, our physical space, our accountability goals, and our staffing structure all felt innovated when we applied, but soon proved to be poor fits for our students. So as an entire school community, we set about redesigning the school to be what are students needed.

Co-founder and deputy director KENNESHA KELLY led this work. Over multiple years, she redesigned the school from the ground up, bringing in evidenced based research strategies from inside and outside of education, to rebuild Kingsman Academy around the students we serve. Redesigned learning spaces, restorative practices, project-based learning, customized technology platforms, personalized competency-based education. These are all ideas that she made come to life at Kingsman Academy to better serve our students.

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One additional piece of our puzzle will come together once we're able to move to competency-based learning credits. As explained in the application before you, the traditional Carnegie unit, time-based credit earning system assumes students learn at the same pace and conserved to punish those who learn differently. As a result, it serves as a barrier to credit earning and high school completion for students most at risk of dropping out, the very students we serve. Six years ago, we could not have proposed the Kingsman Academy that we now know we need to be. The alternative accountability framework didn't exist. The alternative school star framework didn't exist. Competency based learning had not yet reached the District of Columbia. What Kingsman Academy is becoming is, to me, evidence of the innovation and opportunity that charter schools can provide to improve the learning of all students, especially those who have struggled the most to find success in school. We as a city have a long way to go, but there are examples throughout the city of how nontraditional schools can and do serve all students well.

GREG: *As co-founder of Kingsman Academy, KENNESHA KELLY, the newly appointed Executive Director, has worked with students since the school opened. Her own experience, coupled with evidence gathered from surveys and academic data, provided a catalyst to design an academic program which would help students succeed, but also hold them accountable for their own learning.*

KENNESHA KELLY: Our proposed competency based academic program is an evidence-based alternative to a traditional Carnegie unit credit earning system. In a Carnegie based credit earning system, the goal is for all students to progress the course content on pace with their age and grade level cohorts. Because the system is time based, students are expected to move the course content at a standardized pace, even if the student knows the material and is ready to move ahead, or if the student does not fully understand concepts and skills, and needs additional time to learn the material.

Within our proposed competency-based credit earning system, time is not the driving factor in whether students earn credits. Instead, the focus is on whether the student has demonstrated proficiency on critical course concepts at each phase of postsecondary readiness and is ready to move on to the next level. Students have multiple opportunities and ways to demonstrate proficiency. Students have voice and choice in teaching in the learning process.

More importantly, the proposed academic program allows Kingsman Academy to create multiple pathways to graduation and postsecondary readiness, with real time progress monitoring along the way. While teachers could be creative and innovative and how to teach students and meet the needs of students within the framework, Kingsman Academy has direct access to a team of national experts and a partnership with Marzano Academies, to make sure the school remains consistent in what is taught, how competency based units will be earned, and how students would demonstrate competency in courses. Transitioning away from a Carnegie system will provide Kingsman Academy the flexibility in the ways that a student can earn credit, allows students to work on skills, content and knowledge at their current level and individualized pace, regardless of their age, academic history, prior academic performance or disability status.

The proposed charter amendment will allow Kingsman Academy to implement our academic model with fidelity and better respond to identify the needs our targeted population.

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GREG: *Based on their research and experiences in the first years after Kingsman Academy's founding, Ms. Kelly determined the Marzano approach to competency-based learning was the best approach in helping their students to find success.*

KENNESHA KELLY: To SHANNON's earlier point, we spent quite a bit of time trying to figure out how do we design an academic program to meet the needs of our students. We engaged in a pretty robust strategic planning process and we interviewed students, staff and families. We collected survey data. We analyzed historical academic data. We really talked to our students about what they needed in an academic program.

Once we had a good sense of what we needed, we spent quite a bit of time doing research to identify some of the best framework that we could use to implement our program, and we reached out to Marzano Research just to engage them in our ideas and that initial conversation really led us to realize that the alignment in terms of the values of Marzano Academies, and at the time Marzano Resources, was in direct alignment to what we needed to provide to our students and our families. It was just the basic components that we were trying ourselves as a school.

So how do we engage students who may not adhere to the sort of these traditional norms around school engagement? How do we make sure that we have a learning management system to track student progress along the way? How do we identify critical course content the students need in order to progress? And then within that, how do we make sure we have a system in place, not just for accountability, but to make sure our staff received the training that they needed? There are a lot of frameworks that are out there around competency based, but Marzano Research has been doing this work for years, and they really laid the foundation for what it needs to look like, if a student, if a school implements a competency based model. They really check the boxes off in terms of in terms of what we were looking for.

GREG: *DOUG FINN is an associate and manager of the Marzano division of Reinventing Schools and explains how their program provides a cohesive system of competency-based learning, fulfilling the structure Kingsman Academy was seeking.*

DOUG FINN: The nature of the relationship, you know, started as a kind of very entry level support to go into and the amount that Kingsman Academy has taken the ideas, and as you said, kind of that core understanding of what education is, has really developed them into a wonderful merger between what our ultimate goal is for education and what Kingsman Academy's goal is for their students. Dr. Marzano has, I guess he likes to joke in the later part of his career, he is in now, he's bringing it all together, culminating all of the research he's done over the 40 plus years to bring it into a cohesive system instead of just fragments of research that's out there. And so just talking with KENNESHA over the past couple weeks, at moving towards this year coming forward, we're almost lockstep in our thinking of what needs to be done for our students. So, we're very confident and comfortable with the relationship we have them with them, and it feels just almost like a friendship that we're working with. So, we're very encouraged to work with Kingsman throughout this upcoming year.

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GREG: *Kingsman Academy has continued to work with their population of students, and realized the need to serve the whole student, not just their educational needs. Under the Carnegie system, students were not motivated to learn, as Ms. Kelly explains.*

KENNESHA KELLY: We've learned a lot. I think the first thing was to start slow, slow, and steady wins the race but have very clear objectives in terms of benchmarks along the way. I think there are multiple ways that a school can jump into a competency-based program. We definitely took the more strategic approach by making sure that we were collaborating and communicating with our students and families. The first thing we did after the research that we did internally and reaching out to Marzano Resources, was to adopt a standards reference report card. That was really the first communication that we have with our families that were headed in the right direction. What that did was, it took away this pressure of a student trying to get an A, although they didn't know the content at the pace that they were expected to know it. So, for example, we were able to communicate to students and say, your proficiency scale, we're going to measure your content based on a 0 to 4 skill, not an A, B, C, D or F scale.

It made our students motivated and inspired not to give up when they encountered course content that they didn't know. And once we heard students talk about the scale in the sense that, "I have a two. What does it take for me to get a three? What do I need to know? What do I need to learn? I didn't do a good job the first time, but I'm practicing, and I want to get better," we knew we were on the right track.

The fact that we could put that skill on a report card meant that we had a tool to communicate to our families about the direction that we were headed in with the school. The fact that we were able to kind of gradually introduce this to a school community meant that we were able to learn a new learning management system so that we can personalize course content for students. We had to teach our teachers how to use the system. But we also have to teach our students. We took our time in order to get to that space.

The other component that was extremely important was that when DOUG came in when we started the relationship in the partnership, we provided our teachers with professional development. So we're three years in at this point and they're not hearing anything for the first time. They're ready to just implement fully with fidelity. But professional development was definitely there in the beginning, we were not expecting them to learn everything in one year. But over time they've been able to learn the framework, learned the model, practice the model and then helped their peers and support their peers when new staff came on board.

GREG: *The ending of this past school year provided new and unforeseen challenges, as Kingsman Academy, along with all other DC schools, were forced to switch from meeting students in the classroom to meeting them remotely online. While the platform being used may have been different, Kingsman Academy was still able to provide support to the overwhelming majority of their students.*

KENNESHA KELLY: When we knew that we had to prepare for Covid-19, we really focused on our primary areas to implement our distance learning plan. The first was individualized

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academic engagement. We knew we had a learning framework that was designed to support our students anytime, anywhere. And that the content was already personalized for their needs, regardless of their disability status or how many grade levels they were behind, that they were able to access content that fit them, and then the instructional resources were aligned to their needs as well.

We also designed a master schedule that was aligned to our multi-tier system of support system. So, students were grouped into cohorts through distance learning so that teaching teams and support staff could push in to support students as they were learning or receiving live instruction, but also support them if they needed one-on-one support.

The second area was targeted interventions and supports. Quite a few of our students require intensive behavioral intervention. So we assigned behavior support staff, intervention specialists, behavior interventionists, to engage with a very small group of students so that everyone in the building had someone that they could go to. But we also didn't want to put such a burden on our staff that they were not able to respond to the needs and navigate their own Covid-19 challenges. We had morning check-in, community meetings with students, check-in small group instruction.

The third was making sure that our students with IEP's and special needs had their specifically designed instructional plans and programs in place. We coordinated student support services, so every single student had a Chromebook and a hotspot. We knew that that will be important. And then we made sure that our students had food each week.

Then the last piece was, how do we support our students and our families with technology and access to technology? So, we held virtual office hours. The students were trained to provide peer-to-peer support for our management systems. And then the one thing I think we were most excited about is that our PBIS System [Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports] has been customized for Kingsman, and it's also an anytime, anywhere PBIS system that's individualized for students. So, we were able to keep them motivated as they hit certain benchmarks along the way.

GREG: *Since students already have individualized plans in place, meeting online didn't feel all that different from meeting in the building during the school day, as Ms. Hodge explains.*

SHANNON HODGE: I think that the main thing for us was, what we call the virtual school didn't really feel too different from our regular school programming. The systems that students were using, with the exception of the video conferencing software, were ones that they were already familiar with. So once we provided hotspots all of the students for Internet access and Chromebooks, we were able to roll out virtual school pretty seamlessly.

The other thing, I think, is also for us, the reason didn't feel different because our general approach to how we're doing school with our students, is to make sure their needs are met before we jump into the learning and so some places you'll see that is Maslow before Bloom. I think that's certainly true for our students. I often tell people that for our students, the first question they get asked in the morning can't be, "Did you do your math homework?" It may need to be. "Did you eat last night? Did you have a place to sleep? Do you need a shower?"

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And so, for many of our students, those same kind of stressors happened with Covid-19 and so for us, it felt kind of par for the course for us to check on their needs first, before we jumped into the learning. So that certainly helped with virtual school.

GREG: *Should circumstances require the school to open only remotely in the fall, the staff and administration are ready to provide continued support to students.*

KENNESHA KELLY: I think the biggest challenge we had and what will have to improve on for next year is that for students who required intensive behavioral interventions, they were less likely to initially engage in distance learning to the point that SHANNON just talked about. The way our school is designed, we have what we call priority areas, and they are areas beyond academics, where we have to make sure those needs are met first before we get to some of the more traditional school academic priority areas.

So those areas are behavior support services, health, and wellness in light of Covid-19, and student engagement and then academics. Once we identify a student's a priority area, we implement evidence-based practices to make sure that we're responding to their needs but are doing it in a way that's helpful and is sustainable over time.

I think as we think about the upcoming school year, we know that quite a few of our students are already behind in credits, so they're going to require credit recovery. We know that our middle school students in particular are ready to get inside the building and socialized, so what we're doing right now is reaching out to our individual students and families to learn about what their needs are and make sure that our plan for the upcoming school year aligns to their needs, but also to the public health guidelines.

GREG: *Using a competency-based learning format lends itself perfectly for students no matter from where they are learning, and they're always able to continue learning wherever and whenever they left off.*

KENNESHA KELLY: If we look across each priority area, I think we have about 10 students in our daytime program who are disengaged. Once we tried to dig into the information a little bit more, most of those issues were related to just life circumstances, what we were just calling public health social determinants of health, and they had to focus on those areas of life, and academics wasn't a priority.

The great thing about a competency-based framework is that we start with that student wherever they left off. So, it's not like they miss content that they're falling behind. If they're disengaged, we're right here waiting for them. We're ready to move them along in their content once we get them back engaged in school.

We have an amazing support team at Kingsman Academy. We have a community based social worker. We have intervention support staff, who are really on the ground making sure that the kids have what they need. It just may not be academics, and I think that's the one lesson we definitely learned during Covid-19. But it was also the one thing that we've been trying to solve for since we've been open.

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GREG: *We hope you have enjoyed hearing about the competency-based learning plan being enacted by JFYNet partner school Kingsman Academy Public Charter School in Washington, DC. Audio from this podcast originated during a presentation to the DC Public Charter School Board, held on June 20th, 2020 by SHANNON HODGE, KENNESHA KELLY and DOUG FINN. Thank you for listening to this podcast. I'm GREG Cunningham. This has been a production of JFY Networks.*

