

Highest Aspirations Podcast: S1/E28

How Nebraska's Lincoln High School Supports Linguistic and Cultural Diversity

Steve Sofronas:

Hello, Maira. Welcome to Highest Aspirations.

Maira M. R.:

Thank you, Steve, for the opportunity. I'm really excited to share what we're doing here at Lincoln High.

Steve Sofronas:

Yeah, it's a pleasure. We had been in contact way back in I think June. We're sitting here on November 1st. I read an article about the school and we've been back and forth, and it's exciting to finally have the chance to talk.

Maira M. R.:

Again, I'm really excited as well.

Steve Sofronas:

Great. I want to start by referencing and quoting that article that I just mentioned in the Washington Post that featured your school and get your reaction to it. There's a quote that said, "At Lincoln High School in Nebraska, the slogan in the middle of everywhere is more than just a fun jab at teasing about being a flyover country. It actually reflects the life of the school, which lives those words every day through its vibrant immigrant student community hailing from seemingly everywhere around the globe." Is that an accurate description for you?

Maira M. R.:

Definitely. One of our ... Here at Lincoln High, we have four links. Instead of a mascot, we have four Links, and one of those is diversity. Just the fact that you can walk into the school and just, first step that you walk in here you're going to see flags around the school that represent the different countries our students come from. You'll see them in the hallway. It's fun to see a little bit of everywhere in the world here at Lincoln High.

Steve Sofronas:

I love it when you mention that the first thing you see is those flags, so immediately you're in that world and living it.

Maira M. R.:

Exactly. Kids always ask about them too when they come in. I've given tours from aspiring future teachers that want to know, "What are the flags? Why do you have all these flags?" We talk about them representing every student, or most of our students here at Lincoln High.

Steve Sofronas:

That's great. Could you tell us briefly about your role at Lincoln High School as it relates to newcomer students and English-language learners?

Maira M. R.:

Yes. I am an instructional coordinator, which is basically an administrative position here at Lincoln High. When it comes to discipline or my caseload of students, it's all ELL students level one through four, including newcomers. I work with them when it comes to discipline or helping them find supports that they need. Sometimes it's just they come in here and they say, "Hey, I have this teacher. Can you help me talk to them? I'm shy about it." Just here to support the students, basically. But I also work with the ELL teachers, it's the department I overlook, and as long as the World Language too. That's a little bit about what I do here. There's a lot of ... I also do parent engagement, but that's the gist of it.

Steve Sofronas:

That's great, and we're going to talk about some of that family engagement stuff a little bit later. But I think it's wonderful that you have that role of just ... And not "just," we say "just," but supporting these students is huge with the issues that they have, and perhaps being a liaison with other teachers and then supporting those ELL teachers as well. Lincoln High School serves students who collectively speak over 30 different languages. How have you gone about creating support systems to work with all these students?

Maira M. R.:

Here at Lincoln High we have liaisons that help us communicate with families, and these liaisons don't just help with students that are in ELL classes. Sometimes they've exited, or they've been here their whole entire life, but parents didn't attend a school here in the US. So just helping them understand the different culture in our school system compared to back home. That's one of the ways that we help support students. We also have specific ... a four-year plan for students that come to our school as knowing no English to hopefully get them to graduate within four years. Sometimes it takes a little bit longer, and sometimes the four years is enough.

Steve Sofronas:

Let's actually talk a little bit about those liaisons that you mentioned. I think that's really interesting, and I'm going to have you talk a little bit more about them. But as I understand it these liaisons are also cultural ambassadors, and I know that they're an important part of the work that you do, not only with language support but also with cultural responsiveness. First of all, who are these people, and what are the main responsibilities of this role?

Maira M. R.:

Our liaisons, some people, we like to say they're not just interpreters. People say like, "I need to call an interpreter to communicate with this family." But they're not just interpreters. We like to call them liaisons because they help us, oh, yes, overcome that language barrier, but also helping our families understand the different systems in our school. They also just help us plan activities throughout the year. They're always at parent-teacher conferences to help assist with that. So one of their biggest responsibilities is to help break that language barrier, but also just any cultural piece that we need to help parents understand, but also that we the staff here at Lincoln High and all across the district don't know or want to know more about, we can always reach out to our liaisons and say, "Talk to me about this issue. Why is this a big deal?" They are the middle person. They help communicate both with parents and us, our staff.

Steve Sofronas:

It sounds like you're leveraging the talent and knowledge, so to speak, of the people who are in your community to address those questions that ... It's always the case, right, that say you have a hundred teachers, not every teacher is going to know everything about every culture and certainly not every language, so having these folks must be really useful to those teachers if they know that they have them around and they're already in the communities.

Maira M. R.:

Exactly. Our liaisons are not just someone that grew up in the US and learned the language to help translation. Our liaisons are parents, are people that came here and finished their undergrad, came here as refugees. Just basically they are our representative of our students, their life, so they are very well-known within the community, and that also helps because parents will easily reach out to them. When I have a parent come in here, the first thing they mention is, "I called so-and-so to help me with this," and they know all about them or they have them, like, the first person on their cell phone that they call whenever they have a question about school. You can see them ... They know what events are going on. They know what's going on within each community. We just have basically our liaisons that represent the different cultures that we have here within our student population.

Steve Sofronas:

It sounds like this has been a really successful homegrown model. How have you been able to find these liaisons and get them up to speed? Is there a way that you find them? Are they excited to join? Then once they do, what do you do to get them up to speed? Are they well-prepared to do it and excited, or is there something that you have to do to get them ready?

Maira M. R.:

Well, they are hired by the district, so we don't do any of that recruitment. But I know that just based on who is hired sometimes those people will say, "Well, I also have this other friend whose English is proficient and they are well-liked within the community." I'm not 100% sure on that process, how we get them on board. I just know it started a long time ago and now we have a lot more liaisons that help us here within the district.

Steve Sofronas:

And it sounds like, I certainly don't want to speak for the district, but this homegrown model and having people from the community who are doing this work must instill a whole lot of pride into not only what they're doing and their own ability to effect change and to be a part of the school community, but also, you mentioned at the beginning that there are flags everywhere representing all these countries, you also have members of the community who represent these flags are who are it sounds like an integral part of what you're doing there.

Maira M. R.:

Yes. And just to add a little bit more, what's really exciting about our liaisons is a lot of our liaisons have achieved different positions within the district, and being a liaison is the first step kind of thing. Currently one of our ELL teachers here at Lincoln High started as a liaison, went to school, got their teaching certificate, and are now teaching ELL in the classroom.

Steve Sofronas:

Great.

Maira M. R.:

I know of another one who also started as a liaison and now is a principal at one of our middle schools. So, it's really cool to have not just they come from our community, but also see them grow as a professional in helping with our student population.

Steve Sofronas:

That's a win-win. It's a win for them, but it's also frankly a win for the district. I can't think of a better way to hire somebody who you know is going to be a culture fit, so to speak, in the district then by having them do such important work and then seeing them go through what it takes to get certified or whatever you need to do to become a teacher. Those people are vetted, they're well-known to both the school community and to the outside community, so you have this great recruiting funnel and you have these people I think sort of ... not "sort of," they're achieving and doing amazing things. That's really great and something I think for listeners to think about when they think about community engagement, family engagement. I like how you mentioned the idea that these people are not just interpreters, they are liaisons, and how you can actually build a pipeline of passionate, effective teachers and staff for your school.

Maira M. R.:

Yeah, and we also have had students that graduated from Lincoln High and other high schools here in the district that have become liaisons. That's also really cool to see them come back for our parent-teacher conferences and help families interpret. Again, they're also students that were well-known and role models for other students, so it's great to just use those resources that are already here within our community and help grow them.

Steve Sofronas:

I talk to so many people on this podcast and in other venues, and I feel like people talk about the schools that are successful are leveraging this in a very ... or the school districts that are successful with English-language learners are leveraging this resource, this precious resource that we have, and others that really haven't delved into this work too deeply find themselves floundering a little bit with the whole idea of cultural responsiveness, and find themselves a little bit overwhelmed, instead of excited and energized by the idea that they have all these different languages and all these different cultures represented. So, I think you're doing great work. It's a key part of building a school community.

Maira M. R.:

Thank you.

Steve Sofronas:

We've talked a little bit indirectly about the work that you're doing with parent or family engagement. I want to get a little bit more into that, because that's a huge topic. I was just at a conference in Detroit, the WIDA conference, and boy, there was so much talk ... I was really excited to hear so much talk about family engagement and community engagement. I know that at Lincoln there are opportunities for families to attend sessions about college, there's even one called High School 101. Could you talk to us about how you got these programs off the ground and maybe what you've learned from them, just to give people an idea of not only what it is you're doing but how they've evolved and what you've learned, what lessons you can give to others?

Maira M. R.:

Yeah. This started last year. I know that in the past we've tried to hold sessions where we do it for specific languages. Last year what we decided was to really focus on that, because we have nights throughout the year where it's, like, financial aid night or college nights, but we didn't have a lot of attendance from our minority groups, and specifically our Arabic, Karen and Spanish-Speaking families were not always showing up to these events. We decided to work with our liaisons and hear from them what they thought would help.

The planning part of it is sitting down with each one of our liaisons for about 20-ish minutes and talking about what night they think they'll have more attendance, what time. We tried to just work with them since they know the community, they know where the majority of them work or what their work schedules are like. We started off last year with hosting one night where we just did High School 101. Our liaisons kept saying like, "College is a little too much right now. They don't understand just even what it means to get to college, so we need to start from the very beginning, which, what are our high school requirements for graduation? What do classes look like? What are credits? What's a GPA? Just that basic information." We did that in one session with a translation back and forth for ... Because our counselors help with this event, so you'll have a counselor explain it in English and then the liaison will help translate. Then at the end we have a Q&A.

That's what we did last year, and this year we just had one, our Karen night, which was a couple weeks ago. We did it on a ... 4:00 just works great for that family, and we had 18 families show up out of 127, which we think is a good number. What we learned from that one just recently was at the end a lot of the questions were just parents wanted to know what are resources after school, like tutoring, all that kind of stuff. We actually had an afterschool resource center where students can get assigned to it or they can just walk in and get help from a teacher, specific dates and times. We printed out a bunch of copies of those, and parents were just thankful that that actually already existed. They just want to know what is available and how they can get the help too.

We had a lot of parents just ask about our attendance policy as well. That just really shows that we need to start from the basics. We can't go at them ... This is the differences in colleges, this is scholarships, grants that you need to apply for. It's just too much at the time, so then we decided to organize it this semester where first semester is just high school requirement information. Next semester we're going to do the session on college and financial aid night. Then one thing we're trying new this year is adding a morning session, because we've done them in the afternoons every time, in the evenings, and just from hearing back from the liaisons it sounds like some parents would benefit from just dropping off their kids at school and then coming up to a meeting at, like, 8:30 in the morning, because they're already awake, and they'll go home and then they'll sleep, because they work nighttime. That's one thing we're going to try. We haven't had a morning session yet, so hopefully those have great attendance as well.

Steve Sofronas:

This is great. It sounds like ... I'll take a few things out of there. Number one, I love the idea that you're talking to the liaisons who are also members of the community who can give you a real pulse or a real feel about what these future possible participants are thinking. As you were speaking, I was thinking to myself, and feel free to chime in here and correct me if I'm wrong, but oftentimes you have to figure out what these people don't want or don't need as opposed to what they do need. At a specific point in time, these people, like you mentioned, they don't want to know about colleges just yet because they don't even really understand how the system works, the actual high school. They don't know what's available to them.

I know as a high school teacher myself, I look back, and I taught for a long time in two very different communities, one community that was probably a similar demographic to Lincoln, although admittedly not as diverse, and then another district that was really not diverse at all. In both those places I found myself making assumptions about what parents knew, and as a parent myself now, I realize that the family engagement that we all think of, like sending a newsletter home or having a session on college, isn't really the most effective way to do it. So, I love the fact that you're taking a design-based approach almost, thinking about, "All right, what is it that these folks need, or what is it that they don't need?" Trying a few things, trying a few times, taking the data and saying, "We had 18 families out of," I think 120-something show up.

"What if we tried in the morning?" I think there's a lot to take out of that in terms of how to go about setting these up.

Maira M. R.:

Yeah, there definitely is. Because we did try it at the beginning, that's what we said, "Let's do a college night." It was a long session, there was a lot of questions, and it lasted two hours. It was like, "Whoa. This is a lot of information. Where do we go from here?" That's why we decided to break it down to just those basics. Even just the basic, one thing that we realized is we need to get better at making sure our parents bring their students with them. Oftentimes we talk about, like our software that we use to check their grades or attendance, we also talk about that at this session, how you create a login, how do you download the app, that kind of stuff. We're showing them these screenshots of what that looks like, but then we said, "Why don't we have the students here next to them opening up their Chromebook, we're a One-to-One school, opening up their Chromebook, showing them what that looks like so they know, and it's not just a bunch of pictures?"

Steve Sofronas:

And again, I look at myself as an example, and I didn't realize this before I had children of my own, but I consider myself pretty tech-savvy. I was a quasi-tech-integrator as well as a Spanish teacher in high school, I was using all of these tech tools, and now my kids come home and they're doing these things, and I honestly, it's hard for me to keep up with everything, and I'm someone who ... I work in educational technology now, I was a teacher using technology. I think frequently, I'm very empathetic toward people who are just coming here, learning about the system, learning about the community, and then all of a sudden they're faced with, "Oh, this is our student information system where we house all the data." Well, that's hard to understand.

Maira M. R.:

Yeah, and even for our students that are so young and can easily ... and are on their phone all the time, even just that, explaining to them that they have this access to this app that they can get to and check their grades, or even getting them to understand why to check your grades every so often. It's a lot.

Steve Sofronas:

Yeah, that's a whole other podcast episode on the idea that students are ... We consider these kids digital natives, so of course they know how to use technology. Well, yeah, they know how to use social media and play games and do other things that are interesting to them, but they don't all necessarily know how to use software designed to track grades and attendance and things like that, right? So we have a responsibility to teach them and their parents or their families how to best implement them, which is a challenging thing.

Maira M. R.:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). Just even yesterday we had a family come in for a meeting and we helped them set up their account, and they came with an older sister that was helping with the

translation. She was like, "Well, can I just have it on my app and show them, because they don't know how to use the phone in this way?" which is a huge gap, even just between our parents and our students too.

Steve Sofronas:

Of course. Well, we've talked a lot about family engagement, we've talked about the liaisons. I want to shift over a little bit to some of the academics and curriculum, because there are a couple of things that I read, and even I talked about a few months back now, about how you're tracking students and what you're doing with the curriculum. My first question there is about, you have a system where, and you and I talked about it, where you stack courses so students in various ranges within the same level can move from one teacher to another when appropriate. You're going to do a lot better of a job describing that than I am, so could you just describe how that system works? Because I think it's really unique and I think it's beneficial to think about scheduling as people are listening in.

Maira M. R.:

Yeah. Within our reading classes, our literature classes in the different levels, we try to stack those, meaning we offer two different sections of the level two literature class just so that teachers, once they get to know the students and they realize where they are in level, they can shift them through classes throughout the semester without messing up the rest of their schedule, and just try to base them, like, where we put our lower level-twos in one class and our higher level-twos in the other section. That's kind of what we're doing with the stacking, and they do move throughout the semester. Teachers are really good at looking at those students before classes start so we don't have to change everybody's schedule either. That's what we're doing right now with our reading classes.

Maira M. R.:

We did a little pilot of it last semester where two teachers had the same literature class at the same time, it was a level one, and they were teaching door-to-door. Then they just decided, they're like, "Hey, let's move these kids in here," and what was cool is there's a door that connected the classrooms, so they just had that open-

Steve Sofronas:

That's great.

Maira M. R.:

... and as they were doing different activities or doing the reading groups based on level, ability, they would just walk across the classrooms and go to the other station. That was great, so that's another thing that we considered when making the schedule. Can we put these classes next door to each other so that if we need to do some co-teaching it can happen, and it's easy?

Steve Sofronas:

It sounds to me you've just added another layer of personalization, differentiated instruction and flexibility, really, to make scheduling changes, which we all know as educators, especially in high school, is a nightmare at the beginning of the year as students shift around.

Maira M. R.:

No, it is, and even just our ELL world is always changing when it comes to who's arriving, what kind of levels. Right now we're overflowing in level two, and our level one is actually one of our smallest sections right now. So even just at quarter we close some sections and open up some more level two classes to try to keep those even with the numbers, so that we're getting ... Our classes, we try to keep them between 10 to 15 is the goal, but sometimes there are a little bit more students. We have some classes of 18 for those literature classes, but we try to keep those also small so that teachers can come around to each student and offer that one-on-one time.

Steve Sofronas:

Great. Talk to us about the effort that you have made to de-track the curriculum to create opportunities for all students, even those who may have been marginalized, so they can participate in higher-level courses. I'm curious as to how you've gone about supporting students with language barriers in these higher-level courses.

Maira M. R.:

A few years ago we started looking at our curriculum. We had a lot of students that were stuck at levels and staying there for a while, and then aging out and not being able to receive their diploma, unfortunately. What we decided to do is we added some courses just beginning in level one where they are getting graduation credit. We started a health class. Health is a requirement for graduation. What we did is we're teaching a level one health class so they'd get the objectives, they'd get the same type of material that they would get in a regular health class, but it's broken down with a lot of different strategies and accommodations for our ELL students where we use vocabulary, different strategies that are just going to be more comprehensive for our students.

That's one thing that we're doing within our ELL curriculum, but right now another thing that we're trying to do more and more of is working with our ELL district coach and other curriculum specialists to help support our general ed teachers that are seeing more of our ELL students [crosstalk 00:28:42] classes. Now what we're doing is we're pushing level threes. It used to be that they really didn't get into those science or harder math classes until they were almost out of ELL. Now we're making sure that students at level three are getting some sort of science class. So just working with the different departments, the science department, we have an ELL interventionist. She pulls students from classes to work on reading skills, writing skills, whatever it is they lack a skill of, but she also goes into our math classes and our science classes and helps support those teachers with just coming up with different strategies for test-taking, for vocabulary teaching.

We also offer professional development workshops throughout the year that teachers can attend where we just share some different resources. Our ELL instruction ... Our district coach comes to those and helps lead those so that teachers feel like, one, they know our coach, they get to see who she is and they feel more comfortable reaching out to her to come watch them in class or help with that. That's a little bit of what we're doing right now.

Steve Sofronas:

That's crucial, and central to a lot of the work that we're doing here at Ellevation: the idea of empowering classroom teachers, content teachers, to be able to work with these students who may not have necessarily been trained properly or trained at all to work with English-language learners, and to really make true the idea and the philosophy that we're all teachers of language as well as teachers of content. I imagine in a school like yours teachers must, and I love your responses, teachers must know that they're going to be most likely working with students like these. Do some of them actually come to the school specifically, even content teachers, to work with these diverse groups of students? Or do you find that they come in like any other teacher with a wide variety of skill sets when it comes to working with English-language learners?

Maira M. R.:

We always say that people that come to teach at Lincoln High are here because they want to teach at Lincoln High. They know what our population is like, they know kind of what to expect. I think more and more teachers are getting more ELL students in classes earlier than they thought, so they are coming to us too and telling us, "This is what we need. This is where we feel like we still need some support." And I always hear, like teachers that I just talk to in the hallway always talk about how great our ELL students are and how eager they are to learn the language and just graduate. So I know that our teachers enjoy our ELL students a lot, but they also sometimes have mentioned, "I'm not sure how to help them when it comes to this specific skill," or when it comes to even just instruction sometimes, the way we word them. We still even need to remember that basic, how do we explain an activity or objective or what they're going to be doing. So yeah, teachers expect these ELL students to be in their classes. It's becoming more and more.

Steve Sofronas:

But the fact, or not "but," "and," the fact that they're comfortable saying, "Look, this is something that maybe i'm having a hard time with. Could you come help me?" That's a culture that needs to be built, and I think that that's really important for content teachers to know that they have that support, number one, and number two, to not only know they have it but actually to use it. So, that communication is key, and it sounds like you're doing a great job there.

One of the last things I want to talk about is, and I read about this in the article as well, Lincoln High is a part of the Schools of Opportunity Project. Folks can learn about that on their own, I'll link to it at the end, but I'm just curious how that partnership has helped you with the work you're doing.

Maira M. R.:

Well, one, it has reaffirmed what we're doing. It's great to be acknowledged for things that we are working on and feel like we're doing something right, so it was a nice surprise. It was a nice encouragement for all our teachers. We're really proud. I don't want to brag, but we got the gold School of Opportunity award, so it was great. We received it, I think it was around April or May when it was announced. I can't remember exactly when it was. But it's just that we have affirmation that we are doing something right and kind of just pushed us to keep going further, like, "What's next from here?"

Steve Sofronas:

It's great, and that recognition is key. You just exemplified the classic humble educator where you said you don't want to brag. Well, I'll brag for you. It's a big deal and it's great, and frankly, it's one of the reasons that I was able to find out, and that hopefully that this episode and the other acknowledgement that you've received in the press will help others to do what you're doing, which leads me to one of my last questions, which is, I can imagine that there's people listening to this right now who are thinking, "Well, this is great. I wish my school was like that." What little steps would you advise that educators like you take to start the process of creating the kind of learning everything you have in Lincoln?

Maira M. R.:

Well, I would start with finding people in the community. I know that people often say it, but it's crucial to involve all stakeholders. Hearing from your students, what do our students need? What do our parents feel like they need? And working with those community leaders that know those specific communities we are trying to help to gather information on what we need and what they feel it's lacking.

Also including our ELL teachers and our general ed teachers in those conversations. Here at the district we have an ELL steering committee, which this is my first year being a part of it, but they include different teachers throughout the district, administrators, some of our liaisons are a part of it. Our federal programs coordinator is a part of it. The director, she basically sets up these once-a-quarter meetings. We talk about what teachers are saying, what students are saying, and where are we going next, what's still an area that we need to improve on. One of those topics in our last one was that helping our science teachers, that we're seeing more and more students in there, and we need to come up with ways to help them. So just starting with a committee, figuring it out, what is it that we need and is going to have the most impact right now?

Steve Sofronas:

In some ways we're right back to where we started, just leveraging the people that you have in your school and your community to come together, figure out not only what you're doing well and give yourself well-deserved congratulations, but figuring out what's next. Where are the problems, where are the challenges, and what in-house and in-community, I guess for lack of a better term, resources you can use to solve these problems. I think it's great, and I think it's

crucial, the idea of community. The more people I speak with, the more people mention that. So that's wonderful advice.

We'll close by asking you the same question that I ask everybody who comes on the podcast, which is, is there a book or other resource that has inspired you either personally or professionally, either one, that you would recommend that listeners read?

Maira M. R.:

Right now I can't think of a book that I've read lately, but one of our greatest resource here in LPS is, well, our Nebraska Department of Education. They have a website that we refer to a lot with our English-language learner programs with a lot of different resources on accommodations, how we can support our general ed teachers, how to best serve our English learners. If you would go to the website of the Nebraska Department of Education and just type "English language learners," there's a ton of resources, and we use a lot of this for our professional development. We pull from these resources that they share to try to plan our professional development around that. Then you also get to see a little bit about what's going on across the state.

Steve Sofronas:

I think it's so great that you're pointing to a state department of education and saying how great it is and saying that you actually use it for PD. That is becoming more and more the case as I speak with people, and while a lot of people give us wonderful books, both professional and personal, to share, I think it's a great reminder that you just gave us that there is information that's very easily accessible that is quite useful, and created and designed by people who have their hearts in the right place for this work. So, thank you so much for mentioning that.

Maira M. R.:

Yeah, and even just there, I want to point this out because this is a resource that we love, within there you can see that we broke down the different levels of English-language learners, and what their abilities are at the moment. So you'll see a level one right now, what you should be able to expect them to do in a science class or a math class. It's a lot of information and there's so much to navigate through, so just taking the time one tab at a time.

Steve Sofronas:

Sure. It can be overwhelming, but if you know what you're looking for it's great to have it there. Well, Maira, it's been an absolute pleasure to speak with you finally after lots of planning, and I really appreciate you coming on.

Maira M. R.:

Yeah, of course. Thank you, Steve, for letting me share the work that we are doing here at Lincoln High. I'm really proud of this school, and I'm glad to be a Link.



Steve Sofronas:

You should be. Congratulations on all your work, and thank you so much.

Maira M. R.:

Thank you.