

Beyond the Dais: Episode 30 – An Interview with Atlas Preparatory School

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Scott Anderson: Thank you for tuning in to Beyond the Dais, a podcast about the stories taking place in and around El Paso County, Colorado. I'm your host, Scott Anderson, and I have three guests today from Atlas Preparatory School. They are Calley Mannion, the Director of Development, Sara Martin, the Director of Wellness, and Veronica Felix, who is a high school social worker. How's everyone doing today?

Calley Mannion: Great. Doing good.

Sara Martin: Thanks for having us.

Veronica Felix: Great.

Scott: Well, thank you for having me here. I'm here at Atlas Preparatory School, so if at some point you hear announcements over the loudspeaker or a bell chime, we're at a school, you know, what do you expect? So today we'll be talking about some of the programs associated with Atlas Preparatory School and how they're putting American Rescue Plan Act grant funds to good use here in the community. But first, if you're interested in more stories about ARPA funding throughout El Paso County, or hearing from county leadership about local government priorities and how they operate, you can find additional episodes of this podcast on your podcast platform of choice. But that's it, let's get into it. If we could start by having someone here share a little bit of background about yourself and how you came to be here at Atlas Prep. Maybe we'll go around the room. Calley, we'll start with you.

Calley: Yeah, absolutely. I'm Calley Mannion. I'm the Director of Development here at Atlas Prep. For those of you who that sounds like the vaguest title you can possibly imagine, that means fundraising. So, I joined Atlas back in June of 2022. I've been working in nonprofit sector for years now and lots of different combinations of roles, but really got passionate about the storytelling of students in educational spaces and moved out here to Colorado Springs. Found Atlas and got really excited about the mission. Wanted to join the work and help people in the community learn about supporting our kids.

Scott: Great, Sarah, how about you?

Sara: Sara Martin, I am the Director of Wellness, and I started at Atlas about four years ago as a licensed clinical social worker. I've been a licensed clinical social worker for about 7 years now in the Charter world. I moved to Colorado Springs around that time and was just really passionate also about charter education and providing access to really high-quality education for students. And so very similarly, when I found the mission of Atlas, was really excited to apply. In July, my job transitioned from licensed clinical social worker to the Director of Wellness, in large part due to the grants that we were able to secure. Our team expanded significantly, which I'm sure we'll jump into in a little bit, but my role was created to support that team. So, I'm currently working with 14 mental health professionals who are at Atlas, K through 12. So, we've got three different campuses and I'm working to support the team in all campuses.

Scott: Excellent. And last, but certainly not least, Veronica, how did you find yourself here at Atlas Prep?

Veronica: Yeah, so I came to Colorado Springs in July, and I started at least in early August. I've been in the mental health field since 2021. I'm from Illinois and I graduated in 2021, and I started being a mental health professional since then.

Scott: All right. So, I'm wondering if we could get a little bit of background about Atlas Prep. How long has it been here in El Paso County and what is the main mission of this school?

Calley: Yeah, absolutely. So, Atlas Prep was founded in 2009 with just 80 5th graders. So, we were just a middle school to start and slowly started adding grades, one per year. And actually, this year is our first year as a full K through 12 school.

Scott: Wow.

Calley: We added 4th grade this year and now have the full spectrum.

Scott: So how did it work when you had maybe grades that would skip, right? So, you said 4th grade was the last one added. What would graduating third graders do?

Calley: Yeah. So, Atlas Prep is located in Southeast Colorado Springs within Harrison School District 2 and so a number of students would go to some of the other schools, but we've always had this really strong round of recruiting for students in fifth grade. And then as they got older, we added grades upward before we went down to elementary school. So, a lot of the students would come in fifth grade and then we added 6th grade, we added 7th grade, so they were able to continue on learning with Atlas. But it was a problem for a while. It was harder. Our elementary school has a lower capacity than our high school or our middle school. So, we do still do some recruiting at the 5th grade level, but we're really excited to be able to carry students from kindergarten all the way through high school and see the outcomes that that's able to provide for them.

Scott: Very good. And approximately how many students do you guys have right now and what communities do you serve?

Calley: Yeah. So, we primarily work in Southeast Colorado Springs. The majority of our students come from that Harrison School District 2 region, but students come from other districts as well. We are a public tuition free charter school, so students can come from outside the district and enroll with Atlas if they'd like, and we currently serve about 1,225 students. And yeah, about twice as many in the middle school and the high school as in the elementary school.

Scott: Wow. All right.

Sara: I think something that stands out about Atlas as well is that I think we're at about 75 percent free and reduced lunch.

Calley: It's actually about 95.

Sara: There you go.

Scott: Wow. Hey, new information. There you go.

Sara: Yeah. But I think that is, regardless 75 to 95, that is a significant amount of students that are coming from a lower social-economic status. Which I think really speaks to Southeast Colorado Springs in general.

Scott: Yeah.

Calley: Yeah, it's that a primarily low-income students, about of 94 percent of our students identify as students of color and over half of our students are English-language learners or their first language is Spanish. And so, we have a very diverse population of students at Atlas and are really committed to providing high-quality and highly supportive services for them.

Scott: Yeah, that's wonderful. So, can you talk about how important it is for Atlas Prep to be viewed as a pillar within the community, whether it's southeast Colorado Springs specifically or even just El Paso County as a whole?

Calley: Yeah, I think that Southeast Colorado Springs is often kind of ignored in thinking about Colorado Springs as a whole. And I think that a lot of the communities here are often underestimated. And we serve a lot of the poorest ZIP codes in the city here at Atlas, and for Atlas to be really committed to ensuring that our students receive the same level of really high quality education and with that ensuring that they have high levels of support to meet that high level of education standard is really huge in ensuring that our students not only have the access, but also the support to pursue whatever sort of postsecondary path they want. All of our students have really unique pathways, and when we validate each of those pathways and help them see, "what can that look like for you", in a really successful way, allows us to make sure that all of these students have the agency to make that choice for themselves and pursue successful futures.

Scott: Now, after submitting your grant request to the County, Atlas Prep was awarded \$148,000 or ARPA funding. Can you talk about what that money has gone to fund?

Sara: Yeah, so I started to allude to this in the creation of my position, but we were able to fund a full-time high school counselor, Veronica Felix. And I'll let her speak a little bit more about the actual role that she is doing, but that ability to expand our mental health team has been really crucial to the work that we're doing, I think, especially considering like the timing of getting that funding was post-COVID. And during COVID, most of our grades went online. We really lost a lot of access for supports for students and with a lot of these grades missing full years of that social interaction, they came back to school just with an immense amount of trauma, grief and loss, maladaptive behaviors, and so being able to expand our team has been just a really important aspect in supporting students. And so, Veronica's a direct response to receiving that funding.

Scott: Yeah. So, Veronica, if you could talk a little bit about your role then here at Atlas Prep and how that funding has been able to help the students in your estimation.

Veronica: Yeah. So, my role, I currently have 42 students on my caseload. 32 of those 42 students I see on a regular basis, so that looks like weekly or biweekly sessions. I also work with group work with students. Oftentimes they'll have like family sessions and a lot of mediation between students as well, and a lot of reactive services too.

Scott: And given that these are students and it's an in-school service that's provided, how does that work with them? While they're attending classes, while they have their normal class load, how do the teachers work with them? How do you work with the teachers in the classes to make sure they're not missing too much when they're in that time with you? How does that work here?

Veronica: Yeah, so a lot of it too is check-ins with students to see how they're doing in class. They have study hall or early in the morning or towards the end of the day is when I meet with students. I collaborate with teachers and talking to them, communicating with them, and let them know I have the student on my caseload. "What class works best? What can I do to support the student?"

Scott: And since you've been here – how long have you been here at Atlas Prep? You said since August?

Veronica: Since August.

Scott: Okay, so just the beginning of this school year then. What differences have you seen from the time when you first started versus now? We're about 8 months into the school year.

Veronica: Yeah. In the beginning, it was more challenging. I think a lot of students were not used to having someone available Monday to Friday, but throughout the semester I got to meet students and really get to know them more and let them know that I am here for them. Not just when we have appointments, but any time really as reactive services.

Scott: And what do you think that means to them? What have they expressed to you as having that service available?

Veronica: I think it shows I'm reliable, I'm here, and I care. I show up for my students. And I think being in school where they can just walk in and talk to me about the day has shown that they have gained that trust in me.

Scott: That's wonderful. Thank you. I appreciate that. So, I wanted to get back to something. So, you mentioned earlier about different pathways for students and letting them know. Perhaps there are alternate options for them. I've been able to speak with a number of organizations at this point since doing this podcast. The PPBEA is one. Careers in Construction is another. And these are organizations that help students identify career pathways that may not necessarily say, "hey, you're going to school, you know, you graduate from high school and now it's time to go to college because that's the next step in the path", right? Do you offer those same sorts of alternative pathways for students and do you work with some of those other organizations? What does that look like here at the Atlas Prep?

Calley: Yeah, definitely. So, Atlas began with a college-prep-for-all model, and we quickly realized that that is just not the best option for a lot of our students, for a lot of our families, and that there are ways for our students to be really successful and pursue their passions without going to college if that's not the right choice for them. So, we – Atlas is pretty unique in that we have a separate post-secondary success team and a wellness team, so we don't have a team of counselors who are tasked with doing it all. We have two different teams dedicated to supporting students in those ways. And so, our post-secondary team works really closely with a lot of our high schoolers in identifying "are you interested in going to college", "are you interested in trades", are you interested in an apprenticeship in the military". And they work really closely with each student and making sure that they have all the support that they need to do that in the school itself. We do have a trades program so students can learn about construction, plumbing, and electrical right here at Atlas, and a lot of times students in those pathways, they will graduate their senior year with OSHA certifications knowing basics of plumbing and electrical work so that when they graduate they're able to advocate for themselves for positions that have benefits for maybe having skills to start their own company down the line. They're not starting from scratch and they're able to jump in at a higher level.

Sara: Similarly, we have a CNA program, so students are also graduating with the ability to get their CNA license before they even finished high school.

Scott: Yeah, that's incredible. I mean, look, I don't know if the experience was the same for all of us, but I just think about when I was in high school 20 years ago - don't need to highlight that too much - but, you know, it was like I said earlier, it was - you're going through high school and you're going to go to college. That's just kind of what it was. And you know, they had other, they had classes available like, you know, shop class and, you know, some other classes that focused on trades but that wasn't looked at as like a career pathway, right. It wasn't like, oh, you're going to graduate from high school and have some sort of certification that's going to help you get an apprenticeship

or get a job somewhere else and start your career immediately. And you know, I just think even looking, I'll talk a little bit selfishly here, even talking about the county, right? Where we have roles in departments like public works, right, where if you go into public works, they pay for you to get your CDL license, they pay for you to do your training and you can get on the pension plan for the county - which is extremely incredible by the way - and you can start that right at 18. And then you'll be able to retire with a full pension by the time you're 45 years old. And when you're 18 years old, that sounds like eons away, it sounds like something that you'll never reach, right? But you know, now at where I am right now, I think, "Oh my gosh, retired at 45 sounds like an absolute dream". It's like, that's not even like, I can't imagine that being a possibility. So, I think the fact that schools are teaching kids about these other opportunities and like, look, if your passion is in like you were like you were mentioning earlier, Calley, if your passion is in electrical work, is in construction, is in some of those more trade-type jobs, you don't need to go to, you really don't need to go to college. You really benefit from getting certifications and from starting apprenticeships and like getting in right away. And so, I'm just wondering, maybe you could talk a little bit more about the value of showing those different opportunities for students when they are trying to figure that out for themselves.

Calley: Yeah, we're really grateful that that team here at Atlas works really hard to make sure that students are going to visit companies, they're going to visit colleges, and we're also bringing in companies here. So, a lot of times there will be journeyman job site leads coming in and speaking to what their pathways looked like, and they're like, I graduated high school. I knew I wanted to do this. This is where I started. Now I lead this job site. I'm the only person certified to lead it. I make a bunch of money and our students are like, "tell me more".

Scott: That sounds interesting.

Calley: That sounds wonderful. And some of them say, hey, I went to college. It was really helpful. It got me to this place. I went to college. Depending on the job, sometimes I didn't need it. And so, it's really cool for all of our students to hear how so many people took different pathways to get to where they are, and then to see people kind of on the other side of a lot of those decisions, happy and like, willing to share what their experiences looked like because it helps them be like, oh, there isn't one choice that's right. There are not two choices that're right. There's a lot of different ways that I can walk through this. And we have career counselors who are there to guide students on every step of the way. Yeah. And also, our career counselors are dedicated to staying in touch with students for a year after they graduate.

Scott: Wow. Okay.

Calley: And so, they stay in touch. They make sure that students are kind of meeting the goals that they set for themselves. At the very least checking in if the students are willing to reply.

Scott: And I certainly think it's important to mention if you do want to become a lawyer, if you do want to become a doctor, an orthopedic surgeon, if you do want to do some of those things, yes, college is the pathway, right? And that's the right way to go. But again, not everyone wants to do that right? And so, it makes sense to have different pathways.

Calley: Yeah. The flip side of that is we've got students with full-rides to Colorado College, to Richmond, to really, really incredible world-class institutions. And so, there's success on all of those paths.

Scott: Yeah, that's wonderful. And then, Veronica, I kind of wanted to have you answer this more specifically. What do you think it does for the students and their own mental wellness to know that there are different pathways? Because again, for me it was, you know, you need to get good grades because if you don't, you got nowhere to go, right? And then for students who struggled, and you know I wasn't the – I was a very mediocre student. Like I was OK you know, I wasn't terrible, but I got B's and some C's. But for some of my other classmates who did struggle, who weren't great test-takers, who did have problems focusing in classrooms, right? What do you think it does for the wellness of students for them to know it's OK to not be an incredible student so long as you know where you want to go, and we'll help you figure out where you wanna go.

Veronica: Yeah, I think it's absolutely helpful to know that there's other options, considering that a lot of our students are what would be first generation college students, so talking about that and exploring other options is definitely very important.

Scott: Great. And then too, are there any other nonprofit organizations that you guys work with in the community that help benefit the programs that you're working on?

Sara: Yeah, I can speak to that. So, I think especially as mental health professionals, we have to be really connected to the community in order to provide wraparound services to our students. So oftentimes when Veronica and I are meeting with students, we are hearing about a barrier or a challenge that a family is facing and oftentimes that's outside of the school. So, we are working with other mental health agencies. We provide a lot of referrals to Diversus Health, El Centro de la Familia, Be Well Psychology are the three that are coming to mind, but we also work to bring agencies like Inside Out Youth, Voces Unidas, different agencies that really have a niche in our community, we've asked them to come in to also support our students with very, like, specific supports. Often times, I think, especially speaking to the economic status of a lot of our families, there are barriers in terms of clothing, food access and so, we're also working with agencies that help fill that gap as well.

Scott: Very good. So, is there – I wanted to ask, we've maybe touched on this a little bit, but is there a personal story from someone who's been able to benefit from these wellness services that you're able to provide now that you'd be able to share with us?

Veronica: Yeah, absolutely. One of the students that I can think of, an 11th grader male, who's been through a lot of family trauma at an early age and, you know, helping the student find resources in the community has been very helpful for him. We do a lot of trauma-related work, intercessions, a lot of processing and yeah, that's been very, very helpful and that's a story that will continue to stay with me.

Scott: That's great. Thank you for sharing that. I'm wondering too, are there any other programs that we haven't talked about yet that are available here at Atlas that you would like to share?

Calley: Yeah, I think that it's just really unique the way that Atlas operates, we call ourselves, "we're beyond a school" and I think that that's really true. We are more than just a K through 12 school where students come, they go to their classes, they sit at their desks, they leave. At the end of the day, we have an onsite food pantry that is fully student-run. As these two lovely ladies have talked about a lot, we have a mental health team that is far more robust than most schools out there, because we're really committed to making sure that all of our students feel heard and supported. We operate on a year-round calendar and have a free summer program for our students so that even just where kids are during the day isn't an overwhelming burden on families. We offer bus transportation and after-school activities to make sure that parents can not worry about where their kids are, right –

Scott: Right.

Calley: – while they're still at work, right? And so I think I just kind of wanna drive home the point that Atlas is kind of committed to making sure that we're holistically supporting all of our students and not just in the academic sense.

Sara: I think just something to add. Because our team is as robust as it is, we're able to hold smaller caseloads. And so every one of the counselors here really has the chance to get to know their student really well. They get to know the family really well. And to Calley's point, that doesn't often happen in a school where you've got one counselor that's meeting with 250 students. You're not really able to dig in and understand, like, what the barriers and successes are for these students. And so, for a student who is at Atlas and is interested in mental health support or counseling, we have the team this year. And so yeah, I think just the access that we're able to provide for that support is so robust and has really made a difference in students feeling seen and heard at the school.

Scott: Yeah, that's great. Thank you. So, for those who may be seeking services, those wellness services here at the school, how can they go about getting those services?

Veronica: So, we have a referral form. A lot of staff here have access to that. We do a lot of walk-ins too. So again, like reactive services, if I meet with student one time, most likely I will meet with them again.

Scott: Okay, great. And for people who want to get involved, right, and they think this sounds great, I want to be a part of that – whether it's in helping to provide opportunities for the students or resources for the school – where can they go to look and how can they best help?

Calley: Yeah. So, on our website, atlasprep.org, there is a bunch of information about kind of what our school looks like, a little bit more about what we do here and on that website. There are links to give if you'd like to support the work that we do. And then there are also the occasional opportunities to help out in some of the events and sessions that we offer for students.

Sara: I think, speaking to the work that the post-secondary team is doing in addition to the work that our wellness team is doing, if there are you know, organizations that could benefit from student volunteers or if you are interested in coming into the school to speak about your career, we always have career day openings to have people come in and just speak to the work that they're doing. Similarly, to what I was speaking about with resources, our students and families are always in need. And so, if you've got resources along the lines of clothing, access to really any resource, I don't know. I'm like, resources. We just need all of the resources, you know, to be able to support our families. I think that the more access we can create, the better. I also think that our students are hungry for opportunities and experiences that they wouldn't, you know, really get to experience on a general basis. I think the fact that we're so close to Pike's Peak for instance, and we look at that mountain every day and oftentimes kids are not getting out onto trails. And so, our Reach Beyond program during the summer, we really work to create those spaces for students to experience different things. So, if there are any agencies that are like, that would be a great way to plug into the community and offer different experiences for students, we are always open for that as well.

Scott: Great. And then I just wanted to give each of you an opportunity to add anything that we haven't talked about yet, whether it's maybe plug something that we've already talked about. But if there's anything that you'd like to share that we haven't touched on yet, go ahead and do that now. Calley, we'll start with you.

Calley: Yeah, absolutely. As your resident fundraiser here –

Scott: Yes, this is the time for that!

Calley: – we've talked a lot about the ways that Atlas goes beyond a school and the way that we provide really comprehensive services and that is not free. And so, if you are hearing this story and hearing about the work that we're doing and want to give, whether that is financially or through your time in some of the ways that Sara was talking about, there are ways to contact us on our website or give there as well.

Scott: Great. And Sara.

Sara: I think my plug is actually, really just gratitude. Our team would not be able to do the things that we are doing for students without funding. Typically, the mental health

world is the first to be cut when funding gets pulled and we have to tighten the belt. So, the fact that our team is as large as it is and has been able to collaborate as much as we have, we've really been able to provide quality mental health services for our students, which, as I said, post-COVID has become a real necessity, I think. I think we can't be a school that prioritizes academics without also supporting the mental health of our students and so really it's – I just have a lot of gratitude for the grants that have supported us in that mission.

Scott: Great. And Veronica, how about you?

Veronica: Yeah, to add on to what Sara said, I am completely grateful for this opportunity. Atlas Prep, really the wellness team is very unique. It's very special. The mental health services that we offer students here, it's not very common and truly it's been great.

Scott: Great. Well, thank you everyone, Sara, Calley, and Veronica for taking the time today. I really appreciate you guys and for the work that's done here at Atlas. So, thank you for having me.

Sara: Thank you.

Calley: Yeah. Thanks, Scott.

Scott: If you're interested in listening to additional episodes of Beyond the Dais, you can search for us on Spotify, Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, and Amazon Music. Thanks for listening, and we'll see you next time.