Ken Wright Sept 28 2015

Grand Ledge H.S.

C: Ok, it’s almost 8 o’clock on September 28th. I’m in Grand Ledge High School with Ken Wright and the last time I visited Ken in 2008 he was teaching 6th grade in Grand Ledge and now he’s a newly minted assistant principal.

K: Yes. This is my first year as assistant principal. This is a building of over 1700 kids. I focus on 9th and 10th graders so mainly…I have actually a Dean of Students as well who oversees attendance and he’s the one who pulls attendance reports and those types of things but when it comes to discipline, especially the higher level discipline for all the 9th and 10th graders, that is what I focus on, and also supporting teachers in the classroom with instructional practices.

C: Oh, ok, good, good. So, first question, two parts: How do you define success in teaching, and we talked just a little bit about that before I turned the camera on, and do you believe Grand Valley State prepared you for success in the classroom?

K: (00:59-10:15) Yeah. So those are big questions and I think when you define success in teaching, one of the things that I think about is the perspective and that’s the one thing that I probably learned a little bit more than anything else is that successful teaching is different depending on what view you have. And I think that’s always good for teachers to kind of understand as well. So I have a view of what successful teaching is and it’s good for me to have. It’s good for any teacher to have, but they also need to be able to understand that administrators are also going to have a little bit different view to what successful teaching is. Co-workers, colleagues are going to have a little bit of a different idea. Students and each individual student, successful students, struggling students, middle of the road students, they’re going to have a different perspective in terms of what a successful teacher is and it might not always line up with what I, as an individual, thinks successful teaching. One student might say, “This guy doesn’t have it.” Whereas another student might say, “This is exactly what I need to be successful.” And the parents have a little bit of a different perspective, sometimes, too. What I think a lot of times what I see with parents is that when their students are struggling, a lot of times they sometimes think it’s because there is an unsuccessful teacher, but if they’re struggling and they feel like they are getting support from that teacher versus they are struggling and they feel like they are not getting that support then that kind of skews their view a little bit. And, of course, this day and age, the public perspective of teaching has unfortunately taken a bit of a PR hit, which is unfortunate but we’ve seen that here in our district quite a bit. Or successful teaching as a legislator. When we start looking at …when we’re talking evaluations in a little bit…

C: Outside of Lansing (where Grand Ledge is located).

K: That’s a little bit different as well when you start looking at student data and we know that successful teaching is really beyond those standardized testing scores that come back. We know that students are a little bit different and they can show growth in many different ways beyond just how well they do on a MSTEP or ACT or SAT, I guess now. So, yeah, that’s pretty tough and then one of the things I…so, me, now, as an administrator, a couple of things that I would focus on in terms of looking at teachers, because I actually evaluate some general education teachers, core teachers, I guess. So Social Studies teachers, foreign language, art, music and those are all a little bit different, but when I’m going in there, there are some very common things that I would look for in successful teaching. Like we talked about, building strong relationships with kids and you can see that by the way that they interact before class. A lot of the teachers here have gone through “Capturing Kids’ Hearts” through the [Flippen Group](http://www.flippengroup.com/). That’s a fun name. Flip Flippen. Which I actually enjoyed quite a bit myself, but you have them meeting them at the door. They build that social contract. They learn the names of the kids and they go out of their way to make sure they are continually building those relationships. So that’s big and regardless of what kind of classroom you go into that’s one of the things you look for and it can show up in a variety of different ways. And then I would say very purposeful instructional practices will be in place. So you are utilizing time for a specific purpose based on the learning goals that you have, whatever it is that you’re trying to get them to do, they have something to do throughout that entire hour where they are learning or they are working with that knowledge or they are showing that they have learned that knowledge and that’s what I would look for in any kind of classroom. As far as Grand Valley preparing me…

C: Be honest.

K: And so, this is one of those things where I would say I only went through Grand Valley through the teacher education program so I can’t compare it to something else. I can’t say, “Well, my experiences over here at this university were a little bit different” but I did have a teacher intern from MSU and it was a little bit different. I would say the main thing that helped me out going through Grand Valley was that I had an inner city middle school experience…

C: And I have clear memories of you talking Spanish to those kids.

K: Oh, yeah. That was quite an experience. And then, because of the way that Grand Valley did it where you did half…do they still do it that way? …Ok and I think they should keep it that way…so I had middle school inner city and then high school, very rural type of school district.

C: Where were you?

K: That was in Thornapple Kellogg. Down in Middleville. And those were quite a bit different in terms of…I mean the level of the middle school and the high school experience was very good to have, as well as just the different culture in those two different buildings. So that was very helpful and the intern that I had was with me, really, an entire year or for both semesters, I guess (6:01)

C: And that’s the way that MSU does it.

K: Yeah, and she only got to see me as a teacher, kind of individually, and then our culture within our building and didn’t really get to get more experiences so, so I would say that would be good. The other thing is that, and I hear people say that you don’t necessarily learn everything you need to know in teacher education and you learn it on the job, but it’s funny to hear when a student were to say something like, “You don’t learn anything in high school. You learn everything on the job” or something like that and teachers balk at that and say, “Oh, That’s ridiculous! You learn this, this and this” and they always have ways to be able to describe, but then those same teachers would say, “Oh, you don’t learn anything in teacher education” and the reason that’s weird is because a lot of times we have a difficult time identifying where did the origin of some of our own thinking processes and the ideas we have and then the way that we approach problems. It’s difficult to say, “I got this original thinking idea from this one experience that I had in the teacher education program. It may have developed from there, but it’s hard to point and say that’s where it started. So I think that’s kind of where it comes from and I think that’s where it comes from students as well when they talk about teachers. “You don’t necessarily learn anything in K-12 schools that you actually use in life.” Well, you do, it’s just hard to be able to identify the things, the information and the skills that you actually pulled out and find the origin of those things. So, that’s why I say, “Yes”, I know I was prepared because I was a successful teacher. I was identified as successful by my students, by my students’ parents, as well as my administration who was evaluating me so from those kinds of perspectives I will say I was a successful teacher as a result of going through the GVSU program.

C: It’s interesting what you just said now, too, because when I originally started this (research in 2008) I pushed out, with the help of the Stats Department, I pushed out a Survey Monkey that was quantitative and one of the things that the History Department wanted to get at was how did separate courses provide your content background? And the consistent answer, and people were nice to type into the text box, they said what you just said, “I know I learned this but I can’t tell you where.” And in very isolated instances, and I think we may have had over 100 people answer (I think the actual number of responses may have been closer to 30) this, they said, “Well, I remember Professor Stark in my Caribbean History class” or “I remember whoever” but that was very limited, like maybe less than 10% of the responses could isolate to a course or a professor where they learned. They said, “All I know is that I learned it.” And I think that’s a good message to bring back when anybody feels isolated and maybe doesn’t want to collaborate with each other, it’s the whole experience for the students versus an isolated incidence of a single instructor that some people look at sometimes.

K: That’s very true. We see that with kids too. They have a difficult time. They have the skills. They have the knowledge but they don’t necessarily attribute it to the experiences they have in school when they say those kinds of things. We still get that now with professional development. That’s one of those things too, “We don’t learn anything at these meetings…”

C: I am hearing that!

K: Oh, yeah, and I have, so I’m big into the “growth mindset” and [Carol Dweck](http://mindsetonline.com/) with her Mindset book there but I always think it’s the way you approach it and if you can take something out of PD, something that you can learn, some way that you can look at something in a little bit of a different way, to be able to implement it into your classroom or change or tweak the way that you are already doing something. Any PD that I have been to, I have been able to, with that mindset, I could pick something out and I could change something and make it better.

C: Right.

K: But if I go in…

C: No way.

K: and just say, “I’m not going to learn anything from this” then, yeah, you’re not going to learn anything, so it’s all about that mindset.

C: I agree. Anything else that you would like to add to Question #1?

K: I think we can leave it to that.

C: Ok. I anticipate that if I came back at the end of this school year that your answer to Question #2 may be a little bit different but like you said, you did some short term principalship at the middle school. So Question #2: What do you view as the biggest challenges to your career?

K: I’ll kind of back up and tell you how I got on the path to having this position as well.

C: Yeah.

K: I’ve always kind of been in a lot of leadership types of positions and so when I was thinking about a Master’s program I was trying to decide what I wanted to do. I was thinking about Curriculum. So that would have been interesting, curriculum, I’ve been on our Curriculum Committee here in our district but then I decided that I thought I might want to try more of a leadership route so I went through MSU and their Educational Administration program, K-12 Admin program, and that got me involved in a lot of different experiences. I did a little bit of an internship through the middle school that I was at. I had to shadow administrators in the district and so there was some pretty neat experiences that I had. Then I applied for a couple of different positions outside of the district, had a couple of second interviews so I gained some experience just in the interview “game”. It’s a game. You’re playing a game and you’re trying to win the game so I got better and better at that game, I guess. This position came available and there were a lot of applicants, a lot of internal applicants as well and some of those even from the high school here, that were applicants, that now I am working with. So, I would say, then, one of the things that I have had a tough time with (12:00) in terms of challenges in my career are negativity or pessimism and that can come from colleagues. That can come from, as we’re seeing it, kind of in the public, a little bit, as well. We have a community…there’s a community Facebook page that unfortunately some of our staff members get sucked into to just kind of watch, but it’s one of those Facebook pages that brings up a lot of negativities and so when somebody has an issue in the school they post it on this and then other people kind of fall into it as well and then some of that ripple effect comes back into the building as well. We have a tough situation right now that I think a lot of schools are going through but our enrollment has been declining a little bit and we have offset with “School of Choice” and so we’ve opened up we’ve opened up “School of Choice” to fill that little gap. So our enrollment is good but our in-district enrollment has gone down and we have seen…anyway, here at this school we’ve reduced our staff. We used to have 115 teachers and now we’re down to about 80…

C: Wow!

K: And this is in about an 8 year period. So there are right now, many teachers who are teaching without a plan period. I think there are 5 teachers right now in the building who don’t have a plan period for the entire year. About 10 who only have one plan period throughout the whole entire year so they have two trimesters without a plan period and one trimester with a plan period. And there may be only about 10 teachers that actually have a plan period for each trimester. So that’s pretty tough and those classes that are there are filled to the max so there are classes of 30, if not 33 or something but not too many small classes so as a result of that people get worn down and then you start to get that negativity. And it’s hard to combat it. I think that’s one of the things that set me apart for getting this job though was the ability to stay positive and I’ve always been kind of an optimistic guy and kind of breaking down breaking down that negativity. It takes quite a bit to break me down and get me into that negative cycle, I guess, that’s hard to break. That’s why I’m here and that’s the biggest problem, and even when I was a teacher there were constant negative things with any kind of change, obviously, you’re going to get some negativity, but even in the regular run-of-the-mill kind of stuff that we had there were just a lot of teachers that would exhibit negativity and want to butt heads with administration or other colleagues. You get into that “these darn kids” kind of mentality, too, that you see with some teachers…not all teachers, but some of them, they are not willing to change because of what they view as problems that the students have. That’s hard to get out of that. So that’s definitely been the biggest problem. So then I look at, how do I approach that problem? Well, like I said, continuing upbeat interactions with people, building strong rapport, both with kids and with teachers and I’ve tried a few different things as well. I like to read a lot and I like to focus my own reading on things that will help me out and one of the things, with the specific positivity stuff has been the [John Gordon](http://www.jongordon.com/) books and he’s got “The Energy Bus”, the “No Complaining Rule”, “The Carpenter” so it’s story-based things that you can think about, with your interactions and your mindset a little bit differently as you are interacting with other people. Anyway, I see that as a big problem. And a big challenge to me, as well.

C: It’s interesting. I was over at Hamilton High School and they just settled. They had been without a contract for a while and they went a number of years with no pay increase or negative, loss of benefits, things like that, but there were other things going on. I ate lunch with the faculty and the former Grand Valley student I was with, leaned across to me and said, “We’ve decided as a staff to be more positive this year. We’re going to be happy.”

K: That’s cool!

C: “We’re going to be happy” and it was probably…I’m not saying I have eaten at unhappy lunches during this process but it was the most upbeat lunch.

K: Oh, yeah?

C: They were laughing and having fun, and I talked to her afterwards about it and she said, “You know what? It’s really helped. Just to walk in and say, “We’re going to be happy every day.” And I think if you dwell on the negative, obviously, you’re going to get repaid.

K: Definitely.

C: In a bad way.

K: So I…we had a big freshmen orientation that I got to lead and this was just a couple of weeks into starting out as an administrator and I got to lead this big freshmen orientation so we have about 470 students and they were all there with their parents and everything too so it was a packed auditorium, standing room only. So I got to do a…it was kind of like a pep rally before they got to come around, go through the school, get their schedules and see everything but…and then meet some of our different groups…but in this pep rally that I did I talked about a parable that I like to use as I talk to the students as well. And it’s an old Cherokee parable about the two wolves, so it goes like this: The grandfather and the grandson are walking and the grandfather says, “You know I would like to tell you about a battle that is going on inside of me and it’s the same battle that is going on inside of you. It’s the same battle that’s going inside of everyone. It’s a battle between two wolves. There’s a good wolf and a bad wolf. The good wolf represents things like happiness, positivity, generosity and those types of things. The bad wolf represents things like anger, and greed and negativity or laziness” and the grandson thought about it for a moment and then he said, “Grandfather, which wolf wins?” And he looks at him and says, “The one you feed.” (18:31)

C: Oh, good (story).

K: It’s where you take that ownership on yourself. It’s the one that you feed that is going to win and it is going to manifest itself into your own kind of personality and what people are going to see so that’s why I always tell these kids too. I tell them, “Feed the good wolf because that’s what is going to happen if you feed that bad wolf, that bad wolf is going to be the dominant personality of you and you have control over it.” And, of course, I always tell them, “Don’t let other people feed your bad wolf as well because that’s an easy thing to do.” I think that hits home with a lot of kids when you say it like that. That goes along with…they’re feeding, they are purposefully feeding, at Hamilton, their positive wolf, their good wolf and that’s the one that is winning inside that lunchroom then. I like that.

C: I do too. It’s a good story. You really got into (Question) 3 already but are there other things you do, and one of the stories I relayed is I, purposely, during my high school teaching career, cultivated a group of friends who weren’t in education that we went out with socially once a week.

K: Oh, yeah.

C: And part of it was I don’t need to talk shop all the time and I need to hear what is going on outside the four walls of the classroom. So if you would like to add…obviously the books and just trying to maintain a proper, positive attitude, are there any other things you do to fight the stresses?

K: Yeah. I always separate the things that I can control and the things that I can’t. If I can control it then I always want to make sure that at least I can say that I am doing the things that I can to be able to control it and that’s why I read, to get some different ideas and new ways to approach a different idea. If I can not control it I am not going to let it impact me.

C: Good for you.

K: And that’s a big thing because there a lot of things that are very difficult and I can not increase the socio-economic status of an area so I’m not going to stress about that. That’s tough to do because there are some of the things that can get you emotional and so I just stay away from that. And I have two kids. I have a 5 year old and a 3 year old and I like to spend time with them and they certainly re-charge me. And certainly having kids can be tough as well. When you get one of them pulling the other one’s hair that’s not a stressless situation but it’s a different kind of situation and that is rejuvenating. Definitely, finding the things I enjoy outside of the school is always good. I have some activities. I like to play basketball. I like to run and those kind of clear my head as well.

C: Do you still have a lacrosse stick?

K: Oh, yeah. Definitely. Grand Ledge has its own lacrosse team now. It’s got over 250 athletes from 4th grade up to 12th grade, boys and girls, that are playing lacrosse.

C: Wow!

K: That’s very good. And I still play in a men’s league, as well.

C: Oh, do you?

K: That’s fun.

C: Well, good. I always thought of it (lacrosse) as a way to release too. Get out a lacrosse stick and not beat on somebody too much.

K: You have to a little bit.

C: A little bit because that’s lacrosse. Anything else in terms of methods to deal with the stresses?

K: Just think positive about things too. That’s made a big difference but my mom was an Emergency Room nurse and I’ve gotten a lot of my philosophy from her so she was an Emergency Room nurse for 30 years and any time I would stress about small things, whether it was work things or something like that she would always talk about life and death, real life and death situations that she had to deal with on a regular basis in her life and when I think about the eye-rolling that I might get from a teacher that has to do something a little bit differently with the way that they teach, with the way that they are giving feedback to students, am I going to let me stress me out? When I think about some of the things that my mom…and my dad was a police officer so they had to deal with some different things that were truly life and death and so when I think about maybe somebody who isn’t buying into what I’m saying that can be stressful, but it’s not life and death and so I just have to let it go and it’s just having that mentality of allowing it to be let go…

C: Good life perspectives from your parents.

K: Yeah. Oh, yeah. It’s good.

C: One of the reasons for the study is the fact that the survival rate for educators isn’t good.

K: Oh, yeah.

C: And, what, 30 to 40% of all new teachers leave the profession, I mean they are totally out, within 4 to 5 years. So that’s what motivated Question #4: How are you motivated to best serve your students, and your school?

K: One of the things we had some teachers who left here when they started to realize that they were going to have limited or no plan periods and we are actually sitting in a situation where the teachers do not have a contract right now. In fact, this week, on Wednesday they have a mediation and hopefully they can make some progress there but times are a little bit tough and leading up to the start of the school I think is where you started to see a lot of that negativity. But the kids don’t care.

C: And why should they? (not to say the students are not sympathetic but they are also teenagers with their own lives to live in their own world)

K: And that’s…when you think about these…at that Freshmen orientation when they were starting out, the things they were concerned about, the things that they were excited about had nothing to do about whether or not their teachers were happy with their contract and so they knew they needed the help from the teachers. They were expecting the teachers to be able to teach them. And I think that once the people got the basic idea that, you know what, these kids, they need us. They need us to be able to do a good job. I saw a good quote that said that, “The good thing is that, you know what, teaching matters. The tough thing is that it matters every single day.” With every single hour and with every single interaction you have with a student. But just knowing that you (24:36) play that important role with these kids and these kids, they are individuals. They are not…when the state looks at cumulative scores within a district or something like that, it’s important information, data to look, but I think about Joe, who is struggling in certain classes and he’s the one that I want to be able to help out with and when I can see some small improvements or something like that with what it is that he’s learning, that’s what I’m motivated to do. I don’t think anybody in here is motivated by cumulative scores, but they are motivated by helping individual students that continue to get better. I think, again, it’s a mindset thing that you are there to help the kids and the kids need that help and knowing that they need it. If you take that away then they are not going to get what they need. It’s an easy way to stay motivated for that.

C: And if you stay with the growth philosophy that…only one teacher, and she backed away from this, one teacher, said, “Well, in terms of how I see success it’s based on standardized test scores.” And then she quickly backed away from it and she said, “Well, these kids need things” and she teaches on the east side of the state and they have some poverty issues. And she said, “based on what these kids are bringing to school, anyway, anything I can help them with is what I’m here for and if it’s just a little bit of improvement here and here and here, that keeps me going.” So, I think with a combination of your positive attitude and the fact that you are looking at those kinds of indicators for success then it seems like you’re on the right track, Ken.

K: Well, I hope so.

C: (Question #) 5: And this is what year in education for you now?

K: This is year number 9.

C: 9. What changes, if any, have occurred in the strategies and methods your classroom and, now that you’re newly out of the classroom, but you’re still involved with curriculum, so what changes have you looked at over 9 years?

K: I’d say the biggest thing that has changed for me is the push for literacy within the content area. I was, I want to say I was part of that first year where Grand Valley offered that Teaching Reading in the Content Area, it was a specific course that was required. So it was kind of at the beginning of that push but most of the preparation that I did early on was about teaching Social Studies and finding ways for kids to be able to understand Social Studies. The Core Democratic Values was a big thing when I first started out but since then it has been finding ways to get kids to engage in the reading that they are looking at so that kind of close style reading where they are reading it for content and they are different finding ways to be able to break it down. I’ve taken some professional development or conferences about identifying middle schoolers that have decoding problems. So the elementary teachers, they spend a lot of time with figuring out the “Big 5” or the phonics and that stuff that they teach early on for learning how to read but at the middle school and high school most people don’t have that kind of training and they expect students to be good at that and then when we look at their scores, a lot of them, they read at a third grade level. Well, what would you be teaching a third grader? How would you be teaching them how to be able to read if they were in third grade? And so I’ve had to back up there in terms of figuring out how to get kids to read very closely and beyond just, “Read this and answer these questions” because that’s a little bit of a lower level. I mean you can make very high level thinking questions, which are always good, but finding a way to be able to get them to actually focus in on what they are reading and pull out the content that I want them to pull out. So that’s been big and then, also, teaching them to write well. Write well and then also finding a way to be able to pinpoint feedback in terms that will improve their actual writing. So that was some training that I did not get early on and some things that I have had to work on quite a bit in terms of strategies but I would say one of the bigger strategies or methods that I changed, that I think had the biggest impact in terms of what students learned was the more interactive things that I started to do. It actually came from a little conference that I went to. (stopped to start camera again—30 minute limit in this mode)

C: So back to the interactive.

K: Yeah, the interactive. It started when I went to a History conference and there was somebody who acted as though they were Elizabeth Cady Stanton. And so she came out and she was fully dressed and she played the character and one of the things she did was she called people out of the audience. The audience was a group of maybe 25 people and she had them come up and she put on a hat and she said, “You’re my father now” and gave them a card. He didn’t have any preparation for it but he read a line as though he was the father and then, because he took on that role, he said, “Oh, I would never allow you to do these things that men are only supposed to do” or something like that because he was a judge, I guess.

C: Yeah.

K: And then she interacted with him and then everybody else was able to figure out what was going on as a result of that and it was fun because we were able to see someone who was one of us go up there, wear a hat and say a line so I incorporated that into my classroom about 4 years ago and so I created the building of the Constitution. So the Constitutional Convention so I had students come up and they would play things that weren’t necessarily people but they might play the 3/5s Compromise or the Great Compromise so one of them might be New Jersey and the other one might be Virginia (30:31), they are not getting along but they ended up having a super hero come in and it was Compromise Man so then they and I made it goofy so then a stork came in and the baby was the Great Compromise for the two house legislature. So they remember that stuff and then the vibe, I guess, with that, is out in the hallway then, you would have some kids that are generally not kids that pay attention in class but you get them, “Oh, Mr. Wright had so and so, they pretended to have a baby” and then you would hear them say, “What? What are you talking about?” “Well, it was The Great Compromise and the two…” I would, “Oh, they are talking about it in the hallway!” And it just about generating some kind of a vibe by using a little bit of my own goofy personality and getting them to come up and I had them fill out a little questionnaire, “Would they be willing to come up and…?” but then I had little things…Daniel Shays’ Rebellion, then I had them wear a straw hat. Just little things I could do to get a little bit of a vibe where they were laughing but also seeing the interaction between a couple of different ideas. So that was big because I think it made a big difference because I could actually bank on that for a long time. I might do that but then not do it for 6 weeks but I could use the fact that I used it 4 or 5 weeks ago, they still remembered that so they were still like putty in my hands and then I would bring it back again and that’s what they would remember, those kinds of things. They were willing to do some of the more boring close reading and writing things because they knew we were going to be doing more of some of those interactive things too. So that was big.

C: One of the things that a lot of people brought up is the changes in technology and I think you were pretty tech-savvy when you left Grand Valley but how much did that change in your classroom?

K: Yeah, one of the things is I was part of our technology committee here in the district as well. But one of the big things was getting an Apple TV and an iPad and that allowed me to get away from my desk for presentations. So I could walk around and “mirror” whatever was on my iPad through the Apple TV and then project that up and then if I wanted a student to manipulate something on the iPad I could hand it right to them and they could show it up there. So that was really big. We did a couple of BYOD, so they brought in their own cellphones, bring their own devices, and we did a couple of…I used “[Infused Learning](http://www.infuselearning.com/)” and “[Socrative](http://www.socrative.com/)”, which are all of the easy response types of questions and then you get the immediate data back up there and they could see how well everyone did but still remain anonymous. So it wasn’t something that would put them on the spot. But then I could immediately correct it and say, “Oh, we have 30% of the kids who answered this. This is probably what you were thinking. Let me explain why it’s not this” and so those kinds of things were good as long as you were using them in the correct way. There are certainly some things where people say, “I’m using technology” but they using…so if I used to write a question up on the board, now I type that question on a computer and project it up, you’re not changing the way you’re doing anything necessarily and so some of the more fun things I was having them doing is having them create different things. Some fun things that I did was have them create movie trailers. It was an application through iMovie where they create a movie trailer but it was supposed to be a movie trailer about one of the topics, “Going West” or there was a couple of other topics that we ended up using. “Reconstruction”, that’s what it was. And so they created these movie trailers and that was fun because now they are creating content and then I had them upload the content to an area where everyone else could see what they created as well. Again, a quote, a small thing I took away from a conference, because I was trying to find something I could, was, “If a students are making something for me, they will do what they need to do. But if they are making something for a bigger audience they will make it great. And so that’s why I opened it up so what they were creating the other students would be able to see as well. And then I felt like I got better productivity out of it as a result of that. So I definitely changed some things with technology and a lot of it came from tinkering, trying to find an idea. I had some things in my mind that I wanted to be able to do and just trying to get down and see how it would work from my perspective and what the students would actually do and so I had some things that didn’t go well either. The nice thing is, though, is that I had some autonomy in my classroom that if I failed with something like that, with some technology, I didn’t have somebody saying, “You failed at this.” It was, “I will find a way to make it better” thing so that was always good. Yeah, technology can certainly change some things if you’re trying to things better.

C: Now, going back to the interactive thing. Did you create those lines and everything, when you are doing the Constitution?

K: I did. They were pretty time intensive.

C: Wow!

K: So what I ended up doing was I had big notecards and then I would hand them their line and I had to number them on the back so I could keep them organized. Not only organized as the kids were there, but then I would have to be able to quickly get them reset for the next hour as they were walking in. I had this little bin that I kept all my props in and so to think about the most recent one was someone was the 13th Amendment and someone else represented slavery over all. So I had the two of them come up and I gave the person who was slavery, he had chains so he would hold onto that and he said something like, “I am slavery. I am the biggest atrocity that ever…” (36:36) And so that’s what he is saying and then I have the person playing the 13th Amendment, they get to wear a name badge so the kids can remember who it is that they are, and then they had a worksheet. It had information on one side and then on the other side it was, “How was it represented?” And so they had to take the information and say, “Well, it was represented this way” so they could remember both things and that was a little bit of higher level thinking but then I would have them act it out. So then I gave the 13th Amendment a foam sword and I even played the music, “The Final Countdown”. I had them line up against each other and then the person with the sword went up and I said, “It’s got to be a nice slow motion killing” and they went down, and, of course, that’s one of those things where, then they just talked about. “Oh, yeah. Sally got to kill Joe with a sword. Well, it’s because the 13th Amendment…” Again, it’s that vibe where you get them to talk about it, the goofy thing that happened, and then it doesn’t make sense to somebody who wasn’t there. So they say, “What are you talking about?” And they have to be able to explain the history part of it as well which shows they understood it as well.

C: It sounds like great fun. I wish I had been able to see it.

K: They were and a lot of these kids here, juniors, they still come up to me and say, “I remember when we did this” so those were fun.

C: That’s great. That is great! Question #6 and you are on both sides of this: What types of evaluations, both informal and formal, are used to assess your classroom teaching, and I guess also what will be used to assess your administrative work, and how are these evaluations used to better your teaching or better your administration?

K: So we have a little bit of a blend between Marzano and Danielson, the two different rubrics that they have on a scale of 1, 2, 3, 4 or ineffective, minimally effective, effective and highly effective. So now 50% of it is based on the growth of students, the data that goes along with that, which is kind of left up to us to determine exactly data that we are going to use. So middle school teachers use something different than elementary schools and the high school uses something different, which is now based on the S.A.T. and the PSAT to see how it is that they do, as well as a little bit of the MSTEP so we use a lot of different data, which unfortunately doesn’t…it’s cumulative so you’ve got a Math teacher, a Language Arts teacher and a Music teacher all going to be based on well a student might do better in terms of reading or science or something like that so it’s kind of a building goal and then there’s individual stuff as well that the teachers have to determine what data they are going to use. Anyway, as far as the formal thing, I think if you look at it as a, “This is score. I wish my score is better. Why wasn’t my score better?” If that’s your mindset then I don’t think it’s necessarily going to help you out. If you look at it as, “Ok, here’s where I am at, or at least this is where my evaluator thinks I’m at, what is it that I can do to be able to improve myself, as a teacher, in these different areas that maybe they didn’t find me as effective?” Then, I think you can find some ways to get better. That’s always the way that I approached it myself. One of the things that I always think about, though, with evaluations is the “halo effect”. I definitely saw that with me. I got to the point where I was a very liked person by my students and by my administrators and so I think when things came up, I’m critical of myself when it came to teaching, and that’s why I think I was probably able to grow in certain areas as well, but I think that administrators looking at me and maybe I wasn’t as effective in some areas, but because I was good in other areas, it probably boosted up my score in different spots as well. And the “reverse halo effect” can happen if you have somebody who’s maybe unprofessional but has good strategies. They might get rated lower because they rub you the wrong way and it’s hard to be able to separate that, that thinking. I think that a lot of the best evaluative feedback that I have gotten has come immediately from students because it comes all the time.

C: Right.

K: And if I’m doing something and if I’m watching to see how the students are doing or how it is that they are responding to the things that I am doing, that’s feedback right there and that’s really an evaluation on how I’m doing as a teacher in terms of if they are understanding what I’m doing. So maybe I wasn’t clear in some directions. That’s an evaluation piece right there. That’s feedback that I can take right there. Or maybe I get an email from a parent that says, “I emailed you last week. I haven’t heard back yet.” That’s an evaluation on me in terms of my communication with parents and I need to be able to find a way to get better. I think those informal things were a lot better for me picking up from how students were doing as a result of my teaching than the actual paper evaluation and the scores that maybe I got.

C: How often do administrators go into teachers’ classrooms for evaluations? I know there’s a cycle, right?

K: So that’s the…and when I started out it was only new teachers who were being evaluated on a regular basis or doing the observations, I guess, is a part of it. So I think that I started out and I think I had two observations throughout the year and then they started adding in the idea of “walk-throughs” and then after things changed now all teachers get evaluated. All of them have the observations. In my last couple of years of teaching I had only one official observation where they would come in for an entire class period and then I usually had two “walk-throughs” where they would pop in unannounced, sit down for a while, look for a few things and then they would leave. It could be five minutes. It could be 15 minutes. Something like that. Those were good (42:38) and I think the big thing was the follow-up with those. I think I had some where I didn’t hear from for a while and it’s hard for me to necessarily learn from that. Same thing as me kind of evaluating myself but when somebody from the outside says, “Here is what I saw. Tell me a little bit more about it” that was always good for me to then say, “Well, here’s what I was trying to do. I’ll give you the context of whatever I was doing.”

C: Right.

K: And then have somebody say, “Have you thought about this?” “Oh, I never thought about it that way! Great, maybe I’ll try that.” So those were always pretty good. But now it’s, and it’s funny because I just started to release some of the evaluations, we go through a program out to the all the teachers that I’m evaluating myself, and I think all teachers need something a little bit different and so some teachers are, I don’t know, I can’t remember, it might be Glickman that has four different quadrants where they are ineffective but they are unaware of why it is that they are ineffective. They are ineffective but they know why. They are effective but they don’t know why and they are effective and they do know why. And depending on where teachers fall it changes the approach that you are going to have to take in terms of evaluating and giving them feedback and giving support too, to be able to help them out. I think that’s good. I think evaluations are tough. The reason that it’s constantly a problem is that there is no good answer. If there was somebody would have thought about it already. But nobody has and that’s just proof that it is a tough thing because there is so much that goes into teaching and to be able to reduce it down to a couple of numbers is tough. It’s pretty tough. Or even to reduce it down to a very small percentage of visual observations of what a teacher is doing makes it pretty difficult as well.

C: Most of the positive responses to this question have been, from the teachers’ side have been, “It’s the feedback I get, up and beyond the instrument that people are using.” It’s sitting down and talking. That’s where they have gained. But other people have mentioned too, “What of my students? What do they think?” “And how are they learning?” And that’s not formal but it’s really important.

K: It’s helpful. If you’re willing to be observant of that and you pick up on those little things then you can find ways to improve with that.

C: What types of mentoring were provided for you and how would you characterize the results of the mentoring that was provided for you?

K: I think that actually goes back to the formal and informal thing too. I formally had a mentor teacher that was there to help me out. It was another Social Studies teacher. In fact we worked very closely for the entire 8 years that I was at the middle school. And she’s still over there as well. She was great. And I think she started out kind of following a protocol of, “We’re going to meet once a week and we’re going to talk about things and I’ll show this to you and I’ll show that to you” and then I think she backed off from there when she realized that I was able to start out pretty well. Then I just went to her and that seemed to work out pretty well instead of meeting once a week or whatever it was. But I think that was pretty good and I think some teachers may need more than that. They may need less than that. Informally I found some other teachers that I connected with that were close to me, physically close to my classroom. When I started out I was in that portable classroom. That first year was the only year that I was out there and then I was inside the building but, or close to me in terms of…I worked with three other Grand Valley grads that were hired in the same exact time as me. I don’t know if I mentioned that last time.

C: No.

K: Yeah. So in the middle school there were three other Grand Valley grads that I was working with which was kind of neat. So we were all kind of in the same place (in their careers). I didn’t know them before that but we got to know each other pretty well and so because they were kind of in the same boat with me being new teachers we connected pretty well and kind of mentored each other. I think every teacher you can learn (something from), just like PD. It’s that mindset. Every teacher has something that if you’re asking good questions, you can get some good information to be able to improve yourself from. I think the informal mentoring was probably more helpful than the formal mentoring even though my formal mentor was my most helpful informal mentor throughout all those years.

C: So the district does have a mentoring process?

K: Yeah. Actually now I have gotten into this role I don’t have an official mentor but the administrators that I am working with here are kind of my informal mentors and they’ve been great and the secretaries have actually helped me out with answering a lot of questions…

C: Without a doubt.

K: …as they have come up and so that’s been huge.

C: I try to tell my students. I’ve said, “You really want to become friends with the custodians and the secretarial staff because they know how the school runs.”

K: Yes. Definitely and they are the ones that, you know, they have almost unwritten rules. They can get certain things done for you but they are not necessarily on the books in terms of things that they have to get done for you. So that relationship with them can make a big difference. Maybe if it’s just the turnaround time or something like that, it’s, again, nobody likes to say that they play favorites, but it’s hard to find the origin of how you are reacting with somebody probably goes back to how you feel about them personally and how they have interacted with you and when they need something the way that you react will probably be based on that relationship that you have with them. (48:37) That makes a big difference.

C: Have you pursued continuing education, and, obviously, you have your Master’s in Educational Leadership?

K: Educational Administration.

C: Ok. Or professional development and how has this education influenced your success in classroom? In a lot of ways, you have answered this already.

K: Yeah. That’s what I was thinking. So I have been involved in a lot of different types of professional development and then my Master’s program was big and it took up a good chunk of time. It was about 20 months, I guess, that it took to be able to get through that, but I’m involved in our PBIS, at our middle school anyway, I was the PBIS coach, as well as our school-wide literacy coach so those two things…

C: You are a busy guy, Ken.

K: I know it and part of it was trying to build up my resume a little bit, but I also enjoyed being part of those different teams so those things drew me into a lot of different professional development situations too, so that was good. And I’ve been to professional developments that are, if you think about a spectrum, on the poor end of the spectrum; I’ve been to some that have been very good. [Anita Archer](http://explicitinstruction.org/anita-l-archer-phd/)…there were some good things that I got from a couple of professional developments that I got from her. We’ve done a lot of Marzano stuff. Even coming out of Grand Valley there were some Marzano things that I was big into so I liked having that background a little bit too when our district started converting it over into a lot of Marzano stuff. But, again, it’s all what you can pull out of those different PD experiences so I actually went to a bad PD one time that 98% of it was terrible, but that 2% that I took actually had a pretty big impact in my classroom in the way I approached a couple of things so again it’s hard to say…if a great PD doesn’t have an impact on my classroom or improve my students then it wasn’t really a great PD or maybe I didn’t respond to it very well so just more mindset stuff with the way that you approach PD or experiences to be able to do that.

C: Now some or a couple of the districts or people that I’ve talked to, former teachers that are now administrators or teachers, they’ve gone to in-house PD where the PD is delivered by the teachers and then other people have said, “Wow! The ISD or the RESA we are associated with does some excellent PD. Is there a mixture here or where does your PD come from?

K: Yeah, we’ve done a few different things. We do have an ISD that does provide quite a bit of professional development, but it’s funny you say that because my favorite kind of professional development, is when it’s in-house. We’ve had a couple of different PDs. One that was back in 2009 or 2010 that was led by teachers and then just this last year we had one as well and I was able to teach a lesson to teachers about, it was technology-based, so it was neat as well, and I was able to show a few different things. That nice thing about that is you now have a point person with those professional developments, somebody in the district where you can say, “Hey, I’m trying this out. What do you think?” and I already know that person and so those are much more effective I think.

C: And it’s not a “one and done” where they are bringing somebody in and you never see them again.

K: Yeah. And I think you always want to stay away from the “PD rich and support poor” mentality which I have seen before too. And there’s a Steven Johnson, “History of Innovations” that I always think about and I always use this, it had to do with incubators and how with the development of incubators or the innovation of incubators you reduce the infant mortality rate so much so there was this group that wanted to donate these incubators to a small town in Indonesia and they thought, “This is going to help them out because they have such a high rate of infant mortality.” It didn’t do anything because those (incubators) broke after a little while and they didn’t have anybody there who knew how to fix them or solve those kinds of problems so they weren’t getting that support that they needed to continue doing something so that’s why I think it’s always big that if you’re going to have some kind of PD that’s there is follow-up to it and teachers have time to try them out, again with that autonomy so if they fail it’s ok, but continue to try and “This is how we are going to support you with it” and I think that the support part of the PD is one of those things that needs to continue to happen. And if it’s in-house people know what to support them with a whole lot more than if people are going offsite to different things that district doesn’t know how to support them.

C: Right. Then it’s almost useless if they don’t know how to support it.

K: Yeah.

C: “Pearls of Wisdom” question, (53:18) and I do, I have shown these, in the last round, and in the Capstone class, I bring in outside people, grads, and consistently in the Capstone class the students say, “That’s one of the best things that you do is we get to listen to people so I videostreamed a guy from Alaska. I videostreamed somebody in that teaches for the North Carolina Virtual (High School) Network, in fact I’m going to see her in a couple of weeks, but I also bring in actual bodies, and it’s a good experience, so with that load on you, what would you tell current students to make sure they know before they start teaching, in other words, what do you wish you knew before you left Grand Valley to start your career?

K: I think it’s such a tough question to answer because I feel a lot of kids coming out of there are going to have different understandings of different things and to be able to say that, “This is the one thing, your “silver bullet” that is going to help you if you understand what I’m saying right now then you’re going to be successful”. I don’t think it exists. But I would say, the big thing that I would keep coming back to is that growth mindset. Everything that you approach, approach it to be able to get better. And I think that will help them out and one of the big things, too, I would say is maybe even understand a little bit of generational differences with some (54:41) of the colleagues that they are going to be working with as well. I think when I first started out I was appalled at some of the negative things that came up with teachers. They said, “We’re not going to do this” or “This is not a good idea” and I thought, “Your boss. Your principal is telling you to do this and you’re saying ‘no’” and as I got to understand some of the teachers a little bit more it came down to the fact that they knew that something like this was already tried maybe or it’s not that they are trying to ‘bring the plane down’. It’s that they think that the plane might not be going in the right direction to actually help the students. And some of them maybe are just be trying to bring down the plane. They’re trying to be negative but if I had had that mindset, “You know what? There’s probably something…I’m looking at the ‘negativity iceberg’ here and there’s a lot underneath it and I need to be able to understand that they have different thoughts on going along with school or district initiatives than I do and I shouldn’t just assume that they are bad people, bad teachers, which, unfortunately that’s where my mind went sometimes when I saw some negative people but, and some of them continued to be negative people and some of them I saw that they really do have good intentions and they want to be good teachers but they just don’t necessarily want to be just out a new…implement something new and not be supported, which sometimes in the past they had seen too.”

C: Yeah, “We do this for a couple of years or a year and then we dump it.”

K: “It’s going to take up my time and then it’s going to go away kind of thing” so I would say just be careful about some of your assumptions about people and have a growth mindset about yourself. Find different ways to be able to improve and anything you take on you will be able to improve. It’s just about finding that way to be able to improve.

C: Good advice, Ken.

K: I hope so. It’s still not a “silver bullet”.

C: I know. Right. And I don’t think anybody in any of these “Pearl” answers has said, “Here’s the answer to Life, the Universe and Everything”. Question 10: Was there any information that you would like to add about your teaching career that I didn’t cover in the questions? Here’s your chance to expound.

K: Yeah. You know, I guess one of the things that maybe I would have pursued a little bit was continuing with the connections that I made with Grand Valley. I remain Facebook friends with some of those guys that I met with (not distinguishable) but I don’t have great professional relationships with some of the people that are off in different schools now which now I know that just being able to reach out and say, “What are you guys doing with PBIS?” or “Do you guys have a school literacy team in your school? What’s that like?” If I would have kept up with that kind of communication with people outside of my school that I met at Grand Valley instead of just, “Hey, how’s it going?” kind of stuff I think that probably would have helped out a little bit as well as I continued…seven years down the road that would have been helpful information or a helpful contact to easily have had. I guess that’s about it.

C: That’s fine.

K: I certainly enjoy teaching. It’s sad to leave the classroom. I like this position that I’m in but it’s sad to not have my own classroom, my own group that I get to work with, to see them improve so that’s going to make me sad at times certainly but this has its own set of problems that I get to solve and that’s ultimately what I like to do is solve problems so that’s good.

C: Thanks Ken.