Diane Tavenner: Hey, Michael.

Michael Horn: Hey, Diane. How are you?

Tavenner: Michael, I am so excited to talk with you about a school visit I recently did, and it's just giving me so much hope for what's possible.

Horn: All right. Well, Diane, I'm just going to be honest for the listeners out there, you don't get that excited about school visits all that easily. Maybe like 10 years ago you did, but you've got a little bit more jaded and skeptical maybe. I don't know. But this sounds curious and maybe even hopeful. And obviously we launched this podcast with the belief that the crisis of COVID could lead to the redesign of schools, and four seasons later we're into this. We're still waiting for that redesign. So I'm excited to hear what might be promising and what's got you excited. Let's dive in. Tell me about the visit.

Tavenner: All right. Wow. Okay. Where to start? So I visited the Anderson Institute of Technology, or better known as AIT, which is in South Carolina. I think it's fair to say this is a relatively rural area in the northwestern part of the state. And I'll start by saying I know firsthand how much work it is to host visitors, and so I just am incredibly grateful to the AIT team and their students, Dr. Couch, Kelly, Cecil, Dana, and Stephanie. I mean, they were amazing, Michael. They were so open and generous with their time and I just left feeling really inspired in a way, as you said, sadly, I'm a little old and crotchety now. I don't get as excited anymore. And this one really got me fired up. So AIT is four years old. It's literally only four years old. They launched in the fall of 2019 and yep, if you're doing the math, that means they weren't even open a year before COVID hit them. That was not a nice time to be launching a school.

Horn: No, not at all.

Tavenner: It's been hard for all of us, but they don't seem to be deterred by it and have come through it. AIT is a school where high school students from three school districts come to spend half days or full days in 18 different career pathways, and they are focused on preparing students for college and career readiness. And Michael, almost everyone says that now. So I think they're taking it to the level that we would hope for because their learning experiences are incredibly hands on. They ground them in solving real problems and projects.

And so this will sound familiar to folks who listen to us. They're very real world, and the school itself is designed to completely support these objectives. The learning spaces literally replicate real world settings like doctor's offices and welding shops, and a state-of-the-art barn and a green room that Michael rivals that of most production studios. And that's just to name a few of the spaces that we saw. The culture is so self-directed, they really think of it as a college or a company like culture. It does not feel like high school and AIT is partnering with tons of local companies and businesses as well as colleges and universities. So the connections are real and present. I mean, Michael, so many people say they're preparing students for college and career, but these folks seem to be doing so in honestly the realist way that I've seen.

Horn: Wow, that's strong words from you. I mean, I'll note that when I hear it, I think of other schools that I think of as doing a really good job on this front. Obviously, big picture learning schools, a network of schools that have been doing this for a long time. They get students out into real world internships as part of their schooling experience. Very neat projects that they end up working on. I'll say, I think of Korea where I saw the Meister schools master and they'll have real semiconductor plants with the former CEO of a semiconductor company leading these students, although they don't have the choice that you're talking about by any stretch of the imagination.

And then I think about vocational high schools near me and in New Jersey that are not maybe the voc tech that sorts based on racial characteristics or gender, let's call it what it used to be, and actually carry some element of prestige with them. But this does sound different, and it doesn't just sound sort of blue collar. It sounds way more diverse than that. I'll also say, I think you're right, there's a lot of momentum or at least talk in this direction right now. So I'm just sort of curious what is distinguishing this from maybe other efforts around in the water right now toward being really not just the college ready, but the career ready? Because I think you're right. That's a buzz phrase. It's a throwaway line. This sounds more serious about it. I'd love you to dig deeper.

Tavenner: Yeah, let's start with something that I do think some people certainly do. I mean we do this to a certain degree, but I think they've really taken this idea that there must be a value proposition for students in everything they're doing that's beyond just the learning. And I don't say that lightly because obviously the learning is important. But what I mean by that is all of these students who are engaged at AIT have dual enrollment or dual credit options with the courses they're taking with colleges. They can get industry certifications. All of the pathways have honors credit options. There are apprenticeships and internships attached with all of these things. So there is this real life positive benefit from what they're doing beyond the learning and the experience that comes in a valuable credential, or a certification, or a credit or something like that. Again, I think a lot of people are trying to do this, but I just found it to be true in every single pathway and at a much more greater depth than what I often see in places who are trying to do that. So that's one.

The second one, I just want to, you touched on it, but we should go back to it is this is not the voc ed that everyone's afraid of. So a lot of people really fear this direction because of this long history we have of just really tracking students and really what we would call dead end or closed door experiences that they had in traditional voc ed. This place is fascinating because every single pathway is explicit about what you can do if you do this work in high school and don't go on, what you can do with an associate's degree and what you can do with a bachelor's degree and in some cases hire post bachelor's degrees and the pathways and the job prospects. They're really explicit about what the careers are, the salary ranges for those. It's on the wall. It is literally in all the catalog. It's super clear.

I mean, just as an example, there's an electrical design and integrated smart systems pathway, and I love this one because so many people are always use their electrician or plumber as the example of why do we not go into career? Because our plumbers are making a $100,000 a year, and according to the catalog and the center of this particular

pathway coming out of high school, you can become an electrician's helper or an apprentice at about a $46,000 a year income, which is pretty phenomenal, especially for that part of the country. An associate's degree opens the door for an electrical technician, a controls technician, a smart system network technician. Now we're talking 78,000 range. And a bachelor's you can be an electrical engineer, a project manager, engineering maintenance management in the $90,000 range. And it's all laid out here for every single one of the pathways and the steps you need to take and the type of things you'll be doing. We talk a lot about "ings," Michael, and they actually speak to those here, like helping kids explore and discover what they're interested in.

Horn: Very cool. Very cool. Keep telling me more. I'm just sort of curious. So there's these pathways, they mark this out. What's the rigor like? How are they embedding these experiences to really make sure it's creating that optionality, that mastering the ings gives you and not perhaps sorting you into a pathway?

Tavenner: Totally true, and I think one of the interesting things here is I don't think I've seen this many pathways. I mean 18 different pathways and they are ranging from the electrical one I just told you about to digital art and design, a few in the health sciences and the biomedical sciences, pre-med. We met with a bunch of kids who really are on that pathway. Cybersecurity, network fundamentals, computer science, aerospace engineering. I mean, they literally have flight simulators in this place where they're practicing flight simulation. Also, Michael tractor simulators. I didn't know there was such a thing, but you really have to learn how to drive a tractor and so there's simulators for that.

Horn: That's awesome.

Tavenner: Yeah, and I just found in talking with the students is they were very wide-eyed about the prospects and the pathways and just really clear, it was clear to me that they really are being exposed and exploring what the possibilities are. And I met some who've changed pathways. They got in there, they tested something out, they learned about another one while they were in the building that was more attractive and flipped over. So I think that's all great. The question about rigor always comes up. I find it, I think it's really fascinating what happens to teenagers when adults signal their trust and belief in them. And so just the space of it is so professional, it's so clear that they're working with the machines and the technology that are present in the industry. They're being taught by industry people who are super carefully selected for the right mindset about how this teaching happens, very hands on, very self-directed, and then just this problem solving orientation.

So I love this particular experience we had there. We got to see a group presentation by one of the networking, it's a small group in the networking pathway, and they had observed this problem that their teachers were having, which was because the students come from multiple different high schools, the teachers had to open up PowerSchool for each different high school in order to take attendance. You and I would appreciate this, but I was like, wow, you guys noticed that and you appreciate that? And they're like, this was really not efficient. It was hard for the teacher to try to manage. They had all these instances of PowerSchool up. So they decided to try to solve that problem. They went

and noticed that there are these thumbprint scanners that are used across the building because a lot of these pathways require you to log hours in order to get the industry certification. So that's apparently how they do it. It's a whole other conversation, Michael, I can see your face,

Horn: Yeah, we don't have to go there right now. Yeah.

Tavenner: But anyway, they notice these fingerprint scanners and they're like, why can't we use that for attendance purposes? So they are going about solving this problem, and they're doing it by connecting with the company who does the fingerprint thing and potentially PowerSchool. And they realize there needs to be a connector in between. All of that to say, usually what I find in programs like this is in that instance, they would be trying to teach those kids to be entrepreneurs and build a bazillion dollar company. Right. It wasn't a bazillion dollar company, I don't think it is. I think it's a really real problem that they were being super creative about how to solve in a very cost effective, very partnership oriented way that had appropriate rigor for where they are in their lives right now. And so it was stuff like that, that just, I was like yeah that's what it should be like.

Horn: That's incredible. That's incredible. How do the students think about sort of the athletics or maybe some of the typical trappings of a high school?

Tavenner: This is one of the many smart things that this design has enabled is they've really dodged those questions Michael. All of these students belong to a home high school that is comprehensive in nature. As I understand it, it really, they all have football, they all have cheerleading. And so AIT doesn't have to worry about those things. They are really focused on what they're doing. The students have connections in both places. What I found fascinating is I talked to a lot of seniors who having had a couple of years experience here had worked it so that they could spend the whole day at AIT. And it was such a fulfilling experience for them, and they really are enjoying the freedom. They see their pathway. They seemed less concerned about what was happening back at the home high school. And so just to, I think a reminder, we've talked about this often, this pressure to be comprehensive and do everything means that you don't do anything terribly well. And so what a great way to address that issue, I think.

Horn: Yeah. That's wow. So okay, this is clearly something different from anything I've seen. I'll say it's comprehensive in a different way in terms of the number of pathways it has, but I love that it gives students a chance to test and learn what we've been talking about in this season of Class Disrupted about themselves.

Tavenner: Yes.

Horn: Where does it fit me as I start to work in this field? Do I build a passion about it? I'm not one of those people that think we automatically have a set number of passions, do I build it? It's just not landing and I want to try something else. Great. And it also, I didn't realize this when you started it, it sounds like students are able to enroll part-time, still be part of their home high school, which is very unique, I think. And I will say again,

though it does feel like something is starting to bubble in this general space, Diane, so maybe we're going to see a lot more of these. I don't know. What do you think?

Tavenner: Well, that's the part that started to get to me while I was on this visit. As you might imagine Michael, I had a lot of questions about that, like why aren't more people doing this and where did this come about? And so I do think it's important to just talk a little bit about the leader of the school and the man who founded it, Dr. Couch, because he appears to be a bit of a unicorn to me, Michael, and this might be why we're not seeing more of these. He was a successful educator with sort of a good career. He then goes to the Department of Education in South Carolina. He spends 20 years there. This is where he learned about these models. He actually led a delegation that went to Europe and looked at models that are largely the inspiration. He is the one who works on the passage of the legislation in South Carolina that creates graduate profiles and enables and encourages this type of school and learning.

And then he sits back and no one in the state is actually doing anything about that legislation. Schools aren't opening, programs aren't happening. And so I totally admire him. What does he do? He rolls up his sleeves, he goes back and he starts a school. That's like this, that's meant to take advantage of the legislation. He did that one and then felt like some of the sort of traditional regression stuff was happening that we talk about. And so he's now moved on to do AIT. But Michael, my worry is can anyone who's not Dr. Couch, who doesn't know everyone in the state, who doesn't understand the legislation inside out, who hasn't visited Europe, who has relationships with all of these companies and community organization, can a mere mortal actually open a school like this? Because when I poked and prodded, he was pulling on that expansive history and who he is to get this done.

Horn: Super interesting. So before I come in with thoughts, I'm just sort of curious what else you think might be holding people back from doing this or what other parts of his background make him a unicorn against this context?

Tavenner: Yeah, I mean I think the other thing coming up for me is policy. And so I've got quite a few experiences now with different states where the state level policy makers really genuinely seem to believe that they have policies on the books or they have past policies that enable and encourage people to do things like this. And it seems like that's what they want them to do, but then they feel frustrated because no one's doing it. And in some cases states will say, we will give waivers for anything like this. You can get a waiver for everything, but no one's taking advantage of that or that they're just not using the funding that is allocated in the way they want them to. And for me, there just feels to be a real disconnect between what it actually takes on the ground and the policy makers that, and I've thought a lot about this and my sense is that when these policies are passed, they don't actually clear out a bunch of the other demands and requirements.

And so there becomes this sort of net or web that you're trying to work through as someone who's creating one of these schools that maybe, yeah you gave me freedom over here, but you're holding me accountable to all this stuff over here and I can't make the two work. And it just feels very familiar to me from, it's different, but in the charter

world where, yeah when just even on credentialing, like the teachers who are in this building are from the industry. They don't have necessarily the normal certifications and whatnot. And that just right there alone can be a huge blocker and a determinant of success or not. And there's 100 other things along those lines.

Horn: No, that makes a ton of sense. I think it's where I want to land this Diane, which is that my take is that innovation in the pursuit of student outcomes should be the default, not something that you have to claw your way through the regulations and unroll this and unpack that and ask for permission to do through waivers or applications. And I think shortly after you were at this visit, I was with a group of state policy makers actually, and they were talking about all the work they were doing to help districts learn about all the innovative things and pathways that they had created in state policy under waivers. And so this is stuff for personalizing learning or competency based learning or career connected learning, like you name the buzzword, right, there was a pathway and they were all boasting things like, oh, we simplified the application process or we made them aware of what they could do.

Or we reduced it from get this one application for every single regulation you want to get around to just one application for all the regs. Or maybe one was now providing consulting support to help with the waivers on and on and on. I get the spirit of all that, but I hope folks who've been listening to this season have gotten the sense that when you decide to innovate or pilot, it's a lot of freaking work. I mean, if they've listened to what you go through with your innovation, I don't need to tell you that. You do it, but to ask someone on top of that, not just someone, by the way, lots of different entities with lots of different people to get permission from all these regulators and policy makers. And maybe by the way, you want these initial pilots to be done out of the limelight so the community like isn't up in arms about that one thing you're changing or whatever else.

So having to apply actively on top of all the time and money and so forth, and the uncertainty of the process, it just creates so many more opportunities for it to backfire that I think it just, it's crazy that we think that a waiver process is going to stimulate innovation. I think that's the bottom line is that innovation shouldn't be a permission issue. It should be the default in the pursuit of student outcomes. And I'll just say one more thing because I heard this as well a lot of the conference, which is that there's a lot of folks in the innovation world quote, unquote who will often imply that innovation is at odds with outcomes and such. I will just say very clearly, it is not innovative unless you are helping students or the stakeholder you're serving make progress, period. End of the thought.

Tavenner: Michael, I couldn't agree with you more. And having looked at the waiver processes in multiple states and chosen never to go down those pathways and you know we're very aggressive and we're well-resourced and we can do that, it doesn't seem like a viable pathway. And I think I would just suggest as evidence to that, and maybe I'll leave it here, but it was so telling to me when I asked Dr. Couch, who are your peers? Who do you talk to? Who do you get inspiration from? Who do you work with across the... Who? And he paused for a long time and he finally said, well, I visited High Tech High once. I visited Thomas Jefferson in Virginia. And then he just had nothing more to say. And I

said, so you don't have people you're talking with or working with or engaging with regularly. And he just shook his head.

And what I will say, Michael, is as someone who sort of in the space of innovating in schools and whatnot, I felt very connected to that feeling of just kind of being alone in the work and no one else is doing it. And like you said, sometimes you want it to be that way because when people know about it, there's often a negative reaction. But also what a problem if we have such, I mean, education is a massive industry in 50 states, and the educators aren't taking advantage of these waivers, whatever we're doing is not incentivizing innovation and there's not even enough of them to be connected or talking to each other, it just doesn't suggest there's a lot of hope there. So I think we'd need to be doing something different if we want folks to actually innovate.

Horn: Oh, I think let's leave it there. Great inspirational overview of a school that you visited, AIT in South Carolina. Thanks for sharing it, Diane. And thanks again to the team for not just hosting you but also letting you share the story. And as we wrap up here, I'm just curious what you're reading, what you're thinking about outside of these topics?

Tavenner: Well, I'm going, you might be surprised by this one, Michael, but I'm reading Good Economics for Hard Times by the Nobel Prize winning economist, Abhijit Banerjee. I think I just brutalized that. I apologize. And Esther Duflo. Honestly, I can't believe that the 2024 presidential cycle is already has begun. That's all I have to say about that. But I did want to get smarter on a lot of the key challenges that our country and the world are facing. And I wanted to come at it from a different lens. And this book certainly offers that. I'm learning a ton already. It's fascinating. So that's what I'm into. What about you?

Horn: I love that you're diving into this, Diane, and I'm diving into fiction. I finally finished it in Anna Karenina.

Tavenner: Oh my gosh.

Horn: Tolstoy's long novel that you made fun when I started it and I actually finished it. So that is my big triumph for the, probably not week, but several months, shall we say Diane.

Tavenner: Congratulations.

Horn: And with that, we'll leave you on that hopeful note. And thank you again for joining us on Class Disrupted.