

Claire Darmstadter

Hello, everybody, I am so lucky to be joined today by Kaitlin Leppert, grades five to eight Spanish teacher at Lake Country Academy Charter School in Sheboygan. Thanks for taking a couple of minutes to chat with me.

Kaitlin Leppert

I'm super excited for this. It's my passion. And I'll probably be a little long winded. So I hope you forgive me.

Claire Darmstadter

Oh, of course. So first, can you just give us a really general overview of your educational and linguistic background and how you arrived at your current position?

Kaitlin Leppert

Well, and it's actually my story is kind of funny, and I'll try to keep it brief. But I always when I talk to people about how I ended up becoming a Spanish teacher, they're always surprised because when I started taking language classes in middle school, I wanted to learn French. And so I enjoyed my French classes, but I came down with Mono really bad and missed like 52 days of school. And then my school told me, You can't take French 1 next year as an eighth grader and I was, you know, a little angsty, and, and upset about that. And so then in high school, they had always told us, you need to have your two years of foreign language in order to get into college or to graduate or whatever the story might be. And that has changed over the years. And so I was like, fine, I'll just take Spanish to get it over with because it's easier. And so when I tell people that and especially when I tell my students that they're shocked, they're like, what, you haven't always loved Spanish, you haven't always wanted to do that? And I think what really kind of twisted and turned things for me was when I actually got to travel to Costa Rica, in high school with one of my Spanish classes, and I actually was set up to go to a different university to major in Child Life Specialty. And that was my senior year of high school, and I switched in turn things. And here I am. So I went to Concordia University in Mequon for Spanish Education, which is basically a double major in Spanish and K through 12 education. And I moved to Baltimore for two years and taught out there and then came back to Wisconsin, and have been at my current position since. And I just, I love it. And I couldn't imagine doing anything different.

Claire Darmstadter

Yes. And I think it's important to mention the different schools around the state that have those Spanish education degrees, because UW was phasing out of that program. So it's good to know that like, even if like the quote, unquote, flagship university doesn't have it, there are tons of other programs that offer that language education degree.

Kaitlin Leppert

Can you tell me more about that?

Claire Darmstadter

Yeah. So they're moving it into a master's program. So no longer being offered at the undergrad level. So I'm kind of like the last group that was just kicked out of not having an opportunity. So you have to kind of cobble together different degrees. And it's interesting, and it takes some resourcefulness. Because you kind of have to figure out how you make it work. So Concordia, great opportunity, great option if you're interested in that since some universities don't have it. Can you talk a little bit more about inside your classroom? So are there any like teaching philosophies, or styles or practices that you ascribe to?

Kaitlin Leppert

Yes, so that has also been quite the journey. When I learned Spanish, I learned from a very traditional method of using a textbook and had a lot of grammar and vocabulary, which a lot of students are familiar with, and especially a lot of Spanish teachers. That's how they learned as well, for the most part. And that worked really well for me. And I loved learning vocabulary, memorizing things, actually, I have kind of a math brain. And I was able to equate learning a language to math, which doesn't make a lot of sense when you think about it outright. But in my brain, it made sense, which is why I was able to learn so successfully in that way. But what I found when I started teaching my students, and really kind of working with especially the middle level students, because at the high school level, students had to take or they were encouraged to take two years of a language. But once I was teaching those Spanish three and four level courses, the students that were in there were the ones that were good at learning languages and wanted to be there, which was awesome. But when I went to teaching the middle level grades, and our program at my school is K through 8 Spanish, and the students don't get an option, they have to take it. And so that also means when students are brand new as seventh graders, they get put into a class with students who've been learning Spanish since kindergarten. And so I found that my method of teaching with all of this grammar and vocabulary and this required memorization of all this knowledge wasn't working anymore. And I got to a point where I was no longer happy doing my job. And it didn't have anything to do with the kids. It didn't have anything to do with my school or the environment. It was just I was frustrated that I felt like I was running on this hamster wheel and I was getting nowhere. And so I decided to — I thought to myself, there has to be a better way. And so in my searches of Teachers Pay Teachers and blogs and different things online, I found that there was a different way of approaching teaching and that was teaching with a more natural acquisition focused, which a lot of people refer to as teaching with CI, comprehensible input, which basically means speaking to your students in a slow way that they understand and comprehend. And so I just started to dabble in it. And my students, I could see their faces light up. And they became more successful because I was teaching in a way that all students could be successful. Because all of my students speak English, they've clearly acquired a language. And so I wanted to teach them in a way for their second language or third language for some students, where they would also be able to acquire that language naturally and be successful and not feel like they had to memorize or they had to have these formulaic ways of learning language.

Claire Darmstadter

Yeah, and I think I was very similar to in the fact that like, I find comfort in that grammar, that mathematical like structure, but then you reach a point or like, shoot, I am not very good at just

like speaking freely without thinking about that, like rolodex of verbs in my mind, and I pull it out, but it takes me a second, and then you feel really uncomfortable. So I think that's important.

Kaitlin Leppert

And to speak further to that — and I didn't make the connection to how that would impact my students later. But as a student myself, when I was studying abroad in Costa Rica, I found myself digging through that filing cabinet in my brain when I was trying to speak like, Okay, what verb form do I need? What, you know, what tense do I need, what should the ending be? And it slowed me down in my communication to the point that I loved my host family, but my host, Dad was from Mexico. And my host mom, I studied abroad in Costa Rica, my host mom was Costa Rican, they had both lived in Minnesota. So they spoke fluent English. And while some people might think that that's like score!, they actually reverted to speaking English to me, when I asked them to slow down or repeat things. For me, I was like, wait a second, because I'm so slow digging for these perfect verb forms, instead of trying to communicate a message, it actually kind of impaired my ability to communicate with them, and them to me, because they were like, this is taking too long, let's just use the language we all know. And so I think being able to empower students to speak or write or communicate a message, even if it's not perfect, is super important, because native speakers, heritage speakers, speakers of second language in the country in the world will understand what they're trying to say, even if what they're saying or writing isn't perfect.

Claire Darmstadter

And so what I think you're getting a little bit is that often in language classes, we have to be very vulnerable, right? A lot of us are like, we don't know what we're saying, we feel like we're learning like a five year old because we're learning a language kind of from the start for a lot of us. And so that's often a place where we build community as a result, because everybody's kind of in it together. And in recent years, there's been more of a shift, or I guess, a push to having more inclusive language in the language classroom, and especially languages like Spanish where there's gendered language. Can you talk a little bit about how you've kind of negotiated those aspects and how you work towards creating an inclusive environment in your class?

Kaitlin Leppert

Yes, and actually, this is something that I've become more empowered to make as my focus in the last couple of years. Because a lot of times, I would use the fact that I'm teaching upper elementary and middle school students as an excuse to get out of approaching some of these topics, you know, oh, well, they're so young and our school has while it's a public school, it has a base of quite a few Christian families. And we're in an area that's not necessarily super conservative, but there's definitely some of those different political ideologies that maybe scared me from trying to approach this and be truly inclusive and representative in my classes. And so the first thing that I do for being inclusive is my library, my classroom library, my students read every day, I make sure that I have a lot of representation included in there. That's like the most basic thing we can do, right. Also in my teaching materials that I teach with, you know, when I'm using pictures or images, I make sure that those are also representative of diverse races and backgrounds and things like that. And as far as the language itself goes, to be honest, I didn't

even know about the different ways to — the different subject pronouns and things for non binary. And more, you know, having the E on the end, or the X on the end, and things like that. And so I started educating myself this summer. And I thought, you know, what, my students while they are younger, and they may not totally understand that, or their family opinions might be different, it's more important, but any students in my classroom who may not identify with our traditional gender norms and things like that, but they feel comfortable and safe. And so I started, I'm taking baby steps, right? And so you know, this year when I started teaching, especially when it comes to groups of people, my students have always had a problem with, well, why does Spanish automatically revert to the masculine form, even if there's girls in the group, right? So even at that basic level, where we're talking about the traditional gender norms, my students have always been like, *wait a second, this doesn't always seem right*. And so I found you know, the easiest way to step into that was to teach them instead of just nosotros or nosotras, the masculine and feminine, hey, there's this new one. Nosotres or elles for groups when it's a mixture of people. And I tell them to because when I pass my students on to high school, I said, your teachers next year, they may not know about this, and they may not. They may not teach you this. And if you bring it out to them, they may not support this. But I informed them that language is something that's fluid, and it's constantly changing. And so I said, I want you to be aware of it. So that, you know, you can use it if it makes sense for you. And so also, if you see it, you understand what that means as well. So just kind of taking those baby steps and trying to slowly open that up. But I think one of the other things as we talk about community building and being vulnerable, one of the other things that's super important to me, and this is unrelated to language, but related to teaching is that I don't let jokes fly in my classroom that people make, or those snide comments that they might make, just because students and teachers might be maybe ignorant to the meaning that those things can carry. For example, and I'm not sure that this — I'm digressing here a little bit. But I have a guidance classroom, or a guidance class that takes place in my room during my prep a couple times a week. And the guidance teacher was talking about a time when she went with her friends. And she said, Oh, you know, I was out with my girlfriends. And middle schoolers, when they hear that they're like, *what?*, they don't understand what that necessarily means when adults are talking about that. And so one of the students said to another, *well, not in the gay way*. And so comments like that, I don't let those fly, because that it doesn't even matter if it was meaning that there was someone who was gay in the classroom, so I speak up and I say, wouldn't matter anyway, that'd be totally fine. And so just making comments like that, and standing up and not letting jokes slide, will really help you with those students who in your classroom may not have come out, may not have, they may not even understand their identity themselves or be accepted by their families or their friends. But they hear that and they know this is a safe space for me. And case in point, actually one of my I don't know, one of the proudest moments of my nine years of teaching so far, I actually had one of my students did come out to me this year, and felt comfortable and safe with that. And so I know that I'm on the right track, knowing that, that they feel welcome and are able to speak to me in that way. So I'm going to stop now. That was plenty.

Claire Darmstadter

Yeah. And I think that's important, right? You mentioned that like, oh, people worry, *oh, they're only in fifth grade, it's too early to say it*. But if you plant the seed or nip the bud, whatever metaphor you want to use early on, then later on, you're not going to have those issues in that conflict when people are kind of fighting against what they might think with what people are telling them and just makes it so much easier. So yes, you don't want to say absolutely everything probably when they're eight years old. But if you can kind of get them exposed to it, it is really helpful. So looking at community COVID has changed that a lot. So looking in your class with whether it's priorities of how you want to teach or the hierarchy of what things are important to you has that changed has it evolved as a result of COVID? Or how's that kind of changed how you approach your teaching?

Kaitlin Leppert

And it's interesting because I — this year, the last however I don't know we've been living this -- it feels longer than a year -- has been absolutely to me as a human being. I live alone with my cats. I can't leave them out. And the isolation and the space has been super hard for me. So when we're not in the classroom, we've been hybrid and we've been online and now we're back to everyone being in person five days a week. When we were virtual, when I wasn't having that connection, that was hard for me personally. So I can only imagine what that was like for some of my students and their families as well. And so as part of my classroom this year, I made it a point to focus on community. And so if that meant sacrificing some of that target language time, sacrificing some of those lessons I wanted to teach, if we could build those genuine connections and have that community and those relationships, I knew when we got to the point of focusing on that language again, their affective filters would be that much lower. And when your affective filter is lower, it is so much easier to learn a language, to acquire a language. And so I felt it was super important to take that time to connect in English, to learn about how they are doing, to share about my life. That's one of the things that I found as a teacher that helps me have a positive community in my classroom. I am vulnerable about my own life and my family. I share and tell them stories. I let them know when I am having a hard day or my cats are having surgery. And it's actually really funny it paid off, because earlier this year, actually this was before Spring Break. I told my kids I was having a hard week and I had a headache and all these things. And my sweet, sweet, sweet kids, they were like, *what's your favorite food? What can we bring for you?* They're like bringing me tea. They're bringing me doughnuts and bringing me boxes of macaroni cheese. Because they know that's my favorite. And they're just, you know, they know I care about them. And that, and I know that they care about me beyond a level of a student and a teacher, we care about each other as human beings. And I think focusing on that community, whether we're in COVID times or not, that's one of the biggest things I've taken away from this period, is that it's definitely worth it to build into your environment in your classroom in that way.

Claire Darmstadter

Yeah, kids are the best. And so as a result of COVID, of course, community in person has been a lot harder to find. But then kind of as a result, it's been a lot easier to find online with expanding opportunities for virtual conferences, or just like networking and all these things going on online. So can you talk a little bit about how you find connection and community with

language teachers online, whether it's informal Facebook groups, you have a podcast if you want to highlight that you can, but any ways, that you kind of connect with other language educators?

Kaitlin Leppert

Yes, absolutely. And so this goes back to before COVID time. When I started searching for different ways to teach language, I stumbled upon Teachers Pay Teachers pages, and then I stumbled upon blogs, and then I stumbled upon Facebook groups. And within those groups in the last four or five years, I have found such community, a group of people I can bounce ideas off of who I know are trying to teach with the same goals in mind, teaching for acquisition, putting students first, community first, and things like that. And so Facebook groups like CI liftoff, there's an IFLT page, different communities out there with different foci on Facebook. Twitter actually has been an awesome community as well. And Twitter's a different one to engage with, I find different uses for all of my social medias. But #langchat is super useful and have a lot of good conversations on there. Yes, my podcast Preaching to Acquire, it's called, I still get a kick out of a name, even though I know I came up with it, but it still makes me giggle. But I started it because I just wanted to share my ideas with other teachers. And it's become a place for me to share about myself, and I've had other people reach out to me and say, you know, I appreciate you being vulnerable or sharing the highs and the lows. I have a YouTube page, Kaitlin Leppert, you can find videos of me teaching that was scary when I decided to do that. But once I decided to put myself out there, I found that a lot of people were kind of looking for that. They were like, wow, your vulnerability has allowed me to become vulnerable. And through that, I also am a coach through something called Curriculum Club, which is with Tina Hargens, CI Liftoff group. And I've met other teachers who are also coached together. And now we're some of the best of friends. And so I think it can start as this professional relationship where you learn from each other. But then you really start to value what you can personally give to that. And you have these connections. And that can really lead to real relationships and friendships, which has been super powerful. So I'm super thankful for my virtual friendships, because even if we could get together, I have some of my closest friends. We're in Maryland, we're in Nebraska, we're in New Mexico, we're in Montana, Wisconsin for me, and so we wouldn't be able to connect in person anyway. And so this virtual connection, while it's funky, it does provide a lot of a lot of things we may not have had before.

Claire Darmstadter

For sure, I will leave links to all those things in transcripts. I listened to the most recent podcast episode this morning. And I think it's really great because it's just like short 10 to 15 minute little bits and you get the information you need. And it's quick, and you can move on with your day. And I think also I want to mention that you don't have to be necessarily like a practicing educator to be part of these communities. Like for me, I'm a pre-service teacher, but I'm in all those Facebook groups, and you can kind of weasel your way and be like, *I'm so excited about the profession*. And they let you in and they welcome you. And so you can start learning about those things before you're in the classroom, which I think is really helpful. Now to close this out. I say close this out, this might take a little bit longer than I was initially thinking. But can we do some rapid fire questions, just like the realities of being a language educator and kind of

working to demystify the profession? Okay, so the first question is, as a non native speaker, how do you find confidence in your skills or kind of respond to students if they like, ask you a question and you have no idea what the word is because you just haven't had exposure your entire life to that language?

Kaitlin Leppert

Yes, so this is actually one of my areas where I feel the most vulnerable. I feel that since I have been teaching 5-8 grade Spanish now for the last — I'm starting to lose track. That's how I know I've been teaching for a while. I think I've been teaching these guys for about 6-7, maybe 8 years, somewhere in there. I think I'm in year eight right now. I might be wrong. I'm speaking at such a, you know, novice and intermediate level of language that I have lost a lot of my fluency. And so, you know, as far as interacting with students in the classroom, they don't know much difference. And even my native and heritage speaker students, they're so gracious with me. And they just appreciate that I'm trying to connect with them in a way that you know is authentic to their culture and who they are. But when students ask me things, I used to be very defensive about it and feel like I had to have all the answers. But as I've come to realize, teaching them skills to be successful in life, which includes being vulnerable when you don't know something, and not making something up and not lying about it is more important than me being necessarily an expert on everything. And so I'll tell them, *hey, that's a great question. I've never had to talk about this random animal or this random thing that you're asking me about in the target language before, so let me look that up for you.* Even as far as when I'm teaching them, because using the language to facilitate conversations is so powerful. You know, for example, we were talking about Harriet Tubman and Ruby Bridges and a lot of these other people in the target language. And they asked me questions about the history behind it. I'm not a history teacher, I'm not an expert in that area. But let me look that up. And let me get back to you. And I think following through on that is super important. And they are appreciative of that. I've had some kids say, *Well, why don't you know what that word is?* And I'm like, do you know every single word in the English dictionary? Like I'm not a human dictionary? And they're like, oh, okay, that makes sense. And so I think that just being open with them, looking it up, following up with them as the most powerful thing you can do.

Claire Darmstadter

Honesty's the best policy. So the next question, can you walk us through what it's like to interview for a position as a Spanish teacher? So are you interviewing in Spanish? Do you have to bring your resume in Spanish and English? What does that like?

Kaitlin Leppert

So this is actually a really great question that I don't have a lot of information on. When I interviewed for my first Spanish teacher job in Baltimore, the school that I was going to, the teacher previous to me had kind of up and left without leaving anything behind, without kind of doing things in a way that I would do them. And left before the end of the school year, just kind of abandoned the kids about a month before the year was over. And so when I interviewed, they didn't have anyone to interview me in the target language or anything like that. And so I think they were going off of, you know, my university credentials, my student teaching information and

things like that as well. And then the current place I'm teaching at now is where I student taught. And so I had pretty much a three-month-long interview with them as I was teaching there. So when they were bringing me on full time, I actually didn't do an interview, which is probably not acceptable. But I did basically a three-month-long interview, I still submitted my resume and all the official paperwork. But they knew from watching me in the classroom how I was going to be with the students. And to be quite honest, I was thinking about this as I kind of previewed some of these topics before we were talking. And this might be a hot take and controversial, and I would welcome conversation around this and debate around it. But I don't feel that being super fluent, and being an expert language speaker is indicative of your ability to teach the language. And so I feel that if a school were to interview me in Spanish, and that's what they were focusing on their judgement of my ability to be a positive force in the classroom and to teach especially novice level learners, now I understand if you're teaching levels, three, four AP, the language ability is different. But I think I don't know that I would get the job to be quite honest, because I have lost a lot of that fluency. But I know that the way I'm able to make my language comprehensible for novice level students to scaffold their reading, their writing, their understanding, their listening, that's super powerful at that level, and that might be missed in an interview that was just based on me being able to have conversational Spanish about my skills. But that's not what I speak to my students about, if that makes sense. And so I think that even more powerful if I were going to be hiring a language teacher, I would want to see a lesson of them teaching. Maybe not necessarily live if they had previous positions, videos of them in the classroom in a real environment, or *Hey, come on in and teach my kids for a day, be a sub in my classroom*. And that would give me probably a better picture of what their ability to work with students is about. And that's not to say that fluent speakers and native speakers shouldn't be teachers. I want to make that clear, too. Because they absolutely have the best language background for that. But I think that there has to be a balance between fluency and also classroom active classroom skills, if that makes sense.

Claire Darmstadter

Yes, for sure. That's kind of like you said it's a hot take. And I bet people will have different opinions, but I think that's a really good point that you bring up. And so looking, of course, there's like state requirements that people have to be in compliance with. So I know it's changed over the past couple years, but can you talk a little bit about that? Is it an ACTFL test that you're taking? What do you kind of have to do on a state like bureaucratic level to show your skills?

Kaitlin Leppert

This is actually interesting because the requirements in Wisconsin changed as I was becoming kind of a junior and senior in college. So when I first started school, the only thing as far as language went that we needed to do was obviously complete our coursework. I was required to do a study abroad. As a Spanish minor or major, our university required that in order to graduate, and then I had to take the Spanish praxis test for secondary levels. But that did not include any kind of speaking. It included listening, reading, kind of grammar, knowledge, culture and history knowledge. I believe it included writing as well. You just had to get whatever the passing score was. And so I actually snuck in like the last year where they were allowing the praxis to be what was needed for licensure. And then I think they changed to having the OPI,

the ACTFL tests where you have to get a certain proficiency level on them. But I never had to take those. I have wanted to go back and take them just so I can have that. But at this point in time, especially with COVID right now, that's not that's not necessarily where I want to put my efforts at the moment. And to be quite vulnerable with everyone here, I'm not sure how high my proficiency level would be on a speaking assessment, specifically. Reading, writing, and listening, I have no qualms about but as far as speaking, like I mentioned, I haven't had the best community to keep up my speaking skills in and that's definitely something I want to seek out and continue to improve and bring back up because that's an area where I do feel a little bit vulnerable and like, not as confident.

Claire Darmstadter

Yeah, it can be difficult, of course, right, like we talked about Wisconsin is a very linguistically diverse state. But compared to a lot of other areas, it's not really at all in some sense. And so it's very hard, especially in smaller cities, or areas that don't have a super high Spanish speaking population, it can be difficult to maintain those skills. I know we've been going a while. So I'm gonna kind of mash all the rest of the questions into one giant question. Can you talk a little bit about the work/life balance, and then any misconceptions that people have about language educators, whether it's working in a school that's a little bit different? It's a charter, still public, but just kind of what it's like to be in that setting?

Kaitlin Leppert

Okay, so work life balance, I feel like this is something that I wish I could go back and tell my, my first year teacher self, your to do list is never going to be done. So don't even bother trying to like, get all these things done before I leave for the day. My first year teaching, actually my first three years teaching, I really stressed myself out and I gotta get all this grading done tonight, I got to get all this lesson planning, it has to be perfect. And what I've come to realize is that the students don't care if your lessons are perfect. And that was more of me holding myself to a perfectionist standard. The students care if I'm teaching them Spanish, if I'm speaking to them in Spanish, if they can understand me, if we're building community, if they're having fun. And so my lessons don't need to be perfect. Neither does anyone else, any other teacher's. As far as grading goes, I've become smarter about what I grade, and what I assess, and how I assess it. Because I really wanted to look at what I am assessing students on here, if I'm giving them homework, and this is getting into another topic, but I feel like it's important. So I'll just touch on it. If I'm giving students homework to complete at home, and they come back the next day, and it's not done, am I really assessing them on their ability to, to understand or to communicate in Spanish, or am I assessing them on their organization? Am I assessing them on their family life? Am I assessing them on you know, their ability to stay up late enough to do their math, and their Spanish, and their reading and everything else. So I try to assess them on things in the classroom, when I know that they're able to be focusing for the most part on what I'm asking them to do. I asked them to read and to listen and use those modes of communication. And that's what I really look at. And since a lot of those things are happening in real time in the classroom, I found that I don't take a lot of those things home to grade anymore. Or if I have things to grade outside of classroom time, because I think it's important to bring students into that feedback. So we do a lot of reflection in class and we do a lot of grading together, not

because I'm trying to get a cop out of having to take things home to grade, I mean that is a plus of it as well. But just so that students can see where they had those hits and their misses, where their strengths are and where the areas of growth are. Because if I take a paper home and I grade it and I hand it back to them. What do they look at? Just the score. They're not necessarily going through to see what parts they understood and what parts they got confused on, and all of that. So that's where there's value in doing those things in the classroom. And what COVID has taught me this year, which we didn't touch on, speaking of work life balance, is the idea that I do need to take time for myself outside of the classroom. And so I've made it a priority this year that once my teaching hours, my contracted hours are done, I don't take work home, unless it's something I want to do, where I'm like, Oh, I can't wait to make this lesson. I can't wait to figure out a way to teach this topic, which happens sometimes. But I don't take work home unless I want to do it. But I've also had to adjust my expectations of myself, my expectations of students, to make sure that I'm not sitting on an assessment for three weeks waiting to get that back to students, because I think faster feedback is more important and more valuable. So as far as work-life balance goes, I think understanding that you are a person outside of the classroom, and that you need to fuel that person as well. And those passions and interests, while mine might be language teaching, not necessarily grading. So that's as far as work life balance. There's a ton of misconceptions about charter schools. And I could go on and on about this. And to be honest, when I, when I first took a job in a charter school, I didn't understand what it meant to be a charter school. And so I want to emphasize when I'm talking about this, that every state is different in the way that the laws are set up in order for charter schools to kind of exist and to operate. But speaking specifically to Wisconsin, and even in Wisconsin, it's different. There are some areas where I think I'm not sure if Madison is one of them. But I know Milwaukee, where the charter schools are authorized meaning allowed to exist and allowed to operate, they're authorized by universities. Where I teach, our charter school is authorized by our local school district, meaning our local school district has to support us and has the ability every five years-ish, that's how long our contract is, to say, *you're not living up to what you said you would or you're not making progress, or we are concerned about these areas of your school, we don't want to offer you another contract to exist* and then our school would cease to exist. That's not really how it happens because our local school district sees value in what we bring to the table. But it's fascinating because we have to have a close relationship with the local school district. All charter schools are public schools, meaning students don't have to pay a tuition in order to attend them. But for example, our charter school focuses on a different curriculum, we have uniforms for students. We have different ways of teaching from the school district, which allows us to be another option for students in the area. And so I think a lot of, and this is another hot take, and I'm just going for it. But I've seen a lot of places and a lot of teachers, especially in public schools, vilify charter schools as the enemy. And I think there's a lot of nuances. As far as the authorizers, the laws, how the funding is taken care of, that I think people need to understand more and maybe advocate for changes in those areas, rather than for charter schools to just disappear. I understand that our school is not going to be the best education for every kid. We are very focused on academics in our school and a lot more kind of, I don't want to say like traditional book learning but more of a classical style of education versus like a Montessori are more hands on, and every student has different needs to be met in order to be successful. And so that's why I think there is value in choice. But I think making sure

that you understand how the charter schools are funded. For example, our funding comes from the per-pupil funding, it filters through the local district. We actually have to buy back things like hot lunch, we have to buy back busing services. So we have to pay for those out of our own pocket. And so therefore, our teacher salaries aren't necessarily the same as the district because some of that funding is lacking. Whereas in other places, they're funded differently, and they actually do hurt the public schools. So I think that there's definitely value in choice for students. There's value in choice for teachers, for example, as a language teacher at my school, my administrators, there's actually two of us. One teacher does the K-4 and I do the 5-8, our administrators trust us to teach in the best way that we know. They obviously, you know, want us to inform them of our teaching practice. And I run the curriculum by them that we use. And I invite them into our classrooms, and they observe us and things like that. But we have that flexibility, which I think sometimes in larger districts is not available, because you have someone who's saying, this is the textbook, or this is the curriculum you have to use. And then teachers have to get creative to put their own spin on it. And so I think that's where the value for me personally in my teaching environment is, is that I have the freedom to do what I know is best for students. And if what I'm doing isn't working, I have the freedom to change it and to do something different to work for the students' benefit better.

Claire Darmstadter

Yes, it's a very nuanced debate. Very nuanced topic. Thank you so much for all your time for all the listeners that stuck with us, I think this is by far the longest interview to date. No, I love it. You're like the local celebrity of language education in Wisconsin, so I was very excited. I had a very long agenda of things I wanted to cover, but I think we hit all the marks. So thank you so much, and have a great rest of your day.

Kaitlin Leppert

Thank you so much. It was a pleasure.