



The Power of Us: Transforming K-12 Schools Through Collective Action (w/ Andrea Forcum) (*Transcript*)

*Educator Wellness Podcast
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[PODCAST INTRO] 0:00 | Dr. Kari Vogelgesang:

Hello, everyone. I'm Kari Vogelgesang, your host of the Educator Wellness Podcast, here to share and promote my life's work and passion, all things wellness, but not just any wellness. We're here to discuss wellness specifically as it pertains to educators. I am a former elementary school teacher, and I am passionate about helping educators see wellness in a very different way.

This podcast is dedicated to educators across the globe, creating a space for us to come together in an authentic and therapeutic way, sharing our stories, our hopes, our joys, our fears, our sorrows, and hopefully creating some space to share some laughter with one another as well in our journey to learn how to support one another, to prioritize wellness, and enhance our overall wellbeing.

Please join me as we talk with nationally recognized experts to guide us on a transformative journey of self-discovery, helping us to embrace and weave all dimensions of wellness into the fabric of both our personal and professional lives. Also, please note that the opinions and perspectives that are shared on this podcast do not necessarily represent those at the Scanlan Center for School Mental Health or the University of Iowa.

[EPISODE INTRO] 1:12 | Kari Vogelgesang:

Welcome to another inspiring episode of the Scanlan Center for School Mental Health Educator Wellness Podcast. I am your host, Dr. Kari Vogelgesang, and today I am absolutely thrilled to welcome the dynamic and influential Dr. Andrea Forcum, or better known as Educator Andrea.

Dr. Forcum is an assistant professor of teaching and learning at Indiana State University. She has a bachelor's degree in English and master's degree in secondary education and another master's degree in English. She also holds a PhD in curriculum and instruction, and her dissertation focused on the impact of stress on first-year teachers' relationships with their students. Extremely interesting.

Andrea passionately advocates for educators and students on her social media platforms and through speaking engagements, and if you aren't already currently interacting with or following Educator Andrea on one of her many platforms, I highly encourage you to check her out. She is extremely funny, and she is very passionate about all things education.

But for today, get ready to be inspired as we dive into how collective action can transform our schools and drive positive change. This as an episode you won't want to miss. We dive into a very complex conversation about education and uniting together not only as educators, but as a community at large, and we explore the magic of collaboration and solidarity and paving the way for a brighter tomorrow in our field of education. Welcome to the conversation, everyone, and welcome, Dr. Andrea.

Welcome to the Scanlan Center for School Mental Health Educator Wellness podcast. We are so delighted to have you on today. You are famous. Thanks for coming on.

3:20 | Andrea Forcum:

Thank you. I didn't feel famous until this past weekend. I went to a restaurant, and there was a 45-minute mandatory wait. I was like, "Oh, okay." And then the girl who was the daughter of the owner of the restaurant came over and said, "Are you Educator Andrea?" And they got us a seat immediately, and I was like, "I've arrived."

I never need to attain any further glory. This is the coolest thing that's ever happened to me. They opened up a back patio area for me and my family. I was like, "This is too much. I've arrived."

3:48 | Kari Vogelgesang:

Your kids are too young to know how cool that is.

3:52 | Andrea Forcum:

Right. They were just sitting there like, "Yeah, sometimes random strangers come up and talk to my mom. I guess she works with them." That's what they think is that Mom just works with a lot of people.

4:02 | Kari Vogelgesang:

Yeah, yeah. No, you really are. You have quite the following, and it's because, I mean, for lots of reasons. You're super smart, and you bring a lot of interesting ideas to your content, but you're also really funny.

4:15 | Andrea Forcum:

Thank you. Yeah, that's always my goal is that I'm uplifting people. I don't want people to feel dragged down by my content. I try not to avoid tough topics, but I try and view them in a positive lens of if this is hard then it is still something that we as a community can and should do something about as opposed to just being like, "Well, this sucks," which I feel like is somewhat the tenor of what we see on TikTok at times, especially when teachers leave the education field.

There's literally a name for it. They call it Teacher Quit Talk. The girls who run that podcast are actually good friends of mine, so that was not a slam on them at all. But there's definitely a lot of videos that come out where it's teachers who have been really wounded by things that have happened in their schools and all of that, and it gets really heavy.

Their stories are valid, and their experiences, I think, should be shared and need to be shared. But my platform, what I try to most do is just help teachers feel seen and hopefully help them feel like they can laugh about some of the things that happen in their day. I try and give them permission to be like, "It's okay. That was insane, and you can laugh about it. It's all right."

5:30 | Kari Vogelgesang:

Yeah. Well, I hope that we can do that a little bit today together in this podcast as we're going to talk through, as you just referenced, some challenging times that educators are experiencing, some challenging issues that we're experiencing on a day-to-day basis, week to week, year to year. It seems like it just keeps escalating, that time is even. We're going to address some of those in a little bit.

But before we do that, maybe can you just tell us a little bit about yourself? I think your story is really, really interesting, and those of our listeners who follow you probably know a little bit of your story starting in high school and how you did in high school and what you did after high school. But I'm imagining that some of our listeners don't know that story, and I think it's a really important story to tell. So could we just start there?

6:20 | Andrea Forcum:

Yeah, definitely. I think that people have this image of teachers and professors, that they were always academically-focused and they were always that type A student. That was never me. I was undiagnosed ADHD up until two years ago, and what I always considered to be major character flaws were ... not to excuse some of the things that were in my control that I didn't control, but there were definitely things that I think an IEP would have helped me with in high school.

But I was just not interested in academics all the way through high school. I graduated with a 2.7 GPA. All of my siblings, I have three other siblings, all graduated with a 4.0 or higher. They were honors, AP, driven kids. I had a great home life. My GPA had nothing to do with, oh, I'm stressed about what's going on at home. I just didn't feel like it. I just was there for the vibes and to hang out.

So after I graduated high school, I wanted to be a talk show host. I wanted to work on the radio and be a morning show host.

7:27 | Kari Vogelgesang:

Well, listen, you

7:29 | Andrea Forcum:

And now I do have a podcast, so it's kind of full circle. But when I was interning, I saw the lives of the people and what it required of them to do that job well. It was travel, and it was moving every few years and having to go to clubs every night. I was like, "That is just not my scene." So I ended up switching my major to English, and while I was studying to get my bachelor's degree in English, I was a full-time manager at a Wegmans Food Markets, which is in the Northeast area, best grocery store in the world.

They put me in charge of training the cashiers who are all teenagers, and it was so fun. I was doing all of these different things, designing this course. I actually put together a big training curriculum for them before I ended up leaving. I was there for three years. It was the most fun I ever had at a job. I was like, "This is the best." But I knew I didn't want to have to work nights and weekends, which is what it is at a grocery store.

So after I graduated with my bachelor's in English, I worked as a technical writer for a while, and that ADHD thing came back. Sitting in an office, not good for me. I was terrible at that job. They loved me, but I was just the person who hung out and you just chatted with. I basically went back to high school and was there for the vibes, and I don't like feeling like I'm not doing a good job.

I knew I wasn't doing a good job. No one ever said anything to me at all. I never got a consequence. There was never like, "Andrea, you need to do better." I was just like, "I know I'm not doing great here. I can tell you, for sure, it's not my best you're getting." So I thought about teaching again. I'm like, "Well, I'm not making that much now as a technical writer and I won't make that much as a teacher, but at least it'll be a lateral move at this moment."

So I went back to school to become a teacher. At that point, I was married. I had a mortgage, so I couldn't afford to do free student teaching. So I stalked all of the local principals until one of them gave me a job on a provisional license. I emailed them monthly. I showed up to all of the different job fairs, and I'm like, "Hey, have any English teacher jobs? Hey."

There was one rural, small school that was out of town that took a chance on me. My very first day in the classroom, I'd never subbed, nothing like that, was my first day teaching. It was on an emergency license. I was teaching seniors and a journalism class. It was an educational experience for sure for me, probably not for them. I did my best. I'm still in touch with some of those students.

They reach out to me every once in a while. If I come across their For You Page or whatever, they'll be like, "Oh, look who it is." I'm like, "Oh, hey, guys." So I worked there for three years. My licensure program was a bridge to master's program, so I also got my master's in secondary education while I was there. Then I moved to California so my husband could go to school full-time and we could have family support.

I got my second master's in English while I was teaching at a small private Christian school. And then I moved from that to a very large public school in Southern California where I then got my PhD in curriculum and instruction. I got a job at Indiana State this past fall.

10:56 | Kari Vogelgesang:

Congrats.

10:58 | Andrea Forcum:

Yeah. So then we moved from California to Indiana, which is where we've been this year. I just officially last week finished my first full year as a college professor at Indiana State, which has been more amazing than I could have imagined. Really truly is my dream job. I get to teach. I get to also have time to process and plan and all of that that in the K-12 classroom is so challenging. So it's been quite a journey.

And then along the road, right about the time I started looking at getting my PhD is when I then went and started posting things on TikTok, and they started out real bad. If you guys scroll back far enough, it gets less and less comfortable the further you go back. I'm not deleting it because I need people to know from whence I came. I'd love for people to see.

I've seen other creators go through that same kind of evolution where it's like you start out and you're just trying to do what other people are doing, and it's not you. So it feels uncomfortable for even the people watching it. It's very cringey. My first video, it's me pointing out tips for teaching stuff and doing a little jig.

I remember vividly. I bought a ring light, and I set it up. My husband is just looking at me like, "Andrea, what are you doing?" And I was like, "I'm influencing. Shut up. Leave me alone."

12:26 | Kari Vogelgesang:

Don't you get this?

12:28 | Andrea Forcum:

That's always been the joke is I ... I barely posted on my personal Instagram before I started all this, but I knew that ... I backwards planned all of it. So I was like, "Okay, if I want to get a job at a college, they're going to want to see publications, probably." It's very hard to get a tenure track job at a university.

So I was like, "All right. Well, I probably need to publish something. Okay. Well, if I'm going to publish something, people want to see a platform. If I want to get a platform, I need to start posting stuff." So that was how I ended up posting it. I had no idea what it was going to become. I was more just thinking when they Google my name, I want them to see I have a platform of some kind.

The longer I did it, the more I told funny stories and stuff like that and seeing that for a lot of teachers, they can't talk about this stuff online because they have districts that have very strict

social media policies or they aren't really sure how to couch it in a way that seems positive or are just trying to keep afloat, and so they don't have the creative energy to post that stuff.

For me, it became this outlet of, "I had the craziest day today. I need to share it." I always had such a good relationship with the parents of my students. I never had a negative thing said to me. I never had a parent say, "Hey, why'd you post about my kid?" The only thing I ever heard was, "Was that my kid? I knew it was. I knew it. I knew that was my kid." So I got really fortunate with that.

The platform has just grown exponentially over the past year, so now I've got over a million followers between TikTok and Instagram, which feels fake to me. It feels not real until I get jumped to the front of the line at the seafood place in Boston.

14:14 | Kari Vogelgesang:

I was just going to say until somebody recognizes you, and suddenly, they have a table open for you and your family.

14:20 | Andrea Forcum:

Exactly. Yeah. So that's kind of the journey I've taken. It's been a wild, wild ride.

14:27 | Kari Vogelgesang:

Yeah. Well, congratulations.

14:29 | Andrea Forcum:

Thank you.

14:30 | Kari Vogelgesang:

It is something to be really, really proud of. I know that you've put a lot of work and thought and effort into it, but also, it's clear that you're just so passionate about education and about what you do and caring particularly for high school students. I really do think that it just does really go back to what you're passionate about.

Building those relationships and connections with people is the core of what we do as educators, and you're clearly very talented at that.

14:58 | Andrea Forcum:

Thank you.

14:59 | Kari Vogelgesang:

Okay. So you have this career you started. You graduated from high school, and you slowly built this career as an educator. Over the years, even thinking back even prior to COVID, then what do you think are the most maybe one or two most pressing issues that educators are

facing right now or have leveled up in some way, shape or form over the last few years for us that just seem to be presenting significant challenges for educators? What would you say?

15:37 | Andrea Forcum:

What I am hearing most and what I experienced most is the frustration in large class sizes where you've got so many kids. I mean my last year at the high school I was at I had 41 freshman students in one class. My sixth period had 41 freshman students. I would make comments about don't grade everything, and I would always have the old guard of teachers commenting, "If you didn't want to grade stuff, you shouldn't have signed up for this profession."

I'm like, "Sweetheart, sweetheart, I see 200 students a day. If I spent just a minute grading, which is not good feedback, by the way, if I just spent one minute grading for each of those students per day, do you realize how many hours a day that is, how many hours a week that is?" I'm not doing that. I refuse to do that. My kids deserve my time. My children deserve my time. So I had to get very creative on giving feedback and spot checking and conferencing and stuff like that.

But it broke my heart because when I was at the small private school, I would have classes of 16 kids. I had an AP class with nine kids in it. Every single one passed their AP exam because, of course, they did because I was able to sit with them. I was able to give them real feedback, and of course, these are AP kids who care about doing very well and are self-motivated learners. It's the ideal situation.

Whereas in the public school when I had 40 kids, I don't have enough hours in the day to sit and grade all of these papers and give really strong feedback, so I had to get really creative. It meant that I didn't assign as much writing for them, so they didn't get as much practice. It meant that they didn't get as much feedback as they should have from me, and it meant that I felt like I was failing them because I was.

Ultimately, they need that, and the system is not set up for me to do that. So that, I think, is one of the biggest ones is the classroom sizes is massive. The other thing, I think, that has been a problem in every single school I've worked at and something that I'm hearing from so many people right now is the supports for IEPs and 504s is profoundly lacking.

Every school I've ever worked at, the special educators who are attempting to keep track of all of the IEPs and then are attempting to manage the students' accommodations and then they're attempting to do all this. And then one of the schools that I'm aware of just told me that they are combining the special education self-contained classes, which are usually the more severe-needs students with the general population, and they're just having then two teachers in that class.

So now you have some really escalated needs in a general ed classroom with more kids. The classroom sizes all increased from 30 to 39 at the school, and they're like, "It's fine because there's two teachers there." It's like 40% of the kids have IEPs. 40%. These teachers are trying so hard because we are legally mandated to meet those IEPs. We lose our license. We're mandated.

But they're being given this impossible task where they love these kids and they want to see these kids be successful, and there's not enough hours in the day. You try and do what you can.

It just makes it so discouraging for these teachers who are trying so hard to do everything and be everything to everyone in a system that seems to just be putting more and more pressure to be like, "Well, sorry, you're going to have to do it. The IEP says it."

It's like, well, I know the IEP says it. I want to, but I can't give preferential seating to 18 kids. That's not how rooms work. But that's such a good example of something that I remember my first year teaching. I only had 24 kids in my senior class, but 16 of them had IEPs. All of them had preferential seating on it, and I was like, "Quick question, how does one do that?"

They just shrugged, and they're like, "Yeah, preferential seating is wherever you think that they would do best." I'm like, "I don't think that's what that means." I think it should be hopefully away from other kids that also need preferential seating because it's usually because they need a lack of distraction and all of that.

So I think those two things are the biggest is the class sizes and a lack of supports for IEPs, 504. Mental health is another huge bag of, every school I've ever worked at, the school counselors are given an insane amount of students, more students than any one person could possibly be able to meet with and help.

With the mental health crisis in America right now, especially among young people, we have acute cases almost every day. So the counselor is doing that, being the paramedic for the mental health crisis, and they can't go in and help these other kids that just need somebody to listen to about their boyfriend breaking up with them or something. The job is so big, and it seems like the resources are so limited. Everyone is doing the best they can.

I think that's the biggest part that I try and really advocate loudly for because a teacher who works in a school who has those kind of expectations of them, if they were to get online and say, "This is my situation, and it's burning me out," they could get fired. I can say it very loudly now.

I feel like it's incredibly important for me to do so to advocate for teachers in a way that is meaningful because I remember feeling like, "Well, this sucks, but I need a job. I love my students. I'm going to do the best I can, but I don't feel like I can really advocate." My last school, we had a really strong union, so I felt a little bit less like that. But at previous schools, I knew if I were to post something publicly about it and share what I was going through, I'd lose my job.

21:36 | Kari Vogelgesang:

Yeah. I think you said a couple things that really hit hard with me. When I was prepping for this podcast, I did a bunch of research on basically the top eight things that we have identified as researchers and teachers collectively, looking at the National Center for Education Statistics, the NEA, the American Federation of Teachers, the US Department of Education, educational research articles and journals, think tanks, Educational Foundation, so on and so forth.

I looked through a bunch of different resources to identify these things, and basically, what you just said summarizes all of the eight to combine, which is resources, to be honest. You basically described just kind of a resource crisis in our K-12 system, which of course leads into this mental health crisis.

If educators feel like they're overwhelmed, and you had said before that you were in a situation where you just felt like you weren't able ... Well, when you were a writer, when you were-

22:47 | Andrea Forcum:

A technical writer.

22:49 | Kari Vogelgesang:

You were a technical writer, how you ... I mean you were there. You were there for the vibes, which was actually awesome to know that that serves a really valuable purpose in our workplace, by the way.

22:59 | Andrea Forcum:

That's why they didn't fire me. They were like, "She lights up the office. It's fine."

23:03 | Kari Vogelgesang:

She has this purpose. Leave her alone. It's true. All of this is to say when you show up to work and you feel like you're just not quite cutting it and that you feel like you're disappointing people or you're disappointing your students, that leads to all kinds of mental health issues and wellness issues as well.

It really does come down to this resource crisis when we're not able to afford hiring more teachers and when we're not able to build onto our schools in ways that can best support class size or healthy learning environments for teachers and for students, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. I think this is what we're talking about, how there's this big lack of support and resources that go way above and beyond what a school administrator has control over.

23:59 | Andrea Forcum:

Yeah. I think that sometimes people think I'm just coming down on admin, and I really try not to ever do that because I understand that they don't make those choices. They are given, "Hey, you can have this many teachers, and that's how many you've got." Now, "Oh, guess how many students you're getting this fall? There you go."

There are admin that are bad at their jobs, for sure, but there's also admin that are really doing the best that they can with also limited resources, which is why every time I see a teacher appreciation post that is like, "Aw, man, I just got a, 'Hang in there,' or a cupcake," or something like that, I'm like, "But the admin did go and do that." I know it's not enough, and I'm sure they know it's not enough. They're doing what they can. I feel for them because I would rather get that and a heartfelt note than nothing. That's something.

25:03 | Kari Vogelgesang:

I also think this. When we start to separate ourselves like, "Oh, that's the special education teacher. That's the general education teacher. That's the school leader or administrator,"

whatever you want to call them in your district, so on, "That's the school counselor," and this goes back to uniting for a better cause.

When we do that and we're separating each other out like that, then ultimately what that does to us is that it narrows and weakens our bargaining power and our strength in numbers to change the system.

So I really wanted to talk to you about this for a little while on this podcast anyway, about have you been part of or do you know of an instance where teachers, school administrators, community members have really come together to solve a larger issue in a community? Or what might that look like or what are your thoughts on that and how to go about doing that?

26:12 | Andrea Forcum:

One of the schools that I worked at had a really bad gang problem about 15-ish years ago, and it was bad enough that there were stabbings at school. There was a lot of stuff like that. What ended up happening was the school communicated with the families. There was a lot of Samoan families in this school district, and within that community, the parents all got together and they said, "This is it. I know that there are some families and some kids that are involved in this. We're not having it in our community."

Quite literally, the Samoan group of families got together and all literally said, "We will not have this," and kind of ostracized the families that were involved in it because usually it's multigenerational. They shut it down. I don't know the specifics of how, other than the fact that the police were involved with names of kids who were affiliated, a lot of different consequences that were in place where there was a little bit of teeth.

But we're not talking prison time. We're talking alternative education programs and stuff like that where we had to separate out students from the people they were affiliated with and stuff like that. So I know that that was a situation that was pretty profound, and it got squashed pretty heavily for at least a decade. It started coming back a little bit after COVID just because there were a lot of unsupervised kids on the streets during the pandemic.

But that was one of those where it just showed the power of community, of the Samoan community in that area. There are not that many Samoan families in that community, but because there was however many and they all came together and had that common goal and that common decision that that's not what our city needs and that's not going to be who we are. They completely shifted the whole narrative so that now it's pretty much eradicated from that area.

I kept thinking about this question though actually this past week. My husband graduated from Yale School of Medicine with his PA degree. He got a master's in medical science, I think. So we were in New Haven. It's a college town, so there's Yale in there and that's about it. It is the worst city I've ever been to. I've been to LA. I've been to Chicago. I've been to New York.

I have been to big cities many, many times, and I have never felt the level of unsafe that I felt when I was in New Haven. It's not that big, and Yale is right in the center of it. Yale has one of the largest endowments of any university in the world, and the community around it is crumbling. When I was there, I ended up getting a cinder block thrown through one of my windows and-

29:32 | Kari Vogelgesang:

I saw that on your ... I think it was your Instagram. I saw it. I was like, "What? What? What are they doing?"

29:39 | Andrea Forcum:

We were 0.4 miles away from the university in a really ... It was a perfectly fine neighborhood. I didn't feel unsafe. They were college kids, clearly, were renting the houses next door. It didn't feel necessarily like it was a bad area. But in New Haven, it's like if you walk outside of the confines of the university, it feels very, very unsafe.

There were very aggressive panhandlers tapping on windows and yelling at you. When I went to Walmart for something, the way people looked at me made me feel like I was going to get jumped. It wasn't like I rolled into Walmart with some ... I was wearing a hoodie and sweats, and I don't have any fancy name-brand anything. I don't look like I have money. So I'm like, "Why is everyone looking at me like this?"

There were so many unsafe moments. What I took from that was how in a place where there is a university, a place that says that they are so focused on bettering the world through education, how is it that ... I, of course, had to look up how the schools are rated and stuff, and a lot of them rated very poorly. I'm like, "How is that possible? How are there not resources allocated to the community that surrounds your university when you have that much power?"

I kept thinking about how could they fix it. If I were in charge of Yale, how would I address this issue? Because it's a resource issue. It's a resource and drug and mental health and all of these different things. But I truly believe one of the ways we address a lot of societal issues is through education and good school systems. I'm like, "How is it possible that right here ..."

You're telling me that they don't have any way to provide resources? You don't have a school of mental health that's providing mental health services? Why wouldn't you? Right here, you have this whole community that is in desperate need of things, and you have students that need to learn how to do it. Do that.

It got me real heated because I, of course, always Google the endowment numbers and stuff like that, and Yale has all the money. They have all the money and all the power, and it's like I feel like if we all took greater responsibility for the communities in which we lived, the world would be a better place.

32:07 | Kari Vogelgesang:

Gosh, I mean you're just hitting on something that I have been thinking so much about, honestly, for probably about the last decade. I talk about this with my brother all the time, my brother, Brian, which is basically how I feel like we've gotten to this place of where I'm surrounded by ... I struggle with this. I think that people are doing their best. Of course, I do.

But I also feel like somehow we've lost this basic understanding of that we actually are the people, and we need to be stopping what we're doing and coming together and uniting and working together collectively to make sure we have the resources that we need to thrive as human beings in this country and to support each other in doing that.

I just feel like we've become these puppets now in a system that just makes all of these decisions that are not in our best interest, and we somehow are just trusting people to do this. I am not talking about political parties because I think this two-party system is clearly not working for us. I'm not even talking about that.

I'm just saying collectively as human beings, I'm wondering what it will take for us all to really truly wake up and be like, "Education and healthcare are truly the things that we need the most in this country, and we should be investing in the most in this country." We're going to demand this from our elected officials and make sure that this gets done.

That is the thing that has really made me want to do this podcast with you because I feel that energy in you when I see your content. I feel that energy in you when I hear your voice, and I think we can use our platforms to try to get it going, but it just seems also like an impossible task at times.

34:24 | Andrea Forcum:

Yeah, it does. Well, and it's funny that you mentioned the two-party system thing because I don't talk about politics on there. I really avoid it as much as possible, and I've never publicly talked about where I fall on the spectrum and all of that.

But it was so funny when I posted the video of the cinder block going through my window, all of the comments on TikTok from both sides assumed I was voting the opposite way of them and identifying things of why it was my fault that it happened, so people saying, "Well, that's what you get for living in that state and voting the way that you do. That's what you get for ..." It was-

35:04 | Kari Vogelgesang:

People.

35:05 | Andrea Forcum:

And it was from both sides. It was from both sides. I'm like, "Guys, what? I just got a cinder block thrown through my window. Why are you saying it's my fault? I don't live here. I am actually-"

35:18 | Kari Vogelgesang:

Somehow it's all the Republicans' fault or all of the Democrats' fault. You guys, we are the ones that need to be uniting and coming together, not pointing fingers.

35:32 | Andrea Forcum:

Right. I'm like, "I'm just a human that wished I did not have to not have a window on my car now." It was so fascinating how quickly ... Because really what it is when we do that is it's dehumanizing the person who's going through whatever it is so that we feel safer. When we do that, when we label someone as being, oh, well, they're just a right-wing nut or a liberal idiot, any of that kind of stuff, we're just dehumanizing them so that way we don't have to empathize with what they're feeling.

36:06 Kari Vogelgesang:

Yea.

36:07 | Andrea Forcum:

If we can just say like, "Oh, well, that's going on with them because of XYZ," it makes it more comfy for us because we've already separated ourselves from the type of being that they are. It breaks my heart.

36:20 | Kari Vogelgesang:

Brene Brown does an incredible job of breaking this down and how we have learned how to dehumanize each other with language in order to make ourselves feel more comfortable and to be more comfortable looking into other people's lives and seeing the things that they're going through and separating ourselves from it instead of actually helping, being uncomfortable and helping the situation.

She does a really good job of this. I listened to it in one of her podcasts. I can't remember which one now. I can go back and try to find it. But you just said it, and you just hit the nail on the head. I couldn't agree more with you. I just want to find a way for us as not just educators, but just as caring citizens of this country to come together and realize that, listen, team, we all want the same thing actually.

We really do want our kids to get a really good education, and we really do want our kids to be able to go to the dentist and to have quality healthcare and to receive quality mental health services if we need it, blah blah blah blah blah. Getting us to unite, to come together to do that is the thing that I want to start talking about a lot more.

37:43 | Andrea Forcum:

Yeah, I agree because you're totally right. We do all share those same things. We want good education for our kids. We want to not have to pay half our paycheck for healthcare. It's crazy. And yet we, instead, sit there and say, "Well, yeah, but I don't agree with XYZ on their platform and all of that, so therefore they're other, and I don't need to worry about their opinion about anything."

I'm like, "You only disagree on one thing with them though. There's 50 other things you guys could all agree on, and there was just the one thing that you're bothered by." It's frustrating.

39:18 | Kari Vogelgesang:

Or that we continue to listen to the extremists on both sides.

38:24 | Andrea Forcum:

Yeah. I'm teaching a social media class at ISU where I talk a lot about the influence of social media on culture. I think that's one of the things that I think has been so damaging is that we end up in this echo chamber, and the only people willing to speak out on the far right are on the

very, very far right or the very, very far left. Because we know, those of us in between, that if we spoke out, we would get heat from the other side.

If you're in the very far left, you don't care. And if you're in the very far right, you don't care. But if you're somewhere in the middle, which most of us are, you do care. You do care whether or not people are seeing you as only one type of person because if you were to say that whatever topic it is and you took a strong stance on the one topic, the immediate assumption would be, well, you fall into that category in every other way, which that's not who we are as humans. I-

39:21 | Kari Vogelgesang:

We are not. We are so much more complex than that.

39:25 | Andrea Forcum:

Yes.

39:26 | Kari Vogelgesang:

As we should be.

39:27 | Andrea Forcum:

Right. And the fact that we are so unwilling to see nuance in the big things and the little things, I think that's part of what makes it so hard to be a teacher is because we are educating in an environment where things are increasingly polarized.

So there's also that pressure of what kind of a teacher are you though? Are you the kind of teacher that I can see as a human who's doing their best, or are you the kind of teacher that I'm going to say is trying to destroy our country? It's like I'm just doing my best.

40:01 | Kari Vogelgesang:

It's one of the reasons why people are not wanting to go into education because they don't want to be put into a classroom and then have people constantly attacking them because they're making all kinds of assumptions about what they're teaching, how they're teaching, if they're trying to brainwash students in one way or the other, again, either side.

I mean it's just such a complex profession right now. I do think that because, at the end of the day, we're talking about the children, that it becomes a very sexy topic, and so people love to focus on it and talk about it and play on people's emotions around education and the children and what kind of an education that they're receiving.

40:51 | Andrea Forcum:

Yeah.

40:53 | Kari Vogelgesang:

For sure. Go ahead.

40:55 | Andrea Forcum:

I just want to add on to that because you're totally right with it plays on people's emotions. There was a video I came across on Instagram, and I almost never comment on something that makes me mad on social media, pretty much never. But this woman is touting herself as an IEP specialist, and she was answering a question. I think she has a podcast or something, and she's answering a question about a kindergartner who had to be restrained 11 times.

They've got an IEP, 504, is there anything before getting into a self-contained classroom? The woman who ran the podcast was like, "Why would you ever be restraining a little human? That's unacceptable, blah blah blah blah blah." It really made me angry, and she basically said that the teacher wasn't doing their job if they had to restrain them. I'm like, "Sometimes the least restrictive environment is, in fact, a self-contained classroom. Obviously, what is currently in place is not working."

It made me so angry on behalf of those teachers who are ... because that's so traumatizing, by the way, to physically restrain a child. That's traumatizing for you. That's traumatizing for the kid, for the students. To do that 11 times is crazy. That's so many. She should have gotten support so much sooner than that.

42:07 | Kari Vogelgesang:

So much sooner.

42:09 | Andrea Forcum:

So I commented that or some variation of that. Then I shared it on my stories, and I had a mom contact me. She's the mother of a special-needs child and telling me that this child wasn't being supported properly and blah blah blah. I sent a voice memo instead of responding in text because tone is so important with this stuff.

But I was like, "I understand that your perspective comes from the parent of a student who has needs. I want to be very clear that I am not trying to say that we just lock up that kid because they're inconvenient. What I'm saying is that if the supports to keep them in the classroom are insufficient to keep everybody safe, which they clearly are, then they need to be in the least restrictive environment that's going to allow them to do well, and that's not it. If that's having to happen, they need to be in a place where they can succeed and learn."

The parent did not respond to me after that, but it's our kids. It's so hard when we feel like it's our kids that are being talked about. I'm a mom. I care deeply about the kind of values that are being instilled into my children, and so I can also empathize with both sides that if you believe very strongly about a topic and they're going to school and the teacher is teaching the opposite about that, I would feel some type of way. So I empathize with that.

We all have values, and we want our kids to share in our values. So I think it's very normal for parents to be invested and to feel like these are our kids, and I want our kids to believe the same as the way that I believe. That's, I think, part of what makes it really difficult as an

educator because we want our teachers to be teachers of value. It's just who gets to decide what those values are is the big thing.

43:56 | Kari Vogelgesang:

Yeah. I think that's one of the most difficult parts of our job, which is to go into a space where you have such a variety of families and students in terms of their educational background, their life experiences, whether or not they're religious or not, what type of religion, all of that goes into family values. To create an environment that's respectful of all of those values and inclusive of all of those families is a really difficult thing to do.

It takes a lot of time and practice, but it's probably the most important thing that we can ever do as educators to create environments like that, model how to create environments like that, and then allow students to practice in those environments with each other to better understand and build connection with difference and with people who are different than us and to do it in a really respectful way and in a way in which that is I am very different than you on these few things, but that doesn't mean we can't be close friends and have a close connection.

I think that is something that is so lost right now. I have several coworkers who I do not agree with them about several things at all, and we probably will never agree about a few of these hot-button issues, but you know what? They're actually really great human beings. I know that they are. I don't agree with them, but they're great parents. They're great teachers. They're great humans.

I just don't think we teach our students how to do this very well sometimes because we actually don't know how to do it very well.

45:41 | Andrea Forcum:

Yeah, exactly. I feel like that's part of what has happened over I feel like more the last decade. I remember in high school having debates and having discussions about really tough topics, and that was encouraged by the teachers that I had and stuff like that. Now I feel like kids are scared. Even at the university in my social media class, and in fairness, I chose a really hot-button one.

There's a podcast called The Witch Hunts of JK Rowling, and it's fantastic. It's by a organization that is nonpartisan, and they basically look at all sides of a topic. So they looked at JK Rowling's experience as an author early on and how the right really came for her because they said she was teaching kids witchcraft. And then now in her career where she's made some comments about trans rights and stuff like that, the left has really come for her. So the podcast explores that and talks a lot about gender identity and all of that kind of stuff.

Within my class of 17 students, it was so fascinating. Not a single one of them was willing to make a strong statement on their own personal beliefs on that topic. I really did everything I could to tell them, "Whether or not you agree with my personal beliefs, I'm not going to share my personal beliefs about it because my beliefs are irrelevant. We are here to talk about how this was handled, how social media impacted all that."

We kind of got there eventually, but the fear of cancellation, of being labeled or being compartmented into this thing was very real. It was fascinating because then I would be like,

"Okay, guys, go ahead and write to me what it is your take is on that." And then I would find out what they actually felt about the topic. So with me, they were willing to because they trusted me and stuff like that, but they just weren't quite there with the rest of the class.

These are college students. So you take that same kind of tension and you put it in a high school or a middle school classroom. It's hard for kids to know how to communicate about really tough topics when, as adults, everyone kind of just freezes up a little bit about stuff like that because it's difficult. You don't want to offend people, but you also believe things. It's hard.

48:09 | Kari Vogelgesang:

It is hard. It's a hard space to live in when you know that something that you say or believe in and you express can be put on blast and be taken out of context, too, so easily and put on blast in a way that can really be harmful and damaging. We know that this is one of the contributors to the mental health issues that we're seeing in adolescents and beyond, too, even with adults. It doesn't feel good, for sure.

As technology continues to advance and we keep using different forms of social media platforms, then I do think that this is something that we're going to have to pay attention to and try to navigate and figure out over the course of however many years to improve the way that we can interact in social environments online in a more healthy way, for sure.

49:04 | Andrea Forcum:

Yeah, I agree.

49:06 | Kari Vogelgesang:

I mean I think we know this. I've done a podcast about this. Some of it's great, but some of it's not so great either.

49:15 | Andrea Forcum:

Yeah, exactly. I'm working on reading *The Anxious Generation*, which is a book. I can't remember the author's name. But it deals with a lot of that, the fallout of kids who were raised on technology who did a lot less outside play time and were not as protected as they should have been online. Now they have the highest rates of anxiety and depression out of any generation before. It's fascinating. I highly recommend that book to anybody who's looking at how to handle media literacy and all that stuff.

49:50 | Kari Vogelgesang:

I'll have to check that out. One more thing before we wrap things up here because I know we're getting kind of long. But I do think this is interesting. I don't have any research to back this, by the way. This is just anecdotal information about the teenagers that hang out at my house and have for lots. I have adult children now.

But over the years then that they would come to my house, this topic has come up so much, obviously. This person posted this, and this person sent this video and blah blah blah. You know

what's interesting about this is that ... and I allowed my kids to have way too much access to technology, in hindsight. In the moment, I was like, "No, this is good. They're going to learn about a code, and they're going to learn-"

50:39 | Andrea Forcum:

Right.

50:40 | Kari Vogelgesang:

It's really my logic in the moment, and now I'm like, "Jesus, Kari, what were you thinking?"

50:44 | Andrea Forcum:

Well, we just didn't know what we didn't know. It's one of those where everyone was trying to do the best they could with the information they had at the time.

50:52 | Kari Vogelgesang:

Yeah, for sure. I do forgive myself to some extent, but I do have moments of like, "Oh, my God." Anyway, you know what's interesting is that both of my adult children and many of their friends have now said that they would never allow their children to have access to phones and to social media the way that they did when they were in junior high and high school.

51:20 | Andrea Forcum:

Yep. I've heard the same.

51:22 | Kari Vogelgesang:

I think this is fascinating that now our Gen Zers are basically saying .. Wait, no. Is that right? Yeah, they're Gen Z.

51:36 | Andrea Forcum:

Gen Z.

51:37 | Kari Vogelgesang:

Are basically saying, "Oh, no. I know what this did to me, and my kids aren't having it."

51:44 | Andrea Forcum:

I think I've heard a lot of the same from my students. It's been interesting. A lot of them are saying, "I got my phone third grade, fourth grade," all of that, and they were like, "I'm not giving my kid a phone until high school or until whatever." I do want to temper that a bit because for parents that are trying to parent in different homes.

So I had commented on Instagram about it and had shared that I don't want to give my kids a smartphone until probably midway through high school, maybe for their 16th birthday, depending on where they're at mentally and emotionally. Somebody had said, "I agree with you, but the only way I get to talk to my daughter is with a smartphone and FaceTiming with her." I'm like, "Fair. I would do the same thing."

If I was in that scenario and the only way I'd get to see my kids' face because they're at dad's, 1,000%. There's so many reasons. Or kids who need continuous glucose monitoring because they have type one diabetes or there's so many valid reasons. That was the other thing. Some people got real offended. I'm like, "Do you. It's your family." I just know the way that my brain works, and I'm ADHD and my daughter, I gifted her that for sure. So I know that how my brain is developing.

We know for sure the damage that it has done now. Now we know. It's like women who were smoking when they were pregnant, but we didn't know what it was doing. Now we know. So it's like, okay, now we should do something. Another argument I've heard against keeping kids from getting phones is they will get socially ostracized for being out of contact with what's going on, and I get that.

I know, as a parent, you want your kid to have everything. You don't want your kid to suffer in any way. But at the same time, I'm like, "But there's known harm that happens because of phone access." We know for sure. So, to me, I'm like, "It's a price to pay," I think is the way to put it. That is the price to pay is that they are not going to ... Or you get them a phone where they can text and just text because those do exist as well.

But yeah. It's hard being a parent in the digital landscape that we're in right now and trying to create good, empathetic, loving humans that want to make the world a better place while there's just a lot of noise in the world right now.

54:23 | Kari Vogelgesang:

Which also just bleeds into our educational environments, too. It's the same things that we're grappling with even in the classroom, making rules around technology and use of phones. It's complicated. Parents, of course, get involved in those decisions, which they should. I'm not saying parents shouldn't have a voice in decisions and policies and rules that are being made in schools. They should.

But it is. It's a complex time, and we're going to have to, again, really start to come together and see each other as human beings and working towards a common goal in a united front to, I think, get back to a space where people are going to want to become teachers because it is a profession in which our society highly values and protects.

We've done some research, and we've done some work in Finland and in Norway and Sweden. I think that's the thing for me, and again, I don't necessarily like to compare the United States with countries like this because we are such a different beast in so-

55:27 | Andrea Forcum:

We're so big. We're so big.

55:29 | Kari Vogelgesang:

Even just the size of us is so different. I mean state to state, they can't even quite fully understand this, how ... People do when they come here. Then they're like, "Whoa."

But with that being said, I can tell you I don't think that they necessarily have smarter parents than we do or smarter kids than we do, but I will tell you that across the board when we go there, teachers are highly respected and valued, and that profession is highly respected and valued. So I do think that is one thing, for me, that you can thread the needle and see this common theme in these countries.

I think that's something that we need to think about and come together and really advocate for this profession in a way where people are going to provide the resources to become a teacher so we're not buried in student loan debt and so that people will want to be teachers, too, and can afford to be a teacher and then stay in the profession and then provide the types of resources that we need to be healthy while we're in the profession as well, which is a very difficult thing to do.

It's going to take lots of different kinds of organizations and people to be on board to make sure that we move in this direction.

One more question for you before we wrap up today. With all of your experience, looking back at the very beginning of your career, what do you wish you would have known in your first couple years of teaching? If you could go and talk to your previous self as a new teacher, what would you say?

57:18 | Andrea Forcum:

I think one of the biggest things is recognizing that it's not personal, kids' behaviors. I always took it so personally that a kid would be upset or wouldn't put their phone away or fill in the blank, whatever thing they were doing. I always took it like, "Oh, man, I can't believe that they're so upset with me and all of that." Then later, I would find out that they slept in their car the night before.

It's not about me. It's what's going on there. That helped me empathize in a way that was not possible before I learned that about my students and shifted my view of I have no idea what they're bringing into this classroom. I have no idea what their home looked like. I don't know if they have food in their stomach. I don't know how they're feeling, if their body is still shaking from adrenaline because they are in danger when they're home. I don't know.

So that, I think, is the biggest shift I had of it's not personal. I can create an environment that is going to be safe and warm and good for every single kid that comes in here, whatever it is that they're bringing in. I'm going to do the best I can to make sure they feel safe and warm in my classroom. Sometimes it won't work because they're bringing too much in, and that's not always my fault.

Not that I didn't screw up or anything like that, but there were definitely times where a kid came in and flipped a chair after I said, "Good morning. Put your phones away." Like, "Screw you," and they'd flip a chair or whatever. I'm like, "All right. Okay." So I think that's one of the biggest

ones is readjusting my lens on student behavior and what they are bringing into the classroom when they show up at the beginning of the day.

59:10 | Kari Vogelgesang:

That's a really good piece of advice for new educators, but also a good reminder for lots of even veteran educators as well.

Andrea, thanks so much for joining us today. I really, really appreciate you taking the time.

59:22 | Andrea Forcum:

Thank you.

59:23 | Kari Vogelgesang:

I know that you're just finishing some travel, so I know that that's an adjustment when you get back. So thank you for being with us and sharing your thoughts and opinions and experiences. I know that our audience will really appreciate it.

59:35 | Andrea Forcum:

My absolute pleasure. Thanks for having me on.

[PODCAST CLOSING] 59:39 | Kari Vogelgesang:

Thank you for joining us for this powerful episode. That was such a fulfilling conversation that I just had with Dr. Andrea. I think I could have talked to her for hours and hours. Maybe someday we will get to be reunited and have a conversation that can actually last that long. I hope you enjoyed it just as much as I did having it with her.

As Dr. Andrea so passionately highlighted, the key to a brighter future lies in our ability to unite and advocate for the field of education and our K through 12 schools. At the end of the day, we all want to live in a society and raise our children in communities where they have access to the highest quality of education.

This means supporting teacher preparation programs, investing in our teachers, upgrading our school buildings, meeting curriculum and technology needs, ensuring robust school nutrition programs, on and on and on. It means investing in the entire system of education for this country.

By centering education. We discussed how we can improve both academic and social outcomes for individuals and communities alike, which is really what we all want for this country. We have a lot of work ahead of us, and I invite you to join us on this critical mission. Together, we can create a transformative impact.

But until next time, stay united. Stay committed to the cause of education. I'm Kari Vogelgesang, forever cheering you on. Take care, everyone.