

Harrisburg Huddle
Episode 103 – Teaching and Curriculum

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[Host] Hello and welcome to the Harrisburg Huddle, the Penn State Harrisburg podcast.

As part of our land grant mission, Penn State Harrisburg is committed to both training new teachers and helping working teachers grow and advance in their careers. This week, Professor of Mathematics Education, Dr. Jane Wilburne, sat down with Olivia Weidemann, teacher at Milton Hershey School and graduate of the Master of Education in Teaching and Curriculum Program at Penn State Harrisburg. Together, they discussed how the program helped her in her career and the students that she serves.

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[Dr. Jane Wilburne] Hello, I'm Jane Wilburne, and I am chair of our Teacher Education program at Penn State Harrisburg, and I am here with Olivia Weidemann to discuss our Master's of Education in Teaching and Curriculum program. So, Olivia, could you share a little bit about yourself and your background with us?

[Olivia Weidemann] Sure! So, I teach at the Milton Hershey School. Currently, the Milton Hershey School is a private boarding school for students from pre-k to 12, and this year, I'm teaching Algebra 2. I got my initial certification in mathematics in 2013, and then I came here for my Master's degree in Teaching and Curriculum and got my degree in 2020. And because of that, I was also able to get my level two certification in mathematics.

[JW] Thinking back, why did you want to become a teacher, and what are some of the areas of teaching that really inspire you every day to continue to do what you're doing?

[OW] So, growing up, I had six siblings, and my oldest sister struggled with learning. She had dyslexia, and so I would spend countless hours with her at the kitchen table trying to help her learn math. I was in eighth grade, and she was a senior in high school, and she was learning the same math that I was. And so, it was really challenging for her, but I really found joy in helping her understand and get through some of the assignments that she had. Even, you know, she decided to become a preschool teacher, and I remember sitting down with her, helping her write papers. She would think of what she'd want to say, but sometimes the words would be backward, or the letters would be backward. And so, I really think that experience of helping my sister overcome some of the challenges she had made me want to be a teacher. And then also, I just, I really always loved math, and I thought, you know, if I can help someone else learn math, which is sometimes more difficult for students, and find that same joy in doing that, that's really all I wanted. I wanted to help students see the potential that they had and help them when they struggled with learning.

[JW] And if you think back to the courses that you took in the graduate program, some of the core courses are courses such as educational assessment. We have curriculum theory and curriculum foundations. We have learning theory, and then of course, research and the capstone course. To get back to some of those courses, were there any particular examples of how they helped you grow as a teacher, or you were able to apply some of the learnings in your own classroom?

[OW] One of the courses that I found really beneficial, I was already a classroom teacher, and so I'm, you know, three, four years in, I'm in my master's program here, was the educational assessment course. How do you design an assessment that helps all learners to be successful?

So, how do you scaffold it for your students who need enrichment, your students who are at that College Prep level, and then the students who maybe struggle a little bit? I learned different types of items that you could put on the test and how to come up with assessments that weren't just paper and pencil-like tasks. We did a lot of tasks in class. How do you show your learning in ways that aren't always a test? So, I've used that a lot in my classroom. I use a lot more sorts and activities where they're working with people together to come up with the learning that they have to accomplish or even designing their own test questions, seeing what the students come up with as far as what they've learned and what they think should be on the test. And I think that's really helped me to always be thinking about what are ways that I can assess that they're learning to make sure that what I hope they're learning is what they're actually learning.

[JW] Any other courses that had some kind of influence on you and in your own classroom?

[OW] So, definitely the four mathematics specialization courses I took had a huge impact on me in the classroom. I learned, it was great for me to see as a high school teacher what students in elementary and middle should be learning before they come to high school and then to use that to help me understand what students have gaps, well, maybe they don't have the number sense that they need to be successful in high school. So, how do I break things down a little bit better for them? I appreciated just the different types of activities that we did in class. I remember one of the activities we did was we're learning about statistics, and everyone had to make their own statistics station. So, you had to collect data and make a station that people could collect data. Like, it was like, "What's the most popular flavor of Starburst?" And then everyone would vote on it, and then you take that data and you'd make different distributions. So, helping students make their learning more hands-on and also relate to the students that you're teaching,

[JW] And as part of our master's program here at Penn State Harrisburg, you have the option of adding on other certifications such as ESL or special education or principal certification or some state-level endorsements such as mathematics coaching endorsement or the instructional coaching endorsement. Did you do any of those?

[OW] Yeah, during my time here at Penn State Harrisburg, I was able to take four specialized math courses and be a part of the Mathematics Coaching Project. And through that experience, I was able to get my Math Coaching Endorsement. And I still use a lot of what I learned in that program in my classroom.

[JW] So, can I ask what were some of the reasons why you selected Penn State Harrisburg's graduate program in teacher education?

[OW] I really liked that the program here, you could specialize in what you studied. A lot of programs I was looking at, I was just like, "These are the courses that you're going to take, and that's it." But Penn State Harrisburg had different options that, like you said, you could specialize in, as far as ESL, special education, getting a principal cert, or the Mathematics Coaching certificate. And on top of that, I also appreciated that it was a hybrid model. So, being a teacher who's teaching full-time all day and then having to take classes after school, the classes were at night from usually 6 to 9 pm, and every other week was in person, every other week was online. I really just felt like that was good for my schedule to be able to meet every other week in person.

[JW] Did you have any online courses, totally online courses, as part of the program?

[OW] Yeah, I had one totally online course at the beginning. And then also, one of my classes turned into online because of the pandemic. So, yeah.

[JW] After you completed the master's program, how did what you learned help you in your own classroom, especially during the difficult time we were experiencing with the pandemic and the transition from in-person classrooms to everything online?

[OW] It was definitely a quick turnaround to go from teaching in person to teaching online and having students quarantine. As you know, I work at a boarding school, so sometimes our students would go home, and then they'd come back, and they have to be quarantined before they're allowed back in the classroom. And so, I really feel like the program here helped expose me to a lot of different online learning platforms, such as Desmos, Ed-Puzzle, NearPod. I'm thinking of even just online math resources like Delta Math. And so, those resources really helped to change my learning experience in my classroom because not all the students were in person. And so, I really had to quickly shift the way that my classroom ran.

[JW] So, how did you feel as far as your own confidence with being able to reach your students and prepare and teach your students during that pandemic?

[OW] Honestly, I felt ready. I felt like a lot of what I learned here at Penn State Harrisburg with my professors modeled for me, really helped me to quickly transition to learning online, learning in person, changing the experiences my students had that were in the classroom when they couldn't really move as much. But how do I still keep them engaged, give them tasks that they can complete maybe on their own or with a partner, include online learning experiences

that they could take advantage of. I didn't feel like I wasn't prepared. It was definitely a hard transition to go from what I knew to something completely different, and we had to be safe and careful. But I definitely felt like I was ready and I had the tools in my toolbelt to help me during that challenging time.

[JW] As part of our program, you have the option to do a Capstone project or a Master's paper. Can you share which of those you selected and what your topic was?

[OW] So, I selected the Capstone paper. And as part of my role as an educator at the Milton Hershey School, I also run our school's mentoring program. And so, during my Capstone project, I focused on mentoring in schools and what it looked like to mentor this next generation, Generation Z, as they're coming up through our school system right now. And so, I explored the challenges, the successes, and how we can meet the needs of those kids through mentoring, but also in the classroom. And so, I looked at that intersection, did some research, and was able to write a paper and present it to my class.

[JW] Were you able to share the experience of that paper within your own school or with administrators at all?

[OW] Yeah, so with running the mentor program at my school, I have some supervisors that I regularly meet with, and I was able to share some of those outcomes. And we made some changes as a result of the research that I was able to do here at Penn State Harrisburg.

[JW] Can you share how your experiences in the teaching and curriculum program expanded your network connections and your own professional growth?

[OW] One of the things I really enjoyed about my experience here at Penn State Harrisburg was the ability to meet with different teachers that I didn't see on a normal basis. So, there were teachers who were from all different school districts, all different content areas. And I made a couple of close friends that also taught math in different school districts. And it was just neat to learn alongside them and hear as we're learning about different topics: assessment, how do you design curriculum, or how do you shape the learning experiences in your classroom. We could discuss what we were doing in our schools and how could we change that and how could make the learning experience better for our students.

[JW] And then, how did the teaching and curriculum program live up to your expectations as far as a graduate program?

[OW] I don't regret that I came to Penn State Harrisburg. I think the professors here are amazing. I think they practice what they preach. They model for us what they want us to do in our classrooms, and in the way that they speak to us gives us confidence. It gives us excitement for the experiences that we can provide to our own students. I had lots of opportunities to participate in professional development during my time at Penn State Harrisburg. I went to a local conference that my professor had suggested to go to and was a part of some trainings

outside of the normal school day. And so, I think it really expanded my network of not only other teachers but other opportunities to grow in my profession.

[JW] Now that you've completed the graduate program and looking back, what are some of the areas where you feel you have grown professionally as a result of participating in this program?

[OW] I definitely feel like I'm a stronger leader in my department, on the team that I work with. There are 15 teachers in my department, and I feel like some of what I've learned here at Penn State Harrisburg has influenced the way that I share resources and the way that I might think about my lessons. It's different than when I started.

I had a great undergraduate program, but when you're teaching, it's really where you learn what you still don't know. And so, there were a lot of gaps that I think were in my undergraduate program that I felt like I filled in when I came here to Penn State Harrisburg. I filled in how do I assess, how do I create more meaningful learning experiences, how do I design and map out curriculum and pace it? You don't really talk about that much in the undergraduate program. It's more so the theory, understanding students, learning about what they're like. But when you're actually teaching, there's a lot more to it that you still need to grow and experience in your profession.

[JW] So, what are your next steps? Where do you see yourself going from here?

[OW] Right now, I just want to be a classroom teacher. I really enjoy the students I have. I love building relationships with them. I love helping them to be successful in the classroom, exposing them to different opportunities. Taking some students in a few weeks to a Women in STEM conference, and it's just neat to see our students really shine in that field, in the mathematics field. I think that, right now, teaching is my focus. But who knows, maybe down the line, I'll be a coach or curriculum supervisor.

[JW] Maybe a professor?

[OW] Maybe!

[JW] We try to really create a very inclusive and diverse classroom environment here at Penn State Harrisburg. How did that opportunity, participating in classes with various diverse educators, inform you as a practicing teacher?

[OW] So unique to the program here at Penn State Harrisburg, you're not only interacting with people who are at the same grade level as you. Like when I teach in my classroom on a normal basis, I'm teaching with all high school teachers. But in all of my classes here at Penn State Harrisburg, there were teachers who were elementary, middle, or high school. We had Spanish educators, special education. I interacted with people that I don't normally work as closely with. So, it was cool to see how they were applying what they were learning in the course because we would often share out our reflections or our different projects that we were working on.

And you could see what it's like for a student to be in another class and how those people were growing in their own profession and what they're going to bring back to their schools. And so, I really appreciated that.

[JW] During the pandemic, we had a major shift in how classrooms were run, and everything changed from in-person hands-on activities in a classroom to being all online. And how did some activities that you benefited from in the graduate program help you address the content and be able to help your students really learn it when you were all remote?

[OW] One of the things I learned from the program here was sorts. We would do them with paper, and so I figured out a way to get those cards to be electronic. And so, I was using Google Slides and Desmos to get students to still practice the learning. But maybe they weren't touching things, or if they weren't in the classroom, then I couldn't really give them the resource. So, I had to figure out ways to take what was Hands-On and put it into an online platform. We use Canvas, which is the program that is used here at Penn State Harrisburg. And I think that was a benefit for me that I had gone through the program here. I was familiar with how Canvas was run, as far as modules, pages, assignments. And then I was able to quickly transition and make that in Canvas for our students when we transitioned the next year. You know, in the spring, it was a little everyone trying to figure out, but then in the fall, when we knew we were going to use Canvas, I really felt like I had that leg up of understanding the program a little better than I think some of my peers did.

[JW] Can you give an example of a sort activity? When you say "sorts," what did you mean? What kinds of things did they sort?

[OW] For example, if we were trying to learn how to distinguish between different types of polynomials, they might sort them - I might just give them the cards and have them sort them whatever way they want at first and then see and kind of see what the students come up with. One student might sort the polynomial based on terms; one student might sort them based on degree. And then we could kind of use what the students came up with on the slides for the online sort to talk about this. These are two different ways that you can think about polynomials; they're both right. There's not just one right answer, and that kind of took our discussion about polynomials a little bit further.

[JW] So, Olivia, how would you say you were able to work full-time and participate in courses and do the schoolwork while you were enrolled in the program? How did you balance everything?

[OW] What I liked about the program was that there were night classes, and so as someone who teaches full-time during the day, having a little bit of time to go grab dinner and then come to a class from 6 to 9 PM, I really felt like it was reasonable. Once a week being in person, some courses were all online, somewhere every other week you would be in person or online, and at least you're online, maybe you had a Zoom call for an hour, and then you worked on some assignments. I felt like the professors were reasonable about knowing that we were full-time

teachers who also had assignments that we had to work on outside of class, if we were grading or maybe showing up to a sports game for a student or working on things in our own personal lives.

The other thing I wanted to mention that I really appreciated was in the summer they had some week-long intensive courses. So, instead of taking it for a full semester, you could take that class in the summer. I remember I took a classroom management course over the summer, and it was a week-long in person, and I think we had a couple weeks to still work on the assignment. And that really helped the teacher. Five summers off to be able to take courses then as well was really beneficial.

[JW] So, would you recommend the Penn State Harrisburg graduate program in teaching and curriculum to other educators? And what would you say about the program to them?

[OW] I would definitely recommend the program here at Penn State Harrisburg. I think the professors were all welcoming. They were knowledgeable in their fields. There were lots of opportunities for professional development. I felt like they understood who I was as a teacher. A lot of them have been teachers before, and so that helps, having that same common experience. And I really just enjoyed being able to learn. I learned more about my profession, learn how I could be a better classroom educator, I liked to be a better learner myself. You know, I want to be a lifelong learner, and my students to be lifelong learners. And so, I think you can always get better at what you're doing, and you do that by pursuing a degree in something that you're passionate about. And so, I would definitely recommend this program, specifically teaching and curriculum. I think there's a lot to learn after you've first been in the classroom or if you even haven't gotten a graduate degree. I think you should definitely do it.

[JW] Thank you, Olivia, for your intro, for your comments, and your time. And if anyone is interested in exploring our graduate degree in teaching and curriculum, you may visit the Penn State Harrisburg website. And again, thank you very much for all your comments and your feedback to the questions.

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