

John Boccacino:

Hello and welcome back to the Cues Conversations podcast. I'm John Boccacino, senior internal communications specialist at Syracuse University.

Abby Horton:

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Tom Bull:

To be able to tap into some of the practices that were happening in schools in New York City and providing an opportunity for our students to be able to do their student teaching and learning from the teachers in the school environments throughout the city. And that actually is something that's been a hallmark of the program throughout, is the opportunity for our students to connect with schools that are doing some really innovative instructional approaches, really creating inclusive spaces for teaching, but also for student learning.

John Boccacino:

Our guests today on the Cues Conversations podcast, they're here to discuss a unique initiative run through the School of education that prepares our students in the Inclusive Education undergraduate program for postgraduate teaching careers through the Bridge to the City Program, which offers teacher training placements for school districts in New York City. First, we're welcoming on Tom Bull and assistant teaching professor, director of Field Relations in the School of Education. He also leads the New York City based Bridge to City program, which we will talk about with an alum here, Abby Horton, who currently teaches kindergarten and first grade at Midtown West School in New York City. It's her fourth year with the school district. She earned her bachelor's degree in inclusive elementary and special education from Syracuse in 2019.

Tom and Abby, you guys were kind enough to stop by the podcast to discuss the Bridge to the City program as well as the role that the School of Education and Syracuse University have played in your lives. Thank you for joining me on the podcast today.

Tom Bull:

You're welcome.

Abby Horton:

You're welcome.

Tom Bull:

Thanks for inviting us.

Abby Horton:

Thank you.

John Boccacino:

Tom, when was Bridge to the City created?

Tom Bull:

The first year of Bridge to the City was 1998. So Bridge to the City has been around in different forms for about the last 24, 25 years. So it has quite a history of placing students in New York City schools for their student teaching.

John Boccacino:

What were the conditions that led to the creation of the program? What was basically the need that wasn't being met that this would satisfy?

Tom Bull:

Well, I can tell you about, there was a professor, Jerry Major, who is the one that originated the program back in 1998. I think the focus at that time was to be able to tap into some of the practices that were happening in schools in New York City and providing an opportunity for our students to be able to do their student teaching and learning from the teachers in the school environments throughout the city. That actually is something that's been a hallmark of the program throughout, is the opportunity for our students to connect with schools that are doing some really innovative instructional approaches, really creating inclusive spaces for teaching but also for student learning and giving our students an opportunity to experience that. It's been pretty remarkable.

John Boccacino:

About roughly how many students, student teachers would you say go through the program on a yearly basis?

Tom Bull:

So what we do is we have our students are there for the fall semester. We only offer it in the fall semester. So there's a process that our students during their junior years go through. Abby, you could probably talk a little bit about that, but they actually apply for the program. There's a committee of faculty in the School of Education that that takes a look at the applications and approves them. And from there we work with the students to get them up and running for the fall semester that they're doing their student teaching. I would say the cohorts that we have a range anywhere from eight to 14.

John Boccacino:

And Abby, what made it so appealing for someone like yourself who comes to Syracuse wanting to study Inclusive Education? What was it about this program that really called out to you?

Abby Horton:

Yeah, I think twofold. I mean it's New York City's school. It's fun to be able to do a semester there and have the support of your professors and your buddies there. But the schools are really cool here and they're kind of walk in the walk of what we talk about. The school of Inclusive Eds, they're doing all the things that we're learning about. So it's nice to see it all in action.

John Boccacino:

What was it like for you the first day you walked in as a student teacher?

Abby Horton:

Yeah, they throw you right in. I remember seeing my first day of school, all the kids are coming in and I definitely remember feeling like, "Oh wow. I'm kind of one of the adults in this room right now." But I think the curriculum, the projects that the schools do, I think are what really stood out to me. I remember my first school that I student taught, they were growing trout or raising trout to release on a camping trip. So they had all the fry in the classroom and they brought them up from little eggs. So I just remember thinking, "This is really hands-on stuff." It was really cool to say.

John Boccacino:

How did it match up compared to what you were anticipating when it comes to your student teacher placement? What were some of the similarities that you thought and what were some of the ways it was different than what you anticipated?

Abby Horton:

I think I got to do more than I expected to be able to do. I think the educators were really open to trying new things and open to handing their classroom over a little bit and sharing it. So I felt like I really got to feel like one of the educators in the room and not so much is just like an assistant teacher. I remember feeling really, really empowered and excited to be there.

Tom Bull:

So I think that you bring up a good point, which is that one of the hallmarks of the School of Education and I think that sets us apart and Abby, you could say, "Yay or Nay" to this. We have our students in the field a lot. They get into the field into schools their freshman year. And so by the time they get to student teaching and although in this day and age with COVID, there was a little bit of the Applecart got up upset a little bit there. But for the most part, I know when you were doing your program Abby, they spend a tremendous amount of time in the field at different levels of the program in different classrooms in Central New York. So by the time they get to their student teaching, they have quite a bit of experience working with a wide range of students. So that when they get to their student teaching, they're really capable of jumping in and really contributing from day one.

What's kind of cool about Bridge to the City is that we do work with, one of the things that we've been able to do over the years is we've been able to develop relationships with schools like Abby said that really mirror our inclusive philosophy here at Syracuse and the School of Education in terms of what it means, what are best practices, what does it look like, that type of thing. The schools that we work with mirror that philosophy in practice. And for that reason I think the schools that we work with are often sought out by other colleges and universities in New York City. NYU, Columbia, Hunter, Bank Street.

The thing that we hear from the schools and from the administration and from the teachers is that they want Syracuse University students because our students are so well prepared that by the time they are in their student teaching semester, they are really accomplished and ready to jump in and not only accept responsibility for quite a bit of what's going on, but they're also sponges soaking things up and they really work well with the teachers that are down there.

And so that's something we're really proud of, and that's not just the student teaching semester. That's all of the hard work that's gone into getting students to that point. It's a consistent type of feedback that we get from the schools and from the teachers that we work with. It's how exceptionally prepared our

students are when they get into these school placements where they're really doing innovative and really creative instruction.

John Boccacino:

You should be really proud of the reputation that the School of Education has fostered because-

Tom Bull:

For sure.

John Boccacino:

... the trust factor. The trust in schools, the trust in providing student teachers who can handle this task. What is it about our students that really sets them up for success to handle something that is pretty, it can be a monumental task.

Tom Bull:

Yeah. Well I would say again, I think it's part of... Kudos to the School of Education, which across the board we have professors that have high expectations for our students. Our courses are rigorous, they are not easy. They are challenging. But we understand that for excellence to happen you have to be able to take chances and you have to take risks and you have to challenge yourself. And so I think that's a consistent message that our students here from their freshman year on. I think that by the time they get to their senior year, even though they don't really know it at the time, they are exceptionally prepared to be able to step into that role of a pre-service teacher on paper, but also able to take over with confidence all of the different things that go on in the classroom.

Keep in mind, the classrooms that we're working with are inclusive classrooms. So you've got kids of all sorts of backgrounds and all sorts of needs and all sorts of abilities. Our students are prepared to be able to support students in ways that work best for those students because they've had that experience. So I think it's a tip of the hat to all of the folks that work here in the School of Education. Would you agree with that?

Abby Horton:

Absolutely. Yeah. I think the support is a big part of it. Knowing that you're going down there with a cohort of your peers who are also going through the same thing and it makes you really close. You have each other to lean on, but then the professors are coming to New York too and they're checking in on you daily or weekly. So I think it felt like a big leap and a big challenge like Tom said, but one that felt supported. And so it felt safe to try really tricky things and put yourself out there a little bit knowing that you had some people to fall back on. So I think that going with the support system was also really comforting.

John Boccacino:

You're serving your fourth year now. I guess, how did you learn from this experience and what really challenged you about this role?

Abby Horton:

I think Tom laughed a little bit when you said that, because I think I wasn't so sure of myself when I started. But I think having the vote of confidence from my host teacher of, "You can do this." And Tom

and the other professors pushing. I think this helped me get a lot more confident in my teaching. I don't know. I think the school itself, it's the culture of the schools that we're going to is really positive and it feels safe. So I think that helps boost my confidence and boost my comfortability with teaching. Just knowing that it was okay if I had a flop lesson and people would be there to give me feedback and I try again the next day. But I think this program, or at least Bridge to the City, really showed me I can do a lot more than I thought I could before I started. Yeah, I'm just glad I went. I got my job from it. I love my job. It's my dream school. I think the school's incredible and I think all of the schools that we're partnered with are really special.

John Boccacino:

Take us inside the classroom Abby. What was the relationship with a host teacher and what responsibilities would you carry forward when it came to setting curriculum and doing day-to-day lesson planning?

Abby Horton:

I think first couple of days you're just watching, observing, building relationships. And then by day three you're thrown in. She would start giving me at least one lesson a day. Then the next week we're bumping in up, we're doing two lessons a day leading up to eventually teaching full days or full weeks as the head teacher in the room with just some support, which I think was the most valuable part of the experience for me was it's easy to walk in and you teach your 30 minutes and then you're done for the day. But being pushed to really have the entire day, you are in charge of the routines, the transitions between the activities. I think that's when I learned the most about myself and student teaching. And so I think that those last few weeks where I was challenged but still supported in that scary task of being the teacher in the room. I think that was the best part about it.

John Boccacino:

I'm glad you mentioned the fear because in any occupation it's not natural if you don't have a little bit of butterflies, a little bit of nerves, especially the first time you get to do it on your own. How did you get to the point when you were confident in running the classes yourself without the training wheels on, if you will?

Abby Horton:

Yeah. I think maybe it was Tom or maybe someone else, but they'd always say, "If your host teacher asks you to do something, just say yes. Even if you don't know and figure it out later. Kind of fake it. Fake it till you make it. Even if you're not totally sure about, 'How am I going to do this?' Or 'What's it going to look like?' Say yes, take everything on that you can. And then when you're in private you can reflect on it and fix it yourself, but do as much as possible."

So I think that that bit of advice was probably be the most helpful. Just do it, say yes and figure it out later. But I think I finally got comfortable when it was my own first classroom and you shut the door and suddenly you're the only one in the room and you just have to figure it out. There's no one else there, you're it. So I think those last few weeks of student teaching where you're getting kind of that taste of being the teacher in the room. That's what started the confidence and just practice at this point. Now I feel so much better.

Tom Bull:

I'm glad you said that. I mean the idea is one of the things that I think that if I've been a consistent message with me over the years and I've been doing this for a while, is the importance of honest, critical, self-reflection and it's okay. Some of the lessons that I've observed that have been the most successful in terms of teaching our students the practice of being an educator have been ones that haven't gone that well. And after we're done and we're sitting down and talking about it, we're having a critically reflective dialogue about what went well, what needs to be worked on, and how you go about doing that. And I think that's a skill that our students are pretty good with. I think that's one of the skills that's the hallmark of all good educators is understanding it's not always going to be perfect.

In fact, it probably isn't going to be perfect very much of the time, but if you're constantly questioning your practice and constantly coming up with ways to make things better and then trying those things out, I think that's really important. I will say that's another sort of check mark in the plus column for our Bridge to the City schools is that the teachers that we work with John, are teachers that allow our students the space to be able to do those things. In other words, I know a lot of really good teachers that aren't that great with student teachers because they have a certain way of doing things and they want to stick to that. I think one of the things that we've found in the relationships that we've built with the teachers and the schools that we work with is teachers that are allowing our students to be able to have the space to try stuff out and maybe not have it work out, but understanding that that's the way that you learn.

I think that's one of the big benefits of the program is that we have the opportunity to partner with those folks. The butterfly question John, Abby knows this. I've said this to all of my students. I don't sleep well the night before the first day of classes because I'm nervous and I've been doing this for 40 years, well maybe not 40, but it's been a while. But yeah, I mean the idea is if you really want to do a good job, you should have nerves, right? Because you want to do a good job. So we do a pretty good job with creating opportunities for our students to have those experiences.

John Boccacino:

I loved what you talked about earlier that this is the point I want to bring up to both Abby and to Tom here as we're talking about Bridge to the City. One of the factors I love about this program is looking out for fellow teachers and you're living in a community with the other peer colleagues who are in this program. You're not living with an aunt who lives in Manhattan. You're in housing with other student teachers. Abby, how did that experience of sharing residencies and you get to have a sounding board with people that are going through the exact same thing that you're going through. What did you learn from that experience? The social aspects of bonding and living with your fellow school of education peers who are part of the program?

Abby Horton:

I think that was so special, especially because our classes from freshman year are the same, 20, 30 people every single year for most of your classes. So by the time it's senior year, you know these people so well and you're comfortable with them. So I think that was really special having my peers there, being able to come home and someone had... They're in the same experience as you. It's a new city and a huge challenge and you can debrief but then say, "Okay, I need some ideas with this. What do you think?" And use each other to bounce ideas off of. A support system is really what it was. I don't think it would've been the same if we didn't live together and stay together as that moving collective unit. I think that was really important.

Tom Bull:

We purposely set it up that way. We realized that again, that's another characteristic of a good educator is the ability to collaborate and work and support another professional. So the idea of them having to live together, because now not all programs that have students that are in New York City require that they all live together. We do because we do understand that that's another level of support that's built in that really helps them, just not a hoop we're jumping through but it actually is a purpose. I remember you guys, I had these guys freshman year, in what was it? 303 or I don't remember what the class was.

Abby Horton:

Something like that. Yeah.

Tom Bull:

Something like that. So I remember that everybody that was in that class was part of our cohort. So I knew these guys from freshman year on and the bond that they brought together to New York City as a group was amazing.

John Boccacino:

Abby, what was that moment like for you? You cross the bridge, you go from being a student teacher in the program to being a cooperating teacher where now you're the person that the student is looking to for some guidance for some feedback. Was that a little surreal, that moment when you were on the other side of the spectrum?

Abby Horton:

Absolutely. I almost wanted to say to Tom, "Are you sure?" I feel like, "Am I old enough for that yet." But no, I mean I think the thing is I knew what was expected of her and I know what kind of things she's looking for. And so I think having that insight was really helpful. I think she's phenomenal and I think that having that bond of both having been in the same program and I know she has the same philosophies about education that I do, I know that she's going to be willing to try and put herself out there. I know where her education has brought her and she chose to come here.

So it's cool to be the cooperating teacher and I always say I don't claim to know it all, but I do claim to be reflective and we can do that together. Especially now, my classroom's changed a lot so I've really needed an extra adult in the room to bounce ideas off of and say, "Gosh, that really didn't go so well." Or "How can we change this?" And so having her there and having someone who's so like-minded as me has been really a huge support. So I don't really even see myself as this teacher to her, but she is almost like a colleague.

Tom Bull:

John, the other thing, you maybe know this, maybe not is that Abby is just one of a number of alumni that actually are cooperating teachers now. And so I think what you pointed out which was really important, which is that you do understand the program because we do have a very specific philosophy on what it means to be inclusive. Sometimes it isn't practiced in schools that maybe we place our students in, but we have the ability in New York City because there's so many schools to choose from, to really connect with schools that mirror our philosophy of what that means. It just so happens that we have quite a few alumni that are actually teaching in those schools. So what a great connection and what a great pipeline that is for those schools as well. Believe me, the folks that are at the

administrative levels in those schools are like, "When they graduate, come back when they graduate, come back." Kind of thing. Which is, I mean that's pretty heavy praise I think.

John Boccacino:

I know you've both kind of hinted at some of the ways that education has changed, but what do you think Tom might be some ways this program could evolve moving forward? What's next for Bridge to the City?

Tom Bull:

Well again, I think that's a really good question. I think you're right. I think education is ever evolving. What I like about the schools that we work with and have you this is that they are all very student-centered. In other words, the decisions that they make about how they're going to set up their classrooms and how they're going to deliver instruction isn't cookie cutter. It is based on the needs of the students that they have in front of them on a year to year basis. And so the idea of being flexible in responding to the needs of the students in itself creates a dynamic where every year it's slightly different or every day Abby, every day is slightly different based on the needs of the students that are in front of you. And so I think to me that is something that's always going to be evolving because the needs of students change have changed quite a bit over the years.

But the philosophy of making sure that you are inclusive and that you are student centered is at the heart of all of the decisions that they make. And that's really what we talk about in regards to best practice at the School of Education. The other thing too that we do in majority of the schools that we work down there. I know Midtown West doesn't have this particular structure, but they have something called ICT classrooms, which is integrated co-taught classrooms. So you have a general education teacher and a special education teacher that are in the classroom together. So basically it's team teaching throughout the day. And that's pretty common in districts all over the place. But they do it really, really well.

So our students get the opportunity to see really strong collaboration on a day-to-day basis in the schools that they're doing your student teaching in. Which is really important because if you talk about what's down the line, I think again, I think we do a good job of teaching our students how to work with students. Our student teachers, how to work with students. Sometimes the tricky part is how do you work with other adults. So we are giving them an opportunity to be able to see that done at a really high level. And I think that to me is a huge benefit to the program. Would you agree with that Ab?

Abby Horton:

Absolutely. I think that's the hardest part of the job is managing other adults. So I think with adults it requires a lot more collaboration and a lot more communication that doesn't come as naturally, I think as it does communicating with children.

John Boccacino:

Abby, what was that moment like? Why did you want to get into this profession? What made you want to focus on inclusive education and special education?

Abby Horton:

Family of educators. My grandma and both of my parents are teachers. So I grew up valuing it as a profession. So I mean off the bat, I think I was one of those kids that was always saying, "I'm going to be

a teacher when I grow up." And before I think it was so I could use the whiteboard and the cool markers, but now that part's changed. I think the inclusive part is what's really special. The inclusive ed, that's what I was really excited for. One because I graduated with tutor certifications. I'm certified to teach general ed and special education, but I got into it, I have family members with disabilities and I remember them advocating for the least restrictive environment.

Inclusive education is what would've been the best for them. So I think it's just a really special program. It aligned with my philosophies. I don't think I applied to many schools because I was really just hoping to go to Syracuse. Seeing my family as educators and seeing what important profession it is drew me to it. Now my brother's also a teacher. I have a lot of teachers in my family.

John Boccacino:

How would you say that dealing with COVID with the virtual learning, how did that enhance your teacher tool belt to make you a more versatile teacher?

Abby Horton:

That was another one that just threw you in and you say yes and you do what it takes to figure it out and that's what you do. And that's the same message from Syracuse is say yes and figure it out. You have to. That was actually my first year when COVID started and so it was rocky in the start. We were like, "How are we getting this curriculum?" I was teaching kindergarten at that point. So my great team partner at the time and I decided that we were going to record all of our lessons and every single thing that we needed to teach during the week, we split it up and we combined the grade and that's how we got through it. Then as COVID continued and our needs for that changed, we did too. So we did half hybrid and half in person.

I think that I was really pushed as an educator. I was pushed, it wasn't your typical first year. You have eyes watching you and so it is unprecedented. So I think that first year, those first two years were really hard but extremely valuable. I think I definitely grew as a result of it.

Tom Bull:

The skillset of saying, "Okay, I have a challenge here." Instead of complaining about the fact that it's hard, we say, "Guess what? Now we have an opportunity because of this challenge to make ourselves better educators and that's going to be our attitude. We're going to be glass half full on this thing and we are going to figure out ways to make it work for the students because it's that important." Again, I think that's a hallmark of the School of Education and the message that they hear in Bridge, but also in all of our other programs, which is that as leader educators or educator leaders, you have to accept challenges and opportunity to grow and an opportunity to get better at your practice. I think you guys have done that time and time again, and I know you're dealing with that right now because John, maybe you knew this, maybe you don't.

I don't know how you would describe it Ab, but they had students that were Venezuelan refugees that got bused from Texas to New York City and are now living in New York City that have joined the student population at Midtown West. And many of them don't speak English. Many of them have been through major trauma. The thing that I am so proud of Abby and the other folks that are there and my student teachers is you don't hear them spending any time talking about, "Oh well is me." They're spending time going, "Okay, how do we make this work? How do we figure this out? How do we use the resources that we have to be able to include those students so that they have a meaningful experience on a day-to-day basis at the school?" And that's truly what inclusion is about. It's a challenge, but guess what a challenge

is an opportunity to get better at what you do. So I think that's the way they've looked at it and I think that's really important. Those are good teachers.

John Boccacino:

What's the most rewarding part for you Tom, as an educator when you see a student like Abby come through the program, survive and thrive.

Tom Bull:

It's experiences like this John. I mean, the perfect example is, and I think I could probably speak for any of the faculty or professors here. It's being able to keep those relationships in those connections with the students that you've had in your classroom on down the line for the next 10, 15 years. We hear back from them all the time and it's hearing stories of successes that they're having that are based on the philosophy and what we consider to be best practices that we all engaged in when you were here at Syracuse University.

So to me that is it, John. I mean that's what it is. Those relationships and those connections. And then I know as an educator, the most important thing is having a positive impact on students. So to hear them and to see them because I get an opportunity to be in New York City in their classrooms to see them as educators at such a high level. And again, it's what it's about for me in terms of satisfaction with the job I get to do. It's really super rewarding. I've been at this for a really long time and I love it.

John Boccacino:

Abby, last question for you before I let you get going here too. What is the biggest impact you can say that how Syracuse University impacted your career as an educator?

Abby Horton:

I think it was the expectations. I like it is a high bar that is set. I think it takes a lot to continually push for that and feel pushed and supported. And so I think the clear and high and quality expectations, that's what pushed me in my education and that that's I think what helped me be the most successful was knowing that there were people who expected a lot out of me and knew that I could do it and they wanted to help me. So I think it was the expectations that our staff gave us.

John Boccacino:

Our guests today have been Tom Bull, who is the assistant teaching professor and the director of field relations in the School of Education. He also directs the New York City based Bridge to the City program. And one of the proud alums of the program is Abby Horton, who currently again teaches kindergarten and first grade at Midtown West School in New York City. Abby, thank you for making the time today. We wish you nothing but the best with your teaching endeavors.

Abby Horton:

Thank you very much.

John Boccacino:

And Tom, it was a pleasure meeting you and getting to tell your story here and your impact you're having on our student teachers. Keep up the great work.

Tom Bull:

Thanks John, I appreciate it.

John Boccacino:

Thanks for checking out the latest installment of the Cues Conversations podcast. My name is John Boccacino, signing off for the Cues Conversations podcast.