An Interview with Jana Wilcox-Lavin

Perspectives from the COVID-19 Pandemic: Leadership and Learning in Nevada

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Each interviewee had the opportunity to review their transcript. All measures have been taken to preserve the style and language of the interviewee. This interview features Jana Wilcox-Lavin, CEO of Opportunity 180, and was conducted on 5/16/22 by Kelliann Beavers and Kristian Thymianos. This interview covers topics including reflections on leadership, organizational challenges, and opportunities for collaboration.

Interview with Jana Wilcox Lavin

Date: 5-16-2022

SPEAKERS: Kelliann Beavers, Jana Wilcox Lavin, Kristian Thymianos

Kelliann [00:05]
All right. And just to start, to confirm that you have read the consent form and you're consenting us to recording the interview and your name, so long as you've reviewed the transcript ahead of time.

Jana Wilcox Lavin [00:15]
Yes.

Kelliann [00:17]
Okay, great. Thanks so much. So the first question is pretty basic. If you could just describe your role in your organization.

Jana Wilcox Lavin [00:24]
Sure. I am the CEO of Opportunity 180. We are a nonprofit that focuses on ensuring every kid can graduate from high school, college, and career-ready. And the choice is up to them on how they live their life. We do that through five key levers. But essentially, we're an investor and a partner, and we focus on good governance, good data, engaged community, and great ideas, all leading towards more great schools for kids.

Kelliann [00:57]
Great. Thank you so much for that. And then the next question is, how you saw your organization's role during the pandemic?

Jana Wilcox Lavin [01:06]
Yeah. Well, I am humbled by a lot of the ways that our colleagues adjusted their approach, to sort of respond in real-time to needs during the pandemic, which I think was absolutely necessary and critical. We as an organization stayed the course on our mission and vision in particular because we already are an organization that's taking the long view and looking at the horizon.

And so we felt like it was really important to stay the course because eventually, we would come out of this shutdown/lockdown situation and that we needed to keep marching forward in the best interest of kids. And so we actually – our role was to stay the course and to be available as a resource to our partners as needed. But also, to keep marching forward towards every kid being able to live their full potential.

Kelliann [02:05]
Thank you for that. The next question is, which groups do you believe were hardest hit by the COVID recession in the pandemic? This doesn't necessarily have to be specifically groups you work with. It can be broadly, or you can talk about it in the context of your role.

Jana Wilcox Lavin [02:28]
I mean I would say, everyone was – I think the pandemic had a universal impact in lots of different ways. And I would say, those who had the least access to resources that they needed to navigate this new sort of unforeseen full-time lifestyle were those the most impacted. So those who led service jobs that were not paused, those who didn't have access to critical resources, funds, access to food, access to time, and space for childcare. In general, those communities who we had already left behind were left further behind.

Kelliann [03:20]
Thanks. That's a good way to put it. How, if at all, did your organization's goals change to accommodate the hardest hit groups?

Jana Wilcox Lavin [03:33]
We have always been squarely focused on providing opportunity and providing conditions for great schools to thrive, for those that have had the least access to opportunity and the least access to quality schools in their proximity. I would say, one way we are responding now is, we are getting more bullish on the specific policy conditions, and the specific conditions we think are necessary for the system and the environment to respond to what we learned. And recognizing – we are coming out of this without being able to deny the inequities in a way that I think some were able to in the past.

I think the other thing I would say is, the activation of parents across the socioeconomic spectrum and across the geographic spectrum. We are raising specific funds to continue to activate families to be really, the third leg of the stool in student success, in a much more direct way than maybe we were before. So I would say, amplify, double down --didn't necessarily shift.

Kristian Thymianos [04:50]
Could you elaborate a little more on the geographic – sorry? What was the other spectrum that you mentioned over there?

Jana Wilcox Lavin [04:56]
Socioeconomic.

Kristian Thymianos [04:57]
Yeah. Could you elaborate – talk a little bit more about what those spectrums are, and maybe how you were focusing on them?

Jana Wilcox Lavin [05:05]
So I would say that pre-pandemic, there was an assumption that families with resources and families with access to seats at the table had more voice in education policy, had more voice in what was happening, and had more voice in their school. I think what we actually learned through the lockdown is that actually, *nobody* had a seat at the table in a really meaningful way. And resources in that instance maybe gave you a leg up, in terms of what you were able to do to support your students. But they didn't necessarily change the level of voice you had in what happened and the decisions that were being made.

And because that was a normalizing factor, we are now saying, we want to see all parents activated. We definitely want to activate those families that have previously been left out of the conversation. And we want to bring together families that really organized during this time, and really want to see meaningful, impactful change for their kids. We think there's a real opportunity to amplify those voices together in a way that didn't feel quite as clear before. Because this was an environment where your access to quality learning during this time was resource and family-driven and not school-driven. And so that normalization was quite different than a day-to-day in-person learning environment in a really broad socioeconomic swing of a county.

Kristian Thymianos [06:45]
Thank you. Much appreciated.

Jana Wilcox Lavin [06:46]
Sure.

Kelliann [06:51]
Can you discuss if there were collaborative efforts across non-government organizations?

Jana Wilcox Lavin [06:58]
Yeah, I think there were. I think there was definitely collaboration. And now, I'm going to get on a soapbox. I'm sorry. So yes, I think there was a clear collaboration among nonprofits and sort of grassroots leaders in non-governmental agencies to support acute needs that were identified and exacerbated, and just sort of like, you couldn't hide from, right? Tech being one of them. Laptops, access to the internet, right?

I think what we also noticed though is families were still not at the table for those discussions and those opportunities - it still lived in the grasstops space and the policy level discussion. And so for example, when our parent leadership team that we've organized came forward to give some feedback on the approach to technology gap closure– and we have a report on our website, if you want to look it up, that they put together. They surveyed 100 families to find out "what do you still need?" I think this was in the summer, so March-April-May-June. We had four months of implementation, and then they did this survey. And they found that what was being offered still wasn't enough for people to live their daily life. So, if you had four kids, and you were working from home, and you were all on the free internet at the same time, no one could actually do anything successfully.

But nobody asked that question pre–putting the strategy in place. We asked that post. And that's not a blame or a criticism. It's just an example, I think, of how there were just – we continued on this pathway of not bringing families to the table to help design the solutions and were really designing the solutions based on this identified problem and made an assumption that design was going to meet the need. And then when it didn't, and all of this effort had been put into it, it became very uncomfortable. All right. I'll get off my soapbox.

Kelliann [09:06]
Thanks for explaining that. But you said something that I'm wondering – I know a bit about this

–but if you could just give your perspective on helping those who might not understand the difference between grassroots and grasstops.

Jana Wilcox Lavin [09:22]
Yeah, sure. So, I'm a grasstops leader. I have access. I have resources. I am committed to social justice and social impact and social investing. But I am also a privileged white woman who does not experience the day-to-day inequities of the families that I hope to partner with to solve problems for kids. And so, to me, the grassroots are those who are truly both trying to solve the problem and living through the problem simultaneously. And I as a grasstops leader, only fit one of those categories.

Kelliann [10:03]
Thanks for sharing that and helping us understand it. The next question is, what do you wish, if anything, that different levels of government would have done or could have done differently in response to the pandemic and the recession? And if you'd like to talk about specific policies, you can, or you can speak more broadly.

Jana Wilcox Lavin [10:26]
So first I will say, I think we have to just remember that we all had to survive, and want to couch all of my critiques in the context of nobody had ever done this before, at least in our modern – in our world, in this space, in the way that it was done and designed. And so, it's hard to critique without also naming that to be the truth of the context. It was hard for everyone, and mostly, we were trying to survive.

Hindsight always gives us a beautiful perspective on how we could have done things differently. I just want to name that because I'm also generally, usually, a pretty harsh critic.

So I will say two major themes that I wish were true. One, consistency. And, coupled with consistency, regular proactive, meaningful communications so people knew what to expect. I'd say managed consistency plus managed expectations, I think was missing in hindsight, particularly in the school system but I would say mostly, at all levels. We stayed in a reactive mode for 18 months. I understand being in a reactive mode for the first 90 days. I have to believe there's a point at which we can start to do some analysis and prediction and move into a proactive space, where we're saying, "This is what we think is going to happen, and these are the criteria we're going to use, and this is how we're going to decide."

And instead, all the way up until January of this year, we had an unannounced school pause for five days that nobody knew was coming. I just don't believe we didn't have the information in advance to figure that out or predict it. I think consistency and managed expectations, which to me is just a demonstration of respect to the community at large.

The second thing I would say is, I think we had a massive, missed opportunity to actually put our rethinking into action. I believe that from all of that time, sitting at home, talking about how everything was going to be different when we came out of this - nobody actually did anything different when we left.

What I feel was a missed opportunity was a collective, coordinated, clear response to what problems have been exacerbated for us through this situation, and how are we going to use these four billion dollars that we just got from the federal government to tackle these problems in a collective, coordinated, clear way, so the community knows what outcomes to expect and that we are not duplicating funds, and use the funds in different ways? And I think that was a missed opportunity at the level of comprehensiveness that could have existed.

Kelliann [13:34]
Thank you for that. I'm going to ask, I think, just one or two more questions. And then I'll pass it over to Kristian Thymianos. The next question is – and you've talked a little bit about this – but if anything else comes to mind; were there groups in the community that you successfully engaged with during the pandemic?

Jana Wilcox Lavin [13:52]
We supported PEF's work, and we worked with all of our schools in a pretty meaningful way. All of our school portfolio schools, all of our talent partners that we bring in, we pivoted everything to remote. I would say we had some pretty regular working relationships with the key education players in the community and then mostly, our schools.

Kelliann [14:31]
Great. Thank you for that. And then, if you'd like to speak to two to three changes, that your organization completed or experienced, that worked well during the pandemic.

Jana Wilcox Lavin [14:46]
Like how we operate, or how we do what we do?

Kelliann [14:52]
I think either.

Jana Wilcox Lavin [14:53]
Okay. In terms of how we operate, we've gone full to a hybrid schedule, so we've changed our schedule to be three days in, two days out, permanently, going forward, with flexible summer schedules, so that people can spend time with their families and have space to take care of themselves.

Kelliann [15:09]
Oh, wow.

Jana Wilcox Lavin [15:13]
We tried to take all of the learnings from the pandemic, in terms of what worked for people in their life and implement them into the way we operate. So we are now three days in and two days out, and we have Fridays off in the summer. And tried to make some adjustments that met the needs of our team, recognizing that somehow we've managed to do it for as long as we did we can keep doing it.

In terms of what we do, I think I mentioned we got tighter in terms of raising money for activating parent power. And I think that's it. I think mostly, we stayed the course and tried to change the way we operate, rather than what we're trying to accomplish.

Kelliann [16:01]
That's great, yeah. And those accomplishments are pretty huge, so I can see that that would have been a lot of ducks that had to be in a row to make those things happen. So okay, great. Kristian Thymianos's going to ask a few more questions, and thanks again for everything you're sharing with us.

Jana Wilcox Lavin [16:18]
Sure.

Kristian Thymianos [16:19]
Hi there. Thank you so far. Your response is very insightful. These next couple of questions are a little bit about the school environment that you were witnessing. I do want to ask a first filter kind of question before I get into this one. Reading about your organization, I see that there is quite a bit of research/work and resources for charter schools. I want to get that right: that you all are involved with the charter school policy area within Nevada.

Jana Wilcox Lavin [16:56]
Not exclusively.

Kristian Thymianos [16:58]
Yeah.

Jana Wilcox Lavin [17:00]
We are about student outcomes and not public school-type. We are invested in public schools, charters, and district schools and we are about student outcomes.

Kristian Thymianos [17:09]
Yeah, cool. All right, thank you. So can you talk about the role of charter schools during the pandemic? For example, how did their experience or operations change during the pandemic to kind of meet this new need, when parents, schools, and the community were experiencing flux in their normal lives?

Jana Wilcox Lavin [17:33]
Yeah. I think our schools became community centers and community hubs. They became places to distribute food. They became places where kids could get access to certain things that they needed. I would actually say most of our schools worked incredibly hard to keep kids learning, to offer optional spaces for kids to be allowed within the guardrails of what was legal and allowable. But I would say, our schools, in particular, our portfolio schools, our portfolio charter schools that serve exclusively, communities that have previously had the least access to the high-quality schools in the valley, involved their parents in decision making, surveyed their parents weekly, and provided food onsite for families. They partnered together to provide food –

if you had kids who generally commuted a long way, and there was another school that was closer, they collaborated to make sure those families were covered.

And I think they responded, reacted, and found some ways to become the hub for what families needed to get what they could and to stay in close touch with families and staff. So most of them surveyed families and staff every week on "What do you need? What's missing? What's working? What can we accomplish?" We started cross-team professional development and a sort of Dropbox channel, that they could drop resources that they were leveraging and resources that we could provide them, to continue to meet their needs.

Kristian Thymianos [19:05]
Fascinating to hear. Glad to hear that they're helping with the community in that sense. This is building off that-

Jana Wilcox Lavin [19:11]
Why they exist, right?

Kristian Thymianos [19:12]
Yeah. No, for real. This is basically the same kind of question. So what have been the most innovative ways that schools have dealt with the challenges of the pandemic and the recession? If you can think of anything else, other than what you just said, that might be useful and/or interesting?

Jana Wilcox Lavin [19:32]
Useful or interesting in terms of what schools did?

Kristian Thymianos [19:36]
Yes. Just in general, you know. Public, not just charter.

Jana Wilcox Lavin [19:41]
I think the best micro example that we didn't scale is, how often, how frequently, and what you were talking to families about. And I think what's been interesting is to watch – even our schools now, now when they're thinking about making big changes or going into a pause, they're calling families first and saying, "Who supports this? Who doesn't support this? Who would be negatively impacted if we made this choice? And what can we do to support you in that instance?"

And I think the schools that were able to put that in place and to proactively consider the user before making the choice, were the ones who maintained the deepest community connection coming out of the pandemic and the deepest sense of meaningful ongoing partnership.

Kristian Thymianos [20:38]
Thank you. I really appreciate that. Also, other good stuff. I like to hear the kind of community input over there. Again, I feel like you're doing a great job answering questions so far, kind of

touching on everything else here. In light of the experience, is there anything that you think could be done policy-wise to improve access and quality of education since the pandemic?

Jana Wilcox Lavin [21:04]
Goodness, yes.

Kristian Thymianos [21:05]
Maybe like two or three big things, then.

Jana Wilcox Lavin [21:07]
Three big things. We did a survey of Nevada residents that tells us that 76% of families believe that they are not considered when making education policy cross-demo, cross-party affiliation across the board. The biggest policy thing is, how are you considering the user in the policy before it is developed? And I think we often tend to think of the user as the "system," and we're not thinking of the user as the end user. And I think that is a massive, missed opportunity in education policy, period. So I'll go ahead and name that one as my first one, is consider the end user, not just the intermediary users.

The second thing I would say is that neighborhood-zoned assignments are an antiquated system for how kids are accessing a particular school. While I have always been a believer in open enrollment, I think there has never been a stronger case for letting students and families select the school that's right for them. We hear consistently that some students thrived in online learning and some students didn't. Some students really were successful at the hybrid approach and some students weren't. Instead of forcing every school to do everything the same way, why don't we let – we have 400 schools in our valley. Why don't we let them become what the community needs for them, and then let families choose where they want to go? So fundamentally, I would think massively rethinking student assignments, and not through a forced system. That eliminates redlining as the key-way in which students are organized in schools – which I think is just continuing to perpetuate many of the challenges that we know exist – would be a huge opportunity in this next policy landscape.

Kristian Thymianos [23:14]
Those are the right two, yeah.

Jana Wilcox Lavin [23:16]
Yeah. How do we consider anywhere, anytime learning? I think we think of learning as in the four walls of a school. And I think what we know is that learning happens everywhere. And so, while I know the Department of Education is leaning in the direction of competency-based education, I think we also get very focused on holistic versus modular learning. I guess, think about competency-based learning in terms of micro-credentials, rather than a full three-credit hour if that makes sense.

The last piece I would say with that is, I think in terms of teaching, the same thing. How do we modularize teaching credentials so that you can stack many micro credentials towards a meaningful teacher credential, that allows you to teach, coming from a vast array of experiences from before? So, if you've been in the military, and then you worked in logistics, and then you

went on to take another role, what could you potentially test out of, or opt-out of, based on what your competencies demonstrate your abilities are? And then just actually get micro-credentials and other skills that are necessary to move into the teaching profession. Instead, we've sort of forced this very linear, four-year degree, must look this way. And then we constantly complain that we can't get people into a system that is lacking portability. I think we haven't widened the opportunity for people to engage in teaching by offering different ways to enter the pathway, based on wherever it is that you come from.

Look at the Great Recession. Lots of people are changing jobs. Two people that I know that had massive suburban homes now live in the city. Five people I know that used to do certain jobs quit and are doing all sorts of different things. How did the teaching profession miss out on that opportunity to think about how can we activate all of these people leaving their worlds, trying to have an impact, to get them into teaching, without forcing them to have a four-year degree that says that I learned Pedagogy 101?

Kristian Thymianos [25:36]
Thank you. That actually kind of filters a little bit into these next couple of questions geared more towards workforce development things. You said earlier on that you were concerned about high school graduates and college graduates, kind of getting students to that point, right?

Jana Wilcox Lavin [25:58]
Say that again.

Kristian Thymianos [25:59]
You said that you all were kind of concerned with the graduation of students, and kind of like their-

Jana Wilcox Lavin [26:04]
-college and career preparation.

Kristian Thymianos [26:05]
Yes, that's what it was. Okay. So I was just wondering, have you observed any changes in the retention or graduation of existing students?

Jana Wilcox Lavin [26:21]
I mean retention for sure. We've seen massive numbers of students not return to school. I'm not sure we know all of the reasons why yet. I don't know if we know enough yet on the graduation piece. I will say, and I assume you guys know this as people who study education policy in our space. But our graduation standards are quite low. I mean, they're non-existent essentially. And a standard diploma is a "seat time" diploma, and it doesn't actually give you all the credits you need to transition into a 100-level course in college.

Given that, and given that we are not seeing students complete seat time requirements, I would actually ask, did we come out of the pandemic making the changes we know that needed to be made? This would be another example to me of like, did we really think about the most modular, flexible ways to get the skills they need to graduate college and career-ready? Or did we just say,

"You have to come back and provide this seat time by logging into your computer at this time," right?

And so I would argue if the goal is for kids to leave college and career-ready, and kids didn't show up to school because they were working, why didn't we give them credit for work time? And how can we translate those competencies into meaningful skills that we could access, in a modular way, that help them gain the credits they need to transition? Did we get creative in figuring out how kids in that position were successfully translating and transitioning through the system? Or did we sort of stay hard and rigid and say, "These were the seat-time requirements. You log in at this time, and do this thing, and stay off video, and then you get to graduate." And I feel like there was a meaningful shift in the way we think about learning acquisition and training acquisition that didn't codify. It was right in front of us, and we just like didn't catch the ball – as a system. I know that there are examples, but it wasn't systemic.

Kristian Thymianos [28:35]
I just want to pause real quick. It's around 4:30. I wanted to check if you needed to hop off right now, or-

Jana Wilcox Lavin [28:41]
I'm going to move to the phone in just a second. But yeah.

Kristian Thymianos [28:43]
Okay. All right. No problem. Just let us know when you have to go do it, and we can do that.

Jana Wilcox Lavin [28:46]
Sure.

Kristian Thymianos [28:51]
Moving on a little bit, in terms of how students were preparing during this whole ordeal. I wanted to know a little bit about if you've been seeing how housing issues may have been affecting students during this point in time. You were talking a little bit about job insecurity when it comes to adults. But kind of going back to the beginning for these people – or these students.

Jana Wilcox Lavin [29:21]
Yeah. Again, I guess my big headline coming out of the pandemic is, we had so many missed cues. For example, we know housing insecurity is a big thing. One of the best examples I've ever seen of students of a school addressing housing insecurity for students is in a school in Indianapolis. Where they created what they call "the apartment." And in the apartment, every student who's homeless, who identifies as homeless, has a locker that has a key that only the student and the principal have access to. It has a washer and dryer, and it has a place where they can keep their belongings. When leave school at night, and they're going to live in their cars, stay on the neighbor's couch, or be in a shelter, they know all of their things are safe, and that they always have access to clean clothes. And they can always gain access to what they need, and everything that they own is protected. What a simple, simple low-cost solution to create security

for housing insecure students. And what a tiny, little change that needs to happen, where you just find one room in a building.

I guess that's my point. We know housing insecurity is a problem. We know we are losing kids because of it. What are the simple solutions that don't necessarily even require a policy? That just requires thoughtful human engagement to make, to put the needs of the kids first. I think that the headline is, we still haven't shifted to a student-centered policy approach. We are still focused on a system in adult-centered policy approach, even in the midst of this massive disaster.

Kristian Thymianos [31:07]
I want to extend that to food insecurity. I mean, we know that they opened up food distribution centers. Was that enough? Could anything else have been done differently? What about that?

Jana Wilcox Lavin [31:20]
Yeah. I mean I guess that goes back to the question you asked around non-governmental coordination, right? So again, I think everyone did the best they could, like in the first three months. Everybody was just trying to – nobody knew what was happening. So I think people did a lot that they could.

I think in terms of food insecurity, you saw some great stuff coming out of Three Square, United Way and other places, to serve multiple vulnerable families, and I think you saw lots of microcosms of solutions. And again, I just don't think they were particularly systemic. If CCSD, for example, has its own food service – well, not if, they have a massive food service operation, right? How is that food service operation, and coordinating with Three Square – coordinating with the greatest access points for families? And did we create strong enough distribution channels? And I know we used buses to send internet out into the world. Were those buses packed with food? I guess I just wonder if we pulled the threads all the way through each of those pieces. [If] there were some opportunities that we could have considered, and that we still can consider, right, as we think about what comes next.

Kelliann [32:55]
Yeah. Thank you so much for all of that. It's really compassionate and great to hear about your ideas and your perspective.

I think we have gone through most of what we wanted to discuss, so I'm going to spare you the switching to your phone. But I will email you, if it's okay, to check in about anyone else you might think it's good for us to reach out to interview – not necessarily at your organization, but anywhere, really, that you think there is someone whose perspective that might be meaningful for our research. And thank you again so much for everything that you shared, and all the work that you do in the community. It's so important.

Jana Wilcox Lavin [33:32]
Yeah, thanks. So can I just ask, really quickly, what's the end product of all of this?

Kelliann [33:36]
Sure. So we're working on a series of reports. And ultimately, our hope is to make some policy

recommendations based on what we have learned from leaders throughout the state in a range of areas. So it's not all education or nonprofit focus, but that is a part of what we're looking at. And so, whether we'll publish some smaller, more focused briefs about certain sectors that we've spoken with, I guess remains to be seen, based on what comes up from the content. But yeah. We're partnering with a couple of scholars that work at Brookings in D.C., and then we have a professor here at Brookings Mountain West who is leading us, and then our team there at UNLV Brookings Mountain West.

So we've conducted, I think, close to 20 interviews, and we'll keep doing more for the next few months. And then, what comes out of it, will sort of be based on what people have shared.

Jana Wilcox Lavin [34:31]
Cool. Great. Thanks.

Kelliann [34:33]
And we'll definitely be in touch with you about it. And like I said, share the material with you as soon as we have your content transcribed.

Jana Wilcox Lavin [34:43]
Yeah, great. Thank you, guys.

Kelliann [34:44]
Sure. Thank you.

Jana Wilcox Lavin [34:45]
I appreciate it. Bye.

Kelliann [34:46]
Have a good one.

Kristian Thymianos [34:47]
Thank you. Have a nice day.

End of Audio 34:52