



Podcast Transcript | *The Fix*

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Guest: Dr. Michele Scott Taylor

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Questions or Feedback: thefix@oatey.com

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Katherine: Welcome to *The Fix*. The podcast made for the trades, where we sit down with inspiring individuals across the trades to discuss their unique take on the industry, including career paths, job site stories, overcoming challenges, and everything in between. I'm your host, Katherine, a marketer here at Oatey, with my co-host and friend Doug, one of Oatey's resident experts in all things trades. *The Fix* is more than a podcast. It's a community, a community built to support tradespeople and inspire the next generation of essential pros. Let's start the conversation.

[music]

Welcome back to *The Fix* for a really exciting conversation with an amazing guest who has accomplished so much. Doug, are you ready for this adventure?

Doug: Katherine, I always look for a way for our audience to understand how excited I am, and today, I finally figured it out. I was driving by a country club I remembered back in my golfing days, I'd go to that course, it would show me direction, it would give me support by markers, and then at the end, I'd put that ball in the cup and I had success.

Katherine: Nice.

Doug: Today, we're bringing opportunity, we're bringing support and we're bringing success all through one person. You know what? I just got to take a break for a second.

Katherine: Oh my gosh, Doug, that's very well put. I always love Doug's isms to be able to kick us off. Welcome Dr. Michele Scott Taylor, who is the chief program officer at College Now Greater Cleveland.

Dr. Michele Taylor: Thank you. Thank you. I'm so happy to be here.

Katherine: Yes, wonderful. We like to kick it off and have you tell us a little bit about your organization and the role within the local community.

Michele: Wonderful. I'm with College Now, Greater Cleveland. We are the first college access organization in the nation. Founded a little bit over 50 years ago, we are here to help students and families think about what does it take to go from middle school, high school, graduate high school, and then move on to post-secondary? We use the term "college" because it's a lot sexier than post-secondary but we believe in today's society, in moving forward, you do need some education that's more than the high school diploma.

We believe that trades is another opportunity for students to get formal education around how to do things, fix things without necessarily having to go off to a four-year college like Harvard or something like that. That's what we do. We serve our local community by placing what we call advisors in schools across Northeast Ohio and as far south as Mansfield. They work next to guidance counselors or school counselors to help students do applications, get scholarships, go on college visits, career visits, I'm so excited to be here today because I see this as a place that I am going to bring students.

Katherine: Absolutely. That is one of our big missions is that we're not here just to do the talk, we're also going to do the walk with you. To be able to bring students in show advisors, that's definitely something that's come out of our conversations with many of our guests is, trying to get the parents, the students, and the guidance counselor all to understand the importance of what the trades can bring. I think having these advisors is such a great way to connect than that student that **[unintelligible 00:03:20]** counselor with them.

Michele: Oh Absolutely.

Katherine: Oh, that's wonderful. How did you get into your role? Tell us a little bit about that and your work history to how you are today.

Michele: Oh, my goodness. I grew up in a community called Warrensville. I'm sure you all know it. On our east side, heading Southeast side and essentially I went there K12, which a lot of our students aren't fortunate enough to be able to do, go to the same school district. It really allowed me to develop who I was, who I wanted to be. I did have a strong sense of self going to my school district, but I thought I was smart enough to get into Harvard. I was a smart kid. I was number three in my class. I had over a 4.0. Unfortunately, in some of our communities, they don't have as much resources as other school districts.

I quickly realized that I was neither prepared nor really able to get to Harvard. My whole life I've been told that if you do well in school, you'll get a scholarship. That's what I tried to do. Now, there was a TV show on television, sorry.

[laughter]

That led me to want to be a lawyer. Can you guess what television show that might have been?

Katherine: Oh no, we got put on the spot, Doug, television show, lawyers.

Doug: *Law & Order*? I don't know.

Michele: Maybe, not *Lay & Order*. No. There was this family. There was a mom and a dad.

Katherine: Oh, Huxtables.

Michele: *The Huxtables*.

Katherine: Yes

Michele: Absolutely. *The Cosby Show* was a major cultural, iconic television show in my community so I wanted to be a lawyer. I thought I was going to be a lawyer. I went to the University of Akron, studied political science, then fell in love with sociology, which really just means I love people.

Katherine: Yes [laughs].

Michele: Then because of a middle school teacher who taught me from seventh grade to 12th grade, I also majored in French.

Katherine: Wow. That is really cool. We could not speak back French if you were going to do that right now.

Michele: Okay. That's--

Doug: You almost did. You said we oui.

[laughter]

Katherine: There you go, I did.

Michele: There you go. There you go. Essentially, I fell in love with college. I said all that to say, I fell in love with college and I didn't want to leave because I had so many wonderful experiences that I didn't even know I was going to have. I ended up working on a college campus, which I didn't even know was a career path. Then I went and got a Master's degree to work on a college campus. Then I went and got a doctorate to really understand how do colleges and universities move our society forward or how do they not, and what are the gaps? What should students be learning? Is college the only way?

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What I've come to find is that while it's great for many, many people and many people should go, just because that's what life's about, learning, there are many different ways a person can learn.

Then I moved into this role, which allows me to work with high school students to figure out what is the best fit for you. It may not be the University of Akron, it may be a certificate, it could be an associate's degree, it could be going into the trades and getting an apprenticeship. For some of our students, it can be on-the-job training. What we do hope though, is that we put students on a path to a viable career pathway so that they can take care of themselves and their families.

That is ultimately what we do want. We do recognize that some jobs may not lead to that. If you want to do it, it's okay. Just recognize you there could be some limitations to your overall potential earnings. Trade is not that. There's nothing but up when you go into the trades and that's something I've learned over the years. That's why I'm so happy to be here because I need to keep learning more.

Katherine: Yes. I think, especially during the pandemic, we learned that even more with the trades being so essential in a lot of maybe some industries where they weren't and they were out of work and that was not the case and continues not to be the case, especially with a lot of plumbers who are now starting to go into retirement. Not as many plumbers are coming in that there is just a ton of opportunity for them to really manage their own business, manage working for another company, have a life, make a great living, and a great wage.

Michele: It's ironic because so many people wanted to work on their homes including myself and the wait time to get things done or how trades folks were so backed up, they couldn't even get to you during the pandemic just made me realize that there's so much opportunity that we have a lot of people who have not been able to take advantage. We need to make sure that those opportunities are available to them. That's what I'm hoping to do with this burgeoning partnership.

Katherine: You've got it. I love it. Talk a little bit now because we talked about the name of the organization is College Now. Walk us through, despite the name, how does your recruitment and retainment strategies fall into mix?

Michele: Essentially what we're trying to do from sixth grade to high school is help students think about what is the best fit for them, where do they see themselves being most successful in life? While I would say that we want students to get formal education post-high school, we're a little bit agnostic as to how. Again, we say the word college because in our society we know that for every 1% increase in degree completion, it's 3.5 billion that comes into the economy.

We have 500,000 people right now in Northeast Ohio who have some college but no degree. Often there are jobs that require some form of degree certification, some credential, I'll call it a credential to give them access to opportunities. That is really what we're trying to do. We work very hard to understand what are all the opportunities available to students?

In terms of recruitment and retainment, I'm hoping to do more things like this. I need to expose students to what is really manufacturing today versus when my mother worked at LTV Steel or Republic Steel, I think it was called. All the residual knowledge or history that people thought that manufacturing was, but it may not be today. I think I just don't have enough folks who are aware of what that is. It's about lots of exposure.

Katherine: Yes. I think that's dead on to a lot of the conversations we've been having.

Doug: Yes, absolutely. Michelle, when I looked at hiring people and training people, I'd have a father that I would know that said, "Hey, my son's getting out of the house today. He's going to be a plumber. Can you train him?" I'd hire him on and I'd have people come to me and they'd apply for jobs and then we would try to assess their technical capabilities, so we could put them in a position for success and growth. In your position, how do you and your team assess that individual and say, "You know what? We feel this is a great opportunity for you if you take this path."

Michele: I am going to be quite honest. We don't do a great job at assessment, and that is what we're trying to build. What we've been working towards for the past two years is really figuring out how to better assess students' ability versus just interest and passion because most inventories just look at, "What are you interested in? What do you like to do?" We need to do a much better job at identifying who has math aptitude-

Katherine: Yes, absolutely.

Michele: -the different aptitudes you need in the trades, and how do we better do that? We need to get better at that, to be quite honest, because right now, it's more around, "What do you think you want to do? Let's try to get you some exposure to that." Sometimes that's not enough. Interest and passion may not be enough. There might need to be aptitude in order to be successful, and that's the part we're trying to get a lot better at. I think right now-- Have you all heard of CTE, Career Technical Education?

Doug: No.

Katherine: No. Tell us about it.

Michele: Okay, real quick. In many districts in Ohio and probably, I think, yes, across the nation, they have what's called CTE, Career Technical Education. It's the formal name for pathways in high school where students take specific classes that by the time they graduate, they should be knowledgeable enough to sit for certain certifications, to have easier entry into the trade. In Cleveland, where we have a very prominent presence, as well as in other districts, students have opportunities to do a manufacturing pathway, a culinary arts pathway, an IT pathway.

Ideally, there are teachers who are trained to teach them of those fundamental courses so that as students get to high school graduation, they should be at some level work-ready to either enter into an apprenticeship or go onto the next

certification or perhaps be able to apply, as we were just talking about, for union membership. CTE is a formal program of a number of trade pathways that students should have access to.

Doug: Are you affiliated with certain organizations that will give that hands-on opportunity? Katherine and I, early on in the podcast, we had talked about, "Hey, how do you get out there and see if you like the trades?" I had always said, "Habitat for Humanity is a great example."

Michele: Absolutely.

Doug: You're doing something great for the community, but you're getting real-life application but you have someone overseeing you so that you're doing it right.

Michele: There are a few partnerships that I work with that I'm very proud of and organizations I collaborate with, and I want to add you all to the mix, but like ACE. Have you heard of the ACE mentoring program?

Doug: No.

Michele: It's for architecture, construction, engineering, and it's a consortium of those trades. What we do is, I'm on the board of the organization and we help connect students to opportunities in architecture, construction management, and engineering. Companies all across Northeast Ohio are members of that association, and we mentor students in high schools. Also, MAGNET, I'm sure you--

Katherine: Yes, we have a partnership with MAGNET.

Michele: Yes, we often partner with MAGNET. There are a couple of manufacturing associations that often want to come into schools and connect students to opportunities in those trades, trying to develop partnerships in the IT space. Essentially, we're trying to develop partnerships with associations and organizations that are in these industries that need all kinds of people to do all kinds of jobs.

Katherine: Right. Absolutely.

Michele: We do have some partnerships and collaborations trying to give students exposure.

Doug: That's great.

Michele: Then on our board, we try to recruit board members that represent our society as well, or represent industries in our society.

Doug: That's great.

Michele: We try to connect with our board members, "Let us take students to your organization," things like that.

Katherine: Yes, absolutely. I know even some of the plumbers that we have, if you ever really wanted to give them some on-job experience, they would be the first to

raise their hand saying all day long that they would be more than happy to show people what it's like a day in the life out in the field.

Michele: We would love to do that. I have friends who have construction or organizations who, it's more one-off like, "Hey, I know this kid. Can they come hang out with you?"

Katherine: Sure.

Michele: We need to develop more systematic collaborations and partnerships so that we can have a bigger scale, a bigger impact because right now, in my role, it's a little bit one-off, but I'm really working to try to figure out how to leverage relationships that I have.

Doug: That's great.

Katherine: Absolutely. In your experience, how can parents, early educators, we talked about this a little bit but better support students who are interested in exploring the trades or working with their hands? How can they be partners in this as well?

Michele: I would say be observant because oftentimes, families can tell you a lot about their young people that, maybe, a teacher or some other person can't because-- and I'll say moms, we just have to help families cultivate those passions in young people but more importantly, help them recognize what connection that could be to a future career. I think about that for young people who like to draw, young people who like to solve problems, how do we nurture those interests and build their aptitude so they can be prepared for opportunities, for careers, that require that skill set and that kind of work?

I think that's what we have to do. Be observant, really talk to young people, ask them what they like, watch what they do, understand them a little bit better and then facilitate further opportunities, putting them in summer camps that further develop it. Then help students figure out what they don't like as well because this age group-- social media has had a major impact on who they are and what they want to do. I even had a kid who said she'd love to be an influencer. I'm like, "That probably is a job. We're not used to it yet, but that probably is a big deal," but we still need people to know how to do some things that are with your hands. I think that's what we would have to do.

Katherine: Yes. If you look around this room, that's exactly what this wallpaper is, is people who did all this work, influencers in their trades, but they're doing the work. They're showing to me what a great profession is in the community that's out there. They support each other and really wanting each other to win and do a great job of supporting everyone.

Doug: Yes. [laughs] I always joke. To me, an app before I came Oatey was something I ordered before dinner.

[laughter]

I'm a Boomer big time, but social media, I hear you mention influencer. Back in my day, I was an influencer.

Michele: Yes, I could see that. [laughs]

Doug: My influence was based on the fact that I was willing to make a commitment to mentor you, to teach you something, be there to support you through the trials, and then congratulate you on your successes.

Michele: Absolutely.

Doug: You might not have to be on social media to be an influencer.

Michele: Absolutely.

Doug: You might be able to do that in other ways.

Michele: Absolutely. Absolutely. I just want to keep exposing students to real-world places. This is an actual place on West 160th. They're off West 160th that actually exist, and they make this thing that's in Home Depot.

Katherine: Yes, absolutely.

Michele: There's no conception that this- or where do things come from? How does it just happen? This is a perfect example.

Katherine: Well, and I say this to a lot of people when I meet them and say that I work for Oatey and they'd say, "Who's Oatey?" I'm like, "You use one of our products every day and you don't even know it. We are in your infrastructure of your house. We help support what you do. We have over 12,000 SKUs that we sell all over the world and in all different locations." Then all of a sudden the light bulbs are on, "Wow, that's amazing." We've been in Cleveland, Ohio, for over 100 years.

Michele: It's wild. I'm going to be honest, it's quite wild.

Katherine: It's amazing. There's manufacturing from a trade. There's plumbing from a trade. There's all these different components that we support, that there's a ton of opportunity and a lot of fun in a way that you can really grow your career and have a great pathway to success.

Michele: Yes. We got to really change the mindset around, you need to know how to do something to be in the trades. There is education. You need to be successful in this work. It's not just, "I'm just going to go to the trades because I can't do something else."

Katherine: No.

Michele: That's absolutely ridiculous.

Katherine: No, and Doug can talk about it.

Michele: You just said, people don't make it. [laughs]

Doug: Well, the thing is, the trades isn't-- Back in my day, if you ended up in the military, you were looked as a failure because, well, there's no place else you can go, so you go to the military, which we know that isn't true.

Michele: It's not the case.

Katherine: Absolutely not true.

Doug: In the trades, that had that stigma for a while. Well, you can't be formula-educated in a college, so you know what, go to the trades and work. I'm going to tell you something, every time you figure out a plumbing design on a DWV stack, you're doing a lot of mathematics.

Michele: Yes. [laughs]

Doug: That's a draining system in your house.

[laughter]

You're doing a lot of mathematics. You're calculating pipe sizes. A lot of mathematics involved with it. As a business owner, people used to say to me, "Man, what's it like being your own boss?" I want to be honest with you, I was never my own boss because when I was at home, my wife was my boss.

[laughter]

Michele: Good job, wifey.

Doug: Every job I went to, I had a new customer who was my boss. It was my job to guide them to the path of completion and make them satisfied, but they were technically the boss. You have to have the mindset to there's a lot of layers to the technical field. Katherine and I, we've talked about this on the podcast where you might not want to be a plumber because you're afraid to stick your hand in the toilet, but construction management, you talked about that, project management, you can maybe get into an architectural field and draw plumbing systems as a mechanical guy. So many different opportunities in the trades. It's not just sticking your hand in the toilet.

Katherine: Do you feel your organization is an untapped resource for those who are looking to get into trades, and if so, why do you think that is, and then what can we do to change it? How can we help support that?

Michele: I'm going to say yes, but it's not-- I'm not going to lay fault. I'm just going to say we need to do more to better understand the many pathways and many opportunities available to students. Right now, I say, "You want to be an engineer? Okay. Great. I know that the University of Akron has an excellent polymer science engineering program." What our team needs to do a better job is understanding what is it about engineering that makes that the right fit for you, and are there some other pathways given what it is you really want to do?

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I'm great at saying who has the best sociology program in the country and all this, but what we need to get better at are what are the opportunities for other kinds of learning that are as equally, as important as going off to college.

Katherine: Even that student who maybe likes engineering, because they have the thought around it, but maybe they really don't want to be behind a desk 9:00 to 5:00, and their personality tends them to be more as an extrovert, and they like to have a varying schedule, that might not be so. I think you're right on with having to really look at the student and looking at their attributes and how they are as a student, really what they want out of life too.

Michele: I feel like we're untapped because that's where we can tap in, and I think we can have a greater impact. That's what we've been working on and trying to do more of. This was perfect to be here talking about this because that's absolutely where we're driving towards, how can we be a more tapped into resource for people who need to figure it out?

Katherine: Yes, absolutely. That's wonderful.

Doug: That's great. I tell you what, I do have a question because I love success stories. Throughout your career as a mentor, give us an example of one of your success stories of someone who you mentored and supported and what their success was.

Michele: Oh, my goodness. Oh, my goodness.

Katherine: Or maybe your top five. If you have so many, maybe just give us--

Michele: So many in the sense of I can't even think of one that would be as exciting to talk about, because it's really not super exciting. It's just the everyday believing in young people, and then they just all of a sudden turn out. I worked at the University of Pittsburgh for a number of years, and I was the advisor to an organization where all these young people were idealist and wanted to change the world. Thank goodness for Facebook, because they're all my friends. Success in that, I have folks who-- Oh, I have one. This young man, he started--

Doug: See, I knew I'd get one.

Katherine: You got it.

Michele: I know. It took me a second. I had to process. One, and it was more recent. That's why I'm like, "Oh, yes, I just texted with him." He started a company where they build, rehab, construct vacation homes, and that's their business. I was only instrumental in that I just kept saying, "Keep going. You're there. You're almost there."

The reality is, it's not rocket science to help young people figure out their ways. Just consistency, and positivity, and believing that people can be whatever it is they want to be, regardless of what I think or what other people think because it's their life, their journey. I think if more of us do that, we would see much more success from young people, because it's not rocket science, it's just really not. It's just-

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Katherine: Supporting them, believing them.

Michele: -supporting them and believing them and then knowing where to send them when they have questions if you don't know the answer, and I think that that has been my number one saving grace. I don't pretend to know. Let's go figure it out together because I don't know.

Katherine: That is really cool. I would agree. As we sit back, we've had some great conversations today. What do you say would be your hopes and dreams for the trades and for how College Now can really help foster that partnership even more?

Michele: This is a little bit selfish, but what I would really hope is that, like I was sharing with some folks earlier, is that it's not so bifurcated anymore, because really what you learn and what you need to do in the trades, everyone should learn or have some knowledge about or be able to at least tap into. Knowing that there are experts who study this, who work at this, who it's their professional passion and calling and supporting those folks. I guess what I would say is I hope that there's a marrying of what trades can mean in one's life as well as what post-secondary education and college can mean one's life and they're not separate things.

It's a pathway. It could be a pathway for all kinds of people. I didn't say that artfully, my bad. I didn't get what I'm saying. I don't say it as well as it's in my head. In a way, that's coming out right, but get what I'm saying?

Katherine: Yes.

Michele: The way that I look at it, too, and I think that's been one of the conversations we've had, it's equality that no matter what path you pick, they're great paths because it's your path. I got that on record. You can have that one too.

Katherine: Thank you.

Michele: It's so true. It's really fostering that person and what they really can become, and telling them that whatever they want to end up being that they can do that. They want to go to college and they want to go-- that you love school, and you just kept doing it, because that's what made you happy. For somebody who likes to work with their hands, and they like to be not behind a desk and doing what they want, then we should foster that just as much as we should foster someone going to college.

Katherine: Access, I think. Let me say that. I think students and family should have all the information they need to make the best decision for them. What we don't have right now is enough access to the information and opportunities. People don't always have choices. That is what I like to see. I could choose to do whatever, and that's just fine.

Michele: The awareness of all of it.

Doug: You also have to be neutral in your messages that you deliver because we all have passions in certain areas of our life. For me to have a passion in a different

area and then criticize your passion path could actually keep you from being successful someplace.

Michele: Lots of us we do that, lots of family members, unintentionally.

Doug: Absolutely. If it's something that maybe a father and mother doesn't understand, then why would I support that when I understand this over here, and you will probably get a job in this?

Michele: We have a lot of that too, and we respect that because if you don't know, you don't know. If you don't see it, you don't even--

Doug: Exactly. My tradesmen, whenever they would complain about the cold and stuff like that, I'd say, "If **[unintelligible 00:27:32]** was fun, it'd be spelled F-U-N." At the same time, I didn't want them to come to work every day and just be miserable individual. If their passion wasn't in it, let's find you a new passion because you're hurting me, you're hurting you, you're hurting everybody. I think if we help support those passions, and then let them take the path, give them the support they need, so they don't fall off the cliff someplace, we'll have a lot happier professionals in the future, no matter what that choice is.

Michele: That was another good one.

Katherine: Yes, I totally agree. This has been such a wonderful conversation.

Michele: I hope so.

Katherine: Thank you so much for the opportunity to get to know you a little bit better, get to know College Now. As we said, we look forward to this partnership, and we're going to make sure we bring students in here. Those of you that I know in the Cleveland community that are plumbers, **[unintelligible 00:28:30]** I'll be reaching out to you because we want to get exposure. I know that they'd be more than happy to bring students out on the job site so they can really have a great understanding better. Thank you so much. We really appreciate.

Michele: Thank you.

Doug: Thank you.

Katherine: Thank you.

[music]

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