



# Raymond A. Mason School of Business

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## EPISODE 102: THOMAS TAYLOR – THE BUSINESS OF PUBLIC EDUCATION

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Ken White

From the College of William & Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia. This is Leadership & Business. The podcast that brings you the latest and best thinking from today's business leaders from across the world. We share the strategies, tactics, and information that can make you a more effective leader, communicator, and professional. I'm your host Ken White. Thanks for listening. When you think about K through 12 education, you might think about academics, homework, athletics, and other education-related topics but in many respects, public schools and public school districts are much like companies and businesses. Chesterfield County Public Schools, located just outside Richmond, Virginia, is a large school district with over 7,000 employees serving almost 60 thousand students. In order to be successful, it employs a business-like approach to education management. Thomas Taylor is Chesterfield Chief Academic Officer. Earlier in his career, he was an award-winning teacher and principal. As he climbed the ladder and became a superintendent, he realized he needed more training in business and leadership. So he went back to school and earned his executive MBA at William & Mary. He joins us on the podcast today to discuss the business of public school education and how school districts can win when they adopt business practices. Here's our conversation with Thomas Taylor, Chief Academic Officer at Chesterfield County Public Schools.

Ken White

Thomas, thank you for taking the time to join us. It's great to see you back on campus.

Thomas Taylor

It's an honor.

Ken White

You're going to be talking to our executive MBA class soon. You were in that seat couple of years ago. Where did you get the idea? I mean, you're in education. You're an educator to pursue an MBA.

### Thomas Taylor

Well, I took the traditional educator path up to leadership. I was a classroom teacher. I became a principal and eventually a superintendent of a small rural school division, and in that superintendent seat, I was the largest employer in my community. And the more and more I looked at that, I saw that most school divisions were the largest employers in their community. And with that being the biggest business in town, I thought it was important for me to have a better understanding of how business operated and how my business could operate better.

### Ken White

I think when the average person thinks of School District schools, they tend to think academics that's just a piece of it.

### Thomas Taylor

Well, that's great that they do because that's our core business. But on the other side of that, there is the financing of our school division and, of course, the expenditures of our school division. And that is very much a business function. The inherent connections that we make in business school to organizational dynamics and the human resources aspect, and even the IT leadership, all of those things are present. But a lot of people don't think about the balance sheet or the income statement or what actually gets done with our taxpayers once those funds have been transferred to the schools.

### Ken White

How much of your day would you say you estimate spending on the quote-unquote business side of things?

### Thomas Taylor

In my function right now, as the Chief Academic Officer of Chesterfield County Public Schools, we're a pretty big company. We have nearly 8,000 employees. We serve as 64 schools that service is just short of 62,000 students. We've got a big constituency, and we spend a lot of our time, of course, working on our core business which is academics, but a huge part of that in my function as Chief Academic Officer is making the wheels run. And with that is making sure that people have the right resources that they need to be successful in the schools and in the classroom. So I would say that that is 80 percent of my job function. As a school division superintendent and my previous role, it was on nearly 95 percent of my function.

Ken White

Yeah. And one of the positives that I see working in the space I'm in graduate business education and undergraduate business education is if we wanted to, we could go and make money.

Thomas Taylor

Right.

Ken White

To pour back in. Are you able to do that, or do you have to work with what you what you've got?

Thomas Taylor

We generally have to work with what we have. It is a political process. On the revenue side of the shop, and I think everybody is most commonly familiar with that aspect of the school business function. Tax dollars do at the federal, state, and local level do go to support public schools. But I think one of the things that gets lost is what happens after that. And what does the expenditure side of our business look like? What do we do in terms of procurement for large contracts and support of textbooks or instructional materials? Presently right now in Chesterfield, at one time, we had the nation's largest Chromebook deployment in a public school system that was a few years ago, and that was a big procurement project, and a lot of work went into that. We have currently nine capital projects going on right now for one new school build and eight renovations. With that is a significant commitment to time resources and having people with the background and the energy and the understanding of how those things work becomes really important. And just having folks who are conventionally trained as educators seems a little insufficient when you're dealing with an organization that's that size where we've got about a billion dollars worth of revenue, about 700 million in operating every year, and about 300 in capital every year. It's pretty significant.

Ken White

On-the-job training without a business background can only get you so far.

Thomas Taylor

Exactly and that's where the NBA made a significant impact in my practice because it gave me some of the beginning pieces of a starter toolkit on how to really process, understand, and ask the right questions on how to run my business better.

Ken White

You also teach you, and I've had a conversation. You teach at the Curry School at UVA from time to time, and you said boy, my syllabus. I don't know if you remember you telling me it's my syllabus sure did change after I completed the program. How did you approach that differently?

Thomas Taylor

Yeah. The course that I teach most often for the Curry School of Education at UVA is the school finance course. And before coming to the Raymond A. Mason School of Business at William & Mary, my course was very heavily focused on the day-to-day bookkeeping operations of what a principal might experience versus the 30,000 foot ten thousand foot and even five-foot views of what a superintendent principal, bookkeeper, CFO, and the community expects from the school system in terms of stewardship over their tax dollars. So I would say that this has this experience at Mason has dramatically changed my outlook in general. In addition to my outlook as a teacher and helping, folks understand how schools are financed and how they run better and more efficient.

Ken White

And do you also try to give them the more you mentioned a longer outlook, ten, five years, ten years?

Thomas Taylor

Yeah, the forecasting element, I think, is something that has been absent in a lot of school divisions for many years. And one of the I'd say unintended consequences and even a positive consequences of the financial crisis in 2008/2009 is it forced us to take a hard look at our stewardship over our tax dollars and to think really deliberately about how we can look at school finance in the long-range and really consider our long-range goals and work to get them get to those goals and achieve success. Because you can't do it all in one year when you have limited resources and to be really, really considerate and deliberate about how we use our resources and think about that in a more meaningful way.

Ken White

You've talked about operations, capital projects, the budget. In education, and do we refer to it as public education? Is that the right term?

Thomas Taylor

I think so.

Ken White

Yeah. Well, if you were to go meet with a 100 of your colleagues across the nation, what would some of the big issues be today that you're talking about?

Thomas Taylor

Well, in Virginia in particular, and I think we're ahead of the game in Virginia. We are heavily interested in workforce development. We are looking at the long-term outcomes of what a profile of a graduate in Virginia would look like in terms of what do we expect of our kids once they graduate, our pre-K 12 experience, and they're ready for life after high school, whether they are going to a traditional four-year college, a two-year community college, or trade opportunity, or they're going immediately into the workforce. You know what skills and things do they need in their toolkit to be successful and what that translates for us is how do we create opportunities for kids to have meaningful career exploration, develop their skills in a meaningful way so that they are prepared for the workforce? Are they great citizens? Can they communicate very well? Do they collaborate with others? Can they critically think? And are they creative in their problem-solving? Those are all of the kind of key issues that we're we're grappling with right now.

Ken White

And great skills that they'll need for life, right?

Thomas Taylor

Absolutely.

Ken White

We'll continue our conversation with Thomas Taylor in just a minute. Leadership & Business is brought to you by the Center for Corporate Education at the College of William & Mary's Raymond A. Mason School of Business. Once again the Center for Corporate Education is offering its popular certificate in business management program in April. It's a five-day experience designed for the working professional who wants a better understanding of business. Each day is devoted to one business-related topic, including communication, operational effectiveness, strategy, managerial accounting, and leadership. The five core topics taught in our highly ranked MBA program. To learn more about the certificate in business, visit [wmleadership.com](http://wmleadership.com). Now back to our conversation with Thomas Taylor.

Ken White

Are we, as a nation sending too many students to college?

Thomas Taylor

That's a great question. I wouldn't say that we're sending too many students to college. I would ask maybe a different question and say are we sending too many students to college focused in areas that aren't going to yield outcomes that are going to move productivity for GDP in the long-range? And that may be a better question for us to ask. Are we meeting expectations for productivity based on what we are sending kids to college to study? That might be the question.

Ken White

And what do you think might be the answer?

Thomas Taylor

No, we're not. We probably need to retool a little bit and come up with different ways to maybe monetize some historically humanities-based liberal arts instruction or to come up with different ways to look at some traditional pathways. Not that those traditional pathways are bad. In fact, they are what enrich our society and give us meaning in life. But to come up with new ways to turn that into productivity I think it's going to be really important.

Ken White

Homeschooling. Growing? Stagnant? Where does that stand?

Thomas Taylor

I think about stagnant right now just based on some prime efficient look at trends. It's not growing. It's not going away. It's kind of flat.

Ken White

What about online learning? How is that affecting a public school?

Thomas Taylor

There's lots of different ways of doing effective online learning. Online learning can service a need, or it can help you know in the public school system. It can even be a profit center if you versus a cost center. If you really wanted it to be an additional component, I would say that the most effective online learning that I've seen, in particular with some of our learners, has been motivated learners who are seeking a specific task completion. We see this in the professional world like Lydia.com or even Khan Academy or something along those lines where a learner has a specific task that they're looking for filling a gap or are closing a gap and an online learning provides a supplement to the work that they're doing but wholesale online learning as a replacement in terms of replacing the brick and mortar setting in exchange for a virtual setting. We're not there yet, and it's maybe a good thing

that we're not there yet because there's tremendous value in the interaction between peers. The interaction between students and the interaction between faculty and students in a meaningful way. That being said, you can't ignore the fact that this is a great way to help people who don't necessarily have access to that face-to-face environment. And this is a way for motivated learners to be very successful in trying to complete some tasks that they have set as an objective.

Ken White

How would you define a good parent in a school district? What would do good parents do?

Thomas Taylor

Great parents are engaged, and that really is the bottom line. I'm a firm believer in that every parent sends their best to us every day. I'm also a believer in the general principles of public education that we teach who comes through the front door. We don't pick and choose who we teach. We take the best that parents give us every day. There are sometimes great heuristic value in what comes through the front door. But at the same time, any parent that is interested in is interested in advocacy is doing the right thing. It doesn't always materialize the way we sometimes want to see it in some traditional senses. But any parent that is interested in their students performance is doing a great job.

Ken White

So engagement means in their child.

Thomas Taylor

Yeah, engaged in what their child is doing. Talking to their child about what they're doing in school. It's difficult to say what's a great parent and what's a bad parent because it's such a hard job to be a parent. And I think every parent can admit that there are some days that they do it better than others.

Ken White

Sure.

Thomas Taylor

And I think knowing that knowing to be as gracious as we can with parents on a day-to-day basis is really important. But I would. If I had to distill it down to one thing, I would distill it down to the fact that a great parent is a parent that's interested, and the great parent is the one that's engaged.

## Ken White

Right. There are teachers that will be listening to this who say I'm I might want to do what you're doing. Someday I might want to be a superintendent, a principal. What should they do in terms of business education to prepare for a role like this?

## Thomas Taylor

Wow, that would be wonderful. And I like I said earlier I've gone through a traditional path. I got a bachelor's degree in social science. I taught social studies. Got a master's degree in educational leadership and kind of learned the tricks of the trade, so to speak, for the principalship. Got a doctorate in policy from UVA, and those were great degrees and very helpful. But from a practical sense, the MBA kind of trumps them all, and not to say that everybody needs to get an MBA, but some kind of continuing education and understanding of basic business functions in accounting, in marketing, in organizational behavior, communications, IT management. These are all things that are going operations. These are all things that are going to serve the principal, serve the superintendent, serve the community in a very meaningful way. That have tangible outcomes on the bottom line for kids and tangible outcomes on the bottom line for stewardship of the tax dollar. So I would say, in general, seeking any type of professional continuing education that's led by outstanding business faculty would make a significant difference.

## Ken White

That's our conversation with Thomas Taylor, and that's our podcast for this week. Leadership & Business is brought to you by the Center for Corporate Education at the College of William & Mary's Raymond A. Mason School of Business. The Center for Corporate Education can help you, and your organization meet and exceed your goals. With business and leadership development programs that fit your needs and get results. If you're interested in learning more, visit our website at [wmleadership.com](http://wmleadership.com). Also, if you have any feedback or suggestions pertaining to our podcast, we'd love to hear from you. Email us at [podcast@wm.edu](mailto:podcast@wm.edu). Thanks to our guest this week Thomas Taylor and thanks to you for joining us. I'm Ken White. Until next time have a safe, happy, and productive week.