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Well, welcome to the Unpacked Podcast, where we're unpacking the realities in

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today's public schools.

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I am Mickey O'Neill. I'm your host today. And with me, I have Michael McDonald.

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Michael, could you introduce yourself to our listeners, please?

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So, Michael McDonald, Director of Transition Programming here at AMISD.

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And I work with students that are 18 to 26 that are in a program that is post-high school.

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And they're, you know, kids that did not get diplomas and have maybe gotten

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a certificate of completion from their schools and come over to us. Okay.

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Well, can you talk a little bit about the continuum of transition programming

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for our students with disabilities and how that kind of works,

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what that looks like for our listeners?

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Absolutely. So there's a lot of variances within that.

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Some of the kids start in transition programming at their local high schools

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and then they'll come over to us either to SAIL or to Project SEARCH depending

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on where they're needed or what their needs are.

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Some of the kids are down in our center-based programming at Hartwood or Peekman

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and they end up coming over to us in our transition programs at SAIL after a certain amount of time.

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It really is individualized. It really is depending on student needs and where

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they're at in their transition learning.

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Students can be with us till they're 26. So, you know, it really isn't a race.

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Oftentimes they get to us when they're 18. Yeah. And we just try to find the

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right place along the line where, you know, earlier needs.

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Maybe they're not ready to go out in the community. Maybe they're not ready

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to do some of the more individualized work yet at the center-based program.

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So maybe they're there until they're 22, 23, and they kind of get a taste for

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it, and then they come to us. Some come way earlier.

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And then we have kids of the locals that come to us at 18 and maybe stay with

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us for a year or two, or maybe they stay until they're 26. Okay.

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Well, that's quite a variety of different options for kids based on where they are in their learning.

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That's great. And it's very individualized.

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We take the family's needs into account and the student's needs into account,

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and we really kind of try to make it tailored for each student.

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So I think maybe a lot of our listeners might not know that in the state of

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Michigan, we actually provide education, public education through age 26.

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You mentioned you support 18 to 26 in transition programs, but that's probably

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a new piece of information.

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But could you talk a little bit about SAIL, the SAIL program specifically,

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skills for adult independent living, and what our students learn in that program,

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the independent living skills, and maybe some work-based learning? Yeah.

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So they have specific transition goals that they work on.

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Some of it is community experiences. Some of it is working.

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Some of it is training.

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Some of it is, you know, life skills that they'd be working at home.

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A big push in SAIL is to get kids out in the community working.

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And it's really, it's unpaid work. It's volunteer work. We call them training

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sites more than work sites.

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So they're going out into, you know, we've got, I don't know,

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30 different work sites that we use through all our programs.

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And different sites have different things they work on, but also certain students

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have desires to, you know, like if we're at the animal shelter and somebody likes kids.

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Animals and things that they want that. And we take them there and they get

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to clean up the messes from the animals and they realize maybe I don't want

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to work with animals so much.

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So there's a lot of opportunities for them to get out there and just kind of

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see that. Also, we get out in community experiences.

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We have students that, you know, go to Meijer, buy groceries,

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they bring the groceries back, they learn how to cook, they learn how to,

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you know, take care of the kitchen after they're done and clean up.

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And, And, you know, we've, we're doing laundry.

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We have five different sales sites, two here in Mason, two in Lansing,

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and one out at Waverly High School.

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And each program does, functions a little bit differently. Okay.

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What does that classroom look like in those spots? Like, do they have,

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you said, a washer and dryer and like a kitchen so they're able to wash them

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back? It really depends.

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Like in Waverly and in Mason, they have washer and dryer and a kitchen and the whole thing. Okay.

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In Lansing, it's at the Foster Community Center. A lot of our students that

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are in those programs, we're real thoughtful about this, are kids that maybe

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live in apartments or live on their own.

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We don't have a washer and dryer there. They go to the laundromat. Okay.

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That's a good experience as well, yeah. And learn how to do laundry at the laundromat.

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They learn how to take public transportation.

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You know, although Michigan Avenue has been tricky to drive up and down. I bet.

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We haven't been using CATA as much, the number one bus up and down Michigan Avenue.

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But, yeah, so it really is tailored to the students and what they're looking for.

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And what their community looks like and what their living experiences look like.

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So we have students that live in group homes. We have students that live with families.

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So they all have different kind of needs that we have to kind of think about.

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Okay. Well, can you talk a little bit, too, about, you know,

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what kids expect to learn or families can expect for kids to,

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the experiences they take away from, you know, being in SAIL?

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So a big part of it is independence. And it's so really going through probably

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the K-12 system that was more focused on content and curriculum and being with

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their peers and being with their gen ed peers and all that kind of

stuff.

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Once they get to the transition program, they don't have gen ed peers anymore.

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We focus on the things that they need.

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And one of the biggest ones is independents.

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We have students that come to us who are very independent because that's what

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the family needs them to be. And we have students that aren't.

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One of my favorite things that happens is with some of our lesser independent kids.

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Is we'll they'll be doing stuff here and then we'll tell the parents they're

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doing xyz they're like they don't know how to do that i'm like no no they do

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it here they're like well they don't do it at home i said well they're conning

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you just like any other teenager or 20 year old right they're they go home and

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they're like i don't know how to do dishes i don't know how to do laundry.

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You need to do that for me, mom.

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We're like, no, they do it every day at school. They know how to do it.

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So, yeah. That's a great story. Yeah. So, it happens all the time. It's hilarious.

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And then the parents are like, oh, so I can have them do this at home?

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Yeah, absolutely. So, it does create that more independence for them.

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So. Well, that's, that's great. That's great.

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So, what makes you most proud of the work that's happening in these transition programs?

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So, in the four years I've been here, we have doubled in size. So that's very cool.

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We've, we've been able to, you know, work with a lot more students and give

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a lot more experiences and a lot more opportunities because we're,

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the bigger you get, the more you're just able to offer things. So that's a big one.

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Our team has grown as well because we've doubled in size.

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And the thing I really like is how much our team really works like a team,

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functions for the kids. It's always kids first.

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And this is another thing, too. So they're 18 to 26-year-olds,

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so it's a young adult program.

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The kids get mad at me because I call them kids. They say, no,

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we're young adults. Yeah. I'm like, I'm 54.

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One of the perks of being 54 is I get to call 20-year-olds kids.

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So they think that's funny. But so, yeah, I know that's not always the correct

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term. I should be saying young adults, but to me, they're kids.

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So, Diane, I'm trying to think if I answered that question. Yeah,

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you did. You did. You did. All right.

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So I would just say, you know, you know, you talked about the doubling in size.

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You talked about your staff doubling.

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There's one thing we didn't really touch on. And as students are going to job

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sites or community, how do they get there?

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What's the transportation look like? I think people might not really understand

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what that takes to support students.

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So we do multiple different things. So we do team transportation. It's the most reliable.

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But we also work on CATA. Mm-hmm.

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You know, rural CATA or SPECTRAN or all these other things. We focus

on,

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you know, hey, we're going to take this to go to Meijer. And teaching them how

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to use, yeah, how to use public transportation. Great.

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SPECTRAN is a thing. Once you get signed up, you're signed up for life.

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Once they know that you are a student with a disability, you will be able to

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take that with you through the rest of your life and be able to use SPECTRAN for moving forward.

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So those little things are things that are helpful for the families that they

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can, you know, take with them going forward. That's great. That's great.

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Well, I think that's all we have time for today. So I would love to have you

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back and talk about another topic later, but thank you for joining us. Yeah, absolutely.

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Yeah, and thank you to the listeners for helping us unpack the realities in

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today's public schools.