

**Episode Title:** Flexible Scheduling: A Conversation with TranZed Academy for Working Students (TAWS)

*You are listening to the Maryland EdCast. On Maryland EdCast, State Superintendent of Schools, Mohammed Choudhury, discusses education practices, priorities, and policies with a wide range of Marylanders. Superintendent Choudhury is laser focused on transformational education, research, and best practices to ensure all Maryland students realize their full potential.*

**Superintendent Choudhury:** Welcome to Maryland EdCast. I am Mohammed Choudhury, State Superintendent of Maryland Schools. This podcast is an opportunity for me to explore high quality educational practices, prioritize those practices with the greatest impact, and consider scaling practices through policy and collaboration with stakeholders.

For our first episode, I am talking with students and program staff from the TranZed Academy for Working Students, also referred to as TAWS, about their experiences with flexible scheduling and working while in high school.

Joining us today are students, Aliyah Avila and Minelis Brito, and TAWS program manager, Laura Anaya. Before we dive into our discussion, I want to give them a chance to introduce themselves.

**Aliyah:** Hi, I'm Aliyah Avila. I am a twelfth-grade student. I used to attend Rockville High School. Being a senior, I only have a few classes left. Right now, I am working two jobs.

**Superintendent Choudhury:** Thank you, Aliyah. Minelis?

**Minelis:** Hi, my name is Minelis Brito. I recently graduated high school in May of 2022. I was a student at Springbrook High School. I now attend LSU. I just finished my first semester and my major is in bioengineering. I also did a lot of dual enrollment classes at TAWS while I was working as well which also allowed me to graduate a year early.

**Superintendent Choudhury:** Thank you Minelis. I'm questioning how busy I am every day after listening to your daily schedule. Laura, I want to make sure I got your title right. Are you the program manager or program director? And if you can just share that. I think you're the director but I want to make sure that I get your title right. But Laura please introduce yourself.

**Laura:** Thank you. Recently appointed Program Director. My name is Laura Anaya. I am responsible for overseeing the TranZed Academy for Working Students Program, which is powered by the Children's Guild. We are partnered with TranZed and apprenticeship which is just another program that I oversee under Workforce Development.

My responsibilities are to just ensure that we are functioning in a successful, productive, and efficient way as a program, and providing our students and staff whatever they need and resources to fulfill their positions.

**Superintendent Choudhury:** Thank you to the three of you, Aliyah, Minelis, and Laura for joining me today. I'm really excited about this conversation. It's very important to the State Board and I that we are able to ground everything we do in what is actually happening in our schools every day.

I am excited about having a discussion with you guys because one thing that we have not done well is designing our K-12 experience around student needs. We say it a lot. We say differentiate, we say adapt, but we just haven't done it at scale. TAWS provides a promising proof point to be able to do this. My job is to bottle up great things and scale it statewide across all of our 24 school systems, and make sure all 900,000 students truly have schooling experiences that are designed around their needs.

I'm really excited. We have a major, major education reform law called The Blueprint for Maryland's Future. I call it The Blueprint Generation. The blueprint is going all in on making sure kids have pathways, especially at the high school level that are designed around their interests and needs.

The blueprint has this very ambitious goal of making sure all of our students jump into what they most desire after high school, whether it is college or jumping into a career. But also making sure that high school is designed around their needs. It might be just because they have needs around just working, or it may be other needs as well.

I'm just really excited to hear about what your experience has to teach us when it comes to educational policies that we have to make at the state level. Really, again, thank you for making this time today with us.

I hope to learn a lot from your experiences while working in high school and being enrolled in TAWS. Hearing your stories will help the State Board and MSD again as I said, really start thinking about the right policy conditions to be able to really help our state thrive and support every student.

Let's start with your stories. I want to understand your experience in TAWS, how the program works in practice, and the impact of those practices. I'll start with Minelis and then go to Aliyah. My first question is, what does your average school day look like?

**Minelis:** An average day, while I was enrolled in TAWS, we could really change up depending on the days. Because our schedule is so flexible, I was able to do homework at any point in time of the day. But usually I would try to keep it balanced by just checking to see what I need to do at the beginning of the day. Then I just work around with my work schedule for the week, and then I just maintain a nice balance between that.

During my second semester at Taos, I was doing more classes at Montgomery College, duly enrolled. It got a little bit more challenging, but it really did help having that flexible schedule

with TAWS, just being able to learn how to balance myself instead of a 7:00–3:00 schedule at school.

**Superintendent Choudhury:** Aliyah, what about your average today? What is your average day like?

**Aliyah:** An average day for me looks like me getting up getting ready for work. On my break time I tried to check whatever assignments, homeworks that I had left for the whole class. Then I read through the class and plan for what I should do when I get off work.

My first job I go to in the morning and a second job at night. Then when I get home, I try to do at least four homeworks, and I read through what I need to do next and for the rest of the weekend. Because with TAWS, they don't really have deadlines for the weekends.

Anything that I missed from Monday to Friday, I can do on the weekends. I can catch up on the following week, and then have a stress-free week without having to do any homework because I already did it on a weekend. Then just go to work and just do my homework on the next few deadlines that's going to come up.

**Superintendent Choudhury:** I hope in the midst of all of that, you are both also sleeping. That is so important. I won't ask you how many hours because I would not be the best example to also follow in that regard. I'm going to shift over to Laura. How does the TAWS program work? Tell me about the students who participate and the support the program provides.

**Laura:** Minelis and Aliyah did a great job highlighting one of the most beneficial things our program offers, which is a flexible online academic schedule. We currently use Pearson as our online platform. It's a self-paced, fewer fair test type of platform that allows our students, like Aliyah and Minelis said, to log in and complete their assignments really around their work schedule and around other priorities. They're not subject to a stressful schedule, they can work on things during the weekend.

Generally, it could be aggressive and many semesters, where we set about seven- to eight-week deadlines for each of our courses. Within that, there is some flexibility as a mentor or a coach to extend, or in most cases for the students, to complete it early. Because we're not bound by those semesters, students are able to complete their graduation requirements faster than they would in the traditional environment because they can start a new course immediately or simultaneously with the course they are currently taking online.

The profile of our students that apply range. We have college-bound students, non-college-bound students, work-bound students, students coming in with 4.0 GPAs that are interested in dual enrollment, and students that have GPAs lower than 2.0 that may have been struggling in the school for various circumstances.

The profiles of our students really vary, but I think overall the formula of offering them a flexible online schedule, all of our students are provided a dedicated mentor or career coach that helps them think through what their goals are, how to do time management, and post-secondary planning. Our coaches specialize in various subjects like college and FAFSA applications, for example.

We're able to provide these training throughout the course of their involvement in the program, ranging from micro credentialing, to LinkedIn profiles, to free college courses through dual enrollment.

I think you asked how the program works. Really, a student is referred to by various means or they saw direct marketing material. We get most of our students directly referred from counselors within the high schools and then they fill out an online application.

Depending on the circumstances of their profile, there's an initial information gathering process. But it can happen relatively quickly. We see students that are enrolled in our program within 48 hours after applying. From there they are assigned their coach, they're provided their online instructions to access their classes.

Because we have this flexibility, our staff also works in that capacity. We have tutors that are available at night, on the weekends. Our coaches are pretty much always on the clock, if you will. The flip side of that is, we're not necessarily providing support to our students in a traditional 9:00-5:00 environment. Working at night on the weekends is not uncommon. It's really all about meeting the students at their needs.

Whatever resources we need to provide to them, whether it be mental health support, assistance completing their college application, or training around soft skills so they could be competitive with their employer. Basically our program encompasses all of those resources.

Part of the resources and benefits that the TAWS program offers in their planning include individualized career plans, which are a working document that our career coaches work with our students to again, identify what their interests are.

When we were growing up, it was very much what do you want to be when you grow up. In my twenties, I'm still figuring that out. I think that that is something that we need to really consider as we engage and work with our students. We may not be able to draw out what those career goals are, just in a blunt question like that, but through the relationship and understanding what their interests are or what they're good at (usually collectively), we're able to come up with at least a plan. Again, the plan changes throughout the year. Again it's a working document so we make adjustments as needed for our students.

**Superintendent Choudhury:** Thank you so much, Laura. The individual career plans aspect is very important. In the blueprint, it states that our students who are on the career pathway, that they

should be getting high quality career counseling, collaboration between the school systems and their local workforce boards.

A lot of people are asking this question, what does that look like? What does that look like in practice? I think we have something in our own backyard in Maryland that we can look to, to shine a light on to say what that looks like in practice. And then of course, there are other models as well across the country. But what you would see is there are shared elements in them and you hit on some of them.

That's amazing. I feel like if I could snap my finger every student in our high schools should be able to have a guaranteed experience like what you just described. Just the flexibility to take English rather than do it through a whole year or semester, but doing it through a minimester approach. I heard that there could even be adaptations there, if they need an extension. But ultimately it's about the core competencies.

We think that in order to learn 12th grade English, you have to do all of the days in these two semesters. That's just not true and we've uncovered that. It might be true for some folks, but it's not true for many folks. I love that you guys are doing that, and it sounds like your online platform that you guys are using for that helps with that.

Can you tell me a little bit more about the career coach experience, what that looks like, and how often is it on demand? Or how does that work for them?

**Laura:** Our career coaches typically balance the caseload of anywhere from 20 to 40 students. It really just depends on the profile of those students. Their obligation is really not just thinking about how the student is, but supporting them to where they want to go. If they're not where they want to go, helping them identify what their interests are.

We ask that our career coaches meet with them throughout the week. There really is no set time unless we find that a student, because of their work schedule or because of their learning style, needs to meet a particular day or time.

I'd say that our career coaches at least touch base with our students 2-3 times a week. That could be in the space of tutoring or just a check in to let them know how they're performing in their courses. If there's any reason for concern that they're not going to reach a particular deadline. If we notice that they haven't been responsive or logging in, as just random check-ins. That happens pretty regularly.

It's very much a collaborative effort in order for our program to work. We work hand-in-hand with the parents (when applicable) or guardian, the guidance counselors within the school, and the teachers. They're a part of the process in onboarding and determining whether or not TAWS is a good fit for that student.

A part of that involves biweekly updates that their career coaches send to the councilors to let them know the status of the courses they're in. Really to reach out if we need any assistance or resources that we're not able to provide for the student, or just collaborating on the best way to make sure that that student is reaching whatever success looks like for them.

There's a biweekly collaboration with the schools. From there, the career coaches are generally responsible for ensuring that we are entering at least one of our Montgomery County Public Schools a month to meet directly with the staff. Usually with the councilors, we try to hijack councilor meetings whenever those happen. We're just starting to get around in-person again, which is really nice. That's (I would say) standard practice for our career coaches.

Like I said, they have various backgrounds. One of our coaches, in particular, has a background in special education. We really rely on her when it comes to students that have 504s or IEPs, and in her case, her responsibilities include being available for the IT meetings, working directly with the PPW or the social worker. I'd say, it could vary.

**Superintendent Choudhury:** That's amazing. It is an amazing counseling experience. It sounds like it's not some cookie cutter experience. Everyone truly gets what they need and the support.

**Laura:** The TAWS program is currently operating in just Montgomery County. Years ago, a business claim was created for a model like this and it was presented to several different jurisdictions. But Montgomery County being ahead of the game like they usually are, was the first one to jump on this opportunity. We're definitely grateful to be working in Montgomery County, but obviously we hope to be able to serve other high school students or others alike that can benefit in other counties or districts.

**Superintendent Choudhury:** I'm going to go back to Minelis and Aliyah. This time I'll start with Aliyah. What is it like to balance working while attending high school and how does the TAWS program help with this balance?

**Aliyah:** Just to share an experience with regards to the question, last year I attended high school and then I worked as well. I worked as a manager at a restaurant and then I was also going to school from 7:00 AM to 2:30 PM.

At first it was very okay, and then as time flew by, I didn't really get the support that I thought I was going to get from that certain moment. I thought that we were going to have some adjustments regarding my school hours because I am working. But after that, after I finished my whole year at Rockville High School, I joined TAWS and everything was amazing.

I now have more time to sleep, I now work two jobs, and I'm also finishing up the few of my classes that I still have left, which is really great. I really plan to also do dual enrollment enrollments with TAWS.

Like what Miss Laura mentioned earlier, all throughout the week I also have check-in support with my counselor, Miss Cordell. She checks in on me at the most random times, which I really appreciate because then I realized like, oh yes, I do need help in this area and I forgot to ask because of how busy I was.

TAWS program really helped me a lot with transitioning from me working another job and then time managing.

**Superintendent Choudhury:** Thank you for sharing that. And Minelis?

**Minelis:** I work as a gymnastics instructor at Dynamite Gymnastics Center. I basically was working less hours before I joined TAWS because of school. Once I was able to join TAWS, I was able to get in more hours and basically make my own schedule because my work schedule is also flexible.

I was also able to find what works for me when getting work done, when it was good for me to get homework done, and when it was good for me to be at work. Then also, find time to relax and decompress. I guess one of those challenges came before I joined TAWS and not being able to get in as many hours into work as I wanted to.

Like Aliyah said, my counselor was Miss Duffy. I literally still talk to her till this day. She was my career coach. She always checks up on me. I could text her literally at 12:00 AM and she would answer. It was really nice to know that somebody was there as a resource to find somebody else even if we needed to help us out and get us through that big commotion, the rest of high school, I guess.

**Superintendent Choudhury:** Got it. I'm hearing an X-Factor in everything that you guys did was that councilor, that career coach, both from meeting at random times but then also just someone that you want to have almost like a lifelong connection with, it feels like. Thank you for sharing that.

Also, Minelis, I appreciate you uplifting time to decompress and relax. People forget that aspect for our students as well. It's as if you can throw all kinds of requirements at you and as if that time is not important as well.

As we know, mental health and other things have become a more normal thing to say out loud. But we know the needs far outweigh what we can actually provide in terms of support and need to be. I really appreciate you sharing that because I think it's important that as we continue to think about the demands that we place and requirements and etcetera, if we're going to do that, then we got to do it in a flexible way.

Trust me, I ask for many extensions of my wife with my own duties at home sometimes. Sometimes they're granted, sometimes they're not. Most of the time they are. Even with my own team and the department. I appreciate that.

Talking about the value of the people in TAWS and the program and the adults, I have another follow-up question for the students. We'll start with Minelis. How are teachers and other school staff helping you to be successful with a flexible high school schedule?

You talked about the role of the counselor is important, but can you just also talk about just the teachers you're encountering who are part of the program or connected to the program? Can you share a little bit about that, Minelis?

**Minelis:** We used Pearson for the classes. Or TAWS uses Pearson for the classes we go through. Although it's asynchronous, they are very accessible. I could email one of the teachers today and she'll answer or they'll answer in maybe 30 minutes or so. It's really not hard to get in contact with any of the teachers. It's very easy to understand how to get in contact with them. Some even give you phone numbers. That's like the Pearson aspect.

I also was able to still go back into my high school and ask for help from other teachers that I knew from just going in before, that they also knew I was in TAWS and I also needed some help sometimes.

Basically, everybody was just very accessible. If I needed a tutor, I could also use one of the TAWS tutors to help me in whatever class I needed. They would also check in, just as the career coaches would. Everybody was just very open, and it was really nice to have that.

**Superintendent Choudhury:** Thank you. Aliyah, do you have anything to add to that?

**Aliyah:** Like what Minelis said with the teachers at TAWS, they are really easily accessible, and some of them even have links that you can go to. They put it in the classes that we have. They put it there and you can just click on it, and then you can just set up a meeting with them.

Sometimes, most of the teachers have their numbers out there that you can call. If you call, they will call you back in literally 30 minutes. If you don't answer, they leave a detailed voicemail asking what's going on, how can they help. Everything's really been great with how accessible the teachers are and how accessible the counselors are.

**Superintendent Choudhury:** Got it. Thank you for sharing that. Laura, I'm going to come back to you if you have anything else to add. Do you want to add anything else when it comes to school-based practices, you've observed that support students reaching their academic and career goals. You shared about a lot of different aspects of it, but is there one or two other things that you want to uplift that you may have not hit on?

**Laura:** I think it's just important to note that while our students are required to be working and there's some flexibility around what work looks like. Our students that are working are not just necessarily looking for money to spend over the weekend, buy new shoes, go to prom, or to do extracurricular activities. Many of our students are working to support themselves and their families. Maybe the only working person in their household.



I think it's important to just mention that it is a requirement, and we do want to prepare our students to be as prepared for whatever their next stage is. But there is a level of awareness, kind of what you mentioned around mental health, and really developing the student to empower them with the tools and the resources that they need. That they're likely dealing with that their friends in high school are not dealing with at the moment.

It does require our students to exhibit a level of responsibility, self-awareness, initiative, and proactivity because it can be really easy to say, well, I don't have to be at class at a particular time. I'm going to wait to do this later. They have to be motivated. But again their motivation to have this flexibility in their academic schedule is because they're working because they have to. It's unfortunate that students have to choose between being able to graduate, for example, or having enough money to support their household.

**Superintendent Choudhury:** Thank you for sharing that. I think it's very important to remember that many of our students work because they have to, because their families depend on them. That's not a new phenomenon, that's been a phenomenon since the dawn of time. We need to make sure our school systems acknowledge that and adapt.

We often like to say, students are not motivated. They are motivated, but they might not be motivated to fit into the square box that is the schedule. But if you give them a different opportunity to do that, I remember as a classroom teacher, just being willing to have more grace around deadlines or willing to give them a chance to revise something in a differentiated manner just made all the difference. I saw motivation go up because the system was willing to adapt to their needs. I love that you share that. Thank you for uplifting that.

Let's shift to my next set of questions. I'm always thinking about how to scale practices. I'm in the work of scaling. We have 900,000 students. We have 1400 schools. I was thinking about how I can make this experience true across every Reading, Math, English, Science, etcetera experience.

Speaking of scale, I want you to help me and our audience think through how we could potentially scale what you guys are experiencing through the TranZed program that has been a difference maker. I'm going to start with Laura, and trust me, if it's gold and it's something that I think I need to take tomorrow and apply it, I will run with it. I would love for you to share some ideas because I can tell that the three of you have some great ideas that can help us think through better here at the state level.

**Laura:** Thank you. You mentioned a few of them there. I would like to say, definitely increasing resources around mental health. That's something that we really looked at this year. Nothing new but I think to your point something newly okay to talk about. We definitely have taken some steps to invest in that, but the scale would look to expand those resources.

Resources around financial literacy would probably be incredibly beneficial. We do focus a lot with our students around micro credentialing. These are soft skills that we work with the students.

Again, giving them a flexible schedule allows them to work more and graduate, but does it make them competitive? How do they stay competitive with an employer who is looking to hire somebody full-time, but you have students that are going to school during the day. They can't remain competitive in a work environment when they're limited and binded by the schedule.

What we would see if this program was at scale is increasing graduation rates. The direct positive effect on our labor market and hopefully—I hate to use this word; it's so cliché—more happiness around student satisfaction and even retention with an employer. Because as we're working with soft skills for these students that you don't think about with an employer when they go to a job, like how to be adaptable, how to communicate in a multi-generational environment. For example, at work where you're working with young people and older people, time management is one of those.

How to be dependable. How do you communicate. How do you show up for work in a way that makes a presence. These are soft skills that employers are really looking for when they're thinking about investing in someone that I think we just don't focus enough on when it comes to being in school. It's very (again) academic-focused, but not so much about how these soft skills translate and in real life.

**Superintendent Choudhury:** Those are all great things. Lots to think about. When you think about micro credentials, they mean something if there's someone on the receiving end that acknowledges and respects that credential. It's a growing movement and I'm fascinated by it.

The thing that I often struggle with is will that credential account for something for an employer if they are listing on a resume? You have to universalize that experience. I love that you shared that financial literacy principle; is something we should not take for granted, that students just get “naturally inside.” I appreciate you uplifting that.

Minelis, Aliyah, I'm going to ask you the same thing. A question around how do you think this could scale? Like advice, you're basically giving me and the State Board advice here now. What would it look like if we were able to offer a flexible schedule option at every high school in Maryland?

**Aliyah:** Wow, that's actually a very interesting question. I think that that would look more like what Miss Laura mentioned earlier. It will sound cliché, but it will have more impact with the happiness of a student. Because a lot of students have jobs or like hobbies that they want to start on or they want to practice on, or they're a lot a lot of courses all around us that they can take. Like if they want to pursue a career in clay potting, they want to pursue a career in this type of thing.

I also know a lot of people who had to drop out of school because they don't have the privilege to go to school and then go to work with the limited hours that they put into work. So they had to drop out of school. I feel like a lot of people are going to want to go back to school with this option and a lot of people are going to have a happy life, if you say.

**Superintendent Choudhury:** Got it. No, we are bringing clichés back to this conversation. We need more clichés. I think we've all become a bit jaded, and we should not become jaded. Laura said, more happiness, you said more happiness. It is definitely something to not take for granted. I appreciate you sharing.

Also, I appreciate you uplifting that as a dropout recovery program as well, too. You talked about people who are already enrolled, but also people we would reengage potentially through this. Given the inflexibility of life circumstances while being in school led to certain challenges for them ultimately to dropping out. This serves as a re-engagement strategy. Thank you for sharing that.

Minelis, what would you share if we were to scale flexible scheduling?

**Minelis:** I'm going to share an experience that I had with actually one of my classes. I was taking a history course. Before that history course, I was not too much into history. But I feel that because I had such a good platform to learn on and because I had a flexible schedule, I was much more interested in the content and I actually got into the material more.

I feel like that really just would help a student in their success rates as Miss Aliyah stated earlier. Just finding that time where a student can really focus and just put all their focus into school would be so much better.

Some people don't work well in the morning. Some people don't work well midday. Having that good platform for learning and just flexibility is the best way to keep it if you want to have a good success rate for [...].

**Laura:** If I could also piggyback off of that. I don't know if it's necessarily something that you need to do to make sure that it's successful at scale, but again, as a result of it being scaled out. Right now, because we're just in Montgomery County, it's very much a siloed program, if you will. We've been joking with the team recently how the TAWS program is like an undercover CIA file. We exist, we're there, we do work, but nobody really talks about us. We're very much behind the scenes.

I think what you would see just naturally is the more enrollment for one and there are ideas around alternative programs. I think preconceived notions even around what an alternative program is or looks like or what benefit it has. Scaling it out would make it more normal.

Right now, at least when I was in high school, a few years ago, if you weren't going into college, it was very much the military that was a healthy alternative, for example, that's offered.

Unfortunately some students that go to college also don't go to the military. But what do they do? What happens with them? Where would they go? What opportunities do they have?

I just think there's a large population that is incredibly underserved when it comes to these opportunities. Just a result of scaling it would be normalized. God, I hate to use the word respected, but I guess, respected more as not just an alternative, but actually a good first choice, even, if the circumstances called for that.

**Superintendent Choudhury:** Absolutely. Thank you for jumping right into that. We did a round table with some of our students and principals who run alternative high schools, that's the formal definition. And then we also did a State Board presentation deep dive on it. These students have dreams, goals, and aspirations. They also have a life that is also happening, whether it's been having to work or having to deal with a pregnancy or other things.

Frankly, the stigma around alternative high schools needs to be shattered, because the alternative high schools are essentially schools that are leveraging innovative, flexible scheduling and pathways to ensure student success.

Coming into any comprehensive high school, that's what the standard experience should be. We're not there yet. I'm glad you said to both garnered the respect and uplifted as this is a normal state in which we do schools in our state, in our country. I appreciate you sharing that.

Know that the State Board and I are there in terms of philosophically. It's just doing it and making it happen across the board is something easier said than done. But we can do this. We're about to invest billions of dollars to the blueprint in our education, so there's no reason why. Absolutely not. In fact, if we have these ambitious goals, then we need to adapt and be flexible in how we offer our K-12 experience, especially at the high school level. I really appreciate you sharing that.

Minelis, Aliyah, I have one more question in this topic area, and if you don't have anything to add, that's fine. Are there any improvements that you would recommend through the programming and the experience you have?

**Aliyah:** My job requires me to drop from different counties. I wish that TAWS could be more everywhere. Other students that I also talked to, I talked to them about my experience with TAWS and they were just like, oh, I wish we had that in our county, too. Being just more everywhere.

**Superintendent Choudhury:** Got it. I am responsible for obsessing about things like that and making that happen with the State Board. Being more everywhere is something that I'm going to remember. I love the way you phrased it too, so thank you for sharing that.

I have one more question. I call it the million-dollar question. I would love to ask everyone this question every time I engage with folks. Literally, if you had a million dollars that you could invest in your local school community, what would you invest it in?

I understand things cost more than a million, but you have a million and you would get to decide what you would spend that in. We give out many grants in the State Department of Ed, so we are always thinking about where to get the biggest bang for our buck. I'll start with Laura and then I'll go to the students and then I'll close this out.

**Laura:** I hate to be biased, but I would maybe spend some of that money on ensuring the expansion and solidifying the place of TAWS within the county. I think I would probably also invest some money around transportation.

I think there has been a huge gap and this may be the apprenticeship side of things that are coming into play now. But with our partnership, we're able to give our students a trajectory into a direct line of work, either be a referral or a partner of ours.

We find that transportation can be a huge barrier. Luckily in Montgomery County there's a pretty decent public transit system. But that isn't the case everywhere. We think about scaling. I do think there will be a need for some type of investment around transportation when it comes to students. I could probably continue more there, but you know where I'm going with that.

**Superintendent Choudhury:** Those are great things. Transportation and ensuring transportation is a trending need. The question is how we pull it off. I appreciate you uplifting those things. We're talking about TAWS today, so I would be surprised if you didn't say you don't want to invest it in TAWS. I appreciate you sharing that.

Let's go to Aliyah. What would you invest a million dollars in?

**Aliyah:** If I had a million dollars, that would be so crazy. I would definitely invest it in a more specific program that could help students. When you're fresh out of high school and then you want to go to work, you don't really have lean on much experience with, okay, what am I going to be expecting when I'm done with my high school or I'm done with college. What am I going to be expecting?

Just like a program to especially the young students or the graduating students, even, what are we going to be expecting when we're done with school? What are the types of people they are going to meet? What are the types of experiences, the type of jobs that we might have, like a program that would tell that, especially students.

I have a younger brother and I would really love for him to have already an idea. But that comes from school, like the program that he could be in that could tell him like, oh this is what you're going to be expecting when you're done with school, when you're in a job. Just a lot of what to expect when you're done with the school type of program.

**Superintendent Choudhury:** Got it. All great things. I'm glad that you're thinking about your brother's experience coming up. Minelis, what would you invest a million in?

**Minelis:** I would also invest a million dollars in resources for post graduation. I think that resources are the biggest thing that really helped me even get to where I'm at now. Through all of the programs that I did while I was in TAWS, like the engineering programs, the STEM programs and stuff, I was able to find out what I really wanted to study in and what I really wanted to focus on after school.

I thought I wanted to go to the Air Force. That didn't end up happening. That really helped going through. All my resources really helped me solidify what I wanted to do.

There was one more thing. Marketing. Marketing because nobody knows about TAWS. A lot of my friends, they're like, oh, what is TAWS? How are you in there? Like what's going on? A lot of people don't know about the different resources that they have. I guess just putting it out more so that people know about it would be very beneficial to students.

**Superintendent Choudhury:** Got it. Thank you. Yeah, sometimes we have great programs and we're realizing people just don't know. We tend to sometimes think about marketing at the state level, and how can we get better at that? People sometimes wonder, man, how are kids getting into all these other things or how do they know about them? Because their marketing game is on point and yours is not. How we do that better is very important as well.

I appreciate all great things, all amazing things that are solvable things, too. I appreciate you sharing that as well. It's not crazy to think like we're investing billions of dollars as part of the blueprint into our education system with this ambitious goal, rightfully so, for what our kids deserve and need and our families. We can do this, we can get this right.

I really want to say thank you very much for joining me. As we close out for today, I really appreciate you sharing your stories about what it's like being a student who is working and going to school. And also, just what the experience is like as the educator and the practitioner, supporting programs like this, running them and constantly improving them to make them work, because clearly they're working.

One of the things that I heard today is programs like this are for every type of student. Whether you are a 4.0 student and you are thinking about going off to college, or a student who does not have a 4.0 and maybe also thinking about going to college, just so your path is different, or maybe you're thinking about going to work, TAWS is designed for all students.

I love that. I can tell you as a former student, I was not in the 4.0 camp and especially in middle school, do not look up my discipline record there. But you can also become State Superintendent if you put your mind to it and you have people supporting you. For me it was those flexible moments in life.

One of the big, big things I'm taking away to prioritize is we need more flexibility in our system. We need to adapt. We need to provide courses that are not traditionally stuck in. Like, you know what? You take high school English or Math in a whole year and you have to only take it that

way. There's no other way you can take it. And you can't turn in assignments differently. They have to be due at this time, at this moment, at that very moment, and if you don't turn it in, then you're done.

That makes no sense. The working world is not like that. The State Department of Education does not run like that. Even our school systems do not run like that. We need to make sure we're designing schooling experiences around that.

Flexibility is key. Reimagining how we offer courses is key. Policies around making sure that our students all can have the high school experience in this way matter. This is not a stigma in terms of you taking an alternative pathway. It's not, it shouldn't be. It makes no sense. I'm glad we're having a reckoning around this, and I can tell you the State Board and I are definitely very passionate about this.

We are always going to be obsessing about something called regulations or COMAR. They function like law. They essentially say you can do this or you cannot do this. And some things are sometimes gray. I have said, and I'll say it here again, if there are policies and regulations that are in the way of having things like TAWS and programs like this all across our high schools in the state of Maryland, then we will call a special meeting and we will make sure we will tackle and completely redo that policy. If there is. I want people to let us know.

We are excited, we are committed to making sure we get this right. I really appreciate you guys sharing your stories. We all deserve to be happy. That's the one final thing about this. We would be happier if we were going through work life experiences, including schooling, through a flexible experience to design our needs, show more grace.

When we're struggling, to get a chance to try again, and sometimes try again after the other try and get support along the way. And we need help and reminders, et cetera, and TAWS is trying to figure that out and it's working. How do we get from a few hundred students to thousands across Maryland? That's a conversation for a different day.

Laura, Aliyah, Minelis, thank you so much.

**Laura:** Thank you so much for having us.

**Aliyah:** Thank you so much. We appreciate everything.

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