



**Episode #159:**

**Inside The Flex School with Founder Jacqui Byrne**

May 28, 2019

Debbie: Hey Jacqui, welcome to the podcast.

Jacqui: Hi Debbie. Thank you so much for inviting me.

Debbie: I'm excited to share your story and FlexSchool with our listeners. I've had the chance to see it in action and I think it's such a fantastic model and you are such a unique school creator and I'm just really excited to, to share your story. So why don't we actually start with your story. Can you just tell us about how FlexSchool came about, you know, how did this become part of your, your mission and why did you create it?

Jacqui: I was running, I had a business partner and we were running an educational company already and I have four children and two of them were really struggling in school even though they were really bright. And the teachers were trying, this was not, I'd love to say it was the teachers' fault, but it was not, it was my kids, they just weren't gonna fit. And one of them in particular was sort of putting on armor at the end of the driveway to walk to school and getting more and more depressed and anxious and yet getting up early to write a novel. And it was terrific. And so, you know, she had dropped out of gifted and talented and I think they were probably as happy to see her go as she was to go. And gifted and talented programs are fantastic if that's the way you need gifted and talented work.

And she couldn't do it the way that they wanted her to do it. And you know, they're, they're part of a set of triplets and they were in sixth grade and there's a lot of schooling left after sixth grade and I knew that they weren't going to make it in public schools. My other two kids, great in public school, did super well. And so I started looking around at other schools and I knew them professionally, but I hadn't sort of looked at all of their information from a parental point of view and there wasn't really anywhere for them to go. And having a high IQ and D's is not really all that attractive as an applicant. So I couldn't really find anything that was the right fit. And like so many of the kids, you know, they want to do it their way and they may deign to do it your way after they do it their way.

But a traditional school wasn't going to fit, a Catholic school wasn't going to fit. And so I was pretty frustrated and I was getting anxious about it myself. And then I was sitting in a meeting and you know, they talk about this, other people talk about this, and I think that's a bunch of hooey, but this is actually what happened. I was sitting in a meeting and FlexSchool as a network of small schools, the whole structure, everything landed in my head. And I apparently have no filter either because what came out of my mouth was we're going to start a school. And my business -

Debbie: In the meeting?

Jacqui: Yeah. In the meeting. Yeah. And my, my business partner at the time looked at me and said, no, we're not. I said, we are. And then I sort of had her convinced and

then she said, okay, it's gonna take us a couple of years to get all of this put together and to do this. I said, no, we're starting September.

Debbie: Oh my gosh.

Jacqui: So yes, we did this, we did this very quickly. Um, and it meant that not everything was in perfect shape, but I knew that the academics were going to be great and we had the space. So I knew we could make this work and we would figure out how to make the behind the scenes stuff work as we went along. And that's what we did. We started with seven students, two of them were mine. And what an extraordinary journey this has been. And we designed this school for 2e kids, and I was a 2e kid - am, I guess, um, but I could get the work finished.

It might've been at the last second. It might've been using adrenaline to push me to the deadline, et cetera. But I could get the work done. And I knew though that my kids and many, many other students weren't able to do that. So, so much went into setting it up in such a way that the problems that kids have in traditional school, for example, you know, losing points when you turn something in late. That works for a lot of kids, they don't want to lose the points and then you turn it in a day later and you lose, you know, another 25%. But for kids who are struggling with processing speed or you know, some other issue that's getting in the way of being able to complete the work on time, that is a disincentive, right? Then they just give up. They do the math and they're like, forget it, I'm not doing this assignment.

And we wanted to make sure that they did the assignments. And so we don't take points off initially, over time we do. But initially we don't take any points off if someone gets work in late because we want to celebrate the fact that they did the work rather than, you know, that they missed it. So it's sort of taking the, the external locus of control and trying to move that inward so that by the time kids get to college, they want to do the work because they're excited about learning. And it's their goal, it's not a teacher's goal, a parent's goal, anyone else. So that's I think been so rewarding for me, and so cool to have the kids be part of that process. They speak up, you know, we get lots of petitions.

Debbie: I bet you do.

Jacqui: Oh we do, we do. And then we get, you know, one of our values is to say yes and uh, and you know, that comes back to bite us sometimes in the funniest ways. Like a group of kids came last year and said, hey, we want to play fruit ninja. I said, okay. And they said, no, no, no, we want to play real fruit ninja. And I said, okay, um, what would this look like exactly? And they were going to bring in fruit and they were going to have sticks that they would hit it with. And, you know, we arranged a plan whereby they would clean it up afterwards and they had a limit on what they could bring in and whatever. And there was fruit ninja the rest of the year and they loved it. You know, how great is that?

Debbie: Wow. So, oh goodness. So many questions. I've had a lot of experts on the show to talk about 2e kids and specifically how hard it can be to find educational solutions. And even schools that are designed for 2e kids, it can still be so

challenging because they're all so different, right? They have such different strengths and challenges and they're just incredibly unique, complicated people. So can you share, you know, some of the things that you found are so successful. I love the example about the points. I mean that seems like a such a small thing, but it, you know, I know when Asher used to have to do math, any kind of online math program where he could either win or god forbid, lose points, you know, that was the end of it. He had no interest in that. So that seems like a small thing, but I know that can be a game changer. So what else, I know this is proprietary information, don't disclose your big secrets, but what are some of your keys to success in working with this population?

Jacqui:

You know, I'm actually happy to talk about this because we have small schools. We're always going to have small schools because they are complicated and there are kids who are miserable in other schools. And if we can share what we learn, just like Bridges does, you know, and Quad Prep has their program that, you know, we're all trying to help kids who are in other educational environments. Because those kids can't go to a school that's specifically for 2e and they're so unhappy. And if we can make them better with what we've learned in a small school sort of think tank kind of setting, then that's awesome. So one of the things that I think is really important is that there are all different kinds of issues with processing speed. And in traditional school frequently people have like timed multiplication sheets. You know, you said Asher had trouble with with math assignments and things like that.

And, and one of my kids could never, I don't think she ever finished one of those sheets. And so you know, they give you like three minutes to do a hundred problems or whatever it is. And why? Can't it be that you show you know the material, but you don't have to do it in a certain amount of time? Because for some kids it's just impossible and it adds so much stress. And you know, kids on the spectrum have trouble with word problems. So, and this doesn't work with everyone, but what we try to do if, if they really struggle is they don't get graded on, you know, they don't lose points for word problems that they miss, but they can gain points. So it's like extra credit. So we're not penalizing them for things they can't do, but we're still encouraging them to do those problems.

We don't want them to stop just cause they're hard. And then they can get extra credit, and that makes everybody feel better. Or sometimes you can have, what if they write the word problems and then their classmates try to solve them. So I think that it's, you know, they can write them, if you give them an equation, some of the kids can write a word problem and that's awesome. So I think, you know, the accommodations that are in traditional schools work with a lot of kids, but when they don't work it makes going to school so much more difficult. And I think that's part of the reason for the rise in anxiety, depression and also school refusal across the board but specifically in 2e kids. So for example, if, if you're really anxious and you need to go talk to somebody, then having a hall pass is sort of a double edged sword, because if you walk to the front of the room to use it, you have to walk past all your peers and put it on the teacher's desk.

And the kids all know that you're so anxious you have to leave the classroom. And so the kids won't use it. And you know, our kids are allowed to get up and

walk out of the classroom at any time. Now this of course is a double edged sword also. But you know, if you have to go to the bathroom, it's respectful to the kids to be able to get up and go. If you are anxious, how great that you don't have to do anything. You just can get up and leave. And other people might think that you have to go to the bathroom or whatever it is. And so it's something that I don't know that can be done in traditional schools, but you can have a hand signal or something that a student leaves on their desk. So the teacher knows, oh, if that particular eraser is out, then that means you know, he or she's having a little bit of trouble and they're going to go and no one has to say anything.

And you know, kids with ADHD really like to hear that they can leave the classroom. That's a big bonus. But after they do it 50 times in the first couple of weeks, and they do, and they believe that you're not lying to them, then they'll actually stay in the classroom because they can leave. And why can't someone pace at the back of the classroom? You know? And there's some things that we've tried that don't work. Like we sort of had couches in every room and that works for some of the kids, but it doesn't work for others. Or bean bags. Bean bags are awesome. But if somebody in a bean bag actually can't focus on anything else other than being in the bean bag then that doesn't work. So sometimes we have to remove various seating options from different classrooms. Uh, it's mostly the, the younger kids.

So I think this is a work in progress because we're trying to have, we're trying to have a school where kids with all different kinds of challenges can come and thrive. And we do that by focusing on talent development and on their strengths. So, for example, if somebody can't write and gets really anxious when they're writing, but loves to photograph things, then they can start with writing captions for those photographs. You know, we have kids come in and we love them and respect them right where they are, and then we help them get to where they want to go. And sometimes they don't know where they want to go. But having a strength based program allows us to, to split subjects up and put them in the classes where they belong based on their skills. So for example, in an English class, if you can read and talk really well and you can analyze really well, then we'll put you in the class that's appropriate.

If you also can't write, then we're going to help you write in a different way. We'll support you in that class. But you might also need to take an additional writing class or have instructional support and, and have people help you, um, help you through the process of writing. And that's a very common profile for us, the kids who are extremely articulate verbally, but have a difficult time writing. And so it does make it messy to have a lot of different challenges in the same school. And it's not like we have everything figured out. We're still experimenting and trying different things. And you know, Shark Tank works super well with the little kids because wow, if there's a prize attached and they get to develop their own company, etc, then that's fantastic. You know, there's a boy who has a company and, and I would ask him how it was going and you know, he wouldn't tell me because I hadn't signed an NDA and uh, and I wasn't allowed to either, by the way. That was, I thought that was the best part. And you know, sometimes he

would just walk out of the room. Excuse me, my CFO is calling. How awesome is that?

Debbie: That's great. I mean, I just have to say, when I came down to check out the school, I walked in and I just loved every student immediately. It was like, these are the cool, differently wired, awesome creative kids. It was just such a great, such a great vibe. So.

Jacqui: Thank you. You know, they're amazing. They, to me, they are the most interesting kids around. And why would we want to sort of flatten out their quirks? And, okay, some of the rough edges probably need a little smoothing here and there, but we don't want to get rid of the edge completely because they're the people who come up with, with all of the new ideas. You know, if you're a good doobie and you do school super, super well, then that's amazing. And you could still create and you can still do other things, but these kids can't go through school or have difficulty going through school the regular way. And so to be able to give them an environment where they can be safe and not looked down on for the things that gave them trouble in another environment and come up with, there was a class of fifth and sixth graders and we, once in awhile we'll take somebody who's in third or fourth grade if they can do more advanced work and if they can handle that kind of classroom emotionally.

So that's not very many kids. But we had a fourth grader and the teacher was talking about ancient Egypt and said, what do you guys think of multiple gods versus one god? And this little fourth grader sitting on top of the desk with no shoes on, said, um, shouldn't we talk about whether there's a god first? And you know, I just, they're the best kids. And you know, that's a tangent you have to go on, right? I mean, there is no way around that tangent. And that's fantastic. So they had a very interesting conversation.

And once I was in, uh, I was in New Haven and the kids and the teachers and I, we were all talking about what would happen in a zombie apocalypse. Would people's nature go back, go towards sharing with each other and combining into communities to help each other or would people sort of more base instincts of protection and, and hoarding and all of those things take over? And it became incredibly philosophical and it went right through lunch and you know, the entire high school student body was in on it and we let it go into the next class because that was an amazing conversation. So having the freedom to go to different places because that's where the kids want to go and they're learning at the same time is just really amazing. And fun for us too.

Debbie: Yes, yes. Oh, I'm sure. And it, and it is a freedom that, that most programs just don't have. And I think that is one of the things that makes Flexschool so unique. I'm curious to know, you know, some of the things that you shared as the things that help the school be successful, I'm wondering how this works with the teachers. It seems like it's a very unique teacher who can work with these students and allow for this flexibility, allow for kids to get up and walk out of the room and not feel like it's taking away from their authority or, um, I'm just wondering what that process is like in terms of finding educators?

Jacqui: It is hard because teachers have to look at teaching in a different way and there's differentiation in every classroom. All teachers sort of learn that along the way. Um, or the best ones do. But to have to be derailed frequently does take a special person. And I think we look for teachers who are safe to make a mistake in front of. Right. That's a very important thing, particularly for teachers who are gifted themselves, they have to have some empathy for someone who's struggling and not understanding something as easily as they may have. But they also have to think the kids are funny, because they're hilarious. And if someone doesn't think they're funny, then I think it would be really difficult to be in the classroom every day with the kids. And you know, it's difficult anyway for whatever reason, because it's challenging, and that's okay.

But the teachers are, are just a wonderful, wonderful, dedicated group of people who love the kids and want them to thrive just as much as, as anyone else does. You know, when you, when you see the Rube Goldberg machine growing across the the engineering room or you see the, the physics kids lying in the parking lot, measuring slope and velocity, I don't know what they were doing out there, but it takes a special teacher to be able to do all of those things. On the other hand, I think there are many, many special teachers in traditional schools who don't have the freedom to do that because they don't have the small classes that we do. Right? They may be thrilled to do exactly those things, but they can't because of time constraints, of the number of kids in the class, the number of kids they teach all day long.

So I do think it takes a special teacher, but I also think the best teachers in any environment have run into 2e kids and tried very hard to make it better for them. And in fact, you know, in sixth grade when, when my kid was falling apart, the teacher said, well, you know, either it's written better than anyone else's in the class or it doesn't get turned in. And the teacher was so great, she said to her, hey, why don't you tell me, I'll tell you what I need you to prove and you tell me how you're going to do it. And that's amazing. And you can't ask for more than that from a teacher. She was fantastic and she tried so hard with both of my kids. She was so lucky. She had both. And it didn't work, but it wasn't because of her.

And so that's where I think, you know, a lot of times there are stories from traditional schools where it doesn't work and the kids are not doing well. And sometimes it's because of inflexibility, but sometimes it's because it's not the right environment and the teachers there did everything they possibly could within the system that exists and it's just still hard. These are the, these are the tough ones. And TJ, who runs the school in Berkeley Heights, said on the first day he came to visit, he said, these are like all my favorite kids in one place. And I thought, well, that's a good sign.

Debbie: Yeah, exactly.

Jacqui: Yeah. So it is, it is hard. But I think, I think it'd be amazing if you could take an AP class and not have to do 100% of the work, if you can't. And that they don't ask you to drop back to an advanced or a college prep class. How incredible would

that be for our kids? And I know all the reasons why they don't, but it's not for the kids. It's for the scores for the school.

Debbie: Right. Yeah that ability to produce gets in so many of our kids' way. I mean, that writing, especially with the processing speed or executive functioning challenges can be so challenging and it's hard. I think a lot of people don't understand, you know, they're like, but you, you have great ideas. You know what you think, why can't you get it on paper? So it is a unique challenge for the, for this population.

Jacqui: It is, and writing, you know, trouble with writing is, is a huge part of a lot of the kids who are at FlexSchool. And the usual accommodation is to give them dragon speak or have them use, you know, the, the Google system, whatever, whatever they're using. And that does work for some kids, but it doesn't work for a lot of other kids. And to me, finding out how to help someone with writing means figuring out where they're getting stuck. And there are lots of different ways around those stuck points, but you have to know why. So for example, for the kid who has ADHD and is having a party in his head, you know, first of all it's more interesting than paying attention in class so that doesn't help. And then when he goes to write, it's not a writing problem, it's an executive functioning problem.

How in the world do you choose among all of those really cool ideas, but which one do you put down first? And so then dragonspeak doesn't work any more than writing does because the problem, it's an organizational one.

Debbie: Yeah, exactly.

Jacqui: Or, you know, the kids who get anxious, their brains go to white noise. They also can't use dragon speak because anxiety just shuts everything down. And so there are tricks, you know. So let's say you can't choose an idea, put 18 minutes on the clock and just write as quickly as you can, everything in your head, just dump it out and then see what you've got. You can also just start writing, you know, I hate this assignment. I'm mad at my parents. You know, Debbie and Jackie are talking about this. You're not supposed to give any clues to my parents, you know, whatever, whatever you need to say.

And once all of that is out of the way, then frequently the kids will start to write what they need to write. It'll be less formal than it needs to be and they'll have to edit. But that's usually easier. Not that they want to edit, that's a different issue. But there, there are so many different reasons why someone can't write. And the accommodations that usually come back, even in neuropsychs, you know, use a speech to text. And for the kids where it works, it's awesome. And for the kids where it doesn't work, it's just another accommodation that doesn't work and it feels really, really frustrating.

Debbie: Interesting. I may have to borrow one of those techniques in homeschool world here. Get everything out and just write and see how that goes. I want to talk about the structure of FlexSchool because it's, you know, you mentioned Bridges Academy and Quad Prep and there are a couple of other schools out there which are just kind of individual schools, but you have started a network of smaller

schools. And so can you talk about where the locations are and kind of why you chose to use that model?

Jacqui: You know, there's sort of the quick answer, which is that's the way it landed in my head. But I stuck with that because there are so many kids and they're not all clustered in one location. And so we have students traveling an hour and a half each way to go to school. And that is a lot. So having a network of schools, lets us go in to be a part of a community, we can use the resources in the community. Like there's a YMCA being built at the end of our street in Berkeley Heights, we're so excited. And there's a music school up the street and on Fridays the kids walk up to the music school for their classes, and we just hire them. So we don't have to have a gym if we stay small and we become part of a community.

We don't have to have a cafeteria if in New Haven the kids can walk out the door and go to the food trucks up by the, the ice rink. Or they can, you know, walk down to Yorkside pizza or wherever it is that they're going. So keeping it small lets us have much more agility in terms of where we can be, how we can keep costs down to make this even feasible. And you know, there's, there's someone in New Haven taking a French class in New Jersey, you know, that is a wonderful possibility. So that, you know, we don't have a French teacher in New Haven, but there's one in New Jersey. So that lets that student continue to take French. So there's a benefit to a network. There aren't very many heads who have run 2e schools. And so hiring heads is, is a challenge. And what we're trying to do is create a leadership team and they're, they're amazing.

Where all of them have an expertise in something that we need and all together they have everything and then they help each other. And it's so wonderful to watch and to see the ideas and we can try things and some things work, some things don't work. But having a network lets us try more things faster. So like there's a, you know, a teacher support program that, that was piloted up in New Haven this year. That's fantastic. It was easier to pilot it up there because there are fewer teachers there 'cause it's a, it's a newer school.

And so I think in the end the network model sort of will be a really important part of what we're trying to do. And for the kids who use cloud classroom to come into, you know, synchronous classes, they go online into live classes, we are making them a campus of their own so that they have a head and they have support, learning support, emotional support, et cetera. And they could become their own unit. Um, because there's no way to sort of scale the cloud classroom and existing classrooms because the dynamics in the class change once you get too many kids on, you know, on video. So there's so many things we're trying to figure out as we go and we have awesome kids and parents and teachers and leaders who are helping us figure it out. And we'll try something and say, oops, that didn't work, so we're not going to do that again.

Debbie: Yeah.

Jacqui: Wow. It is so much like parenting. Exactly.

Debbie: So what if people are listening to this and they're thinking, okay, how do I make this happen in my community? Is that a possibility? How would parents go about exploring bringing Flexschool to their area?

Jacqui: So there is a way to do it and there are a couple of groups trying to do this already. So if we can get 600,000 either in investment or in prepaid tuition, then we can open a school that sort of wasn't on our radar to open. Because we have, you know, budgetary projections going forward. So we know, okay we're going to start this school and this school this year. So if we're going to add another school we have to be able to get to break even without blowing the budget on everything else. And so, you know, Westchester was able to get a commitment from us sooner because they were able to put that together and now we can get to break even on that school without draining other resources. And we were going to open in Westchester anyway, but this allowed us to make the commitment sooner.

So that's, you know, we can't guarantee that if, if a group comes up with 600,000 that we'll open there immediately, but we will be able to talk to them, make sure it's a good move for us also, make sure there are enough kids in the area, and start planning to open it, which is really, really exciting. And I think it speaks to how much people care about their kids and how much they care about the other kids in their area to have some other option. And you know, I'm, I'm pretty humbled by how much support we've gotten and how much people have helped us grow and change and have pointed out things we weren't doing well enough. And it gave us the opportunity to change. That's an enormous gift that we've gotten from the whole 2e community.

Debbie: Wow. And I just want to say it's such a good community. I mean, everyone I've met who's working with this population, whether they're educators or therapists or neuropsychs or coaches, you know, there is such a love for these children and that is so inspiring to see. And it just makes me feel so hopeful about what's, what's possible in the direction we're moving for these kids. And for the 2e kids that are, that are to follow.

Jacqui: It makes me feel so hopeful too. And I'm, I'm so happy to be part of this community and I'm grateful to my kids for struggling. Because otherwise, I don't know that I would've started a school. You know, there are some days that are long and I think, wow, it really would've been a lot easier to find another school. But I, you know, this is what I want to do for the rest of my life. This is amazing and the kids are fantastic and I love seeing the kids come in not being able to do certain things and then to watch them grow into that over time and then to graduate and go to college and, and be able to have options that they wouldn't have had otherwise. That's just an amazing thing.

Debbie: It must be so gratifying. Well, uh, Jacqui, I want to thank you so much for sharing with us today and I'm just excited to, I mean, I've talked about FlexSchool in past episodes, but I'm happy to be able to formally introduce the Tilt community to FlexSchool. And can you just let listeners know where they can learn more?

Jacqui: Sure. So if people want to find out more, the website is Flexschool.net and yes, we know we have to redo the website. People are like, oh, it's slow. You don't have any everybody on there. It is so true. That is all true, I am sorry. Um, and there are, there's a way to, um, you can fill out an inquiry form and then we'll give you a call back depending on which part of the country you're in or you know, even if you're international, etc. We can give visas for international kids, which is really exciting because there is less awareness in other parts of the world of learning challenges in general and 2e kids specifically. And you know, in some parts of the world there's very little acknowledgement that learning challenges even exist. So I love that we can have kids come and do home stays with, you know, with other families. Some of the kids have lived with me. It's really, it's really great and it's good for the kids in the school, to have people speaking other languages and to, to learn. We had an a PG student last year from Ethiopia and he was great with the kids and so much fun to have around and the kids learned so much from him and his view of the world and how he grew up. So I love that part as well.

Debbie: That's so cool. Okay, so listeners, I will leave links on the show notes page for FlexSchool, flexschool.net and the other resources we talked about. But again, I just want to say thank you, Jacqui, for the work that you do in the world and for creating this school and for swinging by the show to talk to us about it today.

Jacqui: Thank you so much, Debbie, and I love your podcast and tell parents about it all the time. And you are also doing an enormous service for all of these 2e kids. So we're all banding together and, and helping, which is wonderful.

## RESOURCES MENTIONED:

- [Flex School](#)
- [Flex School on Facebook](#)
- [Dr. Devon MacEachron on Supporting 2e Learners](#) (podcast episode)
- [Bridges Academy](#)
- [Quad Prep](#)