



## **Navigating Student Support Services**

**A conversation with Dr. Becky Miller, dean of support services at Eagle Hill School.**

**Sue Cranford, director of enrollment**

Becky, it is so nice to have you here. I'm so looking forward to having this conversation with you.

**Dr. Becky Miller, dean of support services**

Thank you. I'm excited.

**Sue Cranford**

So, tell us, and I don't know if I've ever asked you this question, but tell us how you found Eagle Hill. How did you end up at Eagle Hill school?

**Dr. Miller**

I started as a teacher in the science department, so I taught biology.

I went right to graduate school after college. I went to UMass Amherst, and my degree is in public health. I focused on community health education policy and management. And I thought I would work for the government.

My practicum was in New York City, and I worked at two places in New York City. One was for a nonprofit cancer foundation, and another was for a homeless shelter that was for teenage mothers. I worked at this program with the toddlers of the teenage moms who were going back to school.

I did health education with the toddlers, which was fun and very hard.

**Sue Cranford**

Yeah, I can imagine.

**Dr. Miller**

And then after that, I came back to Massachusetts, and then I did my master's project on bioterrorism.

**Sue Cranford**

And was that at UMass as well?

**Dr. Miller**

At UMass, yes. It was 2004, and there was a lot of ...

**Sue Cranford**

...Bioterrorism.

**Dr. Miller**

Yeah.

**Sue Cranford**

Wow.

**Dr. Miller**

Then I was not really finding a lot of stuff. I didn't really want to leave Massachusetts. I didn't really want to work in Boston. I just didn't like it. I just needed to come back to the country.

So, I was looking in the newspaper. And I saw an ad for a science teacher, I applied, and Michael hired me to teach biology.

**Sue Cranford**

Wow.

Michael Riendeau is the dean of academics. He hired you because he saw really good things and you became a teacher. And how long did you teach?

**Dr. Miller**

I taught biology only for one year.

**Sue Cranford**

Okay.

**Dr. Miller**

Well, I was hired to teach health and biology. I think that particular sophomore class was large, so we had an extra section of biology that year.

The next class was smaller, so we didn't need that extra section. So. I just taught health, and I kind of revamped the health curriculum and changed it a little bit.

**Sue Cranford**

Did you have your PhD at that point?

**Dr. Miller**

No.

**Sue Cranford**

And so, while you were at Eagle Hill, is that when you pursued your degree in psychology?

**Dr. Miller**

Yes. Probably three years into teaching, I thought I needed to learn more things and that I felt like I knew a lot about health education, but I didn't know a lot about learning disabilities or ADHD or any of that stuff, and I wanted to learn more about that.

I went back to school at night, and I would take four classes a semester, and I got another master's in educational psychology, and then two years later I got an EdD (Doctor of Education).

**Sue Cranford**

That's cool because your degree really grew out of the work that you were doing here and your desire to kind of continue your knowledge, building your knowledge, understanding the students that we serve and that every school really serves.

**Dr. Miller**

Right.

It's all about community and what the community needs and creating goals and helping people reach their potential. My title now is dean of support services. When I started, I was the school psychologist, which is similar. I just have taken a few more things under my wing.

**Sue Cranford**

Right.

School psychologist would maybe be a little more narrow in the sense, but then the dean of support services includes the other supports that we offer at Eagle Hill, which we're going to talk about. And those are primarily the counseling services and the speech and language services that we offer right on campus, which from admission, families love. And I like that you were a teacher because I was a teacher as well, and I feel like that it definitely grounds you in the work within a school. And you don't just see yourself as a school psychologist. You understand the whole experience of the students, which I think is really cool.

So how many years in total have you been here?

**Dr. Miller**

This is my 20th year.

**Sue Cranford**

In your role now, tell us how you serve students.

**Dr. Miller**

I still am in the classroom. I teach psychology classes, which I think is important when you're an administrator, that you're still in the classroom and that you're still doing those things.

I think that's a skill that's hard to teach somebody, and you get a lot more information. You get a lot closer to the students when you can do those things. I teach usually one or two classes a term.

I also do ACT accommodations, SAT accommodations. I run those standardized tests and I make sure that the kids get the accommodations that they need.

A lot of our students have ADHD, so we apply for multiple day testing for them. I think a lot of times if you have fluency issues, I don't think that extra time is necessarily what you need. I think breaking things down into manageable chunks and taking a break is more along the lines of what you would need.

But usually for our kids, I will apply for extended time if it's appropriate multiple day testing. Sometimes they might have a scribe where they're not using the bubble sheet when they're answering in the book, and then the proctor will transfer to the bubble sheet because there's a lot of hidden things in those kinds of tests.

I've definitely had kids that have had visual tracking issues. And if they start filling out the bubble sheet and they're not tracking correctly, that's not assessing them correctly. We have a few kids that have that accommodation, and then we have a few kids that have a reader accommodation where they'll have a computer reading to them. The real human that has recorded the test, they follow along and that just aids comprehension, aids fluency.

**Sue Cranford**

And then the accommodations are coming out of the student's educational evaluation.

**Dr. Miller**

Right.

There has to be an educational need for them, even though extended time is great for everybody, or multiple day testing would be awesome for anyone taking this test. There has to be a diagnosed need. And also, there has to be a history of using that accommodation. If you really need something, you've been using it for a few years.

**Sue Cranford**

And that testing, does that testing always have to be done privately or could it be done through your public school?

**Dr. Miller**

Usually, public schools are your first option privately. Usually, they'll add additional things, and they'll go looking for things, I think more so than a public school might. I think a public school would really focus on what you're not able to do, confirm it, and then give accommodation for that. Which, I mean, I see both sides. It doesn't necessarily matter if you have a disability or a diagnosis if it's not impacting your schooling. And that's really what they're focused on. I think a private person is more focused on, looking at if there is a deviation between these tests.

**Sue Cranford**

You actually do administer these tests? Because I know students here and parents here have used you as a resource to say, look, could you investigate this further? If a student comes to Eagle Hill, say, from a public school and has public school testing, they might say to you, Dr. Miller, will you administer some additional tests for my child? Which you can do?

**Dr. Miller**

Yes. And they do a lot of achievement testing here. They might do the Wyatt or the Weschler individual achievement test or the Woodcock-Johnson or I just did the CTOPP with somebody because Dr. Kim in the English Department felt that the student had something there with the reading and we weren't really getting what it was from the file. We wanted to check phonological processing.

**Sue Cranford**

Okay, so let's shift to your work with students you teach. I know you teach some really interesting psychology classes, and I think for me, when I walk around, I always say that I think it's phenomenal that we have a psychology department here because you can actually create almost a little minor psychology, abnormal psychology, child development. I feel those are almost college level classes. I think they're challenging.

**Dr. Miller**

I have a particular student. He's a freshman now in college, and he texted me at the end of last semester, and he said, I was familiar with everything that was taught in my psych class.

**Sue Cranford**

All right, what about working with students? You're also an advisor, so you work directly with students, and then you also oversee the additional support services that we offer and that must be when your title changed.

**Dr. Miller**

I wanted to kind of strengthen up that part of our school. We contract with some speech and language pathologists, and we contract with some individual counselors. The difference is that the individual counselors have offices here, and they're not on faculty here. They're still independent, and they still

have the confidentiality with the student that they would if they had an office down the street. It's just that they are in our community. They understand our community. They understand what the resources are and maybe some options to...

**Sue Cranford**

They know the people who advocate.

**Dr. Miller**

Yes.

**Sue Cranford**

And they know the culture.

**Dr. Miller**

Yes. And oftentimes they might come up and they might ask the student, hey, do you think you should go talk to Mrs. so and so about this? I know that she's really good with this. Or would you mind if I talk to your academic advisor and give them a heads up?

**Sue Cranford**

Right. I think it's really a great system. And how many students roughly participate in counseling services, would you say?

**Dr. Miller**

I'd say probably about 40%.

**Sue Cranford**

And has that increased over your time here or stayed about the same?

**Dr. Miller**

It stayed about the same. I think a lot of the students who are in counseling. They are definitely benefiting from counseling. I think a lot of it is that this generation in particular, I think, is more accepting of talking about your feelings and talking about how you perceive things and willing to accept help to find their answers.

**Sue Cranford**

Do you think students that are at Eagle Hill, and maybe this is hard for you to answer, but do you think they're even more accepting and open?

**Dr. Miller**

Well, we know that kids who have ADHD or learning disability, there's a lot of comorbidities with anxiety, and I think with a reading disability, you probably haven't been diagnosed until 3rd, 4th grade.

**Sue Cranford**

Right.

**Dr. Miller**

But I'm sure that they were understanding that they weren't doing the same things as their friends or that they were spending a lot more time than their friends were trying to learn how to read. I think that that can take a toll on you. I think when you know or you have an inkling that things are easier for somebody else and they're not as easy for you, then something must be wrong with you. And I think that that can take a toll on a kid.

**Sue Cranford**

Right.

Because they also try to hide it. I mean, I think most kids want to blend in. They don't want to stand out.

**Dr. Miller**

They don't want to get pulled out of classes.

**Sue Cranford**

Exactly.

**Dr. Miller**

Everyone asks where they're going.

**Sue Cranford**

You're right. It starts so young. So now here we're still unpacking things that might have happened when they were younger. That's really interesting and just along those lines, because I think about this in admission with working with families and trying to explain to families what we do and the kinds of kids that we do really well with.

We typically say that if anxiety was the primary factor in a student's profile, then we might not be the right school. But we see so much anxiety. I wonder if you could comment on that at all.

**Dr. Miller**

When you use the term anxiety, I think a lot of times people use that word incorrectly, like, I'm so anxious, or I have a lot of anxiety around this test. And I think that if our kids have some of that anxiety, it's easy to talk about where it came from, manage it, if we can place it on something. If it's about taking a test, if it's about reading out loud in class, that's very specific and that's things that we can definitely work on.

I think things that we might see that would be very difficult would be school avoidance, refusing to get out of bed, leaving a class and hiding. Things like that would lead me to believe that anxiety was the

prominent diagnosis there. I think typical anxiety that we would see would be feeling overwhelmed with having to complete this lab report that, you know, is 50% of your grade or maybe being concerned about going to talk to a teacher and kind of needing a pep talk by your advisor first, that might happen more often.

**Sue Cranford**

So just to close out on anxiety, because I know in admission, not only here, but I speak to a lot of colleagues that work in a lot of different schools, and we all feel that we're seeing anxiety more in the reports. What are you seeing in teenagers or in parenting or what are you seeing from your perspective? That's the sort of state of things right now within teenagers and children and parents.

**Dr. Miller**

I think that we're seeing a lot of parents kind of wanting to fast track solving a problem. I find it difficult, too. And I have to step back and think about what I'm doing sometimes. It's so hard to watch your kids struggle when you know the answer. You could just say, we'll just do this, or I'll make this call, and this will just happen.

Sometimes they have to be uncomfortable, and they have to figure out what works and what doesn't work and what might work with one person, or how do you speak to another person. When this is the first time you've ever gone through something as a kid, you're not going to know exactly what to do. But I think it's so important just to let kids try things and be disappointed or fail, and then they can learn strategies or maybe learn that something else is better for them than what they tried.

**Sue Cranford**

That also might be one of the gifts of boarding school. Right? Because we support students so much here. We really have a wraparound support program. But I've seen so many students build incredible amounts of resilience, including my own daughter, because of being in a situation where she had to solve some things on her own. And I wasn't necessarily right there.

**Dr. Miller**

Sometimes I might have a kid come, an advisee or some other student that's just having a really terrible day, and they'll say, this is happening, and I'm having this problem with my friend group or this. And usually my first question is, okay, what do you want to do about it? And see if they can come up with a plan. I might guide their plan a little bit if it's a terrible idea, but usually I want to see—let's think about how we can problem solve this first without me making a phone call and making it go away.

**Sue Cranford**

That's really good I have to remember that. That's really good advice, Becky.

**Dr. Miller**

I like to hear the story first.



**Sue Cranford**

Could you just give an overview of what are the speech and language services? What kind of skills do speech therapists work on with kids?

**Dr. Miller**

Our speech therapists, we contract with a private company. But the really neat thing I think about them is that because they're private speech and language pathologists, they'll do things that public schools won't do. Usually, a public school is going to give speech and language services that directly impact something academic, like, I need help with my writing, or I need help with expressive language, and they might not do arctic speech therapy. Or somebody has a speech impediment.

They might not work on that if it's not affecting their schooling, where our people would. I think that they're really complementary specifically to school psychologists, but also teachers. I mean, they can help with organization of writing.

**Sue Cranford**

They can help with like, executive function skills.

**Dr. Miller**

They can do executive functioning skills. They can talk about social speech, and they might incorporate some pragmatic skills. I think that they take a lot of what kids might be getting from other people and reinforce it.

**Sue Cranford**

That's interesting, because in a narrow view, because my own kids never needed any speech services, I would only think of it as, oh, it helps you to say the words. Yes, but there is so much more to it that is really interesting. Okay, that's excellent. And percentage wise?

**Dr. Miller**

Probably 20%.

**Sue Cranford**

I know that we've covered a lot, and we probably could go on forever, but I always like to close by talking about a student that you remember that really stands out to you as a student that benefited tremendously from being at Eagle Hill.

**Dr. Miller**

One in particular was my advisee. He was another administrator's advisee, and then that administrator was in the Reserves, and he went abroad for a year. So, I took him on for a year but when that teacher came back, I gave him back. But we had a very close relationship.

When he came for his first summer, and he was just a little guy, and I remember he was just getting into trouble, kind of being mouthy and just being silly. And I was thinking, okay, this might work, and this might not work. And I remember him with another one of my advisees. He was a bigger guy. And then I had another advisee that was very small. I remember they would just argue, I mean, banter, not fighting or anything, and I'd say, oh, my goodness, I can't believe, like, these two and what are they doing?

But this guy ended up going to college. He ended up getting his master's abroad, and he works in Washington, DC right now. And I went to his wedding with Dr. Stone, who was his other advisor. I think the biggest thing that kind of sticks out to me is I still get Christmas cards from his parents, and I still send Christmas cards to his parents.

They've seen me have children and that my children are grown up. When I had my first son, I remember his mother sent me a big box of the students' favorite things, and she said, this is what my son liked when he was a baby. And it was. That's so nice, so great. It was really cute little books and, like, a little toy that my son had for a while.

I think that close relationship was definitely something that led to that student kind of realizing his potential. Right? He knew he was smart, and he also knew he had a lot of trouble in school. He had some baggage coming in, I think. And I think that he was able to focus on his strengths, and he's pretty strong in some areas, and he's doing a great job.

### **Sue Cranford**

Wow, that's an awesome story, it almost gives me the chills. It's just all about relationships, and he's basically part of your family, and you're obviously a part of his family and you don't get that everywhere. And you're right. That's what probably he's going to remember. It's not the quadratic equation or whatever, but he's going to remember the impact you had on him.

Thank you, Becky, so much. And I hope that if families come and visit, we'll seek you out. If they've listened, they can meet you.

### **Dr. Miller**

Awesome.