

Announcing IEW's Partnership with Hillsdale! Transcript of Episode 382

Julie Walker: Hello, and welcome to the *Arts of Language* podcast with Andrew Pudewa, founder of the Institute for Excellence in Writing or as many like to say, "IEW." My name is Julie Walker, and I'm honored to serve Andrew and IEW as the Chief Marketing Officer. Our goal is to equip teachers and teaching parents with methods and materials which will aid them in training students to become confident and competent communicators and thinkers.

So Andrew, how good are you at keeping secrets?

Andrew Pudewa: It depends on the secret and the people.

Julie Walker: Well, I know for a fact that you have been keeping a secret along with me for almost a year now.

Andrew Pudewa: And today's the day.

Julie Walker: Today is the day that we get to tell the world of our exciting partnership that we have with Hillsdale College, specifically their K-12 program.

Andrew Pudewa: Yes.

Julie Walker: So we have a guest on our podcast to help us share this news.

This is Dr. Kathleen O'Toole, who is a part of the Hillsdale K-12 program. So Dr. O'Toole, welcome to our podcast.

Dr. O'Toole: Hey, thanks for having me. Great to be talking to you guys.

Julie Walker: So can we just start off by finding out, let our listeners know—What is your role in working with Hillsdale College?

Dr. O'Toole: So I am the person at Hillsdale College who is in charge of the education of the little people and the high school students. I'm the assistant provost for K-12 Education at the college, and what that means is Hillsdale Academy, our private school here on campus, falls under my purview as do all of the charter and private schools across the country that we have helped launch and which we train and guide.

Andrew Pudewa: It's a big job. I'm sure you were born, but you were a very young person when I first came to Hillsdale, because I believe it was 22-23 years ago. And Hillsdale Academy was pretty new. I think Scot Hicks was the head at the time. And I came out and did a couple days of teacher training, some demonstration classes, and I observed in the classes, and it was one of the very few times in my life when I seriously thought I should move here just so my children can go to this school. I was so inspired by that experience. Of course, that was in the earliest time, the

nascent days of Hillsdale Academy. And then last year I had a chance to come back, and we had some meetings with your K-12 team.

And again, I thought, man, if I had kids, I should move here to put my...Of course there's, I'm sure, a very long waiting list, but there's something just so remarkable and special about the school, about the college, about the whole town of Hillsdale. It's almost like there's a protective bubble around it, and the evils of the world just don't come into my mind and heart while I'm there.

So you must love it, your job. How did you come into this position?

Dr. O'Toole: I started one of the Hillsdale charter schools in 2014. It was the third one, I believe, and it was in Austin, Texas. And I was hired to be the first employee of that school, and I learned what it's like to get a charter school started from the ground up and help all of these families understand classical education and hire all of the teachers and shepherd them along in teaching the Hillsdale curriculum.

And so I did that for five years and then came up here to oversee all of it, and it was a good transition I think because I had benefited from everything that Hillsdale provided for so long that it gave me a good idea of where we ought to go as an office.

Andrew Pudewa: Yeah. One of the things I love about the Hillsdale K-12 curriculum is the name you use, kind of as a tagline, an American classical education. Is that right?

Dr. O'Toole: That is right.

Andrew Pudewa: And I meet a lot of people who are not terribly thrilled with spending huge amounts of time studying Ancient Greece and Ancient Rome and ancient "this."

And I know a little bit about the curriculum map because you've shared it with us and the emphasis on our own country and all of the kind of blending of the ancient and Colonial revolutionary founding ideas. It's just so beautiful and brilliant to me. It seems like the very thing we most need in this country right now.

How did that kind of come into being? How did you define the K-12 plan as American and classical?

Dr. O'Toole: Well, I think it starts with a recognition that we're human beings, which means we're meant to live together. We can't reach our fulfillment through solitary life alone. Aristotle says, man is a political animal, and what he means by that is we're made to live in community with each other. And a corollary of that is that the happiness of us as individuals rests in some part on the goodness of the community or the regime in which we are living.

And so that means we are Americans, you know, we are classically educated individuals too. We are mothers and fathers and teachers. We are citizens of a particular state, but we're Americans.

And that means something. And in order to understand ourselves, we need to understand something about this country in which we have grown up and in which we now live.

The good thing about being an American is when you—you know, you should study your country no matter where you're from—but the good thing about being an American is our country is pretty relatively easy to study because it's new-ish as far as countries go, and it's the product of the founding of America.

It was a thoughtful founding. It wasn't just an accident. It wasn't just a random occurrence; it was a decision on the part of a few educated people who wrote down what they were thinking and why they structured, why they thought the New Nation should be structured in the way that it was.

And so the American founding lends itself to study in a way that other foundings do not because they're so ancient or because they were not the product of reflection and choice as the Federalist paper says. So we do it for those reasons. We think we need to, and we think that the founding suits itself to study.

Andrew Pudewa: That is beautiful. I love it. And that was, I think, part of the vision of the original Hillsdale Academy back when I first visited twenty-some years ago. And then over the years, the curriculum map, the plan has been kind of refined, and I would almost say perfected, although we don't want to ever say we're too perfect because there's always room for development.

How—just kind of a real broad brush—how did that happen? How did you or your predecessors in this kind of choose what to put in, what to not put in? Because if you do one thing, you can't do something else. And. It's not like you're the first people to ever do a school.

So, there must have been some guiding principles.

Dr. O'Toole: Yeah, that's right. That's right. So the college has a long history of helping schools outside of the college. That's one of the initial founding principles of Hillsdale Academy. It was to serve as a model for America, and its curriculum was printed and distributed for free to many schools that wanted guidance.

And so to this day, there are some schools that were built on the original Hillsdale Academy model. After twenty years of Hillsdale Academy doing that, we started providing curriculum for charter schools, and also helping local groups of people start their own charter schools and do everything that's required for that, which is a lot more than getting the curriculum right.

And so the college is a place where K through 12 curriculum—what you study and how you should study—has always been on our minds. Our approach is, what we try to do is marry the very best of the classical education world with the regular education world. And what I mean by that is the classical education world, I think, is very strong on what a student ought to learn.

You've got to have a solid foundation in literature, history, mathematics, science, the fine arts, physical education, Latin. And our curriculum is broad across all of the liberal arts and sciences and the fine arts and PE.

We think that the K through 12 years are not a time for specialization. They are a time for learning about the world, learning about yourself, and then when you become who you're going to become, which happens, I guess throughout your life, but really starts happening as you're graduating from high school, as you're going to college, or whatever you're doing after high school, then you've got a lot a deep well to draw from.

You've got a lot of different things that you've learned. You've started to figure out what you're good at, and you haven't been pigeonholed into a particular course of study before you're really ready to choose. So it's a well-rounded curriculum.

Andrew Pudewa: I love it.

Dr. O'Toole: History is a focus of it, but it's not exclusively a curriculum in American history.

It's very deep in world history. It's very deep in pre-American history, which after all is the vast majority of history. If you look at a timeline of all of history that we know, we're a small blip on all of that, and we think that an important part of your history education should be getting a sense of that things have not always been the way that they're now, which may mean that the way things are now may not persist.

And so it's an excellent education, a content-heavy education as they say. We also think that the curriculum is only one piece of getting the education right. The best books do not teach themselves even though they are the best books. And so a lot of our work with teachers is on how to teach, and we think that that is essential.

We think that teachers should be given a lot of practical nuts and bolts advice about how to make this curriculum happen with students in the classroom.

Andrew Pudewa: That's excellent. I don't know if you heard it, but this came across my screen last week. Evidently Bill Gates made a statement that within a few years, AI would replace teachers in schools. And I don't know, whenever I hear something like that, it just gives me a complete creep feeling like I just shudder with horror.

But in a way that kind of statement does have the effect of kind of bringing into focus why we would never want that. And so hopefully, we will see the reaction to that is more and more people wanting something that's good and true and beautiful and grounded in history and a curriculum that teaches children that there is such a thing as facts and truth because so many are growing up today to just not believe anything at all, and it's so frustrating.

Um, I do want to ask you, because I don't actually know this very well, to kind of outline the history of how the Barney Foundation became involved with the Hillsdale K-12 initiative because I think that is so interesting.

Dr. O'Toole: Yeah, well we had this long history of, of outreach through Hillsdale Academy and in the 90s, Charter schools were becoming kind of a big deal and a sort of source of hope. When I was growing up, there weren't any charter schools, and we didn't really talk about classical education but except out in a few homeschooling groups. You know that better than any of us, Andrew, and some private schools.

But there were these classical charters getting started in Colorado, and I remember hearing about them when I was in high school. That development got us at the college thinking maybe there's a way to help average American kids because although private education can be a beautiful thing, it's admission only and it's got to be restrictive. Wouldn't it be great if we could help improve American public education? And so that's how we got thinking about the Barney Charter School Initiative. There's a man named Steve Barney. He was a trustee of the college, and he gave the leading gift to establish the office. And since that first act of generosity, we've been rolling, and we help local groups start charter schools.

And now private schools too. And all of our work is funded by friends of the college. Just like Mr. Barney. We don't accept any money from the schools that we work with.

Andrew Pudewa: Wow.

Julie Walker: So how many schools do you have right now and where are they?

Andrew Pudewa: How can people find them if they want to? We have one opening in Tulsa this fall. In fact, I drive by the building that they are building frequently thinking, boy, they better speed up that building if they're gonna get kids in there by August.

Dr. O'Toole: They are on track, and that is gonna be a great school. The schools are all over the place. We're working with over a hundred now. And many of them are what we call member schools. Those are schools where we do the teacher training. They use the curriculum, we train their boards, we train their principals, and we're kind of on the road visiting those schools all the time, helping teach teachers, and sometimes doing information nights for parents at the school if they've got questions about the curriculum.

So there are 23 of those schools right now, and three, like Tulsa, are starting this fall. So we'll be up to 26.

Julie Walker: Nice.

Dr. O'Toole: And then we've got curriculum schools that are using this curriculum and kind of moving in the direction of the Hillsdale model. And we provide resources for those schools too. And those schools are also popping up all over the place and some, some existing schools are becoming curriculum schools. Maybe there's some part of their scope and sequence that they're not happy with. Maybe they're looking for better vertical alignment or horizontal alignment. And so they'll apply, and if they're a classical school who's interested in this mission, we give them a free license to use the scope and sequence and some other things that we have for schools.

Andrew Pudewa: That's awesome. Last year I came out for part of a very extended teacher training week or weeks, I guess, that you do at Hillsdale, and I have to say, I've been to many teacher events in my life. This was the one that was most like a big party where everybody was so happy and excited and really enthusiastic.

And the content I thought was really unique in that some of the sessions that I was able to sit in were really just kind of about the personal enrichment and intellectual growth of the teacher and not just about “here's pedagogy, methodology, and curriculum.” And I found that just so refreshing.

Dr. O'Toole: Yeah. Thank you. That captures the spirit of the summer conference beautifully. It's two weeks in June. And over the course of those two weeks, we have several hundred teachers, last year it was 800, come to Hillsdale for sessions on – and they're teachers from our member schools—and they're coming to learn from each other on the nuts and bolts of doing this curriculum with a particular grade or within a particular subject, and then the professors at the college teach in these sessions. And you're exactly right. You know, teachers need good nuts and bolts advice, but if they're teaching ancient Rome or human biology, it's great for them to hear from a history prof or a science prof to deepen their own knowledge.

Andrew Pudewa: I sat in on a session, I don't remember the name of the professor, but he was so good, and the whole thing was on Beatrix Potter and looking at the pictures and contemplating them and the nature of the text and the beauty of it. I came away thinking I need to buy the complete Beatrix Potter and start reading it to my grandchildren immediately. I was converted. It was a great session.

Well, we'd better be sure to address the question of how you determined that we should work together.

Julie Walker: And what are we doing

Andrew Pudewa: And what are we doing that we wouldn't want to run out of time without talking about that.

Dr. O'Toole: Well, I have really admired you for a long time, Andrew, and I first learned about you and your work because, when I was starting my school, I had all of these homeschool moms apply for teaching positions. And it wasn't too long before they said, “Oh, have you heard of Andrew?” And so I learned that you are a celebrity among the classical homeschooling mom world. And that got my ears perked up and soon learned about IEW. And we were using IEW in our Hillsdale school, but we had this problem. We had all of this content, and then the writing that we were doing through Structure and Style was on different content.

So when you had the idea of working together, on bringing the Hillsdale content into the structure and style framework, I was all ears.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, I was tremendously excited because since the very, very beginning of when I started doing this 27-8 years ago—oh, I'm feeling old— I would always say, in the teacher

training for the parents, that writing should not be a separate thing. It should be a part of learning about, in a deeper way, the things you're reading and talking about in history and science and literature and whatnot.

And it's very hard to know what everybody's doing. And as the demographic of homeschool mom and school teacher changed from being kind of innovative, designing their own lessons, figuring out what and how they wanted to do it, over the 20 years, I'm sure you've noticed this too, it's more like, well, "just tell me what to do." And so we were kind of forced into creating a curriculum with pre-designed content, what we thought would be interesting or appealing and trying to hit the sweet spot of reluctant writer, 11 year old boys. But I always thought, if there was some way to connect with a school—and I even suggested I could come and meet with your faculty and I could help you lay out source text that would go with your history and everything over the course of the years—but that's a lot of work for one school.

I was just jumping out of my skin when we reached this idea: well, you've got all these schools that have the same curriculum map, and we could create source texts that would fit right in there and reinforce the content while giving really clear assistance to the teachers for the teaching of the composition, the structure and style. So, I think after our first conversation, I must have just ran up and down the hallways kind of screaming, "Guess what! Guess what! Guess what!"

Julie Walker: Well, and that's true. And he came home from that conference sharing the news with me so that I could share in turn with our team that helps us create this curriculum. And you know, my eyes were wide open, like absolutely we can do this. Oh my goodness, this is a lot of work for the next few years.

But we are so excited to be able to announce that we are now selling to Hillsdale Member Schools and Curriculum Schools, a brand new book. It's not a theme-based book necessarily—though it kind of falls into that model—because there's not one theme. It's not history-based writing lessons. It's not science-based. In fact, we call it *Adventures* around here, and that's what we're doing. We have created lessons for your third grade teachers on the Nile River, the Roman hoplite, tornadoes. We go into Unit 3 and do the theft of Thor's hammer, and these all align with your curriculum.

So when your third graders are studying the Norse mythology, they've got a writing lesson based on it. And we spent a lot of time working with your team to be sure that it would align correctly, that the content, the facts were lining up. And so here we go. Grade three done.

Andrew Pudewa: This is grade three, and we are going to do a total of six, correct?

Julie Walker: Right, unless they want more, and then we'll do more too, but...

Andrew Pudewa: The other thing that excites me tremendously about this project is the co-branding. So, not just IEW, but we get to put the Hillsdale logo on it because I just think the world would be a better place if there were more and more schools like yours, and to the degree that we can show people, "Hey, this is what they're doing in part. Go get the whole enchilada for yourself." I'm just so excited. I am by nature a melancholic person. My basic attitude is things

are really bad, and they're just gonna get worse, and so I'm just constantly in need of things that give me hope for the future.

I will tell you, I don't know if I mentioned this to you or not, but I went to do some professional development for Founders Academy in Las Vegas. Originally I didn't want to go. It's a charter school; it's Las Vegas. Who wants to go there? I mean, I don't, but as soon as I walked in the building, it almost converted me on the spot. The artwork on the walls was magnificent. The richness of the environment, the order and beauty, the cheerfulness of the students. And then of course, I got to work with these teachers, all of whom were just unbelievably attentive and enthusiastic and immediately engaged in asking good questions. I thought, I'm having a hard time believing this is a publicly funded institution, especially since one of the pictures on the wall was the Tower of Babel. I thought, how do they get away with this?

But it was great art. It was great art. And I just came out of there, not quite thinking I should move a family to Las Vegas, but I did think, oh, I wanna see a thousand places like this because it is the antidote to ignorance. It's the antidote to kind of the hopelessness that's so easy to creep in in the world of modern public education today.

Dr. O'Toole: Yeah, these schools are beautiful places. It's inspiring from the minute you walk in, and the more time you spend there, the more you learn. You know, even as an educated adult, this curriculum is really rich. One of the beautiful things about this partnership, Andrew, is it's a recognition of something about the nature of writing and the nature of learning.

So by writing about the history, the science, the literature that you are studying, you are studying those things more deeply. It's like having a conversation after learning something. It cements it in your mind and causes you to rearrange it and think about it more deeply so that you understand it and remember it, but it's also helpful for writing, I think, to be writing about something. Writing is in some ways a technical skill, but if you've got something meaty and interesting and rich to work with while you're practicing that skill, you'll become better at the skill.

Andrew Pudewa: I sometimes use the analogy of eating—like everybody eats, but what you eat makes a huge difference. So yeah, everybody does writing in schools, at least up till this point, but what you're writing has a tremendous effect. I'm sure you're familiar with the Francis Bacon quote. “Reading makes a full man. Speaking makes a ready man. Writing makes an exact man.” I think what I see in my visits to Hillsdale Academy and a couple other of the K-12 affiliated schools is you're doing exactly that. You're not giving up on challenging, enriching, nutritious reading.

And, oh, the conversations— when I visited last time, I think I was in an 11th grade literature class, and they were reading and talking about “The Green Knight,” I think, but I was just astounded at the high, high level of engagement and meaningful, focused conversation that was happening. It was very much kind of a Socratic style class. It was a master teacher. She's one of the best I've ever seen in my life. Don't remember her name, but I'll never forget being in that room and I thought, okay, if this can be reproduced, that conversational quality of kind of sparring and iron sharpens iron and, and the guidance of the mentor teacher. And then of course,

the crystallization of thought in writing. And I know Jordan Peterson has talked about this a lot too, so, well, there's so much more that I would like to talk about.

I think it'd be really interesting if you were willing to come back someday and kind of give us an outline, a history of how you did start a charter school. Because I believe there are more parents who are feeling perhaps called to put some energy behind the transformation of public-funded education in their city, in their area, in the world. And that's a, that's a bigger story we would have to undertake at some time.

Julie, do you have any last questions?

Julie Walker: Well, not questions, thoughts, and then we'll just kind of wrap up with this. I will say this, Dr. O'Toole, that when I kind of, in passing, mentioned to my sister that we had this partnership with Hillsdale College, she about came out of her skin. She is so excited about this and you know, she kind of knows what I do, but not really. But she knows Hillsdale and she is just super happy that these two organizations have been able to partner together.

This book *Adventures* is available to anyone who wants to purchase it. This is not just for Hillsdale Academy schools across the United States, but homeschoolers, private schools. This is something that we can make available. It's about a third grade reading level, so that's what we're looking for, but it's not anything that has to be limited to someone as young as third grade. Certainly the topics are of interest to any student of any age. So we're just really happy to make this available, and next year we plan to release two more books with the goal of ultimately having a total of six books for Hillsdale Academy Schools, and anybody else that wants to pick one up, they are welcome to do so.

Andrew Pudewa: We are bundling with many schools, professional development or online development, online support?

Julie Walker: Yes, we're working with some people at Hillsdale Academy, the support that Dr. O'Toole is talking about, to be sure that they're trained to be able to go out and train their teachers. This is a five-day-a-week charter school program primarily that we're working with in Hillsdale.

And you know, Andrew, you just can't go out and teach all these teachers, so we have to kind of spread the net a little bit.

Andrew Pudewa: and we can support schools with webinars and consultations and all sorts of things. And I have enjoyed every single visit I have made to Hillsdale. I have been personally enriched every time, and I'm hoping that this recent time won't be the last because I think it's... it's not like a mine. It's a garden. It's like a paradise garden and there's always more nutrition to, to take and to treasure from the garden that is Hillsdale and Hillsdale Academy and your team and all the professors and everything there.

Julie Walker: Thank you, Dr. O'Toole.

Dr. O'Toole: It's been such a pleasure. I'm really excited about the future.

Julie Walker: Thanks so much for joining us. If you enjoyed this episode and want to hear more, please subscribe to our podcast in iTunes, Google Podcasts, Stitcher, or Spotify. Or just visit us each week at IEW.com/podcast. Here you can also find show notes and relevant links from today's broadcast. One last thing: would you mind going to iTunes to rate and review our podcast? This really helps other smart, caring listeners like you find us. Thanks so much.