



## The Think Inclusive Podcast

### Season 8, Episode 9

#### Wyatt Oroke | Having High Expectations for All Students

##### Wyatt Oroke (00:00):

It really frustrates me when teachers say, "Well, they're an eighth grader, but they're reading on a fourth grade level, so we should be teaching them fourth grade skills. And then my question is, "Well, when are they going to learn fifth, sixth, seventh, and eighth grade skills then?" Right. That's a question of equity. How do we use the 75,600, you know, minutes we're getting with our scholars every single year?

##### Tim Villegas (00:26):

Hello and welcome to season eight, episode nine of the Think Inclusive podcast presented by MCIE. I am your host, Tim Villegas. This podcast features conversations and commentary with thought leaders on inclusive education and community advocacy. Think Inclusive exists to build bridges between parents, educators, and disability rights advocates to promote inclusion for all students. That's right, y'all. All means all. To find out more about who we are and what we do go to [thinkinclusive.us](https://thinkinclusive.us), the official blog of MCIE, and check us out on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter.

##### Tim Villegas (01:09):

Today on the podcast, we talk with Maryland's 2020 teacher of the year, Wyatt Oroke, about what it means to have an inclusive classroom. We discuss his perspective on how having high expectations for all his scholars is essential and what his dream for the future of education is. But before we get into Mr. Wyatt Oroke's interview, did you know that almost 70% of our audience listens to us on Apple podcasts? Which means that you, yes, you have the opportunity to help people find our podcasts by submitting a review right on your phone. When you launch the Apple podcast app on your iPhone, tap the search icon on the bottom right and search for Think Inclusive, and then tap the album art. Scroll down the podcast page to ratings and reviews, and then tap on the writer review link. Give us five stars and your fabulous thoughts and hit send. Another way to help us out is to go to [patreon.com/thinkinclusivepodcast](https://patreon.com/thinkinclusivepodcast) to become a patron. Your contribution helps us with the cost of audio production, transcription, and promotion of the Think Inclusive podcast. And when you become a patron, you get access to unedited interviews, Q and A's, and behind the scenes content. Thank you for helping us equip more people to promote and sustain inclusive education. After the break, our interview with Wyatt Oroke.

##### Tim Villegas (02:56):

Inclusive education is hard work, and for schools and districts that want to be more inclusive but don't know where to start, it can seem impossible. MCIE can help. We've been partnering with educational systems across the United States and the world for three decades and know how to build systemic inclusive school practices, transform educational services, increase the rate of placement of learners

with disabilities in general education, reduce removals and suspensions, and improve outcomes for all students across all school settings. To schedule a free initial consultation and find out how we can help contact us at [mcie@mcie.org](mailto:mcie@mcie.org) or visit our website [mcie.org](http://mcie.org).

**Tim Villegas (04:12):**

Okay. So today on the Think Inclusive podcast, we'd like to welcome Mr. Wyatt Oroke, who is a nationally recognized educator for his work around social justice and literacy. Mr. Oroke was named the 2020 Baltimore city teacher of the year and the 2021 Maryland teacher of the year. He currently teaches seventh and eighth grade English and honors English at City Springs elementary middle school in Baltimore city. And he has received recognition for his teaching, including awards from Johns Hopkins, university of Baltimore school of law, the Maryland state Senate, the Baltimore Orioles, and was awarded the superhero award by Ellen DeGeneres, where he appeared twice on her show. Wow.

**Wyatt Oroke (04:57):**

I know, crazy, right.

**Tim Villegas (04:58):**

And if you can believe that I edited that bio down, folks.

**Wyatt Oroke (05:04):**

You're too kind.

**Tim Villegas (05:06):**

Well Mr. Oroke, Wyatt can I call you Wyatt? Is that okay?

**Wyatt Oroke (05:13):**

Yes please.

**Tim Villegas (05:13):**

All right. Wyatt, thank you so much for being here. You know, we, so Think Inclusive, if you're not aware, is a part of MCIE which is the Maryland Coalition for Inclusive Education. And so you know, we put it out to our staff and we said, "Hey, who should we get on the podcast?" And they're like, "You gotta get Mr. Oroke on." So that's why you're here. And we really appreciate that. So why don't you just get us started by letting us know what inspired you to become an educator?

**Wyatt Oroke (05:46):**

Yeah, thanks so much for having me today, excited to be here. So my education journey started in elementary school when I knew I wanted to be a teacher. In fourth grade, I was a really struggling reader. I couldn't spell, couldn't read well. Words looked like Picasso paintings to me. And I had a teacher that thought the best way to help me improve was to make fun of me every day. So she would call me up in front of the class and had me try and spell words she knew I couldn't spell so that all 25 of my classmates would laugh at me because she thought it was a motivation issue. Right. She thought I just wasn't working hard enough. And after about 10 weeks of going home crying every day, my mom finally figured out what was going on. And, you know, when I went up to the school, the teacher told my

mom and me in the main office that it didn't matter because I was never going to be more than a C student. So she didn't really have to put in any more energy or effort to me.

**Wyatt Oroke (06:34):**

I never stepped foot in that school again, I actually got moved back a grade back to third grade and transferred schools. And my first day there, Ms. Kirtley gave me a big hug when I got to the door. And she said, "I've been waiting for you. I'm so happy you're here." And at that moment I was made to feel whole again, as a human being. And so as a third grader, I said, wow, teachers really changed the way we can view ourselves. And so that led me to want to be a teacher ever since then.

**Tim Villegas (06:58):**

Wow. Wow. That's fantastic. So as you were talking, I was thinking like this is teacher appreciation week, right. And and so this podcast will not be published this week, but I'm just curious, you know, how do you feel about appreciation week? Do you feel like it's something that actually makes you feel appreciated or is it just one other thing that kind of happens in an educational calendar?

**Wyatt Oroke (07:30):**

I mean, I'll be candid. It seems like one of the thing that happens, but I'm not necessarily someone that's driven by that appreciation. My scholars show appreciation every day by the work they do and the respect they put in to our learning space. And so that's really what gives me the motivation I need to go forward. Don't get me wrong, a \$25 Amazon gift card is great once a year, you know, a nice pat on the back. And I appreciate those, but it's really the scholars and their work that keeps me motivated every day.

**Tim Villegas (07:58):**

So about your scholars, you use that word intentionally. I feel it. Why do you use scholars instead of learners or students?

**Wyatt Oroke (08:07):**

For me, it's a level of respect. Like, what do you expect of this young person to do? And I believe that's in the language that you use to engage them with. So using the word scholar, both out in public spaces and internally in our classroom environment, allows them to elevate to that level. And I believe perform at a higher level. It also takes away, I think, external questions that people get like, are they really in there working hard? You know, what are they all about? And I think scholar just sets the tone. Like they're in there to work hard every single day. They give us their very best every single day. And we should respect that.

**Tim Villegas (08:39):**

So how do you feel like the scholars respond to that designation? Do they, do they care?

**Wyatt Oroke (08:48):**

You know, it's funny. I've used it in all of my teaching, so I've never known another format, but I could also say in all of my teaching that, you know, hundreds and hundreds of scholars that I've worked with, they've all risen to amazing expectations. So like within our classroom space, they have all excelled incredibly every single one of them I've ever taught. So I've never seen someone struggle in that space. I

guess it's hard to say what it would be if I used a different terminology, but for me and our kids it's been working well.

**Tim Villegas (09:18):**

So let's talk a little bit about the high expectations that you talked about. So how has that made a difference? Or, and, you know, maybe, like you said, with the, you, you use scholars, you've used scholars the whole time, so, you know, maybe there is, you haven't seen a difference, but with having high expectations and you saying that your scholars have risen to them you know, how has the level of expectation helped your students achieve to that level?

**Wyatt Oroke (09:58):**

Right. I think for me, it's a question of equity. Now, when we think that maybe there are some learning gaps that our scholars might have to me that says, well, they can still access grade level work if we're doing the job we're supposed to. And it really frustrates me when teachers say, "well, they're an eighth grader, but they're reading on a fourth grade level, so we should be teaching them fourth grade skill." And then my question is, "well, when are they going to learn fifth, sixth, seventh, and eighth grade skills the?" Right. That's a question of equity. How do we use the 75,600, you know, minutes we're getting with our scholars every single year? And so within my classroom space, over the past few years, I developed an honors level curriculum that gives them honors credit approved by our district that gives our scholars additional points when they enter into this high school application process.

**Wyatt Oroke (10:41):**

And that's made tremendous growth on the schools that they're able to go to. They're able to demonstrate growth on skills that are a grade level above where they're at and perform exceedingly on whether it's a state assessment we're looking at, whether it's internal assessments we use. And it was just by giving them this additional higher grade level of performing tasks. They rose to the expectation. They rose to the level. We were exploring "Just Mercy" by Bryan Stevenson and having these incredible conversations about the criminal justice system. Then turning around and meeting with the city council about what restorative practices look like. And that happens in a school that candidly has had the highest poverty rate by the Abell Foundation for the past several, several years. Many of our scholars come to us not performing well on state assessments. And so people see them as maybe underperforming. And I say, I think we just haven't, you know, given the bar that they deserve to reach.

**Tim Villegas (11:39):**

So our listeners aren't all in Maryland. So could you explain how the system works? Cause you talked about points with people, with your scholars applying to high schools. So is it not just a feeder pattern and kids just go to high school or do they actually have to apply to the high school that they want to go to?

**Wyatt Oroke (12:05):**

Yes. That's a great question. A lot of the country, it's, you know, your neighborhood high school, that is not how it works in Baltimore city. Our young people have to apply during their eighth grade year, just like you would for college. You have to apply to at least five different schools and sometimes scholars apply to more and you get accepted into one. Now some of those schools have what's called a composite score. That's made up of your grades from seventh grade, your grades from eighth grade, your performance on state standardized tests sometimes your attendance rate is included in there for

schools. And that determines where you go. And it's crazy to think that like how you did when you were 12 could determine where you're at when you're 18 or 19. That shows an incredible incredibly inequitable system in my mind. And so if that is the system, though, then my job is how can I create space for my scholars to excel in this system so that they one day can come back and disrupt and break down the system? So what space am I creating for our scholars in that sense?

**Tim Villegas (13:03):**

Wow, that seems, that is unfathomable. Wow.

**Wyatt Oroke (13:10):**

I would think like, where would I, where would 12, 13-year-old Mr. O be at? Like I struggled, right. I was a struggling, I couldn't read in middle school and yet I have a master's degree from Hopkins. Like that doesn't make sense. And so if my whole life was determined by my struggling reading in seventh grade, it's clearly not an equitable system for our young people. Wow.

**Tim Villegas (13:32):**

So tell me, what have you done and what advice can you give to educators who, you know, they want to do something for their kids. You know, they're teaching day in, day out, but they want to do something else. They want to advocate for their kids in schools and maybe in their district and their state, like, what are some ways educators can do that?

**Wyatt Oroke (13:56):**

I think the first step is listening. That's what I did. Right. It's what is, what are your young people passionate about? And that should dictate the moves that you make. A lot of what I like to do as a white educator, as I say, I sharpen my privilege elbows and I create space for them. Right. And so, yes, they're not the ones who call, you know, Lieutenant Governor Rutherford and had them come to the school. But when he got to the school, I didn't do any talking. Right. They were able to speak to him. It wasn't them who were able to call Mayor Brandon Scott in, but by doing so, they were able to advocate for themselves for the things they need. So I think the first step is listening.

**Wyatt Oroke (14:31):**

The second step. When you think about what your classroom sounds like, it's, who's doing the heavy lifting and who's doing the talking. Um my first year of teaching, I brought a stopwatch after I realized my classroom was teacher centered. And I started timing myself every time I was speaking or leading the conversation. And what I quickly realized is I had a teacher centered classroom, right? The majority of the time was just me. I then implemented a 90/10 rule, which means 90% of the time in my classroom, it is young people leading, discussing, collaborating, exploring, 10% is me taking the lead on instruction. And that's allowed the scholars to really elevate the topics and interests that they have and thus advocate for the things that they want to advocate for.

**Tim Villegas (15:14):**

That's really interesting. Did you let the scholars in on that?

**Wyatt Oroke (15:20):**

The stopwatch thing?

**Tim Villegas (15:24):**

The 90/10 ratio?

**Wyatt Oroke (15:26):**

Uh no. It's not something that I really speak candidly about with them, but they see it. Right. They see it in how they experience the classroom. And there's a reason that our classroom space is seen as so sacred every year is because they know it's their space. If you walk into my classroom, you'll see college degrees that all the young people want to get some day hanging from the ceiling, you'll see pictures of them scattered around the entire classroom. And so it really becomes their sacred space that I try and help facilitate. And so I think while they don't necessarily know the 90/10 rule they see it in action every day.

**Tim Villegas (16:02):**

Oh, that's, that's interesting. I like that. If you're listening and you're an educator, you need to bring a stopwatch and see how much time you're talking.

**Wyatt Oroke (16:13):**

It's lifechanging. It was one day after school, I was looking over this kid's work. And I was like, "he didn't do anything all class. Why didn't he do anything?" Right. I was ready to mark the big old F at the top of this paper. And then I redid the whole lesson. And I was like, wow. If I was a student in my class, I would hate this. And it really made me rethink what lessons look like.

**Tim Villegas (16:31):**

Yeah. Yeah. So as a struggling reader in school, does that often inform you how you are planning lessons?

**Wyatt Oroke (16:48):**

A hundred percent. I mean, it's crazy that I was a struggling reader and now I teach English. That is just like for that one teacher who doubted me, this is like the biggest get back ever. But I think it does inform, it informs, especially when I review scholar work, it's like really trying to identify the strengths they have. I think a lot of education is focusing on areas of growth, right? The conversation right now is all around learning loss. How toxic and negative is just that term in general? Like what about the accomplishments they made? And so what I try and do as an educator is identify those strengths and better leverage them in the classroom. That's what I had in my experience and why I was able to find success later on in school is because teachers said, "You know, he's not a great reader, but God, he's great at discussion. And maybe if I just give him the audio book that's going to help, or if I throw in some more pictures, that's going to help. It's going to make him feel more comfortable and confident. And it did. And so I see those same practices now working with my young people.

**Tim Villegas (17:45):**

So let's talk about your classroom and creating a culture of acceptance and inclusion. So something that is really important to us as Think Inclusive and MCIE is, you know, the belief that neighborhood schools and schools really create a foundation for inclusive communities. So, you know, what in your view are markers of an inclusive classroom?

**Wyatt Oroke (18:15):**

For me, the biggest thing that I've worked on creating is, is thinking about the curriculum. What are we actually teaching our young people? Because I believe how we spend our time shows a lot about what we want to elevate and respect. And so over the course of my eight years working in Baltimore city, I've been able to write my own curriculum. Which I know many teachers are not afforded, but I was given that opportunity based on the school I worked in. And by creating a curriculum that our scholars see themselves in and feel like their voice is centered in, it's allowed them to be more respectful just of one another, elevate themselves, and in doing so elevate their communities. We also try and partner with different community partnerships every single quarter that allows them to see themselves within community work. Whether that's someone local, like Under Armor we've partnered with the Jewish museum we've partnered with, the Reginald Lewis museum we've partnered with. So these local institutions we partner with and thus we're spreading this idea of the classroom is not just within these four walls, but how do I actually break this down so there's work being done outside. In doing so I think we're seeing our young people really rise to leadership roles within our community. And I'll be really excited to see where these scholars go in the next four or 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10 years.

**Tim Villegas (19:32):**

That's, that's powerful to bring in the community like that so that you know, that it mirrors what's going on in the classroom and in the community. What would be when you look to the future of where education is going or in the, you know, this is also, it can be like hopes and dreams too. Where do you want to see education in the future? Where are we going? What, what, what are the big ideals that we should be striving for?

**Wyatt Oroke (20:02):**

So I'm of the mindset blow it up and start again. I believe our education system is inherently racist. I'll just be very candid about that and it is intentionally working to hold scholars of color back. And so when I think about that, I really can't find a way to be, I guess, an ally in this work, but more of a co-conspirator. We're willing to dismantle and be disruptive. And so in my mind it is really rethinking how are we spending our time? Right? Is that, is that actually how we designate these seven-hour school days beneficial to all scholars? If not, how can we restructure them? What do learning experiences look like? I think a lot of curriculum maintains a teacher centered focus. So what are we doing there? What are our professional learning experiences look like for teachers? So how are we actually training and preparing them for work going forward?

**Wyatt Oroke (20:52):**

And, and I think we've always teetered on this idea of like, are schools really going to be this foundational hub in our community. Like, are we actually going to do that? Or you're just kind of say, yea maybe some have a food bank, and yeah maybe some you can get legal services that, and yeah, maybe some of afterschool activities. I think there needs to be a point of reckoning where we say, yes, our schools are going to be the hub of communities. They're going to support communities and be a central location where families and the community can come for ongoing support and ongoing learning. So I think our future needs to be not just community school focused but even broader than our current understanding of community schools really centralizing the work in school building.

**Tim Villegas (21:34):**

You know, you talk about blow it up, right? Yeah. So how can we, like, how can we rebuild that, you know, and keep in mind that it's not just about one particular group?

**Wyatt Oroke (21:50):**

That we were having that conversation just a couple of weeks ago within my school community, because we were looking over the curriculum that our scholars who have special needs and identify within a self-contained classroom, what are they receiving? And what we discovered so much, a point I raised earlier was like, oh, they're leaving us with only really fifth grade skills that they've ever been introduced to. Not even like master, like they're not exploring grade level content. And that's like the most racist thing you can do for young people. And so the work is how do you take grade level content that allows them to meet high expectations and adequately differentiate it down so our scholars have access points to it? I think we really, really, really, really, really underestimate our young people. I think teachers do, I think the system does, I think outsiders do. Like we just underestimate their abilities and in doing so we lower expectations for them.

**Wyatt Oroke (22:47):**

And so I think a critical piece is thinking about what curriculum are they being exposed to and is that truly meeting their needs? Like when we create these individual learning plans for each of our scholars with disabilities, is it actually something that's setting them up for success? Or are we lowering expectations for them because we think that's what they deserve? So that's, there definitely is a clear connection to it and it takes a lot of internal reflection. There was a nicely heated debate in my own school community about what does this look like? Cause we use performance-based grouping. And so if you're in fourth grade, but reading at a third grade level, you're in a third grade group, but if you're reading at a fifth grade level, you're in a fifth grade program, right? Like how does that actually impact what our young people experience in school?

**Wyatt Oroke (23:31):**

So yeah, definitely definitely blow that system up and restructure and rework it. And that's when we think about also preparedness for the next step, right? That was a big conversation we were having is for our scholars when they enter sixth grade, that doesn't happen, right? When you enter sixth grade, you get grade level content. And so if you've never been exposed to fifth grade level content and you're joining sixth grade, you're at a disadvantage right from the jump. There's nothing you can do to change that. And when we think about eighth graders going on to high school, if you've never been exposed to content in sixth, seventh, or eighth grade, we're setting you up for failure. And that's just so, I mean, we can do it though. Like I, the way you just explained it is something that every single school across this entire country can do, right. It's like, do we have the willingness to? Right. That's the big question I always have. Is are we actually willing to put our scholars first? Or not.

**Tim Villegas (24:28):**

That is something that we think about every day, all day. Right. Is how do we, how do we create the sense of urgency for our schools to change? So, you got the answer, Mr. Oroke?

**Wyatt Oroke (24:48):**

I don't, you know, but there were two people in my, when I started out teaching, there were two people who really spoke to me on that level. One was a young person. She stood in front of a room of 700 brand new teachers to Baltimore city, giving a speech, nervous as I don't know what. And she just ended



with this line of, "Am I worth it?" That was like her closing sentence to these people. Like when you're tired, just ask like, am I worth it? And that just put it all in perspective, right? Like as I'm tired at 2:00 AM creating this lesson plan, it's like, yeah, but it's going to be worth it for the 13-year-olds tomorrow. And there was another principal I worked with early on in my career who just reminded me everyday. She's like "the lives of children are on the line today." Like, do you realize their lives are on the line?

**Wyatt Oroke (25:34):**

And when I thought about my own experience, I was like, oh my God. Yes. Like me as a fourth grader who was being ridiculed every day, like my learning experience and what I thought of myself was literally on the line daily. And my teacher then chose to not honor it. So am I respecting the fact that their lives are also on the line every single day? And I also think it made me reflect on if my goal is just to make sure they're ready by June, then I'm failing kids. Right. My goal is what do they look like five June's from now, 10 June's from now, 20 June's from now. And if my mindset isn't there, then I'm failing my young people every day I show up.

**Tim Villegas (26:10):**

You're making me want to be a teacher again, Mr. Oroke.

**Wyatt Oroke (26:16):**

Come on. Hey, I got a couple of things at my school. Come on.

**Tim Villegas (26:21):**

No, no, no. That's okay. 16 years.

**Wyatt Oroke (26:24):**

Oh you put in the work.

**Tim Villegas (26:30):**

That's great. I'm I'm just so pleased to speak with a passionate educator and you know, someone who clearly sees the connection and is making those, you know, making those connections and stuff like that. Well I just want to thank Mr. Wyatt Oroke for being on the Think Inclusive podcast. This is a fascinating and fun conversation. Wyatt will you let us know how people can find out more about you and if you're on the socials or anything?

**Wyatt Oroke (26:59):**

Sure. So I am on the socials kind of. I'm on Instagram [@wyattoroke](https://www.instagram.com/wyattoroke). I'm on Twitter, but I don't tweet. So you can hunt me down on those. And then typically if you DM me, I can give you my email address too, that way. And I'm always down to connect with folks, talk to folks, educators, non-educators, whoever. I can have this conversation all day long. So yeah, definitely reach out.

**Tim Villegas (27:21):**

All right. Well thanks for being on the podcast.

**Wyatt Oroke (27:32):**

Thank you for having me.

**Tim Villegas (27:32):**

That will do it for this episode of the Thinking Inclusive podcast. Subscribe to the Think Inclusive podcast via Apple podcasts, the Anchor app, Spotify, or wherever you listen to podcasts. Have a question or comment? Email us at [podcast@thinkinclusive.us](mailto:podcast@thinkinclusive.us). We love to know that you're listening. Thank you to patrons Pamela P, Veronica E, Kathleen T, Mark C, Sarah C, and Kathy B for their continued support of the podcast. And just for our patrons, Wyatt and I talk about TV shows and books that have recently inspired us. If you want to check it out, make sure you become a patron today at [patreon.com/thinkinclusivepodcast](https://patreon.com/thinkinclusivepodcast) to get access to that unedited interview.

**Tim Villegas (28:24):**

This podcast is a production of MCIE, where we envision a society where neighborhoods schools welcome all learners and create the foundation for inclusive communities. Learn more at [mcie.org](https://mcie.org). We will be back next month with two podcasts again. We are on a roll. Our guests will be Sarah Wishart, the creative director of Each Other and documentary filmmaker. We're going to talk about her film "Excluded," a young people led film about school inclusion in the UK. Also, co-teaching expert, Marilyn Friend, tells us how much you really should be using that one-teach one-assist model. Look out for a brand new Think Inclusive website, launching sometime in July. We are feverously preparing it for you as we record this episode. Thanks for your time and attention. Until next time. Remember inclusion always works.

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