

S1.E6 - Working Well Together!

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SPEAKERS

Angela Khater, Mike Esseily, Beth Santer

Beth Santer 00:10

Beth, welcome to the Wayne RESA Round Table podcast, a space dedicated to sharing valuable resources and insights with our educators and families. I'm Beth Santer, one of the Wayne Resa facilitators who will be joining you for this conversation. We're excited to have two wonderful guests with us who bring both personal and professional perspectives on collaboration and special education. Joining us is Angela Khater, a parent who has been a strong advocate for her child, and the current president for the Wayne County Parent Advisory Council or PAC. Alongside her, we have Mike Essiely, the Executive Director of Special Populations for Dearborn Public Schools. Mike leads the efforts to ensure that students with diverse needs are supported and empowered to thrive. Together, they'll share insights about how parents and school leaders can work hand in hand, even when those challenges arise, to keep students at the center of every conversation, welcome Angela and Mike.

Angela Khater 01:06

Thank you.

Mike Esseily 01:07

Thank you for having us.

Beth Santer 01:10

So, let's get right to this, because parents and director relationships are so important, especially, and they are in Jenna, but they also are in special ed, just because there can be so many individualized differences and it can be so complex. So Mike, why don't we start with you? What does a strong partnership between parents and a special education director look like, and why is it so important for students?

Mike Esseily 01:36

Well, first of all, thanks Beth for hosting this incredibly important podcast. You know, the magnitude of our job is collaboration. If you really think about special education, you think about IDEA, if you just think about compliance, at a bare minimum, you're pushed to collaborate no matter what the situation may be. And I'm telling you this, through my career, there's been a lot of ups and downs, but something that I've learned, even though I've always had it kind of in the back of my mind as a very important pillar to who I am, is to ensure that you listen. You know, whenever you're in a meeting, sometimes for a special education student and you know, sometimes our more intense meetings where we actually have the special education director there, you can have anywhere between seven and 12 people at this meeting. First and foremost, that's probably very intimidating for the parent. But the second thing, too,

that I want to kind of expound on is those seven to 12 people all have a very unique perspective. The perspective of one doesn't trump the perspective of others. It's just that what it is, it's a perspective. So the reality is, I think the key piece is always to listen to people, understand their perspective. We kind of, we talk about Covey Seven Habits of Highly Effective People. And one of the most important ones is seek first to understand before being understood. And I think if you're able to do that, and as simple as it sounds, it really takes you a long way. And ultimately, of the seven to 12 people I'm talking about, they all have the common goal. You know, how are we going to help the students succeed the best, the fastest, the most efficient? How are we going to maximize outcomes? And what a great starting place, right? We know that it's all going to be about maximizing outcomes. Now, how do we get everybody to work super, super hard and collaborative to ensure we're maximizing those outcomes, and that's honestly been the recipe that we've adopted in Dearborn since I've become director in 2017.

Beth Santer 03:28

So Angela, I would love to know your thoughts on Mike's answer, but also I wanted to pick up on something he said. He talked about that sometimes when a director is walking into a meeting, there can be seven to 12 people, and I've experienced that myself, and how does that feel as a parent? And any other thoughts you have on what Mike said?

Angela Khater 03:47

It's it feels really intimidating as a parent, you're walking into an IEP meeting or a meeting for your child, and you feel like it's you against them, and that's initial feeling you...you have walking into that room, but, you know, I think it's important, Mike touched on a lot, but it's really important to respect each other's roles. You know, parents come in with high emotions. They know what's best for their child, but really respecting the Special Ed Director's expertise and knowledge and knowing that they're there to support your child and provide them with the resources that will help you know, let your child succeed. But you know, walking into one of these meetings is really intimidating. I'll never forget my first IEP meeting.

Beth Santer 04:38

Yeah, yeah. So along with that, why don't we go to you for the next question, so parents and educators sometimes see situations differently. So, how can those perspectives be honored and brought together to support the child?

Angela Khater 04:52

I think, through communication. You know, Mike can't read my mind when emotions were high initially, during that first IEP meeting, I don't think we'll ever forget that meeting. I came in with a very strong advocate and just, I think I was at a 10 that day, but, you know, all he saw was this angry parent coming in and demanding all of these things. Where, thinking back, if I just communicated with him, maybe I should have called him before that meeting and said, "Hey, these are my concerns", rather than, you know, just coming in with this, probably the strongest advocate in the state, right and just ready to go to war. But thinking back, I think I probably should have communicated with him and just to let him know, these are my concerns. This is what I'd like to see for my child, not coming in to fight the district. I'm here to work with you and communicate with you so we can make this work for my child.

Beth Santer 06:02

So that's a really good example. And one of my questions was, what are the strategies that you use? So that example of calling the director, emailing the director with those concerns ahead of time is definitely salient to this. Mike, do you have any thoughts on that?

Mike Esseily 06:18

You know, I'm just gonna say that...you know, as directors, we're people too, right? And perhaps, you know, back in 2018 when our meeting was initially held, actually, I think it was, yeah, it was the spring of 2018 it was, I think, my first year as a director. And when you're trying to learn how to navigate all these multi layers of different things, you forget what sometimes, I don't want to say, you forget, but what really matters and what's really, really important. So it was also growth for me as a person, too and as a leader that you know, I wasn't only the leader of the 600 special education staff members in the district. I was really a leader of a community, a community that really, really depended and counted on you to keep our most honestly vulnerable and special students... No pun intended, special students, safe and maximizing their potential. And just that perspective alone has helped me greatly in my career. I don't believe, and I know Beth, you're a former special education director, I don't believe that anyone who wants to become a special education director thinks it's a nine to five or seven to four job. It's not, it's a, it's almost a commitment. It's a, it's a, it's an extreme commitment. You're committing to, I, my opinion, you know, your most important vulnerable population, and you're trying to make their life better. And the clock doesn't stop there, right? It doesn't stop at four o'clock, and the work and the passion doesn't either. And really, when I started to understand, I guess, the enormity of the responsibility that I had, I think it really shifted mindsets a little bit too from, hey, compliance is great, but compliance doesn't move people. Compliance doesn't move students. Compliance, we know, is there to protect kids, sure, but I had one of my mentors who really taught me a couple things. It was, one, compliance is a very low bar. And two, don't ever go in with boxing gloves. And I know Angela kind of referred that a little bit. And honestly, if you just really look at some of those things, I think the more you do and the more you understand people, you'll get there. And the reality is, when you start building these relationships and building that trust, that piece of trust, parents, community, will be more attuned to listen to you. And I think that's such a critical piece, too. And of course, the most important thing, it's bigger than us. It's bigger than an individual, right? It's not about 'you' ever. It's about the community you serve, the kids that you serve, and that's honestly how we do things every day in Dearborn. And honestly, it's contagious, you know, you see it now all over the place. You know, we have amazing supervisors coordinators, who kind of believe the same way, and it trickles down to our staff and everything else. We have a saying in Dearborn, it's whatever it takes. Now, obviously within reason, right? We always kind of have to have that asterisk, but whatever it takes means we're going to do whatever possible we can in our control and in our power to ensure a student is successful. Too many people are counting us not to be that way.

Beth Santer 09:19

Yeah, you said you talked about trust. And I do think trust is something that is really important in any relationship, and definitely when you have a director and a parent that is supporting her child with special needs. So I'd love to hear a little bit more. We can go to you, Angela, and then Mike, you can add on, what are the most important aspects in terms of building that trust? So Angela from a parent's perspective, how...how do you build that trust in your director?

Angela Khater 09:57

Like I mentioned, communication is key with building that trust with the director and letting him know the concerns and hearing him out are huge. But you know also, I think parents need to open up their eyes to see what the director is actually doing. I'm just going to give a small example. It was my son's first year in school, and he had heard he loved Santa Claus. I mean, this is something so small. I don't know if you remember this, but you know, Mike came in dressed as Santa Claus, and

Beth Santer 10:36

wow...

Angela Khater 10:37

that I think that was the moment when I knew, gosh, he really cares. And he's...he's really going above and beyond. Because, I mean, and I'll never forget the phone calls I received that he was just my son. Was over the moon with this, with the director coming in dressed up as Santa Claus. And I know he knew who you were. He knew it was Mike. But you know, it's the little things like that, that parents need to really open up their eyes to see that they're not this evil monster. Look and see what they're doing. Pay attention to these small little things, and you can build that trust with your director, even though initially it doesn't feel that way. But, you know that's... that's what I started doing. I'll never forget that

Mike Esseily 11:21

I wasn't a very good Santa Claus.

Angela Khater 11:23

No, you was, my child knows

Mike Esseily 11:24

We did okay. We did okay

Beth Santer 11:25

I was gonna ask you if you have a picture of it

Mike Esseily 11:29

Yeah, actually, what we did. And, you know, one of the nice things about that, one of the nice things about that is, you know, that little moment, they'll transcend it into what we have now, a special education PTA in Dearborn, right? It's very probably one of the only ones, I think, in Wayne County, if not in a lot of Southeast Michigan. But now what we're doing is we're working together, and we're hosting, we're co hosting or co-sponsoring great events like this last Halloween, we had a nice little pumpkin patch where a lot of our families brought in, you know, their students to a local community park. And Angela, I got to give her props too. She was the perfect pumpkin.

Angela Khater 12:04

I dressed up as a pumpkin

Mike Esseily 12:06

She was getting a lot of attention. And now, we actually took, we took the Santa Claus idea one level above. And now we actually have a really, a really Santa Claus, a really good Santa Claus with frosty, who's Angela

Angela Khater 12:18

Yep, I'm frosty.

Mike Esseily 12:19

And we get to but we get to take pictures our kids get to take pictures with Santa Claus

Angela Khater 12:23

It's a fun event

Mike Esseily 12:24

...and I'll tell you that experience alone means the world to parents. You know, how many conversations do I have with families to where, hey, I don't go do this in public, because sometimes they don't understand my child or whatever, which breaks my heart, right? And we're obviously going to continue

to push inclusivity with anything we do within the community or wherever it is. But the reality is, if we can make you, know, your life a little bit easier, but just by that small gesture, which is actually a blast, it's probably one of my favorite days of the year, right? I think it goes a long way. And just to talk about, like contagious, our entire community now in Dearborn, I can tell you, I'm so proud. I'm so proud of the leadership and everything else. We're heading into a direction to where, you know, our special needs community is becoming relevant with different events I know, like for homecoming, although we're going to work on some things a little bit there, but like, they have special sensory hours, different, obviously, different partnerships within the community, and this is what it's about. And small, you know, gestures of advocacy, whether they're not, they're seen just small and very individual seven, eight years ago, they transcend into these movements that become even bigger than us. And that's why I always tell parents this, I don't care who takes it personal. You advocate now, obviously you always want to be respectful, right? There's no reason to take shots personally at anybody but advocate. Advocate for your child, and let's continue to work together to, obviously, maximize potential. You know, you guys have in Wayne County RESA, something that you guys taught us in Dearborn was the wraparound process, right? We've implemented it, and we've done it in Dearborn. And really what the wraparound process is, is bringing all stakeholders to one table. Now I know there's complexities with it, but like, it's parents, it's private therapy providers, it's the school district, and it's all working on a plan that's very similar, that will again maximize potential. And those are the biggest success stories that we honestly have. It truly takes a village, and when you get that village on board, there are no ceilings for our kids. They're gonna break through them. I really believe that.

Beth Santer 14:26

Those are great examples. So let's keep on this theme of trust, and how does active listening and empathy play a role in building trust and diffusing tensions? And either one of you can take that.

Mike Esseily 14:38

So I often say we lead with empathy, not sympathy, and we have to lead with empathy. And the reason why I say that is because we're going to understand your story. We're going to understand where you came from, but we're not going to lower expectations. Okay, we're going to keep our expectations very high. There are going to be some hard days because of that, but that's okay, because we're not.. we're looking at not only short term games but long term, where do you see your child? Or where do we want to see your child? I do believe that. You know any...any special education, whether it's administrator, teacher, whatever it is, ancillary staff, member, paraprofessional, whatever your role is, you better have a whole ton of empathy, because if you don't, you're probably in the in the wrong profession. You have to understand where people come from. And it works for parent and I think Angela gave you some examples to where, hey, we can be empathetic towards staff members as well, right? I think sometimes this world, a little bit of empathy is all it really, really needs. So honestly, what I think is solve a lot of people's problems, and that's where I continue to say it's bigger than us. It's bigger than any individual. And as long as you have that in the back of their mind, I think you'll do fine.

Angela Khater 15:46

And you know, Mike, I'll never forget that...remember, we were in a meeting one day, and I came on really strong. And I'll never forget Mike calling me after and putting things in perspective to me, and asked me to be a little more empathetic towards the teacher. And I knew at that point that, gosh, I really hurt her feelings, and I felt terrible about it, but, you know, at that moment, I don't even remember what the situation was, but you know, emotions were high, and he recognized that, you know that's not the person Angela is as you were getting to know me more. But you know that phone call meant the world to me because he brought it to my attention to make me aware of," hey, you're coming on strong to a teacher that's actually trying to help your child. She's not working against him. She's working with him." So...

Beth Santer 16:43

And, you were open hearing it,

Angela Khater 16:44

Yeah, I was open. I'm actually very thankful for that. So yeah...

Beth Santer 16:47

That's a great story. So I know earlier we talked about you.. referred to an IEP meeting, or a meeting that you had attended. So let's dig into that a little bit more, because every year, yeah, students with special needs have at least one IEP. Sometimes they have more. And there's decisions that are made at those IEPs, and let's talk about shared decision making. So what does shared decision making look like in practice at those IEP meetings or other planning sessions?

Angela Khater 17:21

Gosh, those IEP meetings, I always get a lump in my throat..never, you know

Mike Esseily 17:26

It's a lot of it is, I'll be honest with you, it's listening on both ends. It's, you know, everyone has a role, right? We may be professional experts, but nobody's the kid expert like the mom. So you better take that into consideration when they're telling you things. And I can tell you this, there are more times and maybe not sometimes when the parents said, "Okay, Mike, we'll do this. But I'm telling you, they may not respond appropriately". And you know, sometimes we learn the hard way. I think I've grown a lot to where we're going to be more proactive with things right now. But you know, there's, there's that thing with moms and dads, they know their child really, really well. And I always say with special education, we have the best profile of any single child and the entire world, really. I mean, you know, they're cognitive, you know, they're adaptive. You know everything about them. Now, on top of it, you know how they are as individuals with the parents. Why aren't we taking this data and really utilizing it? Right? It's not about what's easy. It's about what's right.

Beth Santer 18:27

Yeah, Angela, you have anything to add?

Angela Khater 18:29

No, I just wanted to say in IEP meetings, I think the hardest thing for a parent to hear, you know, after they've conducted all of their testing, you know, the weaknesses, your child's weaknesses. And, you know, that's, that's a part that's the hardest thing for me to hear in a meeting. And I think I've come on strong several times, like I don't want to hear the weaknesses. I don't care what you're you know, I've said it, where what your...your testing, has found. This is my child. Let me tell you about my child and what's going to work with him. But I think you know, in the past, they listened, you know, just I'm gonna keep coming back to this communication piece that you need to communicate with your school staff, the directors, the coordinators, otherwise they're not going to be able to read your mind.

Beth Santer 19:24

So at those IEPs, giving that space so everybody has a voice at that table.

Mike Esseily 19:31

And positive intent, right? Always assume positive intent.

Angela Khater 19:32

Uh hm

Mike Esseily 19:35

And I think sometimes we're our own worst enemy when we think someone is saying something, just because it's about us, personally or whatever. No, just, let's just assume positive intent, and let's listen, right?

Beth Santer 19:46

So both of you are a great example of how whether you have bumps in the road or conflict, you can work through them. So what advice would you give to parents and administrators who are struggling to find that common ground?

Angela Khater 19:59

Mm. Yeah, you know I say, I say, get involved your...with your child's school, be open with your special ed director, communicate with your teacher, your coordinator. I think that was very helpful. And my, I mean, with me, please

Mike Esseily 20:19

Absolutely. Develop those relationships and remember the why. Remember the "why". You know, what is the why here, right? And it's okay to disagree on how to get somewhere most of the time. Like I said, your goals are the same. You want to maximize potential for a child. Just have honest, open conversations to say, this is why. I think this is the best way we get there. You know, like, very hot thing that I'm sure a lot of directors is, you know, you have parents who just want an individual para all the time. Well, great. Okay, listen to them. Why do you think this is necessary? Okay? Then tell them, Okay, we can do 1,2,3, without really an individual aid. And by the way, you know, our goal is always to make our children as independent, as successful as possible. So sometimes those can hinder some things. Just have those honest conversations. Because I think what happens sometimes, too, is parents do a little research, because they want to advocate for their child, and they come in with that and they say, Hey, this is what I really think my child specifically needs, which is fine, take that into consideration, but then have those conversations and figure out the real reason why you think this support is necessary or not necessary sometimes, and kind of go from there.

Beth Santer 21:28

So let's, let's stay with you, Mike, because you guys have mentioned and moving in some proactive strategies. But let's talk about systems. And directors are really good at creating systems. So how can schools and families proactively create systems or routines that prevent conflict and encourage that ongoing collaboration?

Mike Esseily 21:53

Okay. Well, obviously, you know, what we do a lot of is we do a lot of parent meetings, right? We want to make parents..we want parents to come in. You know, they're not as well attended as I would like, obviously, but we want to provide the information. Another thing too is everybody has social media, you know, do information campaigns out there just to inform, you know, people. But what we regularly do is we have different different aspects come train our staff, different perspectives. Like one time, we had an advocate come in and speak to our staff about what's going through the mind of parents. And, you know, those things alone really develop a little bit of empathy. So people say, Oh, okay, that's why this parent was raising these concerns, or that's why they felt, you know, the way that they did. I really do think it's a lot of it is messaging. I mean, for us, we try to make things as simple as possible to our coordinators are very, very involved. So if parents need somebody to go to, they know who to go to. We also have a district liaison just for special education, who helps support some of those things as well.

Beth Santer 22:52

Angela, you have anything to add?

Angela Khater 22:54

No, I mean he...

Beth Santer 22:56

He covered it?

Angela Khater 22:57

He covered it beautifully.

Beth Santer 22:58

I love that. Well, we've come to the end of our podcast, and I have to tell you, I appreciate both of you for your commitment to students and to kids, for Angela, for the commitment you have to your child, but also the commitment you have for advocating for all kids through PAC and Mike, your commitment to serving your community, and specifically for that advocating for special needs students, that's fantastic. Both of you provided very helpful strategies that I think are going to help our parents and directors moving forward, working together collaboratively. So, I and the RESA community want to thank Angela and Mike for sharing all of their thoughts and insights and for being with us today. Thanks to all our listeners. We hope you join us again for the Wayne RESA Round Table podcast. Thanks so much.

Angela Khater 23:49

Thank you.

Mike Esseily 23:50

Thank You.