

The Wayne RESA Roundtable Podcast S2.E1: 3 Teachers, 1 Mission: Helping Your Child Thrive

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SPEAKERS

Speaker 2, Speaker 1, Beth Santer, Speaker 3

Beth Santer

Welcome to the Wayne Risa roundtable podcast, a space dedicated to sharing valuable resources and insights with our educators and families. I'm Beth Santer, one of the Wayne Risa facilitators who will be joining you for this conversation. Today, we have a very special episode featuring three incredible special education teachers. We have Regan Cowger, who is an elementary resource room at Ammerman in Norfolk Public Schools. Mimi Higgins, a secondary resource room teacher at Holmes Middle School and Livonia public schools. And Jason HESH, who's an SCI teacher at how in Dearborn public schools. Welcome to all of you. Thank you. Before we get into the questions, I have to tell you, I have been anxiously anticipating this podcast because it's really personal to me, besides the fact that I've been in education for over 30 years, I also come from a family of educators, and so the opportunity to lift teachers and educators, and specifically special educators, is is very meaningful to me, and I'm just so happy that all three of you agreed to join me today. So with that, let's dive in. So this one will be for each of you once you briefly introduce yourselves a little bit more than what I said in terms of how long you've been in special ed. Give your why. What's your why that you got into special education. Why don't we start with Mimi? Thanks.

Speaker 1

My name is Mimi Higgins, and this is my 31st year teaching in special education. I started at Beacon in 1993 and then I worked at River Rouge in the middle school, the high school and the alternative ed program. I worked in the Washtenaw County Juvenile detention for four years in the summer, and then the rest of my years have all been in Livonia.

Beth Santer

That's great. And what's the why? Why'd you get into special ed?

Speaker 1

The why for me, has always been that when I look at the special ed kids, I think that they are the overlooked population, and they have this enormous value that sometimes can feel like it's untapped. And so I have this excitement about being able to show not only my students but their families and the rest of the world and the communities just how great their worth and their value really is.

Beth Santer

That's terrific. Thank you. How about you, Jason? Tell us a little bit about yourself and what's your why?

Speaker 2

My name is Jason Hush. I'm an SCI teacher at Howe school in Dearborn public schools. I've been a teacher for 13 years, mostly in Wayne County, except for the two years I was at a charter school in Warren. This is my 11th year at Dearborn and my seventh year in a self contained classroom with an SCI population. I've pretty much in Dearborn, been a part of every position, any kind of position, like resource teacher, self contained teacher, in the CO taught classes or they act a teen rooms and the why? Why did I go into special education? I just believe in helping the underdog. I always root for the underdog. And I feel like our student population, they need people that believe in them and want to help them and root for them, and I'm that person. I think it stems from my mother being a nurse, always wanting to help people who just kind of trickle down into my my pedagogy as a teacher,

Beth Santer

that's great. That's great. And you know, they always say in special ed, we use acronyms. So for those of our listeners who don't know what SCI means, it means it's a classroom for kids that have severe cognitive impairments. And these three guests are intentional in that they each represent a different piece of special ed. So we have Regan left.

Speaker 3

My name is Regan calger. I work at Ammerman Elementary in Northville public schools. This is my 19th year teaching, my 19th year there, which is good for me, because I don't like change. I think my why is, well, I always knew I wanted to be a teacher, ever since first grade. Mrs. Mason, she was an amazing teacher. And during that year, there was a boy at our school that came, I believe he came mid year, and he had some something was going on, which I now know was some sort of an emotional issue, but she would carry on just like, you know, nothing to see here, you know, kind of a situation. But I was always really curious about it. Never knew what happened to him. He wasn't there very long, but it always piqued my interest, and I just kept that in the back of my mind as I. I went through school, like I said, I always knew I wanted to be a teacher, but it wasn't until going through the program that I settled on special ed.

Beth Santer

Specifically, I think it's great that you mentioned that part of the reason why you went into teaching is because of a teacher you had. Because that's the experience of so much of us is, or so many of us is that, you know, the teachers we remember are not the ones that maybe we got the A in the class. It's

the ones that we really felt like had that care and empathy. So that's fantastic. So let's switch to what are the most common challenges parents ask you about when supporting their child at home. Why don't we start with Regan?

Speaker 3

I think the most common challenges that probably the number one that I see a lot is just parents not knowing where to start. Yeah, unless they have family that has have gone through the special education system or programs or whatnot. They don't always know exactly where to start. They don't know where their what their resources are. They don't know what options are. There for them. A lot of parents have a I guess, in their mind, they have a particular idea of what special ed might look like, whether it's from an experience they had in the past, or from what they might see in an old movie, or anything like that. I had a parent that was very upset when his child became eligible for a specific learning disability because he had been in special ed as an elementary student and was basically he goes, I was just put in a room to color all day, and he was of absolute average, normal, you know, intelligence and ability and all that. He just blossomed a little bit later than everybody else, and he was afraid that that was going to be the situation for his daughter. And so I think those fears are also a big component of it, but just yeah, not knowing where to start, not knowing what to expect.

Beth Santer

Yeah, I think a lot of especially when you have a child that has special needs or some different layers of needs, it's that fear. It's that fear of the unknown, or in the story you told, the fear of the known or their past experience. Mimi Jason, anything to add?

Speaker 1

Yeah, I thought that was so interesting, because you're looking at it from the perspective of elementary, of a student who's just been found eligible, probably, yep. And I see it more from the perspective of kids that are older. And I think that one of the challenges right now really has to do with curriculum. And, you know, helping parents figure out the systems that each individual school has, you know, like it could be their Google Classroom, or it could be Schoology, or it could be Power School. It could be, you know, just them understanding the the nature of the building of curriculum. You know, as things become more difficult, and I think that's really hard for for parents, yeah,

Beth Santer

and it does get harder, right? What about you, Jason,

Speaker 2

as a parent, my a new parent myself, I struggle, and I see parents struggling with watching their child struggle, and it's hard to know when to I do you? Do we do as a as a parent, when your child struggles with basic life skills. So I think time management and being patient and waiting for results in a positive manner are what parents struggle with. If I could just remind them that everything takes time, especially with the SCA SCI population, consistency and time and are just managing that, and making sure you're letting your child do as much as possible independently, with minimal support is extremely important, so that carries over into guilt. I think parents feel guilty when they see their child struggle, and sometimes it's hard to take the it's hard to stay on that path and not take the easy way out and just do it for your

child, because you don't want to see them the struggle. You want to prevent a meltdown, or you want to see them succeed right away. Yeah, so persistency is important?

Beth Santer

Yeah, absolutely. So routines are really important in special education, kids like predictability, and that's true in Gen Ed too. How can parents create effective routines or learning environments at home to reinforce what's happening at school. And that's for anybody who wants to start.

Speaker 1

I feel like at the secondary level, those a couple different things you know, really, number one would be knowing your kid you know so knowing, if. Should come home and immediately start doing homework, or if they need to take a break and, you know, go outside or watch a cartoon, or, you know, play a video game for a little bit, just to help them decompress for the day. So that would be number one. And then I think after that knowing curriculum, and I don't mean like knowing what the teachers are teaching, but just knowing what your kid is learning, I think that that helps with the routine and having that idea that you're working on multiplication facts at school, but then that can also carry over into something that's very organic at home, you know, like you don't have to just be doing multiplication facts, but you can plant multiplication all over your house. You know, I used to do that with my kids. I they would open up the refrigerator and I would have, like, three times four on a milk jug, or, you know, with those crayons that we used to use in the shower, so they would see those things every everywhere they went. And it created that consistency between school and then at home. And then, I think, also knowing what they're learning when they get older, so that you can have conversations about them. So although that has to do with engagement, it also is a routine because you're intentional about the conversations that you're having with your kids, and they, you know, learn to expect those conversations.

Beth Santer

Love that consistency from home and school example.

Speaker 3

That's great. And I think it's very important what you said about knowing what they're learning. And the first thing that popped into my mind is to read those, those teacher newsletters every week. So when your kid comes home and you said, you know, what did you do today? Nothing. Would you learn? Nothing. You could be like, well, actually, you learned about this this week. Tell me about it. You know, I think that's really important, because that's not always just going to come naturally from the kid. They're just going to be like nothing. You know, I think it's also important for parents to remember when they're doing learning routines at home that for a lot of kids, they've been working really hard all day long, and they are taxed, and sometimes they get home, they just need to not do anything, yeah, and it's okay. We don't have to have them in, you know, Kumon and two sports and, you know, all these different activities, which they're all great in their own sense. But a lot of these kids work really, really hard all day long. Yeah? And they need to rest, yeah? They need some downtime to

Beth Santer

not be over scheduled, right? Yeah, what strategies do you recommend for parents to communicate effectively with all of you, or teachers or school staff? And I think that's a really important question.

Again, important in general education, but special education even more so, because there are more layers and parents who have multiple kids, they may only have one child that is receiving special education, and so for many of our parents, it's new. It's new every year for them. So what would be your suggestions for that? And that's for anybody as well.

Speaker 1

Number one, when I'm when I'm thinking about parents coming into the school and communicating with us, it's so important that we know who the kids are outside of the IEP. You know, it's one of the questions that I'm always asking whenever we have meetings. I want to know what are their favorite things, and that helps, I think, level the playing field a little bit, so that it doesn't feel like we're on opposite sides of the table. Yeah, and then after that, you know, I had a principal a long time ago who said to always assume best intentions, and that is equally as important that kids are going to come home with a story, and, you know, they're seeing it through a kid lens, and they're seeing it through the lens of somebody who's struggling, and the day was hard and the day was long. And, you know, I know that it's hard when you hear kids, you know, coming home and they've had a rough day. So I think assuming best intentions and going into communication with staff, being willing to listen and being willing to engage in tough conversations.

Beth Santer

Yeah, great points.

Speaker 3

I was gonna say the same thing in terms of assume best intentions and positive intent for communicating and collaborating with staff. We know that this is your baby. We know that this is your baby, and this baby is your number one priority, but to please know and understand that your baby is our number one priority as well, and they're the reason why we are there. And it might feel like everything is against you or everything is against your child, but know that we're there for your child, and you know, assume that positive intent don't come in. Glen's ablaze before you have a conversation.

Beth Santer

Give it a moment. Yeah. Okay. What about you?

Speaker 2

Jason, I've established a basic rule with my families, because I use Class Dojo. Dearborn switching over to parent, parent Connect. But right now we're using Class Dojo so the parents can translate. But my rule is, anything important regarding their child, please send an email or anything, any quick information that I need to know is a Class Dojo, quick questions. Please use Class Dojo. And the reason why I have this rule is because if it's a quick if it's an important legal question or something about your child that it affects their daily education, I want to be able to forward that information to the proper parties, whether it's speech or social work or administrator, and that kind of sets the boundaries. Also, because my Class Dojo app is out, it's informal, and then I'm not receiving any information at night when I'm at home with my family, because I like to relieve myself from from work. Also, I feel that you should have tried to stay consistent with whatever the school is using so the parents can get used to one thing and keep on using it after that. That's why I don't use my phone or texts. I know during covid

We had we a lot of parents got comfortable with texting their teachers, yeah. And then I found that, I finally found that that made everyone available, 24/7 and I just don't, I think, I don't think that's appropriate for the parent or the teacher. I don't mean that in a bad way. I just mean it's important to remove yourself from the job or the parent to remove themselves from school at night. So that's why I established the rule of class, dojo and email based on what the dialog is. So they have that balance. Yeah, it's good to have that balance. Is what I'm trying to say. I don't. So it kind of creates that balance. You're right, yeah,

Beth Santer

you know, it's one of the points you made. It's interesting, because special educators, parents will hear the word case manager. Case Manager handles the IEP. Case Manager. All the questions go to you first, and you're right. The case manager is that person, but they're not going to know everything, so they might need a minute to find the answer out from one of the other providers, or, if it is a legal question, to find out that answer. You know, as hard as we try and as long as we work, we don't know it all right, that's correct. Yeah. So are there specific tools or resources you would suggest for parents to help their child with homework or skill development? Because I do think a lot of that parent contact is rooted in what you all have so eloquently said earlier. It is that fear of the unknown or that desire for their child to not fall behind, and they love this child more than anything. So what would you suggest

Speaker 1

the most important resource is free. It's just the parents. It is being present. It is showing up. And you know, if we have to look at what is a specific tool reading with your kid, one on one, just sitting down and spending that time. It could be 10 minutes a day, but just sitting next to them and encouraging them to read with you, or you're reading to them, I think that the most important tools and resources are the free ones?

Beth Santer

Yeah, yeah. 1,000% what Mimi said? 1,000% Yeah, reading too. It's so important because it's in everything. It's in math, it's in social studies, it's in science, it's in ELA and so it's probably the one area that you you will not get away from with any school subject.

Speaker 1

And it's the exchange of language. Yeah, it is, you know, you're talking about a story, and then you tell me what you read, and this is what I read, and what do you think might happen? And that building of vocabulary, and, you know, finding a new word, it's it is so valuable. And even though we know that it's true, it's really just not, it's underrated.

Beth Santer

Yeah, Jason, I'm curious what your thoughts are with that, because you do work with students who have a little bit more complexity to their learning profile. So what are the suggestions that you have for parents to help them with skill development?

Speaker 2

I just always recommended the parents to practice how they would practice, just at a slower method, with a patient pace. I like to call it, our students within our program, they necessarily don't do homework. But a lot of those life skills are just daily skills that we use throughout the day and we take advantage of. I just think, if you're going to the parents, the most important. And then obviously being patient with that, that student that you're trying to teach,

Beth Santer

maybe it goes back to what you said. I think in the first question, that sometimes when you see a child struggle, I think I've probably done this before, too. As a provider and a mom, it's hard to not jump in and do something for them. And so for our students that are working on a lot of those life skills, it probably it is easier and faster for our busy parents to do it. So it's I like the word patient pace, where you're taking that time out to make sure that those kids are learning resilience in finishing that task, that's great. So how do you individualize support for each child when giving advice to parents, because each child is so different and so specific,

Speaker 1

you know, first building trust with families, and then I think after you've built that relationship, then you can offer advice, but without knowing the family dynamics or what the unique needs are of each individual student, it would be really difficult to offer advice and then probably having a good understanding of strategies that they've tried before. There's a lot of tools and resources, and I think language that we use as as educators, that we bounce off of each other, but knowing, having the awareness that parents have probably heard half of them, yeah, so giving them the platform to say, tell me all the things that you have done that have not worked, so that I can start building on the things that could could what's new that we could try. But if I don't ask that and I just offer it to them first, then we're going nowhere. I could

Beth Santer

see how, especially because you work with older students, how that's really important. Because you're right. They probably tried lots of things. What about you, Regan, I think

Speaker 3

connecting parents with other parents that have had a similar situation, or kids with similar needs, or anything like that, is very beneficial, because, first of all, it gives them a bit of a comfort. It gives them a potential friend, an ally, you know, someone who's been through it that can give advice. This is great. This don't waste your time, you know, all that stuff. I think it's very important. A lot of times I feel parents initially, at least when they're starting this special ed, you know, route. There's, they might feel a little bit of shame or guilt, and they might keep it to themselves and not, you know, seek those people that have the experience that can help them outside of the school setting. So I think that's that's a really powerful, powerful tool, powerful option for you know, for these parents is to to hook them up with with others.

Speaker 1

I love that I do too. I love building communities.

Speaker 2

Network is definitely important. Yeah, I definitely feel that firsthand experience from other parents can help settle our parents emotions down, because it is nerve wracking thinking about the big picture of what your child where they're going to end up, where they're at now, versus where they're going to end up in. Well, in my case, 20 students go to school at Howe until they're 26 when you start talking about the future, some of the parents, they get emotional, and that's because, you know, the future is, even though it's far away, it's still, it's it's hard to think about where their child is going to end up. And they've So networking is important,

Beth Santer

yeah, having that support, supporting one another, yeah. So I. Think of an example of a simple home strategy that made a big difference for a student. And I'm going to actually start with you, Jason,

Speaker 2

so I have a four year old daughter, which is with some of my students, that's the level that some of them are functioning in it. So what works at home is what I also try at school, and we use this. We use a schedule, but that goes with the schedule is just a basic routine, and that works for me, and that works for my wife, and then now it's working for my daughter. So I recommend of just establishing a routine with a schedule, and that way this your child understands what the expectations are for each afternoon or each evening or each morning. You can make a you can have a visual schedule or just a written out schedule. But we've, right now with my four year old, we're using a visual schedule. She can't read yet, but a written schedule would work just fine if you had a student that could read.

Beth Santer

Yeah, sounds very simple, but yeah, it helps with everything, right? With comprehension and behavior and predictability,

Speaker 2

it's definitely important to establish that expectation. So yes,

Speaker 3

and the consistency, consistent, consistency, consistency, and everyone things come up. You know, different wrenches are thrown in, into the mix, but to be as consistent as possible with your expectation, with, you know, the support that you're going to lend, the communication with the with the staff, all that stuff. And with, as well as the kids schedule, I think is important,

Speaker 1

we learned a lot of stuff during covid, you know, we learned about Google Classroom. We learned about, you know, Adobe DocuSign and Google meets. And in that time, we really had to figure out different ways to communicate with each other, especially with families, because there was a portion of time when some kids weren't there, and sometimes they were there. And one of the things that we started doing, and it was really for specific kids that struggled with the executive functioning skills of going between Google Classroom and paper assignments and online assignments. And we just created a really simple google doc that had just columns and tables so that we were communicating with the parents about what the kids were doing. It eliminated. I turned this in, I didn't know where to

find it, and we were providing real time information to families, and it also provided some consistency between home and school. So the parents that I think were the ones that were really interested in, what are you doing in social studies, and what's this assignment? Is it on Google Classroom? Was it on paper? We're just writing all of those things in as like as the hours are moving through, and we still do that for a handful of kids, and it's been super successful.

Beth Santer

Yeah, yeah. Again, gives that consistency. Yeah, Regan was talking about too. So we're going to shift to the next question has to do with advocacy. And advocacy is very important for our students with special education needs, and they have a lot of hopefully have a lot of advocates in their life, and their most important advocate is their parents. So what role does Parent Advocacy play in a child's success, and how can parents build confidence in advocating? So why don't we start with you, Mimi,

Speaker 1

I love this question. I really do you know the the word advocate, advocacy means to promote or to support, to defend, to to be present on someone's behalf, and so understanding that that's the reason why we're doing things is really important. But advocating doesn't always mean that you're fighting so yeah, amen, you, you come in as a parent advocate, which really just means that you're you're just parenting. You're coming in and you, you have all of this information about your kids that we do not have, and so you have a voice to tell us how they're beautiful and how they're wonderful, and they're special, and they're your universe, and all of the things that we don't know about, and you know, creating that give and take in conversation is first, is lays the groundwork for parents, I think, to be able to advocate effectively. Okay, and then from that, from building that relationship, comes that confidence, because you start to see that I'm listening to you, and you're listening to me, and that all of us have information that's important, so that when we get to an IEP, or when we're talking about goals or objectives, or we're talking about curriculum or social skills groups that we're instead of us being on separate sides, we're meeting in the middle. So that role of parent advocacy is really recognizing that you're supporting and you're listening and you are defending but it doesn't have to be fighting.

Also be embracing. Yeah, you're embracing.

Speaker 2

It's definitely a partnership. You're a partner, equal partners at the table, your your your seat is just as important as everyone else's. Before every IEP, I like to call the parent before the meeting and ask them, Is there anything you want me to bring up that you you don't feel comfortable bringing up and talking about that's what I'm here for as the case manager or the teacher. But I definitely feel the trust is what makes a good partnership. Trust that I'm doing everything for your child, and I trust that you're doing everything to help your child. And you mean well too, just like I do or the school does.

Beth Santer

Yeah, yeah. So I want you we're going we're getting to our last question here. I want you to think about this one for a minute and share one experience or story that you've had with a parent, family, student,

colleague, Administrator, anybody that is the most memorable and epitomizes that why we're kind of going back to the Beginning,

Speaker 3

early on in my teaching career, one of the first students I ever had. I kind of inherited him, because I started mid year, and so he was already on caseload, and he was a pretty, I mean, low stakes in terms of there wasn't a high amount of need. He was a kiddo that had a specific learning disability, and he, you know, he worked hard, he had a very supportive parent, and he did what he needed to do, and I did what I need to do, and all just, it all just flowed and went well and didn't, you know, think a whole lot about it outside of that. It wasn't a high needs situation, it wasn't anything legal, anything like that. It was just your, your average kiddo, years and years and years later. Believe he was in 11th grade. Him and a buddy of his stopped by the school one day at the end of the day, and he came into my room, and he's just like, Did I ever say thank you? And I was like, what he's like, Did I ever say thank you like you have no idea how much you helped me. And while crying, I'm sure I was just like, Wow. I didn't realize that I had made such an impact with the kiddo that, you know, was a pretty, you know, I don't want to say basic, but the needs were pretty basic, right? And it was very rewarding, and it was very, I guess, solidified what I was doing and why I was there and why I would continue.

Beth Santer

You never know what difference you make. Yeah. How about you? Mimi Jason,

Speaker 1

when we were teaching at Riley together, I had a student on my caseload, and he came in as a seventh grader, arguing, refusing to work. A lot of complaining about not wanting to work. And I remember having these conversations with him about, you can, you can do hard things. You can struggle. And on the other side of this, something lovely is going to happen, I promise you, but you can do hard things. And then I ended up going to the high school, and he was up at the high school, and same conversations about working and pushing through things that are hard. And he is a state of Michigan police officer right now, wow, and he has come and talked to our staff before, and the joy that I have of i. Uh, seeing how far he's come and that he's it's not just that he pushed himself through being a police officer. It is that he has ended up being a loving father and a husband and a member of a community, and it's, it is exactly what I knew he would be, and 100 times more than what I had hoped for. It is the joy, because it's really hard to pick one. You know, when your expectation is that all of them end up that way, yeah, and your hope is that all of them end up that way.

Beth Santer

I think, too, the fact that you said that you had that conversation with him in middle school and then had it again in high school, and I think sometimes, too it you have to realize that these problems aren't always solved in a day, and that our students need that encouragement for many years, but it paid off. That's fantastic.

Speaker 2

Jason, overall, I just enjoy seeing our students progress on to the next level. And you look back and you think about each student that you've had and what situation they were in before they you became

their teacher, what situation or setting you were in with them when they you were their teacher. And then what you see after, and the parents are complimenting you and thanking you and telling you what it wasn't for you starting this, we never would have gotten here. Yeah. I mean, that's flattering. I always remember when inclusion first started, and trying to figure out what students, you know, needed me most, and just teaching the basics to them. And some of them had some pretty tough parents that advocated for their child, but just hearing them talk about me in meetings and explained that, you know, before Mr. My son or daughter was with Mr. Jason hash, it was hard. They struggled and hated school, and now they love it, or just seeing their smiles when you see them walking down the hall and they say hi to you. So important, yeah, because our students at Howe go to school with us until they're 26 so I Yeah, we have them for a long time, so they're almost like family to us. And then when you pass them on, it's almost hard to because some students have been with me for four or five years, and you get a little jealous, but it's further good. I definitely enjoy seeing my older students progress and become young men and women in society,

Beth Santer

that's fantastic. And with that, I want to thank our three educators who were here today. You guys were amazing, and you've represented not only yourselves well, but all of those special educators who aren't here. You've represented them well as well, and as I said at the beginning, it's been a true honor to share space with you and have this conversation with you. We hope that the information, stories and strategies shared today support our families and staff. I and the RESA community want to thank Regan, Mimi, Jason and all of our educators who show up every day to support our students. We thank you for being with us today. Thanks to all of our listeners. We hope you join us again for the Wayne Risa roundtable podcast. You.