

Covering the Aftermath: Teacher Shortages in Special Education

Wednesday, Jan. 11, 2023 at 2 p.m. Eastern

Speakers:

- **Lee V. Gaines**, investigative education reporter, WFYI Public Media
 - **Edison McDonald**, executive director, The Arc of Nebraska
 - **Deralyn Morrow**, parent, Indiana
 - **Savannah Tryens-Fernandes**, child health and wellness reporter, AL.com (moderator)
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Savannah Tryens-Fernandes, AL.com 00:17

Hello, everybody and welcome to "Covering the Aftermath: Teacher Shortages in Special Education." My name is Savannah Tryens-Fernandes of AL.com and I will be moderating today.

Before we get started, I want to go over a couple of ground rules. A quick reminder that everything is on the record. If you have any questions throughout the discussion, a request for clarification or details, links, just drop your questions in the chat box, and we'll get to them in the last 15 minutes. We'll have roughly 45 minutes today with our panelists -- a 45 minute discussion -- before a Q&A. And I'd like to thank them all for sharing their time and expertise with us.

The goal of this session is to help journalists build trust with students and their families who use special education services, as well as to know where to go for public records, find out more about the national network of advocates who exist, and learn about what accountability means when covering this topic.

We're following up on a webinar from late last year that discussed the topic of teacher vacancies -- how this isn't a national labor issue, how journalists can unpack the topic so it centers teachers and families, and how special educators in particular carry an invisible burden for filling in where there are gaps. Not to mention the impact on families who are in turn dealing with unmet needs and unfulfilled resources. This webinar will look into special education but unfortunately, we are not joined by any teachers -- mostly because it's a school day, and also likely because of the pressures already in place.

However, we are joined by advocate Edison McDonald of the Arc of Nebraska; audio journalist Lee Gaines of WFYI, who has covered special education; and two parents -- one of whom isn't here right now, but she will be joining us shortly -- Deralyn Morrow and Carmen Rojas, both of whom have children with individualized education plans. So, thank you all so much for being with us today.

And with that, let's get started. Edison if we could start with you. As a reminder, Edison is the executive director of the Arc of Nebraska, the state's chapter of the national organization that works to support people with intellectual and physical disabilities. So, Edison, maybe if we can just start with the basics: Can you define Special Education for us? Specifically, who qualifies? And what are the spectrum of services that are available?

Edison McDonald, Arc of Nebraska 03:08

So, when we're talking about special education, we're talking about anybody who falls under IDEA who needs extra increased supports. So that can have a really broad range in terms of who that will include.

You know, you definitely will think about folks with, you know, Down syndrome and autism. But even some of those, you know, other disabilities, you can still have supports there. I think really, you know, the most important thing to remember here is kind of the core. We've started to see a huge increase in restraint, seclusion, issues, where we have kids who are pushed out of schools, shifted to other schools, when they don't want to be, they are being kind of -- we'd call it "school push out," where even though they're not formally suspended or removed, they'll still go and say, "hey, you know, Mom, Dad, Jack's not doing so well today. So can you come pick him up? We don't want to have a suspension on his record." Which, of course, then exacerbates the problem, because then we don't have data to be able to actually track it. And we don't actually see "oh, hey, he's really getting pushed out of classes."

And I think really the course of so much of this comes down to two big issues. One is funding. And then the second one is just our overall staffing crisis. In terms of funding, Special Education has been radically underfunded since the beginning. And that has really just kind of had this long-term, continuous problem where we've had shortages. And typically, in most states, special education is the highest shortage out of every department, even higher than STEM. And because of those long-term shortages, we've had a system that's kind of cobbled together and just barely able to support itself.

Well, we knew that we were going to have a big shift within our system, when COVID came, when we started to lose a whole bunch of folks out of the workforce. But COVID was a capitalist, and instead of that happening, over 20 years, happened over, you know, six months, a year. So, as we're trying to figure out how to deal with these issues that were supposed to be longer-term, all of a sudden, have been compacted. Now we have to deal with that huge shortage. And that really can be really significant.

So, like here in Nebraska, in Omaha Public Schools, they have 50.2% of their special education positions are vacant, which is just gigantic. And how can you function in a school when you've got those sorts of shortages? I think a lot of the other numbers I'm seeing are a lot lower, but still significant, typically in that like 19-20-something percentage range of vacancies, that that really puts a lot of pressure on folks. And it's hard, because, you know, part of that really comes down to that funding. We have so much of that funding where we started off, and we really, you know, we were already short. But as we've seen that exacerbation, we've seen the impacts of inflation, we're seeing more and more folks who are struggling. Folks who are saying, "let's take, I'm going to take an early retirement, I'm going to go to another job, I'm going to go to an area where there isn't as much pressure." And then those well-intentioned teachers who are saying, "I'm going to go to another area where there's going to be less pressure," then it continues to grow the problem.

And it continues to get worse for well-meaning teachers who are trying to do their jobs. And so, you know, really what ends up happening is that you have, you know, your state funding, which is short.

And because of that, then your school board is going to struggle, and your administration is going to struggle to figure out how can we do this on such a hamstrung budget.

And then because we have the shortages, then it ends up putting teachers into these precarious places, where then we see a lot of these issues start to really kind of pick up more, we see increased restraint. Because if you've got a classroom with too many kids, and you can't support them, and then one kid goes and you know, tries to bolt off down the hall, it's harder to go and take that time to work on those de-escalation tactics to really kind of, you know, prevent the issue, because you got way too many other kids you're focused on.

So, then what happens if you go for, you know, something that's going to be, you know, more aggressive, and that's where you have some of those really horrible cases of restraint. And we've had some really just horrific ones. I've seen kids who have come home, and you can see the fingermarks of an adult on their arm. And I've even seen those with finger marks on their neck. And that's, that's what happens when we create this pressure-cooker system. It really just significantly escalates what's going to happen. And then, you know, I think the other big piece is not just talking about teachers, but also talking about paras and other support staff. And I think that's especially where I'm hearing there are even more issues because paras aren't going to have that same level of training as teachers. And because the pay is so low, they have huge vacancies, too. And they're just turning over anybody who they can get into those positions when those folks aren't trained, they aren't supported. We don't have a good infrastructure. We're basically just asking for problems. And that is the special education crisis that we're seeing now.

Savannah Tryens-Fernandes, AL.com 09:40

Yeah, and when you're working with families at Arc, what is some of the support that they're asking for from you and what are some of the common difficulties you're navigating?

Edison McDonald, Arc of Nebraska 09:51

So, you know, I think for the supports they want are just to make sure that the kid can get a good, quality education. That they have the support that they need at school, that they have the access to services that they need. And then from us, you know, typically, as they're asking for those -- and those are things that they do have that right to under IDEA and FAPE -- but what's happening is that they are getting pushed out. And a lot of times, it's off the books.

As I said, you know, in that case of a student who, you know, they're like, "well, we don't want to officially say that they're suspended," what that really means is they want to keep it off of any sort of paperwork. So it doesn't create any sort of negative paper trail for them. If a court case comes up down the line, or if somebody is investigating the more systematic stuff, and teachers feel it too: Administrators pressure them, to not write things down, to not report things. And that creates a really difficult environment where you don't have that data, you don't have that trust. And it decays trust between teachers and administrators.

And it decays trusts of families and families of kids with disabilities have to struggle through so much already. I already tell, you know, kind of say, not even just within special education, but the life of a kid

with a disability, the likelihood that you're going to have to pursue legal action, just to get your basic rights is pretty significant throughout their lifetime, whether that's dealing with Medicaid or access to education, or, you know, civil rights, whatever it may be.

There are a lot of really difficult barriers. And a lot of times you do have to get legal counsel involved and legal counsel is not cheap. So that really makes it difficult for families. So then, you know, even if you can get, even if you have the funds to have an attorney, that doesn't mean that there are enough attorneys who really specialize in special education law, who have that knowledge. So I think that's another barrier. But the biggest one, and I think the biggest one that you all will be dealing with, is that families are scared of school districts and for good reason.

There are a lot of school districts that really take on some more aggressive tactics. And it leaves families feeling like they can't trust, they can't have a conversation with the administration. And I think especially a lot of administration is really shifted to depending on their lawyers, because they're, they're afraid of litigation. So, I think as you work on building the sources of parents, and I'm really excited to hear more from the parents who are on here, that's, that's really hard to go and make sure that you can actually get those stories shared. And a lot of times I'll have parents who will tell me stories, but they're scared to go and go public with those stories. They're scared to go and pursue a legal case. They're scared to go and file a Department of Education complaint, or a Department of Justice complaint.

Savannah Tryens-Fernandes, AL.com 13:19

Do you have any advice for journalists given, you know, no paper trail, as you mentioned, when there are push outs, given that there's a fear of retaliation? How do we get these stories?

Edison McDonald, Arc of Nebraska 13:30

Yeah. So, I mean, there's there are some data sources, you can look at the Office of Civil Rights out of the Department of Justice does have some data on this. And they do investigate cases, depending on your state, and I'm not as familiar with other states.

But here in Nebraska, we've got our State Board of Education, and we have complaints there that we can look at. Some states, I know have started to go and work on getting some sort of specific source where they're tracking all sorts of disciplinary data.

So, those are good places to go to at least look for data. But then in terms of building stories, I'm probably biased. But organizations like the Arc are your best friends. We have those stories. We've built that trust. And you know, families know that we're going to be there. We they know that we're going to protect their confidentiality, they know that we're going to have their back. But it really does just take that time to go and build the relationship. And I think especially just walking families through and talking about things and saying like, you know, especially as you're talking what's on the record versus what's off the record, and really focusing more on just starting by getting that background of the stuff off the record until you can kind of help to guide them through to share that story. Because otherwise it can have negative implications for that individual, because targeting is real. Doesn't happen every time.

You know, a lot of folks, I think, have really worked to avoid that. But it happens. And so, I always advise families, you know, most families want to see the system change, not just for their kid, but for all kids. And I advise families, think about your own kid. First, we'll focus on the system, and only really go after those, if you're really comfortable, you know, if you really feel like you're in a spot where you can go and pursue that, and that that really varies, you know. I think, especially if they are looking at pursuing legal action, most attorneys will advise them not to talk to reporters, at all, which is a good idea. But you know, I think it's just, it's building that trust and being very, very careful with that source.

Savannah Tryens-Fernandes, AL.com 15:59

So, Deralyn, I want to transition over to you now. I saw you nodding along when Edison was explaining the big picture problems that we're seeing in special education right now. If you could just give us some insight into what the experience has been like for you and making sure that your children's needs are being met.

Deralyn Morrow, parent, Indiana 16:18

Um, well, I have two boys. One is in fourth grade and he has autism. And my first grader, he has an IEP, but it's listed as "other." I was nodding because he was talking about the teacher shortages, the para shortages and all the problems that it creates inside of the school system, especially for special education. I've worked as a para. As of right now, I'm a behavioral tech with ABA. I've been seeing, from my perspective, I've been seeing a lot of teachers leave and go into something like ABA, as well as I've seen this past summer, my son, a fourth grader, his school, right before school started, they had only maybe two teachers in the whole building. They had, maybe, I want to say less than half of paras in their school.

And so, I've seen the difficulties that the teachers are having. And I've seen the hardships that make it for those children, because they're not getting a quality education. Like, as of right now my son's school, they don't go to lunch. They have the para bring the lunch to the classroom because they don't have enough support. They're not doing like their arts and music or library time because they don't have anyone to fill those positions. And so, for... hate to compare it, but as compared to my first grader who's in a regular gen-ed setting, he's getting a full elementary education, but my fourth grader, he's not. I've also seen, like, as of right now, my son's teacher, she's already said she's told them she's not coming back. She doesn't have enough support. So that's why I was shaking my head because a lot of the educational aspects I really agree with it.

Savannah Tryens-Fernandes, AL.com 18:36

And what's that impact? What's that impact been on your son's and your family? When you don't have those teachers in place?

Deralyn Morrow, parent, Indiana 18:44

It's been very hard. My son, he's been having some, like transitional issues, like with transitions and he's become a runner. And my other son, he's, he's doing better but at the same time, he's not having the support that he has, he needs for like he's "gifted," and so he's not getting that kind of support educational wise because of the setting that he's in. And they've had to, for my fourth grader, because he was pretty much having a meltdown in classrooms, because she only has one para and they should

have four in that room. She's had to call the principal. She's had to call the in-house police officer to come in to kind of you know, help defuse the situation. So it's been very hard. And I'm trying. I'm in a position where I'm like, I don't know what my options are right now.

Savannah Tryens-Fernandes, AL.com 19:51

So, if a journalist approached you about writing a story about special education in your school district, what would you want to hear from them to know that they understand the topic and some stories or directions you would point them to?

Deralyn Morrow, parent, Indiana 20:11

As far as like stories and things like that, I would point them to the district. I would point them to be the issues that are going on at the schools. I would like to have the trust that what what is said is not going to be misconstrued into something else, that they understand exactly what's going on. Because a lot of these kids, they don't have advocacy. And they don't have, they don't, they're kind of just pretty much being left behind. And so, I would, I feel like as a reporter, I feel like getting that story out there, it creates more people knowing what's going on, it could possibly promote change for these kids that's really needed.

And I feel like, because even as a parent, and I know other parents with children with special needs, they're frustrated. They're extremely frustrated because they go into the schools and they either don't know who to talk to and they're looking for transparency They're not getting it. And they're also looking for things to be done in a timely manner. And that's not happening at all.

And so, I feel like accountability -- that article gets out and follow up. What changes happen? How are these districts? How are these school corporations and directors at the school, the principals at the school -- how are they are they fixing what the issue is? And to be able to fix the issue without it blowing up into something as if "we're not talking to you anymore."

Because a lot of parents, they become afraid to continue to try to talk to those higher ups, because, you know, they may have created this, this issue where now we have to go through the school, or now we have to go try to get some type of arbitrations, and that person becomes a pariah.

Savannah Tryens-Fernandes, AL.com 22:20

So, part of accountability, if I'm hearing you correctly, is for us journalists making sure that we stay with the story, you know. It's not just one-and-done. We're following up, we're continuing to see where the process is leading. Is there anything else in terms of count of accountability? That, you know, would it be important to you to see from a journalist and the stories that they're putting out?

Deralyn Morrow, parent, Indiana 22:50

If they can, with a follow up, or if like, a parent comes with a concern, and they see that it's a major concern that maybe that they can make another story, or make another article or something that gets those words out. If it's like, let's say, like the teacher shortages, if the parents find out or get that information about those teacher shortages, and they, and they're not getting the information that they

need, that they can feel confident enough to go to a reporter. And that reporter was able to investigate that situation and get some more information out.

Savannah Tryens-Fernandes, AL.com 23:33

Is there anything that you would want to see a reporter do that would make you feel more comfortable talking with them, especially as it relates to these retaliation concerns that both you and Edison have brought up?

Deralyn Morrow, parent, Indiana 23:44

A lot of people don't want to talk to reporters, because they feel like they're going to be hounded about this information. And they're scared of when this information comes out what's going to happen. I feel like a reporter should give them a feeling that's kind of a friendly feeling. And be more -- show empathy, show understanding, and just kind of give them (the parents) as much information that they know possible to help ease and gain trust and gain a feeling of safety, that this is a safe place where I can talk to you.

Savannah Tryens-Fernandes, AL.com 24:33

Thank you. So, with that, Lee, I think this is a great place to ask you, your reporting on special education. What's really struck me about it is just how many voices you have in there, from families, to teachers, to administrators, how do you source those stories and get, you know them to be so so many different perspectives in them?

Lee V. Gaines, WFYI 24:56

Thanks for that question. And I also just want to thank Deralyn for being a source of mine and just for being so open with your family's story. And I've really appreciated, you know, everything that you've shared with us because it's informed our reporting, and we're going to continue to report on that particular special education system.

But in terms of sourcing, I'm always trying to think about, you know, at the end of the day, who is most impacted by this and it's students. And sometimes if you've got a student on the autism spectrum, who perhaps doesn't speak, then you need to talk to their parents, you need to talk to the people that are at the heart of this who are really feeling the brunt of it, and are also the most vulnerable. And sometimes you can actually talk to the students. I think one of the most exciting things for me is to get voices like that on to NPR airwaves, because those are voices that we don't typically hear.

So, I would say that finding the teachers and finding the families, that's probably the most challenging sources for journalists to find. Folks like Edison at the Arc in Nebraska, or the Arc of Indiana has been a crucial source for me, throughout all of my reporting. Kim Dodson over there has been great. They're pretty ready and willing to talk with you. Same with experts at the national level. Disability Rights Network is another really good source, especially for the legal stuff.

I would also encourage everyone to talk to attorneys who represent parents in special education disputes. I can say for Indiana, there's not that many of them. So, they're, you know, and I think a lot of times, they're not even used to being talked to by reporters, because my opinion is that special

education is an under-covered issue under the umbrella of education. So, thinking about like, who are all the people -- who are the categories of people that are impacted by whatever story that it is you're trying to tell? And, don't give up.

You know, I think the way that I found Deralyn, actually was going through board documents. And I was trying to talk to para-educators, so paraprofessionals, who had resigned or who had left this particular district, and I saw Deralyn's name, and I was able to find her on social media. And then it turns out that Deralyn is also a parent and has two children in that district.

And so that was, you know, going through board documents, my co-reporter on the story, Dylan Peers McCoy, is excellent with data, excellent with FOIA. She requested teacher licensing data so we could look at, you know, what kind of licenses people held, if they were on, you know, provisional or emergency permits, or if they were fully-qualified educators and trying to talk to both of those individuals. And through looking at that licensing data, we could also see by comparing it to a more recent year, like who had left, so we were trying to track down, people who had left, and you can do that, you know. Social media is your best friend in that regard.

So, like I said, a lot of it comes down to just being really diligent and really persistent. And I want to acknowledge that that is not always easy. I'm an investigative reporter now. And what that means is I have the privilege of time. And when I was not an investigative reporter, and I had more daily responsibilities, it was hard to fit that persistence in but I really do think at the end of the day, it's worth it. It's going to make your stories, so much better, and so much more compelling, and hopefully more impactful so that we can hopefully change the system and the lives of the folks who are impacted by this for the better.

Savannah Tryens-Fernandes, AL.com 28:52

You brought up special education being an under-covered issue. And I'm curious, if you had to kind of make a case to your editors about covering a topic where you know, you can make where you hear from a lot of people, but it's just like the minority of students. You know, it's not the it's not a math class that every student has to take, or it's not a reading class that every student has to take. How did you -- if you did -- have to navigate any pushback, how did you, kind of, make your case there?

Lee V. Gaines, WFYI 29:22

Luckily, I have an editor in a newsroom, who was 100%, behind my push for special education. But I think part of the reason that they were supportive of it is because I made the case that during the pandemic, this was a group of students who were especially impacted, because a lot of things that happen in a special education classroom don't really translate to an online learning environment. Like, for example, trying to provide speech language through services via Zoom.

That doesn't always work out so well. So, I knew that as much as students in the general education population were impacted by the pandemic and virtual learning. I knew that that was probably even more severe for this category of students. And I also think you could make the case to your editors that like, "Look, do you see anyone else covering this? This is an opportunity for us to make our mark, for us

to break stories, for us to, you know, get really impactful reporting out there. And we really don't have much competition."

You know, I there's very few other people in the state of Indiana, for example, that are covering special education specifically. And it's, that's kind of great in some ways that you don't have a lot of competition. In other ways, it's terrible, because there's so many stories. I wish I could clone myself.

Savannah Tryens-Fernandes, AL.com 30:48

And, you know, you've done at least one two-part series on teacher shortages affecting special education. In one story, a parent finds out there is no teacher in her daughter's classroom, just a teacher's aide. In your reporting, how common is that?

Lee V. Gaines, WFYI 31:07

That's the school that Deralyn's fourth-grader attends. That school has, it's a school that's for kids with disabilities, specifically, both developmental and emotional disabilities. That is a particularly egregious example of the shortage, I think, as Deralyn has said, they still have terrible staffing issues. But that issue of lacking a teacher, I think, is has begun to become more pervasive.

And it might not be that your classroom doesn't have a teacher at all. But they might have a teacher who's on a provisional license. So, it could be someone who's brand new to special education. And they're still working through the credentialing process. And I don't want to knock those teachers because everyone has to start somewhere. But if they don't have the support that they need in the room with them or from the administration, then you are kind of setting them up to fail.

So, it's not just a question of like, Does my kid have a teacher? It's: What kind of teacher do they have? And if maybe, even, you know, worst case scenario than someone who's on a provisional license, could be a long-term substitute. So that's someone who isn't qualified for the job, and is also not even receiving the education that they need to be qualified for the job.

Savannah Tryens-Fernandes, AL.com 32:28

Yeah. And how do you go about finding these gaps?

Lee V. Gaines, WFYI 32:33

That is a great question. So, Edison mentioned complaints and due process decisions. I actually, I don't think you did mention due process decisions, but you did mention complaints. So, complaints is actually what led me to start investigating the system that Deralyn's kids attend, because they had more complaints lodged against them than any other special education system in the entire state of Indiana. So that was a really big red flag. And that ended up being, you know, fruitful for us as reporters. There's also due process decisions.

Now, depending on the state that you live in, there might be very few of those. I know in Indiana, most due process decisions end up getting settled before they go to the hearing stage. And I do want to mention this just to talk about some of the barriers that parents can face when coming to reporters, if they were in a due process dispute, and they ended up settling. Oftentimes, what I found in my

reporting is schools will ask them to sign non-disclosure agreements. And so they might face a penalty, or like a monetary penalty if the school finds out that they talked about the services that their kids received, or the dispute at hand between them and the district. We did do a story about those disputes.

And we ended up anonymizing our source to protect her from any legal repercussions. But aside from those two places, I also think looking at your teacher credential data, something that Dylan and I found earlier on in our reporting, was this rise in the number of emergency permits issued for teachers and special education. And so, what that indicated to us was that there was a decrease where they weren't finding enough qualified teachers to fill these positions.

States also have job banks, you know. Indiana has a job bank where you can find out all the available jobs. It's not the most reliable source of data, but it is a source of data. So, it can give you a sense of you know, what, where are the shortages most acute because it's not just special education teachers. We're also talking about paraprofessionals and we're talking about speech language pathologists, occupational therapists, school psychologists, physical therapists, all of these people are crucial to making special education work. Well. So those are sources of data.

Edison brought up seclusion and restraint. Now, you can get aggregated data on that, or you should be able to from your state, and you can even go to your particular school district and request that data, you might have to file a Freedom of Information request to get it. But I still think it's worth getting, you're not going to get students names, hopefully, if they're following FERPA. But it is another window into like what's happening in special education classrooms. And then in terms of, you know, trying to confirm and like bulletproof your story.

Hopefully, the parents that you talk to will be willing to share some of their documents. So that could be their child's Individualized Education Program. So, you can see what they're entitled to compare to what they're actually getting in school or communications that they've had with the district. That's been really helpful in terms of fact-checking some of the things that parents have told me, because oftentimes, the district will use FERPA as an excuse not to confirm it, or they just won't answer you at all. I've had that situation a number of times. So, your parent, if you've built that trust with them, they will really be a crucial source of, of not just the story, but also some of this information that backs up what they're saying, because there's a lot of paperwork in special ed.

Savannah Tryens-Fernandes, AL.com 36:34

Yeah, that was very helpful. Thank you. And then I want to ask your advice on this. You know, as I began covering special education, I was very intimidated by just how technical and complex it can be, you know. I think that for journalists can be like the first barrier that you'd have to undercut, overcome when dealing with this topic. Do you have any advice for journalists about like how to break down those complexities, or just some basic things that we need to understand before covering special education?

Edison McDonald, Arc of Nebraska 37:10

Yeah, um, you know, I'd say there are a number of really great trainings, they can help to crash-course you through stuff. On our website, we actually have a training we recently did on kind of that school

push-out sort of side effects, we're talking more broadly, but also talk some about kind of the current crisis portion.

And the Arc of the US actually has an excellent training that really kind of crash-courses through that quickly. You know, I think the, the two biggest areas are just, you know, figuring out and being able to understand when you're, you know, looking at those complaints, and those due process complaints.

I think that's a big piece to understanding the impacts of restraint and seclusion, which there are a number of resources that can really help you to kind of get caught up on that very quickly. And I think the other thing is school funding, you know, and really understanding that school funding and then how your special education is funded.

So, like here, in Nebraska, because property taxes are such a heavy portion of our school funding. And especially when it comes to how kids with disabilities are funded, it really is a lot of that property tax side. It leads to very different impacts on like rural districts versus our larger urban districts. So, I'd say those are kind of the key pieces to kind of crash-course through, and a couple of those resources that I'd recommend.

Savannah Tryens-Fernandes, AL.com 38:54

Yeah. Deralyn, I wonder if you have any advice as a parent who's had to navigate this system of how you've kind of broken it down to better understand what you're entitled to, and, you know, what services are in place for you?

Deralyn Morrow, parent, Indiana 39:09

Um, for me, it was, because I'm going to be honest, when I found out about my son's diagnosis, they basically, when we went to Indianapolis, they pretty much gave us a sheet of paper and said, "Good luck." So, it was kind of like, "okay, well, what do I do from here?"

I personally, I made it my mission to get to know people that aren't at his school, to get to know and to find out who's in the district who, who, like, who's the directors. I joined the PTO at the school. So I kind of put myself inside so I can kind of have an idea of "this is what's going on." And so, for me, when I find something that's like, "Okay, this isn't right," even if it isn't my kid or it's my kid, but it affects the other kid. I'm willing to say, "hey, we need to fix this, we need to do something about this."

So, I've gathered a network on Facebook, it's called the Parent Advocates of Porter County. I created a Facebook group for parents if they wanted to join the group. So, if we have some issues, we can talk about this or we can get it out there. So that way we can create a parent network of parents that are on the spectrum, or not just the spectrum, but other special disabilities. And also, for me, navigating it is finding out who I talked to, if I don't know, keep asking questions until I can get those answers.

Edison McDonald, Arc of Nebraska 40:49

Two things I want to tag in on: One, those social media groups are great. Parents of kids with disabilities have so many Facebook groups that really can be great sources of information, and can really provide a lot of great stuff. Sometimes, again, though, I will caution, we're seeing more school

administrators and staff in those groups. And so sometimes it makes it hard to have kind of those more confidential conversations. And that's always the danger of social media.

The other thing is the special-ed directors. I would especially suggest talking to the state special-ed director, because, I think, individual districts will be more likely to want to kind of cover up things and say, "Oh, no, our district's doing fine. It's all good." But I think you'll get a little more of an honest assessment from the state who's like, "Oh, hey, okay, we see kind of the bigger picture. And we're not worried about just one individual school. We're not trying to cover up things. We're just trying to make sure that we're providing quality education while across the state."

Savannah Tryens-Fernandes, AL.com 42:09

Well, thank you both. In the last few minutes we have before opening it up to a Q&A, I want to ask each of you, if you could just share any suggestions you have maybe on a story idea, a public record we should be requesting or maybe people we should be talking to. Edison, you want to start that off?

Edison McDonald, Arc of Nebraska 42:31

I mean, yeah, I already said that the State Board of Ed director, I think that's an excellent source. I think also, you know, those organizations, I can't say how invaluable they can be, whether it's the Arc, or the Down Syndrome Alliance, or the autism groups, or, you know, those sorts of organizations, we can really help to just be that connector, be that funnel, give you kind of that background and crash course through stuff really quickly, and connect you with those families. And if and if they don't have them off hand, then they have the relationships to go and quickly get them for you.

Savannah Tryens-Fernandes, AL.com 43:17

Great, Lee, you have any suggestions for us?

Lee V. Gaines, WFYI 43:22

Well, one that I thought about just now is that this is complicated. It's hard. It's challenging work to do.

What has really helped me is teaming up with another reporter to do the work. She's on maternity leave right now. And I've already felt her absence in doing this reporting. And when she gets back, we're going to continue and hopefully publish a big series. But I cannot say enough about how helpful it has been to have another person on the team with me doing this work in addition to our editor.

So, if you're not lucky enough to have another education reporter in your newsroom, maybe you have a health reporter, because this also touches on a lot of health issues, children with disabilities, there's medical needs involved, things like that, I highly encourage you trying to team up in order to tackle this. And then the other thing I would recommend is try to understand the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, that's IDEA or "idea."

And then our state Indiana has its own kind of set of rules in addition to IDEA. It's called Article Seven. Your state probably has something, I don't know what it's called in Nebraska, Edison, but I'm sure they have something like that. So, try to understand the law so that when you're listening to parents, and you're talking to them, and they're telling you something, you might know, in that conversation,

identify a violation of that law, because they're not getting something that they need. So those are my two big suggestions.

Try to understand the law and try to find someone else who's down to help you with this reporting.

Savannah Tryens-Fernandes, AL.com 45:02

Yeah. Deralyn, in any suggestions to your story ideas, things we should be looking at people we shouldn't be talking to?

Deralyn Morrow, parent, Indiana 45:14

I honestly say when you're talking to the parent, and they have, I guess you can say they have a grievance with whatever is going on in that situation, asked if they're okay with sharing that documentation. Because sometimes, if you can share that documentation, you can end up finding the things that may have not been mentioned.

And it may create a bigger avenue for you or a different another story I'm looking for another side, side road to take with. And, also, with the parents like Lee said, knowing the laws and knowing Article Seven. A lot of parents don't know their rights that they had when they when they're able to, with the IEPs. And for even the 504 (plan). And having some knowledge of that can help the parent as well.

Savannah Tryens-Fernandes, AL.com 46:22

Thank you, all three of you. I think we're going to open it up now. To audience Q&A. People want to put their questions in chat.