Ms. Eliana Tardio:

Welcome to episode three of the National Center for Systemic Improvement, or NCSI, podcast series on Pursuing Equity at the Intersection of Language, Culture, and Disability. This podcast builds on the work of the NCSI Thought Leader Conversation Series, which aligns with NSCI four system elements, data literacy, stakeholder and family engagement, research-informed practice, and systems coherence. This episode focuses on authentic engagement of families, and schools, and community partnerships.

In this work, NCSI commits to supporting state education agencies, SEAs, and community partners in expanding understanding about the intersection of language, culture, and disability in K-12 education. We identify next steps for SEAs to enact system improvement that focus on elevating equity in both opportunity and achievement for students who are English learners with disabilities. For more information about NCSI, please visit our website, ncsi.wested.org. My name is Eliana Tardio, and I'm a content specialist for the National Center for Systemic Improvement at WestEd, and I'm the mother of son and daughter with Down Syndrome.

Ms. Angela Mcguire:

And my name is Angela McGuire. I am the parent of an individual with intellectual disabilities. I'm also co-lead of the Stakeholder and Family Engagement Systems element team for NCSI and a project director on other work within WestEd. In our previous episodes, our thought leaders often return to the importance of family engagement as a key piece in achieving equity at the intersection of language, culture, and disability. For example, in our recent episode on data literacy, our thought leaders discussed how when we meaningfully engage families in the data collection and decision-making process, we are better able to capture the context of each child's unique cultural and linguistic assets.

Ms. Eliana Tardio:

In today's episode, we are going to dig deeper into what authentic family engagement means by sharing highlights from the third session of the Thought Leader Conversation Series, which took place on September 7th, 2022, and focuses on the importance of collaborating with families, and schools, and community partners to support students with disabilities designated as English learners. In our conversation, we'll center the families as experts, explore the varying degrees of interaction between schools, families, and communities, and discuss the conditions and capacity building needed to advance deeper levels of interaction.

Ms. Angela Mcguire:

But first, it's important to discuss the current reality for many families as they try to engage with their child's education system. Mrs. Ximena Hurtado, a teacher in Florida's Lee County School district, shares the experience of one newly-immigrated parent trying to understand the services her daughter's school provided.

Ms. Ximena Hurtado:

Yes. Since my daughter was born and I was new to this country, in my country, we don't have the same economic situations as you guys and we don't have the same kind of services. So on that point, I feel very lucky. The other side of the coin, I was really, really confused because I didn't know anything about those kinds of therapies. When the occupational therapist came into my house, I didn't know what to expect, what is she going to work with. Or, one of the things that we face as a Latina, we don't know what those services mean. I have to learn in what way those services help my daughter.

Ms. Angela Mcguire:

From this and other stories shared during the live session, as well as her own experience as a teacher working with families every day, Mrs. Hurtado summed up the difficulties families face in engaging with their child's education with statements like this.

Ms. Ximena Hurtado:

Most parents want a chance to contribute. The exclusion could make the parent feel that their input is not valuable, that their child is viewed just as another part of an assembly line. This boils down to a passive racism, the feeling that the parents are uneducated simply because of cultural differences.

Ms. Eliana Tardio:

This exclusion Ms. Hurtado explains is largely due to a lack of culturally-responsive strategies that allows family to actively participate in their child's education. To address this, we need more culturally-responsive training, strategies to evaluate our own behaviors as educators, and most importantly, an open mind to learn from and in collaboration with families. "The solution is not a simple translated flyer," Ms. Hurtado says. "It is building a cultural bridge between the family and the school." Dr. Cristina Santamaría Graff, professor at Indiana University and Purdue University, expands on what it means to build the cultural bridge.

Dr. Cristina Santamaría Graff:

So as cultural liaisons, cultural mediators, cultural bridges, we really need to think about how to also describe to families what is the operating system that we're in and how we're navigating not only language and terminology but being really informed about how we can move forward and moving the dial for advocating for the wellbeing of our students.

Ms. Angela Mcguire:

Dr. Cristina Santamaría Graff introduces us to the levels of interaction described within the Leading by Convening framework for authentic engagement created by the National Association of State Directors of Special Education. The framework describes four levels of engagement, informing, networking, collaborating, and transforming. For more information on Leading by Convening, you can visit NCSI's website at ncsi.wested.org. Dr. Cristina Santamaría Graff describes how the framework considers the intent, delivery, and reception of the information provided to families.

Dr. Cristina Santamaría Graff:

So instead of going from maybe a top-down kind of approach to I'm here to disseminate information to you, we are moving toward, and this is in the arrows represented, the double arrows going up, more of a grassroots approach to where families and individuals with disabilities are really moving the dial and progressing our systems into opening spaces where they are able to and welcome to create opportunities and pathways for their own child up with the expertise that they have as families about their child.

Ms. Eliana Tardio:

The first level of interaction informing is the act of sharing or disseminating information. However, as we heard earlier about the experience of a newly-immigrated parent, informing can get confusing if you are not familiar with the system, services provided, or terminology use in the communication. Dr. Cristina Santamaría Graff explains why.

Dr. Cristina Santamaría Graff:

The initial communications that come home in their home language, although that is one step toward being able to provide translatable and accessible language, it's not enough. Because some of the language embedded and terminology, as we know, embedded in those documents can be very confusing and could be loaded with historical meaning and nuances.

Ms. Eliana Tardio:

Important details can easily get lost in translation if you are not careful to ensure that the intent of the message remains intact and clear. To avoid confusion, Dr. Cristina Santamaría Graff says it is important to explicitly define all language and terminology used to foster an inclusive and welcoming space.

Dr. Cristina Santamaría Graff:

This whole idea of informing has to go beyond just what families' roles are or just what the procedural safeguards are. It's really sitting with and working alongside families to unpack language, and terminology, and the conceptual understandings underlying the language that provide more comprehension to what's actually going on.

Ms. Angela Mcguire:

For Dr. Cristina Santamaría Graff, the key to authentic engagement is moving away from only using one-way informing methods of communication to approaches that facilitate two-way communication between families and personnel from the school. Networking is the second level of interaction in the framework and brings the family to the table to engage in a two-way conversation.

Dr. Cristina Santamaría Graff:

So this is really... Networking is like a first step into beginning that dialogue. And what we have to remember with dialogue, it's both speaking and receiving, it's both giving and receiving, and that's where we need to really move toward.

Ms. Angela Mcguire:

In order to have a meaningful two-way dialogue at the networking level, Dr. Cristina Santamaría Graff explains how it is necessary to have supportive structures such as explicit definitions for language and terminology.

Dr. Cristina Santamaría Graff:

But I want us to just be really open about how we are considering the way in which communication is being brought to the table, orally, visually, through written word, through spoken word, and all the ways that we can provide networks of support like scaffolds around that language to make it more accessible, to scaffold it, to make it more comprehensible, even to differentiate it in ways that are going to make sense from family to family. Through these really intentional ways of bringing forth supportive structures around language, we can also mediate conversations between the families and educators so that comprehension hits at a much deeper level for the families.

Ms. Eliana Tardio:

One essential supportive structure is the participation of qualified, informed, and unbiased interpreters and translators. Portland State University professor Dr. Julie Esparza Brown shares more about what that kind of support should look like.

Dr. Julie Esparza Brown:

Yeah. Interpreters and translators really need to be trained. They need to not just be able to interpret IEP into EPA in whatever language. That makes no sense. Jargon is jargon in any language. So they really need to be trained to help with the basics, understand the basics of special education, and trained to understand that they can ask the professional for clarity around when they know something is just not going to be understandable to families.

Ms. Eliana Tardio:

But the two-way communication goes beyond just interpretation and comprehension. Dr. Esparza Brown introduces us to the third level of interaction, collaborating, which involves working with families at all levels as a part of the team, whether in the development of their child's IEP target setting within the SPP/APR or planning a school event.

Dr. Julie Esparza Brown:

So we're moving the dial, engaging people, and trying to do something of value, and working together around the issues. As our theme has been thus far, communication is what is critical, establishing relationships, taking the time to really form meaningful relationships so that then families feel that they can trust in the communication that's happening and that they're a part of it.

Ms. Angela Mcguire:

To create truly collaborative opportunities to work together, it is also important to include community partners and other education entities such as parent centers and culturally-specific agencies. They can help us understand key differences in our knowledge or beliefs as Dr. Esparza Brown explains.

Dr. Julie Esparza Brown:

It should include those communities to help us co-construct a plan that is centered on the needs of the child, the multiple needs of the child and their cultural background, and their home, their life experiences, their languages, particularly when they're an English learner. Are we giving them the opportunity to continue to develop their home language? And often, we're not. So all of these discussions need to occur with the team that includes, like I say, not only families but the communities that understand the cultural and linguistic nuances of our families.

Ms. Angela Mcguire:

To support collaboration, school leaders and teachers must address all factors that could get in the way of family and community engagement. For example, they may consider blocking extra time for interpretation, scheduling meetings outside of the workday, and providing accessible information about parental rights and responsibilities, which are often written at the college level.

Ms. Eliana Tardio:

The final stage, transforming, expands beyond collaborating. As the school leaders and teachers partnered with families and community members to set a vision and accomplish the work, Dr. Santamaría Graff talks about the importance of not only listening to families but integrating what they have to say.

Dr. Cristina Santamaría Graff:

But the transforming level is really about not only listening to what families have to say in a very active way, like really listening, but integrating what they have to say into the decisions made for their child in a way where families are even driving some of those decisions about their child's educational and academic and overall wellbeing, their trajectory.

Ms. Eliana Tardio:

In transformative engagement, families and community members are seen as equals who are critical to success and can easily find entry points into the system. Dr. Esparza Brown describes it as a multi-directional wheel with no dial.

Dr. Julie Esparza Brown:

Where everybody has equal power, it's not top-down communication. It really is about communication where anybody can begin the communication, we have processes and procedures where there are interpreters available when needed, and the student is at the center of this, so making sure that we always have the student as our center, and that the communication includes the student, and about the student, and again, everybody has a voice and an equal voice. So such multi-directional communication then is what we really need for this transformative engagement because everyone is an equal partner, they work to change the system, and they're a critical friend.

Ms. Angela Mcguire:

At the transforming level, families and community members are a crucial part of the system. But to ensure families are authentically engaged, there need to be certain conditions in place on both the side of the family and the school or system. The Dual Capacity-Building Framework is based on existing research and practices and helps us establish the goals and conditions necessary to achieve effective family engagement. We discussed the two essential conditions laid out in the framework in our conversation today, but make sure to check out dualcapacity.org to explore it in more depth. First are the process conditions, which are the mindset shifts that are key to the design of any initiative that aims to build capacity for family and school partnerships. Thought leader and longtime National Parent Center Director, Debra Jennings, shares more about what that looks like.

Ms. Debra Jennings:

At the foundation, it's about mutual trust, it's about strength-based thinking, and strength-based mindsets, and looking for how are we going to look at the child, the family, and also, the community in terms of what each brings to the engagement, what each brings to the school, what each brings to the classroom, what each brings to the community, the school, the state, the district.

Ms. Angela Mcguire:

Other process conditions mentioned are cultural responsiveness, respect, and humility,

Ms. Debra Jennings:

Cultural humility because we know that in many of our schools, the professionals, the staff do not reflect the cultures of the children. So it's important for those of us who are in these places where we are different in culture that we look at our own culture, not as what should be happening for everyone that everyone should be of the same culture that we are, and if they're not that, that's a deficit.

Ms. Eliana Tardio:

Dr. María Cioè-Peña, professor at the University of Pennsylvania, expands on what cultural humility means. She says, "We as educators must reflect on our own positionality and acknowledge our outsider status on certain areas of the child's life in order to authentically learn and collaborate with families."

Dr. María Cioè-Peña:

That's right. We are outsiders to communities. We are outsiders to cultural backgrounds. We are outsiders in socioeconomic ways. So it's really important that we create space for understanding where we have shared commonality and where there's also space for us to grow alongside the growth that we believe or perceive that parents need.

Ms. Eliana Tardio:

The Dual Capacity-Building Framework also addresses organizational conditions which ensure that family engagement is embraced across all system and departments, in all strategies, resources, and infrastructure. Mrs. Jennings explains.

Ms. Debra Jennings:

Family engagement needs to be embedded across all of the pieces of education, and it needs to reflect the needs of families and how family and also the strengths of families that they can bring in terms of supporting and building each of those areas, seeing families as co-creators, seeing families as ambassadors and sustainers for the improvements that we are making in our learning and systems.

Ms. Angela Mcguire:

The Leading by Convening and the Dual Capacity-Building Frameworks presented at this session provide important information on how to increase authentic partnership with families and how we can apply these concepts in practical ways. So we recognize families as equal co-creators and experts in the lives of their children. Mireika Kobayashi, Manager of the Department of Student Services at Cincinnati Public Schools, expands on what it means to maintain process and organizational conditions and recognize families as equal co-creators in our system.

Ms. Mireika Kobayashi:

We need to honor what they bring, those funds of knowledge, the wealth of knowledge that they bring, and then we have to make sure that our educational systems are creating welcoming environments for our families, where our families and our communities see themselves and see how they can be those co-creators and see how they can really lead to success for all the students that we serve.

Ms. Eliana Tardio:

Ms. Kobayashi says we need to better understand the perspectives of families beyond just the technical models. Ask them what are their long and short-term goal for their child beyond academics. How do they understand their role in their child's schooling? She shares why these kind of questions are so important.

Ms. Mireika Kobayashi:

So many of our parents that I've worked with, when I ask them to be a equal partner, they have this concept of being that equal co-creator is not something that they experienced in their educational systems in their home country. So we need to make sure that we understand where they're coming from and help them co-create and recreate the systems in which they are equal partners.

Ms. Angela Mcguire:

Parents are not empty vessels. They are experts in the lives of their children, and the family home is a place of learning for their children when not at school. Dr. Cioè-Peña explains why it's important to honor their knowledge and recognize them as complex, multifaceted beings.

Dr. María Cioè-Peña:

Right. So it's important to think of parents in this way, as stakeholders, as members of a child's educational team without whose support the child with cease to grow. So as such, it's important that we think of them as experts, experts of their own children but also of their own sociocultural context and content, and that we think and design of ways to integrate them into our practices in our classrooms and in our schools in ways that position them as equals rather than as guests or visitors. That parent is also an expert on migration, on binational family communication. They are anthropologists who study new communities in order to carve out spaces for themselves. They're explorers looking for reflections of their previous lives in new lands.

Ms. Angela Mcguire:

As experts of their children and their sociocultural context, Dr. Cioè-Peña highlights the importance of involving families in discussions around their specific needs and preferences to actively participate in their kids' education.

Dr. María Cioè-Peña:

Your key audience and your key constituency also holds the answer, and those are parents. Ask your parents, "How do you want to show up? How do you want us to support you so that we can understand that we are mutually in this work of raising this child together?"

Ms. Eliana Tardio:

We want to finish this episode with a powerful quote that serve as a reminder that authentic and meaningful collaboration can make a positive difference in the lives of students with disabilities and their families.

Dr. María Cioè-Peña:

In my experience, the best experiences for my son were when myself, and the teacher, and other partners within the school were able to work together and to really figure out what was better for him and help him get success.

Ms. Eliana Tardio:

When we work with a commitment of honest collaboration and partnership to foster relationships that support families in feeling valued and heard, we see school leaders and teachers investing in tools and strategies that honor the family voice in the education of their children, a voice that is irreplaceable. Because regardless of the accent, language, or cultural background, it brings love, it brings passion, it communicates dreams, and it provides a set of unique information that no assessment or evaluation can capture alone.

Dr. Julie Esparza Brown:

But I think at all levels, we really need to look at our processes, and our systems, and how we create policy and processes and ask ourselves, "Who's at the table? Do we have the voices of the families at the table at all levels?" Because again, we don't know what we don't know. It's in those conversations that then we see where the gaps are in our systems.

Ms. Eliana Tardio:

We all win when we work together. And most importantly, the big winner is the student.

Ms. Angela Mcguire:

That's all for this episode of Pursuing Equity at the Intersection of Language, Culture, and Disability. This podcast summarized the third session in our journey of pursuing equity at the intersection of language, culture, and disability. Up next, we will explore two additional systems elements that are critical to transforming our education systems to improve services for English learners with disabilities, research-informed practice and systems coherence. We hope you join us for these additional discussions. And if you haven't yet, don't forget to listen to our first two episodes, The Foundational Session and Session Two focused on data literacy. Thanks for tuning in. We want to express our deepest gratitude to our thought leaders for their contribution and passion for this work. We're your hosts, Angela McGuire and...

Ms. Eliana Tardio:

Eliana Cardillo. To learn more about the Thought Leaders series and the work of the National Center for Systemic Improvement, funded by the Office of Special Education Programs, or to watch the recording of the full Authentic Engagement of Families, Schools, and Community Partnership session, visit our website at in ncsi.wested.org.