Ms. Swati Guin:

Welcome to the fifth and final episode 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 NCSI's four systems elements, data literacy, stakeholder and family engagement, research informed practice and systems coherence. In this work, NCSI commits to supporting state education agencies or SES and community partners in expanding understanding about the intersection of language, culture, and disability in K-12 education. We identify next steps for SES to enact system improvements 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.

Dr. Kate Nagle:

My name is Kate Nagle and I'm a senior program associate at WestEd. I co-lead NCSI's Systems Coherence Team, which works with center staff and partners to build the capacity of states to develop greater coherence in their systems.

Ms. Swati Guin:

And my name is Swati Gwen. I'm a research associate at the American Institutes for Research and a member of the NCSI planning team for the series. After kicking off the series with a look into the complexities at the intersection of culture, language, and disability, in our foundational session, we committed to dedicating the following sessions to explore the NCSI elements for system improvement one by one. That's how we spent the last three sessions focusing on data literacy, family and community engagement and research informed practice as approaches for improving outcomes for students designated as English learners with disabilities.

Now to wrap it all up, our thought leaders spent the last session of the series, which took place on November 30th, 2022, exploring how systems coherence can break the silos in which English as a second language, ESL, Special Education Services, ESE, and general education tend to operate. We must reimagine new ways to create meaningful collaboration among these departments that serve the intersecting needs of students with disabilities who are English language learners. In this episode, the thought leaders discuss several challenges and barriers to systems alignment. They also identify strategies for strengthening and sustaining systems coherence.

Dr. Kate Nagle:

Let's start by unpacking what we mean by systems coherence. Based on the work of Michael Fullan and Joanne Quinn, NCSI has identified two foundational pieces that make up systems coherence. First systems coherence creates consistency in beliefs, policies, and procedures to ensure shared understanding of the purpose and nature of the work. And second systems coherence involves taking action so all parts of the system are functionally aligned and all participants understand their part in achieving the goal. There are four key elements of systems coherence in education. The first is a shared purpose among all team members, which starts with strong leaders that bridge people and communities together. Speech pathologist Timothy Tipton explains further.

Mr. Timothy Tipton:

I think that the most basic one of what we're talking about today is identifying the students who may or may not have disabilities. Whether you're supporting that at the early multi-tiered systems of support level or you're supporting in the IEP services level or anywhere in between. So what is our purpose of identifying these students and also providing them the proper supports? And really this can only happen if we bring together share perspectives with families, special educators, general educators, language supports really if we want to come together and get to know the whole child. And it's a type of process that I refer to as a transdisciplinary process, it shares these resources. It shares the data and it helps us make these decisions together. So as we work together in developing an IEP and developing those supports, we're building off each other's knowledge and skills.

Dr. Kate Nagle:

When professionals and families share knowledge and skills, they're engaged in the second key element of systems coherence, deliberate collaboration in creating processes and procedures. Mr. Tipton explains more of what deliberate collaboration entails.

Mr. Timothy Tipton:

It starts with purposeful collaboration, whether that's in creating processes, procedures, guidance documents. There are so many crossover procedures that impact so many different levels in stakeholders and professions, whether that's reclassification of students who are English learners, who have disabilities, identification of disabilities, accommodations during our testing. So many of these things we really need to be talking together about in order to find out what are the best practices for these students. And the cross developmental collaboration when we look at these different frameworks, builds off those procedures, those practices, and enhances the systems that we use.

Dr. Kate Nagle:

This collaboration across departments considers students designated as English learners from the get-go with the goal of creating strategic alignment when initially developing new processes within the system. This collaboration also involves examining data through various lenses and intentionally engaging families and communities. The third element is strategic resource allocation and use, especially of staff expertise and efforts. Mr. Tipton explains why this is important.

Mr. Timothy Tipton:

Are we duplicating efforts when we're assessing as well? Are we interviewing the parent, asking the same background questions? Are we putting that same background information in our reports? Maybe instead, we could start to delegate some of those tasks and gather data and share a wider swath of information of unique information that cuts across different contexts. So we're not all looking at the same thing. We share data from multiple contexts and that just provides more holistic and meaningful patterns to make important decisions for our students. And it really feels like when we are duplicating efforts that we may just be over allocating to that type of resource and that just may be perpetuating our inequities.

Ms. Swati Guin:

And the final element is reflection and improvement, which should continually happen at every level. It requires investing in professional learning to build and sustain collaboration and centering the assets and learning needs of the students.

Mr. Timothy Tipton:

Why think of it from multi-tiered systems of support to implementing an IEP support? We're continually monitoring, adjusting our instruction and our interventions, and I know that's happening at different state and district and also school levels.

Ms. Swati Guin:

When attempting to change and strengthen systems, we also need to be prepared for conflicts and challenges that may arise, particularly when we do the necessary work of examining limitations and implicit biases in ourselves and in the systems that we support. We are strengthened when our views are challenged.

Dr. Kate Nagle:

There are several other barriers and challenges that can come up when creating coherent systems that support students designated as English learners with disabilities. Starting at the state level, a recent study found that efforts for coherence can be constrained within the structure, culture, and politics of education systems. For example, state education systems consist of multiple departments which are often siloed rather than working together in tandem. This fragmented approach can be exacerbated by federal funding streams that maintain separate initiatives for general education, special education, and ESL.

Ms. Swati Guin:

State policies inform the work of districts and schools. As we discussed in our first episode on the foundational session, many historical bilingual education were rooted in xenophobia and racism that disrupted services and created misalignment across departments. These misaligned systems can further exclude families and communities by providing conflicting messages that confuse and constrain families' ability to meaningfully be included in their child's education. Educators also receive mixed messages about how to best support English learners with disabilities. One common misconception is that special education trumps English language development for these students.

Dr. Kate Nagle:

While state policy can impact system alignment in districts, there can also be silos within their own instructional programming. For example, educators are influenced by their own specializations and training. Dr. Sara Kangas from Lehigh University describes the challenges this poses.

Dr. Sara Kangas:

A lot of our beliefs that we have as state leaders, as educators intimately connect to our own disciplinary training. So the ways we've been professionally trained are specializations and the frameworks that we use shape the way we see systems, how we understand equity, for example. Or what we think are best practices and services or what do optimal supports look like for these students. Our answers to these questions will likely change depending on our own background in terms of disciplinary training.

Dr. Kate Nagle:

With our beliefs, it is important to examine how we label students and how we value languages. As Kirsi Laine, deputy director of the Language and Culture division at the New Mexico Public Education Department asks.

Ms. Kirsi Lane:

Do we actually value them? How do we see bilingualism and multilingualism? And we can say it's great, but do we really value those as assets? And how do we have our departments set up to support multilingualism or how do we really support that that has its own track? Are we looking that that's a great asset to have when students graduate? What about somebody who is really great at languages, are we really supporting that? So I think there's many ways to look at that value of languages, and it ties to how are we then making sure that English learner students then have their language acquisition services that they need to be successful, whether they're students with disabilities or not.

Dr. Kate Nagle:

Having language development specialists at IEP meetings is crucial for understanding students' language development and exceptional learning needs in a holistic way. But when these systems are separated and act in isolation, we create a specialist model where individual specialists are working with just a subset of the student's needs rather than accounting for the whole child's fuller set of needs.

Ms. Swati Guin:

When students receive multiple separate instructional services, their school day can be highly fragmented, which results in stress for everyone involved, educators, students, and their families. However, when teams work together to intentionally develop a coherent approach to supporting students and recognize that all students are general education students, they can create a more aligned and effective learning opportunity, as Eliana Tardio, NSCI content specialist says.

Ms. Eliana Tardio:

Services and supports are not meant to segregate, isolate, or label students, but instead they are pieces of the puzzle that connect to maximize the opportunities of all students as general education students first. There are no ESC or ESL or SPED or special education students. We have general education students first and always our students.

Ms. Swati Guin:

So how exactly can we strengthen systems' coherence? One of the most important steps a state can make is to engage in purposeful aligned action through a mission or vision statement. Once that is established, a state can provide capacity building activities that align with their statement, such as a leadership development opportunity and planning for future collaboration. Ximena Hurtado, a teacher in Florida's Lee County School District provides some examples of these capacity building activities.

Ms. Ximena Hurtado:

Building capacity can include understanding where gaps and knowledge occurred around the students designated as English learners with disabilities, and offering professional development and technical assistance to improve the knowledge and actions around that topic. At a local or school level, as samples of capacity building activities can consist of training and mentorship.

Dr. Kate Nagle:

Other parts of the process including improving the knowledge of teachers in how to use evidence-based practices and programs for students who are English learners with disabilities through learning opportunities such as professional learning communities. For teachers to design, review, and revamp lessons together, being honest and transparent about what worked and what didn't. Ms. Hurtado explains what this transparency should look like.

Ms. Ximena Hurtado:

Mistakes will happen, but covering those mistakes or making excuses won't help anyone grow or reach the goal. Transparency help everyone be accountable to our community, our leadership, our teachers and our students. Monitor progress, it is imperative that we make sure that we are constantly assessing whether or not we're still focused on the purposeful action we started the journey [inaudible 00:14:46].

Dr. Kate Nagle:

Building coherence can also include monitoring student progress in ways that consider the whole child. Engaging in continuous correction to make adjustments as needed and using conflict engagement skills like active listening through all of these actions, however, effective communication is at the foundation as Ms. Tardio explains.

Ms. Eliana Tardio:

Creating that pool of resources, sharing responsibility and accountability, working efficiently to avoid duplication of efforts and exchanging information regularly are all actions that happen through open and effective communication. Same thing applies to clean data, to collect data to ensure its authenticity and to be able to interpret that data accordingly we need to communicate effectively as a part of the system. Achieving that consensus among interventionists and services that will allow us to keep a strengthening system coherence for our students designated as English learners with disabilities.

Ms. Swati Guin:

Ms. Hurtado shares how one strategy, the creation of a master schedule helped her ensure students designated as English language learners with disabilities were not just an afterthought.

Ms. Ximena Hurtado:

I believe it's important for our ELA students with disabilities, not to be an afterthought, but include them from the onset. My school, when we start working at our master's schedule, we actually started prior to the next year coming up, we create a list of all our ESC students, our ESL students, ELA students with disabilities, and we work that master schedule around them. So they are like our primary students. And then when we create that schedule, so then instead of just plugging them in after the thought, we consider them first. So then we see where our needs are and where we need to provide more support. And so that's how our master's schedule is created at our school. And I'm part of that because I'm the ESL and ESC rep at our school. So I really hope in which that every school will do that.

Ms. Swati Guin:

From her experience interviewing the director of exceptional programs and the director of multicultural services at a district that successfully built their systems of coherence between the two departments. Senior researcher at WestEd, Dr. Jamey Burho agrees with Ms. Tardio that communication was at the heart of their success. And building on that communication was the relationship and trust the leaders had with one another. After attending IEP meetings every day for a month, the director of multicultural services was the first to recognize how the two departments were so siloed. Dr. Burho explains what she found.

Dr. Jamey Burho:

She discovered that no representative from English Learner Services was attending these meetings, and she also discovered that there was a misconception that special education trumped English Learner Services. And the only reason that she came to those realizations was because she was sitting at those meetings trying to understand what was happening. And based on those insights, she reached out to her counterpart in the exceptional programs, the director, and they sat down and went through every single IEP in the district for students who were duly identified and discovered that only 10% of those IEPs were correctly marked as representing a student who was also an English learner.

Dr. Kate Nagle:

After noticing this separation, the two directors worked on creating incremental changes, which were conveyed through frequent and consistent messaging that made sure everyone understand why these changes were happening. The leaders model collaboration by attending state level meetings together and deliberately modeled this collaboration to state and district leaders. Ms. Laine expands on the importance of this modeling.

Ms. Kirsi Lane:

So when leadership, and to me from the state level, there is that emphasis, deliberate emphasis on collaboration, and that's being modeled. I mean, an example could be when there are state plans done or strategic plans, so how do we pull every department into it? And then making sure that then once we have a final output, that everybody's voice has been in it. But it starts with a modeling or in the district level, they modeled they were everywhere together, right? So that when we have statewide meetings, we also overlap. So when leadership, and to me from the state level, there is that emphasis, deliberate emphasis on collaboration, and that's being modeled. I mean, an example could be when there are state plans done or strategic plans, so how do we pull every department into it? And then making sure that then once we have a final output, that everybody's voice has been in it. But it starts with a modeling or in the district level, they modeled they were everywhere together, right? So that when we have statewide meetings, we also overlap.

Dr. Kate Nagle:

In addition to modeling and communication, the directors empowered speech and language pathologists to use their expertise to ensure students aren't misidentified. With the collaborative relationship they created, they were able to align all services including related services like speech and language, so that students were getting a coherent program of instruction. Ms. Burho shares more about this relationship

Dr. Jamey Burho:

Along with that relationship that these two directors had, the relationship with the students is critical, and the relationship with their school leaders is critical. Be with people was a message that came up consistently in the interview. You've got to be with people. You've got to be in the buildings, you've got to communicate with the families, with the students, with the teachers, and they finished by saying, this really stuck with me at the end of the interview, that with strong relationships, you can move mountains.

Ms. Swati Guin:

Relationships like the one between these two departmental directors does not happen in a vacuum. Meaningful collaboration requires trust, shared responsibility, and clear understanding of each person's role in promoting success for students. Ms. Tardio leaves us with some thoughts about why it is important that we focus on creating an environment that fosters collaboration.

Ms. Eliana Tardio:

As we learn to focus on our students' abilities and possibilities as individuals, it's important that we apply the same logic to our relationships as professionals and pieces of the system. Because we all have talents and unique capabilities. Communication is an investment that is going to allow us to do more with less, to eliminate distractions and many times misunderstandings and to keep learning together as we adapt and stay flexible and resilient through the ever-evolving systems. As Dr. Brut says, "Let's make meeting engines of success so we all have opportunities to contribute and find ways to collaborate."

Dr. Kate Nagle:

As we've discussed in this episode, a lack of coordination and communication at the intersection of our general education, special education and English language development systems often leads to fragmented services for English learners with disabilities. This can be especially true for large state systems with multiple siloed departments, misaligned systems and specialists working in isolation. In the foundational webinar in this TLC series, Dr. Alfredo Artiles cautioned that intersectionality is an issue rooted in our institutional structure. In this episode, we've discussed some solutions for overcoming these institutional intersectional problems and transforming our systems to create coherence. The backbone of this approach is to center students and align our systems around a shared purpose for serving English learners with disabilities. Leaders at every level, state, district and school can achieve this functional alignment by developing a strong vision statement for serving these students and modeling into departmental collaboration. Through clear and consistent messaging, leaders at every level can establish consistent policies and procedures for aligning services and avoid duplication of effort.

Leaders can also support professionals by making their roles and responsibilities clear and providing ample opportunities for professional learning, sharing expertise, and meaningful collaboration. Family engagement is also critical to these collaborative conversations. Since families offer invaluable knowledge and insight about their child's evolving strengths and learning needs. At the school level, leaders can increase alignment by first considering the needs of English learners with disabilities when scheduling instructional services. Finally, policies for aligning services must account for the immense cultural and linguistic assets of English learners with disabilities. One powerful way to recognize students' language skills and to meet their language learning needs is to include a language development specialist in IEP meetings. Educators can value students' cultures and multilingualism as immense assets as part of IEP development and take care that all subsequent instruction is coherent and aligned with students strengths and learning needs.

Ms. Swati Guin:

And that's all for this series. Thanks for tuning in. We want to express our deepest gratitude to our thought leaders for their contribution and passion for this work. We are your hosts-

Dr. Kate Nagle:

Kate Nagle.

Ms. Swati Guin:

And Swati Gwen. To learn more about the Thought Leader 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 systems coherent session, please visit our website at ncsi.wested.org.