The Think Inclusive Podcast

Season 9, Episode 6

Jenna Rufo | Using Inclusion as a Framework to Build Equity and Support All Students

Tim Villegas (00:00):

Honestly, it's embarrassing how many times I thought about giving up. In the next few months, Think Inclusive will turn 10 years old. And when I first started, I think I had the faint hope that it would turn into something I could do every day, but never considered it a true possibility. A few years ago, I was at Georgia state university for the screening of Dan Habib's film, "Intelligent Lives." And there was a meet and greet with Dan after the film. Dan had been on the podcast a couple of times to talk about his films, but we had never met in person. And we had a chance to talk and I remember him asking me, "So how is Think Inclusive going, are you doing this full time?" And I said, "Hah! I wish. For now, I'm just doing this on my free time, nights, weekends, and holiday breaks."

Tim Villegas (00:58):

And I don't think Dan knows what that comment meant to me. And here's where I'm going with this. He thought that what I was doing was good enough for it to be my full-time job. And you know what, there are countless others that have given me encouragement along the way, to the people who reply to the Weeklyish, to those who give reviews on Apple podcasts, to the personal emails I get thanking me for what I do. And I appreciate all of you so much. It's sometimes hard to know the impact you're having when you're a communicator. You know, there are numbers of downloads and email open rates and social media engagement. But my favorite kind of data is getting a message from one of you that Think Inclusive has helped you become a better advocate, educator, or human being. So thank you. Thank you. Thank you. From the bottom of my heart. I didn't want another episode to go by without telling you that. My name is Tim Villegas, and you were listening to the Think Inclusive podcast presented by MCIE.

Tim Villegas (02:14):

This podcast exists to build bridges between families, educators, and disability rights advocates to create a shared understanding of inclusive education and what inclusion looks like in the real world. To find out more about who we are and what we do, check us out at thinkinclusive.us, or on the socials: Facebook, Instagram, or Twitter. Also, take our podcast listener survey. Your responses will help us deliver and develop a better podcast experience. Go to bit.ly/TIPodcastSurvey to submit your responses. That's bit.ly/TIPodcastSurvey. We appreciate it.

Tim Villegas (03:05):

Today on the podcast, we interview author, educator, and consultant Jenna Rufo about her book, "Reimagining Special Education" and how we can use inclusion as a framework to build equity and support all students. We also discuss what it looks like for students who are not included 80% or more of

their day in general education. And if there's a bare minimum to what we call inclusive education. We are so glad you're listening. And now our interview with Jenna Rufo.

Tim Villegas (03:41):

So today on the podcast, we have Dr. Jenna Rufo, who is an experienced public school leader turned inclusive education consultant. Jenna founded empowerED School Solutions to support school districts with implementing inclusive education. And Jenna was inspired to enter the field of education by her sister, Nina, who has multiple disabilities. She views education as her calling and it is passionate about providing quality programs for all students. Welcome to the Think Inclusive podcast, Jenna.

Jenna Rufo (04:16):

Thank you for having me, Tim.

Tim Villegas (04:18):

So we're really excited about you being here. I would love it if you could maybe just tell us a little bit about yourself and how you would describe your role over the last few years in implementing inclusive education.

Jenna Rufo (04:35):

Sure. Great. Well, as you said, my sister Nina, she inspired me to enter special education. Nina has some significant disabilities and I think growing up, she really had an impact on me because you know, at that time there were not necessarily all of the laws that we have today or they weren't at least being regulated the way that they are now. And I just saw a lot of injustices that Nina experienced. So from that I went into special education and elementary education and I did my first teaching job in Massachusetts. And my role there was as an inclusion facilitator and this was 20 years ago. And I point that out because 20 years ago, when I started with that role as an inclusion facilitator, the district that I was in had been doing it for a long time. So there are parts of the country where this is nothing new.

Jenna Rufo (05:25):

So I did start my career there. I managed services for students who had significant disabilities at a public middle school so that they could be included in general ed. And then when I moved back to Pennsylvania, where I'm from, I felt a little bit like I had stepped back in time because I was very surprised that the practices here were still really segregating students. So from that I decided you know, that I wanted to pursue my administrative certification and I did. And then I became a special education administrator and then a director. And in that role for a large school district, I led the transition of special ed from a system of mostly self-contained classes to much more inclusive one. And then prior to leaving to my consultant role now, I was assistant superintendent. So I was able to see that change through at different levels. So, you know, I experienced it as a teacher and then I also was able to lead that change. And now the work that I do with school districts across the country through empowerED is really in supporting them to create more inclusive schools.

Tim Villegas (06:33):

I also, you know, didn't put this in your bio, but you wrote a book.

Jenna Rufo (06:37):

I did, yes.

Tim Villegas (06:41):

And I do, and we're going to talk about it, but I also I'm not sure if I'm going to edit that or not, but we definitely want to make sure that you get a chance to talk about "Reimagining Special Education the book that you wrote with Julie Causton. So let's talk a little bit about why you felt the need to write re-imagining special education. So when COVID hit, educators knew, you know, something needed to be done to support students with disabilities. Was this the reason why you wrote it, or was this something that you had already been working on?

Jenna Rufo (07:28):

I think it was partially the reason. And I say partially because the reality is that it's something that I have been thinking about for a very long time. And it's very clear to me that special education has needed to change for a long time, because despite all of these decades of laws that we have saying that students need to be included, and this plethora of research indicating that students with disabilities are best served in general education, the separate programming persists. And, you know, that said, while things have needed to change for quite some time, I think that the need is even more urgent now, because if we think of kids who have been out of school or have had these interrupted experiences over the past year and a half, we have students returning to us now who perhaps they might not have had their most basic needs met or they have limited parental support at home for virtual learning and no judgment there because I lived that and it's really hard.

Jenna Rufo (08:26):

You know, parents are working at home or they're frontline workers and, and it's a challenge. And then, you know, we have students who are school avoidant or truant, or have school anxiety that are now coming back. And in many ways have had those fears reinforced. And then our students with disabilities and our students with limited English proficiency, who just didn't have access to as rich an experience as they might've had. And then on top of that, you know, you can think of the students who worked ahead, or those who were really supported, or those who preferred the online learning environment. And you know, we have now this very wide range of skills in classrooms, the social emotional needs, and then trauma from the past year and a half. And if special education is the only prescription for support, then that system is going to become really overwhelmed.

Jenna Rufo (09:15):

And we're seeing more behavioral concerns and mental health challenges. But what I like to point out is that the same, nothing new, right? So we have always had a wide range in our classrooms. We've always had social emotional needs and behavioral needs and kids who maybe are on the margins of what we consider to be "average." And I say that with quotes. So I think that really it's a systemic issue. And while COVID could really be an impetus for some positive change, this is not the result of COVID, you know, and nor is it the result of the school board, the teachers, the administrators, the government, the economy, the students. This is the system that we have been in for a very long time. And we have this unique opportunity right now to really press pause and reset and to think what has always worked in school for students and what has never worked and what do we need to do to make it better for everybody.

Tim Villegas (10:10):

So, Jenna, what does it mean to reimagine special education?

Jenna Rufo (10:16):

So I think when we use this moment in time, I like to use that word, that "re" prefix a lot, right? So re-imagine, so it's this idea of restoring our students and in my book with Dr. Julie Causton, "Reimagining Special Education," we talk about how to look at our students to see their gifts rather than their deficits, and then design experiences recognizing that inherent potential, and then building upon their strengths. It's about redesigning instruction so that we have meaningful, differentiated tasks for students and multiple ways for them to demonstrate their knowledge. I think it also means restructuring intervention and enrichment. And when I think of the intervention and enrichment services that we have, they're really based on these artificial labels of special education. And if you're special ed, you go down the hall with this teacher or if you're an English language learner, then you see the ESL teacher, or if you're gifted, you know, you get to do something really fun and exciting, but it might not necessarily have anything to do with the curriculum with the gifted teacher.

Jenna Rufo (11:23):

So we assign these services based on these artificial labels. So it's about breaking down those walls between special education and general education and all of the other support systems and figuring out how can we maximize the talents of our staff so that all students have the opportunity to receive intervention or enrichment when they need it. Because really, you know, there are always times when someone is going to need a little more help or when someone is going to need a little more extension. And then I think it's also about reconceptualizing equity. So looking at disability as another form of diversity, and something that's just a natural part of the human condition rather than something that is special or that needs to be fixed.

Tim Villegas (12:08):

I love how you include equity into the conversation. Has it been your experience especially talking now about inclusive education like has equity always been there and now we're just kind of paying attention to it or is it like, how does that, how has that connected?

Jenna Rufo (12:35):

Yeah, so I think unfortunately often disability is not included in these equity conversations and I actually heard of a superintendent and I was flabbergasted to hear this, who said, you know, they were starting this diversity equity and inclusion task force. And he said, well, I don't really want to use the term inclusion because that implies special education. And I just couldn't get over it. And I thought, of course that implies special education. Right. So we really, when we're thinking about disability in the context of equity, we want to look at it as just another form of difference and diversity. So rather than seeing disability as something that's separate, just looking at it as something that's part of who someone is and, and what makes them who they are. And, you know, just like we wouldn't segment or stratify or segregate students based on race or gender or other characteristics, we shouldn't be doing that for students with disabilities.

Tim Villegas (13:35):

So when you wrote the book and you're kind of explaining this, the reimagining right, what do you feel like was the most glaring aspect of education that needed to be reimagined?

Jenna Rufo (13:51):

Oh, that's a good one. So in terms of the most glaring aspects, I think it really is related to placement practices for special education. When we're talking special education, at least, you know, there's certainly a lot of other things that we would need to reimagine as well. But the default, rather than being that we need to go to a separate place, the default should be general education. And there is a preference in the law for that as well, and with good reason, because there's a lot of research that supports that, you know, this is the most effective setting for students. So I think when we're reimagining, a big part of that is shifting our belief system from the belief that students need to leave to learn, or they have to go somewhere else to get what they need. I hear that a lot. That we can provide them what they need within the context of general education.

Jenna Rufo (14:46):

And I think that the reason that that is so hard for people to conceptualize sometimes is because it does require change. It requires change in teaching practices in terms of having much more interactive things for students to do using stations, differentiating instruction, having modified materials that stand and deliver type of instruction or call and response where students sit and raise the hand. And then the teacher calls on them. The reality is that that doesn't work for a lot of students and it really doesn't work for students with disabilities. And, you know, I would challenge that it's effective for many because while you might not see students outwardly misbehaving when they are in those models, I don't know that they're really engaged. So it's really about making those classrooms more engaging, more inclusive so that students can learn to their highest potential alongside their peers in general education.

Tim Villegas (15:43):

Do you think that's why it's been so hard for systems to change is because I mean, it actually requires them to do some work?

Jenna Rufo (15:58):

I think that's part of it. And I think most teachers want to do well by students, right? So nobody goes into this thinking, you know, I'm just going to phone it in. You know, I, I went into education because I like kids. I care about them and I want to help them. And I think to me, where I see it breaking down the most is that belief system piece. Because I've thought a lot about this. And why, despite all these laws aside, all this research, do we still have these separate programs? And the belief systems are less malleable. So I think, you know what I would say to someone who is not sure about is this something that I want to do is to really go into it with an open mind and an open heart, because I can teach anyone a skill.

Jenna Rufo (16:47):

So I can provide you professional development on co-teaching or differentiated instruction or universal design for learning. And we can provide you with all of those skills. We can provide you with time to collaborate with your colleagues, but we can't necessarily get at those belief systems as easily. So I would tell people, you know, suspend your judgment and just give it a try. And not a half-hearted attempt, but really go into it thinking I want to make this work. This might be a challenge to the way that I have thought previously or the way that I have taught. But I'm going to try it. Because I think to me, the beliefs are the biggest barriers to effective implementation.

Tim Villegas (17:29):

How did you handle that when you were a district leader? How did you navigate that? Because I know that I'm sure that that's something that you came across.

Jenna Rufo (17:43):

Absolutely. I think from a district standpoint, one of the most important places to start is with your district administrative team. Because, you know, they say the vision it comes from the top and you really need to have all of your team on the same page. And, you know, I was in a central office position and it would be very easy for me to say, this is what we're doing, but the reality is that the principals in those buildings and the other special education administrators, they have to carry that out. So I think first you really have to have a solid understanding and foundation with your leadership team, because they're the ones that are going to get the questions, initially at least. And then I think when you're interacting with teachers, it is a bit about challenging the belief system. So, you know, we can provide them as much training as possible.

Jenna Rufo (18:35):

We can do put supportive structures in place like collaborative planning time or have time for them to problem solve. But we do need to really navigate some of those challenging conversations. And this type of change for many systems is foundation shaking change, right? Because it's challenging what we think about students and where they are best educated. So as leaders, I think that there is an element of support and listening and really having those conversations with your staff to bring them along. And I think for me, my goal was always, I want to reach the tipping point. So I know that not everybody is going to think that this is a good idea, right. But I need to get as many people believing to start shifting the culture. And then when there comes a point, you know, several years down the road, when you still have staff that's not necessarily in it, then that's when you have to have some challenging conversations of, you know, is this the place for you?

Jenna Rufo (19:39):

And that's really a hard conversation to have, but one of the things you can also do is really look to hire compatible staff. So as that staff turns over, making sure that we're bringing people in who believe in that vision. And you know, I think it gets to that point where, of course you want commitment but you have to comply as well. Right? So the goal is commitment, but there comes a point when, you know what, I will take compliance because I have done all these things for you for several years. And, you know, maybe I'm never going to bring you along, but if you can give it a shot and you're going to do what I'm asking you to do in terms of working with these students, then, you know, then that's okay, because you're just not going to get everybody

Tim Villegas (20:23):

I'm wondering if you could help our listeners visualize, like, even in an inclusive school district that's doing their best to provide inclusive practices. What does it look like for the kids that aren't in there 80% of the day? I know I didn't ask, I didn't prep you for this question. I apologize. But it was something that I was thinking about. Because I think it's important for, I think it's important for educators and parents who really do want to see inclusion move forward where they're at, but they don't quite get, they just can't visualize what it is cause they're in a segregated system. You know what I mean? So can you walk us through a little bit?

Jenna Rufo (21:10):

Yeah. So I think two questions. So the first one being, what does it look like for those kids who aren't included, or aren't included for most of their day, at least? So the federal indicator that is reported on is the percentage of kids with disabilities who spend 80% or more of their time in general education. And so the federal government is really looking to see how many kids with disabilities are included in the classroom for the majority of the day. So the students, I think, you know, in that 10% of highly inclusive schools that, you know, they're not at a hundred percent they might be at a, what we call a Pennsylvania supplemental level. So part of the time in special ed part of the time in gen ed, and I think for those students, for me at least, the goal was always inclusion.

Jenna Rufo (21:59):

So the goal is always to get them in. And I know one of the, one of the things that we're seeing a little more frequently now, which I don't necessarily think is a bad thing is, you know, we have students who are coming returning from mental health placements or residential settings for significant emotional needs. And sometimes they need a little step down before just kind of being you know, back into a huge public school. If we're in a really highly restrictive setting through insurance because of behavioral or emotional needs. So sometimes we're seeing some of these step-down programs that help facilitate that transition. And I think for students with emotional needs, I would always rather see them in that type of environment then, you know, we just kind of put them right back in right away. And then a month later they're out again or they're in a separate placement. So I think that for those students that are not included 80% or more of the day, we want to look at, is there a transition plan to facilitate them going back in?

Tim Villegas (23:06):

Yeah, I think that's important for people to hear. You know, again, I wanted to hear people address that, you know, when I was a special education teacher working in a school district that was, you know, like at 60% and just could not even like... 90%, what does that even look like?

Jenna Rufo (23:33):

Yeah. And I think Tim, so to that second question that you had asked, what does it look like? So that's where it gets really tricky because people can't imagine, well, how can this student with down syndrome possibly be included in general education? And what about the specialized supports or the other things that they need? And so the way that I see it is rather than, you know, we build these special ed classrooms and we fit students into the classroom. So if you don't fit in gen ed, then you could fit in the special ed class. We design the schedule and the program around the student, and you wrap those services around the student. So if a student needs 30 minutes of intensive reading intervention, because of course we want children to learn how to read, right? Intervention doesn't need to come at the expense of inclusion.

Jenna Rufo (24:21):

How can we schedule that to maximize their time in general education? So is there a school-wide intervention and enrichment block where that's a time that anybody can get support where that student could receive it? Or I think it's also about looking at what are the individualized goals for those students? So a lot of times I think teachers just need reassurance and permission that every student who has a significant disability, the expectation is not that they are going to keep up with everyone else, that here are our targeted goals for that child. And here's how we're going to modify the material with the

support of your special education team or inclusion specialists so that student can be meaningfully included. So rather than trying to fit the student into these predesigned boxes of this is the general ed class. You don't fit in. Then, you go to special ed. Really looking at how do we wrap the service around the students so that those students who have more significant disabilities can be in general ed.

Tim Villegas (25:21):

If you're an educator or an administrator that are listening to this conversation I want to just highlight what Jenna said about the, that specialized intervention block, because guess what you're probably already doing that. Probably already have. You probably already have, if you're in a high school, you probably had an advisement block or some sort of intervention block, or, you know, they've got all these really cool names now, you know, as far as the times of day that people get, you know, a little bit more. And those are the times when you can have someone with an intellectual disability get, a specialized, you know, highly special needs specialized intervention. That's when they can get it and it doesn't have to, they don't have to be removed from a regular class or you know, the life of the community or the school. So thank you for mentioning that, Jen, I really appreciate that.

Tim Villegas (26:26):

Inclusive education is often misunderstood a lot. A lot of times, we just, we're not really even talking about the same thing. When I'm saying inclusive ed, you know, everyone thinks all kids in one classroom all the time no matter what, everyone's doing the same thing, stuff like that. But is there a bare minimum to inclusive education? You know, there's, there's a lot of things like if, if a school district is implementing inclusive education, you know, they're implementing a lot of a lot of things, but is there a bare minimum to that that we can say, yes, that's inclusive.

Jenna Rufo (27:06):

So I love that question. And I want to answer it by sharing this story with you of this amazing behavior analyst who I worked with. And she was doing a training for staff on inclusive behavioral supports and was getting a lot of questions like, well, why are all these kids with behaviors in my class? Or why are these kids who don't speak English in my class? Or why are all these kids with autism in my class? And her response was brilliant. And she said, they're in your class because they live here. So the bare minimum to being included in a classroom in a public school is that you live in a district. So it's not up to the students to prove that they could be meaningfully included or that they can hang in gen ed, it's up to us to figure out how we're going to reach them.

Jenna Rufo (27:52):

And, you know, when I say that, I don't mean, of course, that, you know, don't give teachers any supports or don't provide differentiated materials. Of course you need all of those things. But I think that we have to stop thinking that this is a choice and that it is something that we can decide whether a student is worthy of being included in general ed or they're not. So the default assumption is that they live here and they're going to be in general education, and we are going to do our best and put as many supports as possible for them and for our teachers to make them successful.

Tim Villegas (28:29):

That's great. They live here. Well, we could go on about that. So I want to get back to the law. I mean, do you think that, do you think that the law needs to be changed? Like it's, I mean, it's been a while since we've even, since Congress has even considered it. Right. But, you know, I've talked with a few different

people about this idea, you know, about continuum of placements being a barrier, right. I mean, it's in the law, but it does give everyone an excuse to say, well, they belong somewhere else.

Jenna Rufo (29:18):

It absolutely does. And what frustrates me when I hear that, you know, we need a continuum of services or a continuum of placements justification for why we shouldn't move forward with inclusion or why a student should not be in general education. It is an excuse. And really the cornerstone of the law of IDEA is this idea of least restrictive environment, which is the general education classroom. But instead we have latched on to this concept of continuum of placements to justify what our current practices are. So I think that the law is certainly it needs to be re-looked at. Last re-authorization was 2004. I don't know that the fundamental cornerstones of the law need to change because I think they're there and they support inclusion, but I think the accountability piece and the way that we are monitoring for LRE, that that certainly needs to change.

Jenna Rufo (30:18):

And one thing that I will share with you. So, you know, as a leader in an inclusive district, we had many families that would move to the district. And what that does, and of course we would welcome them with open arms but there is a financial component to that. And so then their district that they came from that was not as inclusive continues being not inclusive. And then the systems that are overwhelmed. So to me, money talks. And I think, you know, we fund schools and provide funding through IDEA that there should be some type of accountability piece there where if you're not meeting your LRE targets, then you get less funding. And I think we would see a lot more changes if that were the case, because as it stands now, you know, you get a corrective action letter and a slap on the wrist, put together a plan and, you know, maybe you'll meet that threshold. Maybe you won't. And if you don't, there's really not a big consequence. So I think looking at that more innovatively and creatively would support some more inclusive practices.

Tim Villegas (31:23):

I love that idea because I don't know this number off the top of my head, but I would say most states aren't meeting their LRE, you know, target. And they set the target.

Jenna Rufo (31:38):

Right. And the other piece, Tim, is even those ones that are, we need to disaggregate that data, because what happens is you have either certain levels. So, you know, perhaps middle school or high school might be more inclusive, which kind of seems counterintuitive, but they might be more inclusive because they're implementing co-teaching than their elementary. So their average brings everybody up. Whereas we have to really start looking at systemically across the system by grade level and by disability category, where are students being included and where aren't they. And for our students who have intellectual disabilities, I mean, their inclusion rate is just dismal. It's in the teens, I believe, in terms of the percentage of time that they spend 80% or more in gen ed. So I think it's also looking at that, that data and disaggregating it to determine where do we need to improve?

Tim Villegas (32:34):

Yeah. Yeah. So there's a district here in Georgia that has a very high LRE rate, I mean, like 90%. But when you dig down students with autism and intellectual disabilities are continually being segregated into

special education classrooms. So it's, it's interesting to me that you can have such a high percentage yet still be segregating students by disability.

Jenna Rufo (33:13):

Right. And I think that goes back to the belief system piece. Well, they can't do it, or they won't get anything out of this. And our students who have more significant disabilities in many ways, they have to prove that they can benefit from general education where you know, nobody else has to say, I deserve to be in gen ed because, you know, X, Y, or Z, whereas we have students with disabilities who we make these assumptions, well, what could that student possibly get out of this? Or, you know, what could the student possibly learn from you know, learning about FDR in history class? Well, what does anybody learn from that? So it's really that we have decided that this is the curriculum that holds value. And schooling is more than just acquiring that information, right? So it's about being a member of a community. It's about problem-solving and developing your critical thinking skills. And you don't get to do that when you get pulled out.

Tim Villegas (34:11):

Do you have any thoughts about neighborhood schools or homeschools? Cause again, a lot of districts will cluster services, you know? And I, I understand why it's not, you know, I understand why because of resources and, and stuff like that. But was that something that you came across when you were at north Penn? Did you, you know, how did you navigate that?

Jenna Rufo (34:41):

Yeah, so absolutely. And you know, the preference should always be that the students in the neighborhood school that should be where we start, because that's where their natural supports in the communities are. So, and when I say natural support, that's what are the existing resources? So, you know, if I am a first grader with significant disabilities, I have friends on my street that I see and I need to go to school with them. So as I grow up, they serve as my natural supports. So I think that the preference for the neighborhood school is important. And I think that there tends to be a reliance on clustering when we have these separate programs. Because if we continue to stratify students by disability category and say, well, we're going to have our autistic support program here. And multiple disabilities is in this building and life skills is in this building, but when we start breaking them down, then there's really no reason to go to another building.

Jenna Rufo (35:36):

Now structures need to be put in place to make that effective. I had mentioned early on that my first career was as a first position was as an inclusion facilitator. And I really believe in that model because you have someone who is a support within the building for your students who have more significant needs, and they work behind the scenes. So they work with the teachers to modify, they provide behavior support. And that I think is really key to sustainability and to keeping kids in their home schools, because it's in many ways unrealistic to think that a special ed teacher who is co-teaching all day or who is in the resource room all day is also going to have the time to modify all the curriculum for a child with significant needs.

Tim Villegas (36:25):

I'm so glad you brought that up because again, if you're an educator or administrator and you're hearing Jenna talk about an inclusion facilitator, really, you know, those district level support people that you

have that are quote unquote behavior specialists or instructional support specialists, all of those people can be inclusion facilitators, cause that's essentially what you did, right. I mean, you I mean I dunno, I guess I'm putting words into your mouth, but like, in that, in the position of an inclusion facilitator, you know, what did that look like? Were you supporting behavior as well, were you supporting a curriculum? Like, was it more segmented or did you have other positions that, that supported those things?

Jenna Rufo (37:08):

Right. So in actually in the book that Julia and I wrote, we have a whole chapter on inclusion facilitation, and we've proposed three different variations on it. And the reason that we propose these different variations is because it's really dependent on the students and the school. So the first variation would be building level. And the building level facilitator has more of a caseload of students who she keeps an eye on, but she's a support more to all of those teams. So this is helpful in a school that maybe has already begun with inclusion and they're well, on their way, the teachers might just need some coaching. And the building level that teacher would sit on either the data team or the leadership team or MTSS team to really look at those pre referrals as well. So if we're having kids who maybe are exhibiting behavior challenges, what can be done to support them.

Jenna Rufo (38:06):

So the behavior piece is definitely built into there. Another way to look at it is which students specific. And I think that student's specific facilitation is helpful when you have a cluster of students who have some pretty significant needs. So if you are a school that you know, maybe it's dissolving a life skills class or multiple disabilities class, and those kids are remaining where they are, you might want to look at the student's specific model. And in that model, the inclusion facilitator is paired with a caseload of students, usually about seven or eight who have pretty significant needs. And they work a lot with modifying the curriculum and doing some of those behind the scenes work. And then finally, the third model is more helpful, I believe at the middle and high school level. And that would be content specific. So a content specific inclusion facilitator model is when we would pair an inclusion facilitator with a department.

Jenna Rufo (39:02):

So if you think of a high school level, we have a high school science department. We would have one inclusion facilitator that just works with the science department. And the reason that that's helpful is because particularly as you advance in the grades, the content gets really much more challenging and nuanced. And so to have someone within the special education department who really gets to know the content really gets to know that team of teachers, and they can become those content experts in addition to supporting the modifications. So I think that there's multiple ways to go about it. I wouldn't recommend the content specific at an elementary school or a very small school, just because you won't have enough staff to go around. But there's different ways that you can approach it. And I think you look at who do you have in your building, and then what model makes the most sense?

Jenna Rufo (39:51):

So like I said, we do have a chapter in our book on that with some guidance about when to use which model when not to use it. And I think one thing that I also just want to make clear is that this doesn't mean that you need to go out and hire a ton of new staff members. So what happens when we start dissolving some of these programs and collapsing classes, you start to free teachers up. So rather than

using a special education teacher to instruct a group of students in a separate setting, now that person is available to provide more consultative behind the scenes supports.

Tim Villegas (40:27):

If, let's say I was an educator who wanted to see this change in my school, but didn't know where to start. What kind of advice would you give them?

Jenna Rufo (40:39):

Yeah, so I think the first advice is that you have to speak up and you have to get that courage to say what you believe in and stand behind it, because believe me, the colleagues who don't want to do this are going to speak up. And I think that I would say too, even if your system isn't there yet, you can still make an impact. So start with one. So look at who in my class is leaving me. You know, I'm a general education teacher. Who is leaving me that I really think they could be in here and talk to their teacher, talk to their team, and think about what you can control. And in my work with my co-author Julie Causton, one of the things that she has talked about before is this idea of the starfish story and what the starfish story is.

Jenna Rufo (41:26):

You know, there's this old man he's walking along the beach. He notices this young boy who was throwing starfish into the ocean. And he says, what are you doing? And the boy says, I'm throwing the starfish back into the ocean because the tide is up. And if I don't do it, they'll die. And then the old man says, well, you'll never make a difference for all those starfish. And then he says, I made a difference for that one. And then he picks up another one and throws it. And I made a difference for that one. And I made a difference for that one. So we have all of these starfish and we got to start throwing them back in. So I would say to our teachers who want to see this kind of change, start with one, start throwing them back in and progress will come.

Tim Villegas (42:16):

Why don't we do this? Because I know you have empowerED, and I know you have your book. So if you could spend just a few minutes talking about where people can find you, you know, resources, stuff like that.

Jenna Rufo (42:31):

So if you are interested in learning more about my services or my book, you can find my website at www.jennarufo.com. That's J-E-N-N-A-R-U-F-O.com. And you can also go to bit.ly/ReimaginedBook. And that will give you information on where you can purchase the book. And you can also follow me on Twitter @JennaMRufo. So that's where you can find me.

Tim Villegas (43:04):

So, Dr. Jenna Rufo, thank you so much for being on the think inclusive podcast. We appreciate your time.

Jenna Rufo (43:10):

Thank you so much. I enjoyed it. Thank you for having me.

Tim Villegas (43:15):

That will do it for this episode of the think inclusive podcast. Subscribe to the think inclusive podcast via apple podcast, the anchor app, Spotify, or wherever you listen to podcasts. What do you think about our new podcasts logo design? Email us your feedback at podcast@thinkinclusive.us. We love to know that you're listening. Thank you to patrons Veronica E, Sonya A, Pamela P, Mark C, Kathy B, and Kathleen T for their continued support of the podcast. When you become a patron, your contribution helps us with the cost of audio, production, transcription, and promotion of the think inclusive podcast. And you could even get a shout out like the fine people we just mentioned. Go to patreon.com/thinkinclusivepodcast to become a patron today and get access to all our unedited interviews, including our conversation with Jenna Rufo. Thank you for helping us equip more people to promote and sustain inclusive education. This podcast is a production of MCIE, where we envision the society where neighborhood schools welcome all learners and create the foundation for inclusive communities. Learn more at mcie.org. We will be back in a couple of weeks with a special episode about the self-determined learning model of instruction, or SDLMI. Thank you for your time and attention. Until next time. Remember inclusion always works.

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