



The Think Inclusive Podcast

Season 8, Episode 8

Melissa McCullough | What Inclusive Preschool Services Look Like

Melissa McCullough (00:00):

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Tim Villegas (00:49):

Hello and welcome to season eight, episode eight of the Think Inclusive Podcast presented by MCIE. I am your host, Tim Villegas. This podcast features conversations and commentary with thought leaders in inclusive education and community advocacy. Think Inclusive exists to build bridges between parents, educators, and disability rights advocates to promote inclusion for all students. That's right, y'all. All means all. To find out more about who we are and what we do, go to thinkinclusive.us, the official blog of MCIE, and check us out on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter.

Tim Villegas (01:28):

Now, do you love the Think Inclusive podcast? Because we do, and we want to let you know how you can help us. And there are two ways. Number one, give us a five star review on Apple Podcasts. Perhaps like this one: "I just listened to Lou Brown's episode, the first of season seven, and it was so good I started to take notes. The sad thing is what he astutely knew was wrong in the 1960s is still often what is practiced. Not only that, but as a parent of a child with down syndrome who is fully included in high school, I see regression behind me. I see great sacrifices necessary on the parent's side for inclusion to even be possible. And I see parents actually advocating for separate schools and building separate living options. We need to stop the regression and move forward again together. Thanks for all you do." No, thank you, Miss Ecuador for the review. We appreciate it. Number two, go to patreon.com/thinkinclusivpodcast to become a patron today. Your contribution helps us with the cost of audio production, transcription, and promotion of the Think Inclusive podcast. And when you become a patron, you get access to unedited interviews, live Q and A's, and behind the scenes content. Thank you for helping us equip more people to promote and inclusive education.

Tim Villegas (03:01):

So today on the podcast, we talk with Melissa McCullough, director of early childhood for the East Moline school district in Illinois. And we discuss what a truly inclusive preschool program looks like and

what they are doing to move past the outdated model of providing specialized services in separate places. We didn't get this bit recorded, but Melissa followed up with me just a few days ago, and she said that she was happy to report that her program is starting the 21-22 school year with zero students in self-contained settings or placements. Get ready for a fascinating conversation. Stick around, after the break, our interview with Melissa McCullough.

Tim Villegas (04:01):

Inclusive education is hard work. And for schools and districts that want to be more inclusive, but don't know where to start, it can seem impossible. MCIE can help. We've been partnering with educational systems across the United States and the world for three decades and know how to build systemic inclusive school practices, transform educational services, increase the rate of placement of learners with disabilities in general education, reduce removals and suspensions, and improve outcomes for all students across all school settings. To schedule a free initial consultation and find out how we can help, contact us at mcie@mcie.org or visit our website mcie.org.

Tim Villegas (05:16):

Well, today on the podcast, I would like to welcome Melissa McCullough, who is the director of early childhood for the East Moline school district in Illinois. Hello, Melissa, how are you doing?

Melissa McCullough (05:28):

I'm great. How are you guys? Thanks for having me. It's so exciting.

Tim Villegas (05:32):

Excellent. Well, we're excited too. So to get us started, why don't you tell us a little bit about yourself and the district that you work in?

Melissa McCullough (05:40):

Okay. Well, I'm the director of early childhood for the East Moline school district. And here in East Moline, we're kind of located in the quad cities in Illinois, if anyone's familiar with the quad city area. And we our district is a pre-K through eighth district. So we serve as children from early childhood through eighth grade, and then we feed into a high school. And we have about 2,700 students in our entire district. Our early childhood program serves about 200 kids. And some kind of noteworthy things about our district. We have about 20, I'd say 20 to 23% of our students, our student population is our English language learners. We have a 99% low income rate in our district. So we have a lot of children that come from diverse backgrounds and our special education population makes up about 16% of our district. So as far as early childhood goes, like I said, we serve about 200 students in our program.

Tim Villegas (06:41):

The reason why we wanted you to be on the podcast was we heard about how you started the journey for your preschool program to become fully inclusive. And so I'd love for you to tell us you know, how that got started in your district for preschool and what that looks like.

Melissa McCullough (07:08):

Sure. So, kind of how that got started. Before I came to the East Moline school district, our program, our programming was pretty all or nothing. So our special education supports that we provided for early

childhood students. We had separate classrooms where the special ed population, the special education children were housed. And those, those supports were provided all day in that classroom. And then the other classrooms that we had available were just a general education early childhood classroom. And so we kind of had that all or nothing approach to special education. So in our state, our preschool programming is funded through preschool for all. So that's through the state board of education. And so I would say, I think 2017 is when we had to recompetete for that preschool for all grant. And during that time, they really were pushing for districts to become more inclusive.

Melissa McCullough (08:06):

And so they wanted us to be providing more blended programming options for students and to be considering the least restrictive environment, because that's what we should've been doing anyway. But at that point we really hadn't made that jump. So when we wrote the grant to become more inclusive it was kind of a good catalyst for us to be able to say, this is the time to do it, because if we don't say that we're going to do it, and if we don't build our program to look this way, then we may not be funded. So that was kind of when we made the switch to become more inclusive. And before that, I had a lot of background in early childhood with inclusion. So starting my career as a school social worker in another district, that's all I knew when I came out of college.

Melissa McCullough (08:51):

When I got my master's in social work, I started as a school social worker that was, I worked for a district and that's all they did was inclusion. There was no separate schools, separate classroom, everyone was fully included. And so I think that plays a big part of mindset, attitudes and beliefs, is where you've come from. So for me, that was a big, that was very important for me to try to bring with that that perception to this district that I work for now. So that's kind of how we started, you know, that grant process was the catalyst. And we really just, I had that clear vision at that time I wasn't the administrator of the program. But I had that, you know, that background knowledge. So I really wanted to make sure that I could weave that into my approach and my, you know, the, the way that I could work with, with parents students and teachers to kind of make sure that that mindset sort of trickled down to everyone else.

Melissa McCullough (09:45):

The other thing that was really important back then like I said, it was around 2017, 2018 our special education numbers. So we call that here in our state, it's the indicator six for compliance for our state compliance numbers for special education. Our indicator six data showed that we were over identifying students in a more restrictive environment. And so any time that you're over identifying or over that state average, then you have to do a plan and improvement plan, or your funding is, is changed because you're not providing enough inclusive opportunities for students. So before we made the switch, we were invited every year to re rewrite this plan so that we could make sure that we're following different chains to make sure that we're more compliant in that area. So that indicator six data that was really crucial too, because that's when I could get sort of the administrators and our superintendent to really listen to know that once you tie it to funding or once that, that data is out there and it, and there's a, non-compliance finding sometimes that's when people listen and they think, okay, maybe we should, we should do something different. So besides all of those, you know, factors for me, it's, it was just the right thing to do because that's just all I knew coming from a school social work background.

Tim Villegas (11:05):

Right. So when you talk about it's the right thing to do, so tell us why specifically pre-school, it's the right thing. Why is it so important for students with and without disabilities to be educated side-by-side?

Melissa McCullough (11:23):

Yeah, so it really just, is that perfect opportunity when you think about it, it's the perfect opportunity to build that inclusive mindset to build those perceptions and acceptance among all members in our program or just in life. You know, it's not just about inclusion within preschool, it's about inclusion and how you're building those mindsets in these little, these little sponges that are, you know, they're, they're paying attention to everything. They're paying attention to what their teachers saying and how their teachers are handling students. And I used to say, and someone told me once that, you know, the, the reason why we do it in preschools, because this may be the only time in that child's educational career that they might be included because in the, in their later years, their schedule or their trajectories are already set, you know, they they may always be in a self-contained program or in a life skills program. And so maybe now is the time because they may never get the opportunity.

Melissa McCullough (12:21):

And I don't really agree with that anymore, but it, when I first started, I was kind of like, well, that makes sense. You know, if not now, when? So I do really think that it's, it's something that, you know, we have to do it in preschool. We have to even do it before preschool, but we only have control over when they come to us. So why not start now? Why not start when their brains are ready to hear it, and their bodies are ready to, to feel it. And so for, for sure, it's the beginning, it's the foundation for the rest of the years.

Tim Villegas (12:52):

Were there situations where families would, would come in and realize, Oh, this is an inclusive school, which means my, my student, my child is going to be included with everyone else. Maybe they were expecting a special program or a special class. How did you navigate those conversations with the families?

Melissa McCullough (13:16):

So I actually have a really good example of that. When we did make the shift to being more inclusive one of the administrators at the time had that very concern. She said how are you going to talk to these families that maybe don't want their child, their typically developing child in a classroom mixed in with children with disabilities. And so I listened to what she said, and, and my plan for that year was, at registration, I would have us a table. And when parents came through to register their children, I would show them and talk through them the flyer -- that inclusion brochure that's put out through our state board of education, kind of talks about the reasons why, and how it looks in early childhood. So I would kind of, I would talk to the parents about, okay, I know in the past, this is what our special education programming looked like.

Melissa McCullough (14:06):

This was the makeup of our classrooms, but next year, this year, we're doing something different where we're going to be including all students. And this is how it will look for your child. And I did not have one parent who said, "you know what? I don't know that I like that." Or they didn't have, you know, I didn't have any parents that had any concerns about that, except the parent of the child, whose child, who, the child that was still going to be in a self-contained program. So here I laid out this beautiful vision of

how inclusion was going to look for these kids, for all students. And then when it came down to it, then he was like, that's great. But what about for my child who the team has decided will still be in a self-contained classroom? And I was so glad that he asked that question, and then, you know, of course, as a, as a, an administrator, then you kind of softly remind them of their advocacy skills and to be able to call a IEP meeting so they can talk about that placement decision. But that was the only parent that, that really questioned the inclusion was the parent of the child with a disability who was still being in a separate classroom. So all the other parents were like, this is awesome. He thought it was awesome. And so it was a good reminder and a good conversation to have with that other administrator at the time that actually all parents want this.

Tim Villegas (15:24):

So what does inclusion look like in preschool?

Melissa McCullough (15:27):

Yeah, I can kind of give you a picture. So in our state in Illinois, we have to stay under certain ratios, so we, we can only serve in a blended environment. We can serve 20 children and 70% of those children should be without an IEP and 30% should be, you know, could be up to 30%, could have an IEP. So so that kind of determines, you know, the ratio of what what the class makeup is. In our particular district we've done, we've done a year where we went up to 20 and that was a little difficult on some teachers. So what we've tried to do is we've tried to make sure that we can we have enough para support and we have enough teacher support that can be embedded so that all students have the support that they need.

Melissa McCullough (16:16):

Our teachers are all dually certified, so they have the early childhood endorsement through the state board of education, and then they also have the special education endorsement. So they kind of wear both hats their, the gen ed teacher and the special ed teacher. So they're the ones that are writing the IEP and they're monitoring the goals and they're providing the differentiated instruction. And right now we have on a typical year, a non COVID year we, we would serve about 18 kids 18 students in total, in the classroom with one teacher and one to two paras. So we wanted to make sure that we have enough support with extra hands and being able, if, if we have students that might in traditional years maybe would need like a one-to-one paraprofessional we can do that with, with more people in the room, but maybe not necessarily just the individualized paraprofessional, we like to be able to share them so that so students don't become too dependent on one person in particular.

Melissa McCullough (17:13):

So we kind of have that lower ratio. And the other thing that's really important for us, when you look at kind of how the day looks, is our related service personnel. They push into the classroom. So the related services are provided in the, the, the gen ed or the blended classroom, which was a switch. And that was something that was really hard for some people to make that change. Because sometimes some of those services are more of provided more of like a medical model. So for them, the reduced distractions and pulling them out to a separate office or a separate therapy room was what was, what they thought was the best practice for them. So now the majority of the services are, are pushed into the classroom. So our, we have two speech language pathologists. We have an occupational therapist, physical therapist, we have a school psychologist, a school social worker, a behavior interventionist, and all of those people are working within the classroom to support those students.

Melissa McCullough (18:11):

They may need to provide something, you know a small portion of time outside of the classroom, working on some individualized skills, but for the most part, all of those related services are provided in the classroom. Which is, like I said, that's kind of something that we had to get used to. And now that we've been doing it I think most people realize that therapies and services can be provided in any type of scenario. It's not just a speech and language skills can be worked on during a speech and language session. Those skills can be worked on when students are walking down from the bus and, you know, walking in the hallway or walking outside for gross motor time. So it's, it's really shifted our mindset to have those services available in the classroom.

Tim Villegas (18:59):

Besides the collaboration time that is set aside for staff, are there any other kinds of professional development that you give your teachers and paraprofessionals to facilitate inclusive education?

Melissa McCullough (19:13):

Yes. And I feel like that was one big factor and one big rock that we had to make sure that we planned for as we became more inclusive. So a lot of that work had to be done prior to that inclusion starting. So we had to kind of set the stage. And I feel like before we, we wrote that RFP, before we decided that this, before we rip the bandaid off and said, okay, we're doing it. I kind of would plant seeds about inclusion, you know, and people would kind of roll their eyes and say, "Oh, here she goes again. She's going to be talking about that." Or I would bring in Early Choices or someone, you know, someone that wasn't me just so that they could hear it from another source. And so we did a lot. We, we kind of front-loaded with a lot of professional development before we decided that this was the route that we were taking.

Melissa McCullough (20:02):

So we, like I said, we, I capitalized on our partnerships that were available to us through the state. I had some speakers come in to do some training. I don't know if you're familiar with CARA'S Kit but it's kind of just adapting and modifying the environment for students. We had a training for that. We did trainings for how to write a special education IEP how to maneuver the environment for teachers that were traditionally considered special education teachers, but now had to learn the gen ed environment. So you kind of had to look at both angles and figure out where those needs were. I surveyed staff, you know, I did surveys to make sure that I was meeting their needs when it comes to professional development, because I didn't want it to just be this initiative that they were just, you know, doing, because I said that they needed to do it.

Melissa McCullough (20:55):

So we, we did some heavy professional development with structured teaching. So work baskets transdisciplinary play-based assessment. I, we did some some professional development for our parents, just on the power of play, just how to be able to get down on the floor and play with, with children. We've had Paula clues come in. We've done a lot of work with conscious discipline and that, you know, just really looking at yourself and your own personal mindset, beliefs and attitudes. And so we did a lot of those kinds of things. And like I said, we did some reflection so that, so that our staff members could kind of just, I could kind of take the pulse of where they were and then start there. And so we did a lot of professional and we still do we a lot, a lot of time each year to district initiatives, but also specific to early childhood and inclusion.

Tim Villegas (21:52):

And I'm curious did all of this come from your training? Did you have a mentor that was helping you through this change process? Like where did this come from? Did you just wake up one day like, "I know how to do this."

Melissa McCullough (22:09):

No, no. I mean, like I said when I first started in education as a school social worker, I worked in a program and that's all they did. And so the administrator there I still talk to him to this day, he was a mentor to me and I watched him make it work, you know, and I watched him have this unwavering desire and will to make it work. And so I remember sitting in IEP meetings where myself and the school psychologist would be determining eligibility for a student. And we talk about the placement and we would lay out all of the accommodations and modifications and services that this child would need. And then we would talk about placement and it would be like, okay, well, you know, we're going to do it. We can make it work, no big deal.

Melissa McCullough (22:53):

So I think that's what started it. And then I have three boys that are hearing impaired. So for me, it's what I would want for my own kids. And so that's kind of, that has helped to have that other hat as a parent to know what it's like to be on the other side of the table. So I just, I'm just passionate about it. Cause I think that it's the right thing to do. And I feel like we should have been doing this all along. And I don't know why. I don't know why it's catching, it's taking this long to catch on.

Tim Villegas (23:24):

Is there, do you, I think I know the answer to this, but I'm just going to ask it anyways. Uis there any reason that any other preschool program in Illinois, or the United States for that matter, is there any reason why they can't do what you're doing?

Melissa McCullough (23:42):

No, I don't think there is, but I think that you to have, you have to have the right approach. You have to have the buy-in and you have to have the supports in place for your staff to know that they can do it. And if you don't have, if you don't have somebody at the helm that that is going to, like Mori my mentor, you know, if you don't have more a Mori saying that that's okay, we're going to make it work. We're going to do whatever it takes to make it work. If you don't have somebody that's, that has that passion and that skillset that can do it in a way that's not forceful and it's like, you're putting it out there and then you kind of step back. And it's amazing that before this was my, it was kind of like my baby, you know, before this was, Oh, like I said, here she goes again, and she's talking about inclusion. But now it's amazing to see how now I can kind of step back and everyone else has kind of stepped up to say, wow, like, why wouldn't we do this?

Melissa McCullough (24:37):

And it's happening almost all the time now where our evaluation team will say, you know, in the past we just evaluated this, this child. And in the past, I would have said, this child needs to be in a separate classroom or a separate school because they really need this intense amount of support. But now they're coming and they've had this team conversation and they're like, how can we even say that this child needs a separate classroom or needs that level of support because they've never been in an educational setting before. So aren't we supposed to try least restrictive environment first and then

collect data and then decide if they need to move to a more restrictive environment? Yes. So now it's not me saying it all the time. It's, they've decided, and they figured it out that this is, this is working and it's the right thing to do.

Tim Villegas (25:22):

Yeah. Yeah. That's great. That's great. Let's talk a little bit about barriers. I think you touched on it a little bit from the transition, you know, going into the K-12 or K-8 in your particular situation. What do you think are the biggest barriers to inclusive education?

Melissa McCullough (25:48):

I think it's always just attitudes, beliefs, mindset. I think that you really have to have some hard conversations with your staff and figure out where everyone is as far as their core values and how they feel about this type of service delivery. And I think the amount of supports is definitely a barrier. If you, if you can't equip your people with what they need, whether it's professional development, whether it's, you know, modified seating, adaptive seating, whether it's a different kind of curriculum that they need to supplement with, if you aren't able to provide the tools that they need, then it's probably not going to be as effective. I also, I think another barrier is, you know, administrative support for me, for our district our superintendent, once we started talking about this, and once we started talking about, you know, funding and things like that, he started listening and he started saying, wow, I think that we really do need to make some change here.

Melissa McCullough (26:43):

And so having the support from the district level and from that systems perspective that is crucial as well. So making sure that all of the stakeholders that you need to make it work are all in agreement that it's going to work and it's going to happen. I think the other thing too, with staff and mindset, and to try to get staff to shift in their mindset and their belief system. One thing that we, that we were able to do was we took a road trip. We took a field trip to another school who has been doing inclusion and doing it well for years. And so for me, I needed to like, like I said kind of push it off and let someone else be the talker for a little while. So we took a road trip. I used some of my professional development funds, and instead of going to a workshop, we went a couple hours away to a school near Chicago.

Melissa McCullough (27:36):

So if anybody knows anything about Illinois, we have a city called Chicago here. So we drove to Chicago, we stayed in a hotel, got up the next day and they were able to observe in these beautiful classrooms where they were able to take pictures and get some ideas and strategies and watch it in action. And that's kind of, they needed to see it to believe it, and they needed to hear it, and they needed to hear it from somewhere other than myself. So we did that and then we actually came back and did sort of a presentation to our entire staff because I couldn't take the entire staff so we just took the certified teachers and a couple of related service providers. And so we came back, we created a PowerPoint and showed a bunch of pictures about things that we saw and and great interventions that we were able to see an action.

Melissa McCullough (28:28):

And we presented that to all of the staff. So at least they could see, you know, some pictures and things like that. And then we kind of came up with a list of all right. What, what kinds of things did we see that we think that we could start with now, what kinds of materials do we need to purchase? Cause we've

got money that we can, you know, we can buy things that we think would be super important. So I wanted them to have some ownership in that process. I wanted them to be able to see it in action and then really reflect on what's missing from our program and then kind of, you know, kind of come up with their own plan and solution for how to make it work. So that's kind of how we started with that. And then I think after that, I started to kind of incrementally see that shift in, you know, in mindset.

Melissa McCullough (29:10):

I think the other important piece to know about that visit was that they still kind of came back saying, but we have different kids than they do, or, but they didn't have the same kinds of kids because their kids all, you know, they didn't need as many English language supports or, well, our kids are different. And so they needed to see it from a different lens and then they needed to come back and put it into practice and then see that our kids, you know, really did benefit from the same types of things. So. And they're all our kids and that's kind of the theme that they've kind of, I think, understand now. Is that it's not just their kids, my kids... They're all our kids.

Tim Villegas (29:52):

Anything else that you want to talk about?

Melissa McCullough (29:57):

Yeah, I would just, can I give a little plug for Early Choices?

Tim Villegas (30:03):

Absolutely. Yes.

Melissa McCullough (30:03):

If you're in the state of Illinois and you have not partnered with [Early Choices](#), they are a fantastic resource. They will help you. They will come to your program, they will provide professional development. They will just be a like-minded set of people that you can bounce ideas off of. They're amazing. So Early Choices I can't say enough good things about them.

Tim Villegas (30:29):

Yeah. We love Early Choices. Well, Melissa, we are so thankful to be able to talk with you and to hear everything that you're doing at East Moline. We hope that this inspires other districts and whoever is listening that preschool inclusive preschool program is within reach. And it's everything that you talked about. It's a matter of mindset. It's a matter of resources and commitment. So we, we really appreciate your time. And we wish you all the best.

Melissa McCullough (31:08):

Thank you so much. I appreciate the opportunity.

Tim Villegas (31:16):

That will do it for this episode of the Think Inclusive podcast. Subscribe to the Think Inclusive podcast via Apple Podcasts, the Anchor app, Spotify, or wherever you listen to podcasts. Have a question or comment? Email us at podcast@thinkinclusive.us. We love to know that you're listening.

Tim Villegas (31:36):

Thank you to patrons Pamela P, Veronica E, Kathleen T, Mark C, and Sarah C for their continued support of the podcast. And just for our patrons, Melissa shared with us the cutest video and image of one of the students in her program that you just have to see. And if you want to check it out, make sure you become a patron today at patreon.com/thinkinclusivepodcast.

Tim Villegas (32:03):

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 two weeks with Wyatt Oroke, 2020's Maryland teacher of the year to get his thoughts on what makes an inclusive classroom. On the blog, make sure to check out 15 ways for students to participate in general education using technology. Thanks for your time and attention. And until next time, remember: inclusion always works.

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