



## The Think Inclusive Podcast

### Bonus Episode

### Megan Gross and Nancy Brundrett | What Inclusive Education Looks Like at Poway Unified

#### Nancy Brundrett (00:07):

When you see a caterpillar... There's nothing when you look at a caterpillar that tells you that it's going to be a butterfly. Nothing. Nothing when you look at that would tell you it's going to be this big, beautiful, successful butterfly. So if we just pause for a second and say, what is it hurting us to give this student a chance? Like maybe we'll get in there and we'll find a butterfly.

#### Tim Villegas (00:29):

Hello, and welcome to a very special bonus episode of the Think Inclusive Podcast presented by MCIE. I am your host, Tim Villegas. This podcast features conversations and commentary with thought leaders on 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](https://thinkinclusive.us), the official blog of MCIE, and check us out on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter.

#### Tim Villegas (01:08):

Now you probably already have a notion that educating students with and without disabilities together is the right thing to do. That's why you're listening. But finding information to inform this belief or to share with people who don't believe that inclusion is the right thing can be difficult. That's why we've made it easy for you. We have a brand new resource document called The Best Inclusive Education Links, which is a compilation of a hundred links and over nine years of delving into the world of inclusive education. The resources here include some of the best websites, articles, movies, social media accounts, and more that will give you a better understanding of inclusive education. So go to [bit.ly/inclusion100](https://bit.ly/inclusion100) to sign up for our hundred links resource document today. That's a [bit.ly/inclusion100](https://bit.ly/inclusion100) to sign up. It'll also be in the show notes. So check it out if you're interested.

#### Tim Villegas (02:13):

So Tim, what is a bonus episode? Well, we love our listeners so much that sometimes we release extra episodes. And this is one of them. But what if you want even more content like unedited interviews or subscriber-only posts? All you have to do is go to [patreon.com/thinkinclusivepodcast](https://patreon.com/thinkinclusivepodcast) to become a patron today. Your contribution helps us with the cost of audio production, transcription, and the promotion of the Think Inclusive Podcast. Thank you for helping us equip more people to promote and sustain inclusive education.

**Tim Villegas (02:52):**

So today on the podcast we talk with Megan Gross and Nancy Brundrett of the Poway Unified school district in California. They tell us how their district has changed, how they educate students with significant disabilities and their role in supporting Poway schools with inclusive education. Stick around, after the break, our interview with Megan Gross and Nancy Brundrett.

**Tim Villegas (03:28):**

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](mailto:mcie@mcie.org), or visit our website [mcie.org](http://mcie.org).

**Tim Villegas (04:43):**

Alright. So I'd like to welcome to the Think Inclusive Podcast, Megan Gross and Nancy Brundrett. Megan has been a special education teacher for 14 years, supporting inclusive practices for students with mild to severe disabilities in K-12 schools. And she's currently a teacher on special assignment where she's supporting school staff and facilitating inclusive practices and leading professional learning for K-12 school teams. Megan is the 2017 California teacher of the year, and she is also the co-author of two books: "The Inclusion Toolbox" with Dr. Jenny Kurth and "ParaEducate" with Renay Marquez. Nancy Brundrett has been a special education instructional assistant for 19 years in the Poway Unified school district. She is currently serving as the district's first classified on special assignment where she is providing job embedded coaching to fellow instructional assistants, supporting school teams and implementing inclusive practices and leading professional learning. So Nancy and Megan, welcome to the Think Inclusive Podcast.

**Nancy Brundrett (05:55):**

Thank you. Good to be here.

**Megan Gross (05:58):**

We're so excited to get a chance to talk with you today, Tim.

**Tim Villegas (06:01):**

Yeah. So I am, I'm really excited about this conversation too because I've never heard of a classified on special assignment. Is that like, is that a thing?

**Nancy Brundrett (06:16):**

It's a thing for Poway Unified school district, which is awesome. I believe I'm the first one ever, his is an amazing time and a great honor to be that, to be chosen as that person.

**Tim Villegas (06:30):**

Right. So why don't we get started? Megan, why don't you tell us a little bit about, you know, Poway, how you are implementing inclusive practices and how Nancy in this special assignment role, how is she supporting that?

**Megan Gross (06:47):**

Well, so Poway Unified is a school district in kind of the suburban part of Northern San Diego County and the city of San Diego itself along with the city of Poway we have more than 30,000 students 39 schools TK through 22 years old. So we have a lot of students, a lot of staff. We're really fortunate to work for a district that, that believes in the idea of continuous improvement that our boss likes to like to say, we reserve the right to be better, right. And to continuously improve the student experience. And so we have school board members who are really supportive of the work and support of inclusive practices along with a superintendent who is leading the way. And so with their support the district created both of our positions as a teacher on special assignment and classified on special assignment with the recognition that we have staff and families who want to expand our inclusive opportunities, and we need support to do that.

**Megan Gross (08:03):**

You know, we had no interest in doing some past practices and in other places of kind of a dump and run. And that was not what we wanted to do. And so a couple of years ago Nancy and I both have this opportunity to start a pilot project and to work with schools that volunteered and applied and were excited to take their next step in inclusion. So unlike other places across our country, where there was kind of a district mandate that you must do this our district really gave us the, kind of the creative freedom a couple years ago to identify what is your next step? What is a reasonable place to begin expanding inclusive practices? And so Nancy and I have been really lucky to get a chance to support really creative teachers and instructional assistants and site leaders in carving out what that looks like, whether they're in elementary school, middle school, or high school. And I'm so thankful that our district created Nancy's position because there is absolutely no way this work happens without boots on the ground, someone supporting paraprofessionals and classroom teachers and principals. I think Nancy's in the principal's office sometimes more than, than classrooms. But really providing that, that real time support which I think is so often missing when we're including students with unique needs.

**Tim Villegas (09:36):**

So I want to, I do want to get to the questions that I gave you, but more things just come to my mind that I know that the people who listen are gonna want to know. And one of those is about the reason why your district started this process in the first place. I know that you were a teacher, Megan, you taught in the high school and this was already sort of baked in to what y'all were doing. But was there a reason why the district was like, "yes, we want to move, you know, toward a to expanding this to more schools." Was it a philosophy? You know, where, where the philosophy grew. Or was it, you know, some districts are looking at LRE numbers, you know, and saying, "you know what, we need to improve this. So how can we do that?" Or was it both, so I'll, I'll let you and Nancy speak to that.

**Megan Gross (10:51):**

So I think it's a combination of both what got the ball rolling kind of system-wide was that our school board had actually requested in the state of California, there's an independent auditor who comes in and kind of assesses special education services. And so our school board had requested this and to find

out like what are ways that we could improve our, our services for students. And so one of the findings of this report is that we continue to really create these specialized programs that everybody loves and moves to the school district for. But that isn't kind of fulfilling our obligation under IDEA to provide access to general education in the least restrictive environment. So we really took a hard look at kind of what our services were and, and what our starting point was.

**Megan Gross (11:49):**

We our district created stakeholder committees that met for 18 months and really included representatives from all across the community, from all different, different personnel classifications to really look at what is our next step, like, where do we take this report and how do we implement it? And the report kind of gave kind of a two-year guideline of like, you know, we, we need to kind of see some shifts and some changes. So you have that kind of data supporting the change. And then we also have family and staff members and a school board that says, Hey, we're ready to do this. You know, let's, let's, let's really make the change. Like we've talked about it for a long time and we're ready. And so I think that really that administrative and leadership support you know, that opportunity to really like take a philosophy and, and put it into practice. Like that's just, it's rare. And it shouldn't be, but when you do have that support, you get to build this really incredible opportunity for, not for students, but also for staff. And I think Nancy can really speak to that of how, of how kind of this, this inclusive moment for students is really leading to this inclusive moment for staff as well.

**Nancy Brundrett (13:11):**

Yeah. I, I would agree with what Megan said, you know, Poway was, was long recognized for our excellent special education programs and people moved here for that, but alongside that comes the pride that staff including teachers and IAs have in those successful programs, right. And those awesome outcomes. And that I think has been one of the shifts that's hard to get at because people are like, "but no, no, no, we do this so well, we have such success. The kids are doing great." So that's just another layer of sort of the coaching and the teaching up, if you will, about yes, we are excellent. We're still excellent. Right. We're just going to do it a little different because now we're going to do, you know, maybe look at a different way of doing it that's more inclusive.

**Nancy Brundrett (13:56):**

Not only for our students, but I look at the success of those students in the general ed spaces and their general ed peers. Like they really do gain a lot from this. You can kind of, I can go into an elementary classroom and I know like when that one's going to be a special education teacher, you know, you, the kids just pick up on it and it's as wonderful for them as it is for the student that is newly included. So praise to Poway Unified. Absolutely. I think, and I was one of those IAs for all those years in a very specialized classroom where we did some, you know, inclusion, but it was not what we're doing now. And, and we just didn't think like we didn't have the permission again, to think outside the box and think, Oh, this student might be non-verbal and have a difficult time with, you know sensory issues, but they're excellent. And, and the subject matter and taking them into a second or third grade classroom, getting them exposed to that and getting their peers exposed to them, how powerful that is going forward to that child's education continuing all the way up through high school.

**Tim Villegas (15:02):**

So, when you are supporting staff, when you're supporting teachers and, and teaching them about co-teaching who is supporting you? Like, who is giving you the support? You know, when you get into a

situation where there's going to be barriers, whether that's, you know, school staff or parents because what we've seen as, as far as MCIE and for organizations that work with districts it, it seems like it needs to come from the top as far as a philosophy, right. That this is what we're doing, and while your schools opt in. Right. what, what does that look like? What support do they give you?

**Megan Gross (16:08):**

That's a really great question, Tim. I think that, that leadership support Nancy and I have a boss that, that we get a chance to connect with and say, Hey, this, this is a challenge I'm having, like, I'm trying to support these teachers and I, I said this thing, but it wasn't received well. And how do I fix it? It means also like partnering with with our unions and with our teacher union and with our classified union. And, and having everyone kind of have the same vision and the same picture of, of what the work is. So that way, when those offices get phone calls you know, they're informed about, well, this is what's happening. And you know, our unions have been great partners and, and also reaching out to principals when there are questions and concerns. So that those things can really be kind of handled at the lowest level possible. Go ahead, Nancy.

**Nancy Brundrett (17:05):**

I also, I also think that, you know, we're, we're talking about teaching people how to be collaborative and teach collaboratively and support students collaboratively. We have to, that does start at the top. I totally believe that. And I think our special ed department, it works very well with our learning support, you know, our LSS department or teachers or gen ed partners. And I think the more of that, that we see at the top level, right? Like we're all in this together. They're not your students, they're all of our students. And our district does have a very strong vision, mission statement around all students are general education students first. I think getting that message out and just often and quickly has helped. I think people just start the buying in. But you're right. It does start at the top. It starts at the bottom, it's all over the place, right. We need everyone to be on the same page. And I think Poway Unified has done a really great job of that with leadership and then individual campuses with, with site admin administrators program specialists, all, all of the pieces that, that really make our special education department work and bringing that into not always just being a special education thing. It's a student thing.

**Megan Gross (18:21):**

I think folks are also looking for your consistency. So I think, I mean, especially in education, right, we always have a new fad and a new buzzword and everyone kind of experiences change fatigue. And oftentimes there are things that come into our schools and if you wait a year, 18 months, it disappears. So you don't have to be an early adopter because it's going to go away. And so I kind kinda think two years into this work, people are, are seeing across the district, Oh, Oh, they're serious this time. We're actually doing this. And, and the support network is larger and there are more voices saying, "Oh, I am co-teaching now. And this is what this looks like, and I'm an instructional assistant, and I get to support the gen ed teacher." and so I think that also kind of builds a momentum of support that this isn't just this random thing that we decided to do that we're going to forget about, you know, next funding cycle next school year. So I think that consistency also helps.

**Tim Villegas (19:26):**

Awesome. was there a time that you were ever skeptical about inclusion? Like you know, maybe at the beginning of your teaching career or something where you're like, "Hmm, I'm not sure about this. Like I

kinda like self-contained special day class. I think that's a good idea." and so if you were, what, what changed, what, what moved you over and the same question for Nancy?

**Megan Gross (20:08):**

So I'm really fortunate in the sense that my first teaching position was in an inclusive school district. It, my, my mentor teacher, I shared a classroom with Dr. Jenny Kurth. And so that was really intentional on my part. When I was finishing my credential, I really felt as though I needed experience in inclusive settings, if I was going to be an agent of change in other places that you had to be able to kind of walk the talk and have experience. And so I believed in it from having seen it in my student teaching placements and from having that opportunity to work alongside Dr. Kurth. And we're just really see what happens when students have access to core content and electives and lunchtime with their classmates. So that was a really intentional choice on my part when, you know, across my career I think that it, it would be disingenuous to say that, like, I have never once doubted, could I include a specific student.

**Megan Gross (21:19):**

And so you know, I think one of the things that's been really critical to, to my career has been my instructional support team and the paraeducators who work in my classroom and support students. And it's you know, in the beginning when you first start out teaching I was really, I felt like I had to do it all. Like I had to adapt everything, I had to like be in every classroom space. And I had this very sweet pair of professional who came to me one day after school and said, I see how hard you're working. This is not sustainable. Like, I, I am a college graduate, I have a master's degree, let me help you. And it was kind of that wake up call of, Oh, Oh, people here have skills, right? Like they want to be a part of this work in a really meaningful way.

**Megan Gross (22:13):**

And so, you know, she gave me that permission to let go of some of that control. And so when I did actually take a position here in Poway that was a segregated classroom. I had the confidence to like say in my interview, this is not who I am, and this is exactly, you know, we're going to be as inclusive as possible. And do you mean my kids too when your, your school memo says that we're an inclusive school? And so, and then, and then that message was a part of our team of this is what we're going to do, and we don't know how we're going to do it, but we're going to do it. And so, you know, I had four incredible paraprofessionals who supported this classroom and it became their mission too and so when I did have doubts and when we had new students come into our classroom who maybe had really unique behavioral profiles, and I started to worry of, could we do this the benefit of having this team of people who it was their mission too right called me out on my kind of hypocrisy.

**Megan Gross (23:22):**

Like, what do you mean you're not going to include that student? You know, and, and what is it going to take? And, and we had a great behavior support team provider, come in and say, "this isn't you, what? We're going to figure this out." Right. And so having those people who can provide that reality check and also that real time support and not thinking, I think sometimes, especially as the teacher, right, it can feel really overwhelming of how am I gonna provide intensive instruction and some reading and some math skills, and also support students in general education? And what if a student can't stay the entire class period, like, what am I going to do?

**Megan Gross (24:04):**

And in this case with that student, you know we talked as a team and said, what are we going to do? Right. This this isn't sustainable the way it is. And we want our students to be included. And so our behavior support provider, right, provided us permission of what, if you just started with two minutes a day and it, and it seems kind of silly, right? But, but those two minutes built to 10 minutes, built to 20 minutes, built to an entire 80-minute instructional period, 70-minute instructional period. Built to a student could go to the classrooms by himself and get started and set up. And, and because of that, and because of that push, and because of that reminder, right, it wasn't, I didn't feel this overwhelming pressure that like I had to succeed right. Or that our student had to succeed because otherwise everyone would think inclusion was a failure. And I think sometimes we feel that pressure as special education teachers or, or professionals trying to advocate for inclusion, that if this fails, people are gonna like, say, you're done, you know, go back into your classroom.

**Megan Gross (25:14):**

And we also, you know, kind of, because we pushed these little incremental changes, we also provided this general education teacher an opportunity to shine and to incorporate, you know, that it, it, wasn't just on us to include the student. And she's a very dear friend of mine to this day who said, well, okay, so what do I need to do? So great. Like, let's make sure there's a sensory box that everybody can access. And, you know, really providing that, that accommodating supports and structures for her own classroom to make it a safe space. And I think for me, that was a really important kind of like moment of, Oh, we can always do this. It just might look really different. Right. And we have to have the patience and persistence to go from two minutes in September to 70 minutes in June. And that's a really hard thing to sustain sometimes. But, but it's so, so worth it. And so that was, it's good to have people on your team who will give you a reality, a reality check and keep you honest and keep you grounded in what your values are for all kids.

**Nancy Brundrett (26:33):**

I think the one thing that Megan didn't really say, but I'll say it for her is, you know, that the team with your paraprofessionals, your instructional assistants and the teacher really does have to work as a team. And I think oftentimes really well-meaning stressed out busy, special education teachers, right? It becomes more of like, they're up here and saying, well, I need you to do this with this student. And kind of like, you know, we're, we're divvying up the work, but how much time do we really come together to collaborate within our own team to talk about what some options could be for an inclusive opportunity for, for a student. And I think it takes a really strong teacher to be able to stop and say, Oh, I have this team here. And maybe they're not really well versed in this subject area, but they are in this subject area. And what kind of a PD can we do together that might, you know, really expand the opportunities for us to include these kids, whether they be, whether it be an academics or co-curriculars.

**Nancy Brundrett (27:36):**

So I think it, it Megan's point is well taken. It does take a team. And sometimes that's hard to look at from an IA perspective, because you might be tasked with taking a student to a classroom and you think, Oh my gosh, this, this student is non-verbal. They have, you know, maladaptive behaviors. And this teacher is telling me, I have to stay here for 30 minutes, right? What are they going to get out of it? I hear that a lot. Well, what are they going to get out of going to science class? Or what are they going to get out of going to this math class? So, one of the things that I try to spread the word about with, to our instructional assistant population in Poway is through PD, is like this analogy of a Caterpillar, right?

**Nancy Brundrett (28:17):**

When you see a caterpillar... There's nothing when you look at a caterpillar that tells you that it's going to be a butterfly. Nothing. Nothing when you look at that would tell you it's going to be this big, beautiful, successful butterfly. So if we just pause for a second and say, what is it hurting us to give this student a chance? Like maybe we'll get in there and we'll find a butterfly. We'll find somebody who is amazing at math. And I think the other thing is that when we have the strengths, when we give, when we find those strengths in our students in a general education setting, and if their peers are seeing this, maybe this great skill of being able to be a calendar savant or something, right. That kind of draws kids into them. And that's great. That's good for all students, right? And then it's like a strength-based thing while they're really great at this, let's try something else.

**Nancy Brundrett (29:06):**

And I think that really does that does build up all students and the paraprofessional needs to be willing to look for those opportunities and, and permission from the team, the classroom team to let's try this, let's try this. Sometimes it may not work, but if it doesn't work, we don't give up. Right. We don't just say, forget it. We're trying it again. What other area, what other subject matter, what other time during the day could we, could we possibly get this student to, to make those connections and, and broaden their, their social opportunities and, and their opportunities to be successful.

**Tim Villegas (29:46):**

Fantastic. what's, we're, we're almost to two o'clock, but I wanted to know if there was anything that you wanted to share with our audience that, you know, maybe I didn't ask in the questions or something that you're like, Oh, I really wish, I really wish I could say this, you know, to the people who listen to this podcast,

**Nancy Brundrett (30:12):**

I have one. You know, I think one of the things we talked about was what advice would you have for people moving forward? And I think build a team, right. Build a team. And I think it's important to let failures that you may have had in the past go. Right. With whether it be with, with personnel, with a certain you know, a certain subject area, a certain department, and, and give yourself a new try, right. Build a team, try it. And I think, you know, as always our, our attitudes and our experiences are really important. And I think include, like, let's be inclusive with students. Let's be inclusive with every adult partner that we have on a campus. You know, you might not think, Oh, the person who takes the, the lunch money in the cafeteria needs to know this, but they do. Right? Including everyone from the bus drivers to the custodians that do interact daily. And often with our students, like in the lunch courts, the people that are serving the lunch. People in the front office. Including everyone in what the mission and vision is for inclusion, I think is a really critical and don't give up, right? Don't give up. Cause this is what kids absolutely deserve. And, and really what we all deserve because making students experience better makes everyone's experience better.

**Megan Gross (31:40):**

Nancy. I love that.

**Tim Villegas (31:41):**

Give her a raise.



**Nancy Brundrett (31:49):**

You know, I, I have, I, I have a daughter who's going into this field and I used to always say, "Oh, don't go be a teacher. Don't go be a teacher. They don't make enough money." You know, but she reminded me recently, she's 24. I remember, you know, when, when I would say that to you right on the reverse, you know, you don't make much money, mom and I would, she goes, but you know what you always used to say? Yes, but I never, ever in the morning wake up and say, I don't want to go to work today. And there's value in that. And, and it was a great reminder for me because I've obviously told her that early on in her life, there is value to doing something meaningful and something that you love. And I think a lot of our paraprofessionals really do, you know, operate from that same mentality of it's powerful work. It's great work, it's hard work. But seeing successes really does have a huge value and it makes you get up in the morning and not be like, Oh, dreading going to work. What what's new going to come today? What, what successes will we have today?

**Tim Villegas (32:54):**

Thank you. Thank you for that. What about you, Megan?

**Megan Gross (33:01):**

You know, I think one of the things over the past few years that I've been working on is learning how to be comfortable with being uncomfortable. And I think as a teacher, that can be really challenging because there's so many moving parts. And, and you know, just, you just want to like get in and, and teach your content and teacher your students. And for so long, our profession has been isolated and you had your room and I have my room. And now that, that really we've kind of blurred all, you know, we're starting to blur a lot more lines and supports. I think learning how to kind of you know, be comfortable with the change and be comfortable with a little bit of uncertainty has been something that's been really impactful for me to remember when I, when I don't feel comfortable.

**Megan Gross (34:02):**

Nancy can tell you that I often retreat, right? Like, I, I need a moment to kind of like process and figure out what the next step is. And I think on a journey of, of inclusion there are lots of, of kind of roadside pit stops, right? Where all of a sudden you're like, what, what am I doing? Am I really making change? This is really, is this really going to like take hold? And so I think you take that team that Nancy says, you know, you build and, and you kind of give each other grace for when you need to take a step back from the space. And, and I've been so grateful for Nancy and for my other colleagues who, when I need a moment of like, Oh boy, whew, like this is getting hard and uncomfortable. And I don't know what I feel about this. You know, someone else will say, yeah, but look what, where we were six months ago, right? Look where we were a year ago, remember that student in the classroom. And I think you you know, folks on this journey need to have that circle of support, the same circle of support we would want our students to have we need to have for the hard days and for the days that just doesn't seem like it's advancing as fast as we want it to. And as fast as it should. That, that for me has been really super, incredibly helpful.

**Tim Villegas (35:26):**

Awesome. Well I wanna thank Megan Gross and Nancy Brundrett for being on the Think Inclusive podcast. We appreciate you being here.

**Nancy Brundrett (35:38):**

It was an awesome experience. Thanks for having us.

**Megan Gross (35:41):**

Thank you. Love talking to you

**Tim Villegas (35:49):**

That will do it for this episode of the Think Inclusive Podcast. Subscribe to the Think Inclusive podcast via Apple podcast, Google play, Spotify, or on the Anchor app. And while you're there, give us a review so more people can find us. We love reading reviews on Apple podcasts. Thank you to NewBethG for the five star rating on Apple podcasts: "A fantastic podcast for all educators. I am a special educator working on a state grant, and I am loving this podcast. I am working my way through past episodes and constantly sharing with my consultants and school and district administrators we support. The last episode with Katie Novak was amazing, and we plan to use it for a UDL PLC in one of our districts." Thanks a lot, NewBethG.

**Tim Villegas (36:37):**

Have a question or comment? Email us at [podcast@thinkinclusive.us](mailto:podcast@thinkinclusive.us). We love to know that you're listening. And thank you to patrons Pamela P, Veronica E, Kathleen T, and Mark C for their continued support of the podcast. This podcast is a production of MCIE, where we envision a society where neighborhood schools welcome all learners and create the foundation for inclusive communities. Learn more at [mcie.org](http://mcie.org). We will be back in May with our guest Eddie Fergus of Temple University, where we discuss disproportionality in special education. On the blog, make sure to check out nine ways your school may be doing inclusion wrong. For example, if your school has an inclusion classroom. Thanks for your time and attention. Until next time. Remember: inclusion always works.

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