



The Think Inclusive Podcast

Season 8, Episode 1

Jennifer Spencer-Iiams | Leading for All: How to Create Truly Inclusive and Excellent Schools

Jennifer Spencer-Iiams (00:06):

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Tim Villegas (00:19):

You're bringing some Leslie Knope energy.

Tim Villegas (00:24):

Hello, and welcome to season eight, episode one of the Think Inclusive podcast presented by MCIE. I'm 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 (01:10):

Thank you for joining us for our conversation with Jennifer Spencer-Iiams, assistant superintendent for the West Linn-Wilsonville school district near Portland, Oregon. We will be talking about the transformation that took place in her district toward inclusive practices. And guess what, y'all? She's got the receipts.

Tim Villegas (01:31):

But before we get to Jennifer, if you have ever visited thinkinclusive.us over the last eight years, you know that we have always had ads on the website. Well guess what? Since joining MCIE, there are no more ads getting in the way of you accessing all of our content. Here's the catch. We need your support to keep Think Inclusive ad-free. Your tax deductible donation will help us expand our reach to people across the United States and the world to promote inclusion for all students. Go to bit.ly/mciegive to make your donation. One more time: that's bit.ly/mciegive to make your donation today. Stick around, after the break, our interview with Jennifer Spencer-Iiams.

Tim Villegas (02:28):

In 1997, Ellen Brantlinger from Indiana University first used the term "inclusionist" which for many means some who wants to get rid of special education.

Tim Villegas (02:46):

Decades of research show better outcomes for people with disabilities when they are included, and authentic inclusion is happening in schools and districts around the country and the world (some nearing 90% inclusion rates or above for many years). This progress did not just happen but is the result of careful planning led by educational visionaries and the implementation of strategies that promote effective inclusive education. It's time to bring back the moniker of "inclusionist" to mean a collaborator for inclusive practices, not simply someone who wants to throw the whole system away without replacing it with something better. If this resonates with you, you are an inclusionist. .

Tim Villegas (03:15):

And do we have the newsletter for you. The Weeklyish is for inclusionists. Subscribe at weeklyish.subtack.com.

Jennifer Spencer-Iiams (03:22):

Hi, this is Jennifer and welcome to the Think Inclusive podcast.

Tim Villegas (03:46):

Alright, Jennifer. It is a pleasure to have you on the Think Inclusive podcast. Everyone we have Jennifer Spencer-Iiams here. She is the assistant superintendent of the West Linn-Wilsonville school district which is part of the Greater Portland area. She recently wrote a book with her coauthor, Josh Flosi, called "Leading For All: How to Create Truly Inclusive and Excellent Schools." Thank you for being with us today.

Jennifer Spencer-Iiams (04:18):

Thank you so much. It's my pleasure.

Tim Villegas (04:21):

So we had a chance to talk a little bit before, you know, this podcast, and you got to tell me a little bit about your journey towards inclusion and your district's journey toward inclusive education. I would love it if you could just give us a little bit of background. What was the impetus for your school district to go through this transformation toward inclusive education?

Jennifer Spencer-Iiams (04:49):

West Linn-Wilsonville has 10,000 students, give or take between 16 schools and about 10% of students in our district are identified as students who experience a disability and are served by special education. But I really think about a day that I spent with a parent and this was nine years ago, and this was a parent who was very invested in her child, as all of our parents are, and had spent time thinking about her child being included as a kindergartener. Her daughter was-is very lively and fun and social and also experiences disability. And she was committed to her daughter being able to be part of her community and go to her neighborhood school. And so she started the year in kindergarten and the neighborhood school, and it was challenging.

Jennifer Spencer-Iiams (05:46):

The supports that she needed were not in place. The instructional methodologies and strategies were not in place. And so that mom came to me and she was frustrated and she was worried about her

daughter. And at that point we had, as many school districts do, specialized or segregated classrooms for students who experienced more significant disability. And so we had the supports and we had expertise to support her daughter, but it wasn't at her neighborhood school. And so we sat there together and realized in order to help her daughter meet her needs, we were going to have to bus her to the other side of town, to a different school out of her community. And that mom cried. And I cried because I realized in a way that I'd always known, but in a more personal way, how that was going to impact this family and this child, and it was not okay. And so I sat with that mom that day and I pledged to her that we can do better. We will do better. Together we're going to change our school system.

Jennifer Spencer-Iiams (06:59):

I want to take you forward to a couple years later when we were having a teacher welcome back event, and we had invited a student who had just graduated from high school to come and address our teachers. It's very important to us to include student voice and really listen to our students and their experiences. And so I invited this student, his name was Everett, to come and speak to our teachers about his experience in high school. And he had lived most of his life in our district and had spent most of his life in segregated classrooms with teachers who had lots of expertise in supporting his learning needs and were doing really good work trying to support him and help him have a great experience and work towards his IEP goals.

Jennifer Spencer-Iiams (07:52):

But what he didn't have was a sense of belonging with the school as a whole was respect and access in general ed classroom with his typical peers. And then in his junior year, we had shifted things in our structure and in our system. And so he was able to participate in school in a different way in his junior and senior year. So we brought him in to talk to teachers and asked him about his experience and what that was like for him in his earlier years of school compared to his junior and senior year. And he got very excited and shared this sentence that has stuck with me. He said, "You know, once they let me out, I discovered I'm a lots of classes kind of guy, I'm a lots of friends kind of guy, I'm a lots of teachers kind of guy." And he talked about how the classes were sometimes harder and he had to work a lot harder. And he struggled with getting feedback about the work he had to do, but he learned through that. And that phrase has stuck with us, "Once they let me out," which reminded me that sometimes as adults and as educators, we might create things with the very best of intentions for students that they might not perceive them or experience them in that same way.

Tim Villegas (09:23):

So when you started this process what was your original goal? Because, you know, for some, for some districts or for even some states, you know, as far as their strategic plan, you know, it's all about the LRE number. So, what is it, what was it for you and your district that you said, "Okay, well, you know what, we're going to, we're going to tackle this goal first."

Jennifer Spencer-Iiams (09:50):

Yeah. Well, when we first started, we had lots of conversations, lots of conversations with teachers, lots of conversations with administrators, with parents with students gathering information in that spring and summer before we, I really started the work, we started the work in the fall. So really understanding where we're at, where are the strengths to build upon. And there were a lot of strengths already in place in this district around a long tradition of good community support a lot of strong academics, a lot of strong co-curricular activities. So these were strengths and much as we think about in the IEP process,

we're really trying to build on students' strengths and help them move forward towards the next goals. We really think about that as an organization too. Where are your strengths as an organization that you can build on to reach those next goals?

Jennifer Spencer-Iiams (10:48):

So, as we had those conversations, three areas of focus really became clear to us that we needed to really improve our instructional practices. We need to change the way we teach so that more students are successful and accessing learning at high levels every day. The second area of focus was creating inclusive cultures. We need to have educators who share ownership, who believe all students are our students. We need to create cultures where co-curricular activities are valued and participated in by all students. And remove any barriers that might exist for students. So that was our second one, was creating inclusive cultures. Our third was increasing student voice. So knowing one of the things I continue to learn by reading authors who experience disability is the importance of working with people and honoring their voice as we think about change. So that's been a really important part of that.

Jennifer Spencer-Iiams (12:00):

So those were our big areas of focus. And within there, we did set some very specific goals. So one of the goals that we wrote down on paper that first year was "every student educated at their neighborhood school." You know, it sounds simple, but it's actually kind of complicated when you actually mean every student. And you know, we've had, again with, with great intention over the years in special education, we've set up this model of expertise and specialized supports. And I'll, I'll put my quotes around "specialized" because the more we learned about student needs, we certainly need expertise in strategies and how, but the needs that children have are really universal in many ways. The needs to belong, the needs to learn, the needs to participate, the needs to feel safe. And we need to support those. So that was one of our very specific goals in the first year that we wrote down is "Every student at their neighborhood school." It took us a couple of years to get there. But we knew that we wrote it on paper. We were very specific about that.

Jennifer Spencer-Iiams (13:11):

Some of our other specific goals were every student who is served by special education, participates in co-curricular activities, at least one per year. And just writing that down helped us get very specific. We started to have that we added as a question on the special factors of our IEP pages, so that once a year, the team is going to check in, "Hey, what are you doing in terms of cocurricular activities?" And we found that some students didn't even know they were allowed to be in co-curricular activities. Some other parents didn't know the process of how do you join the robotics team? How do you become part of the debate club? How do you go out for a play if you're a student who experiences disability or join an athletics team? So that was another specific goal that we wrote down that we've been able to both have quantitative measurable percentages of -- we've increased our percentages every year of students participating in co-curricular goals -- but perhaps even more importantly, are the stories that we continue to gather about that sense of belonging and being part of something that students get when they join a co-curricular activity.

Tim Villegas (14:33):

What do you think right now is the biggest challenge to inclusive education?

Jennifer Spencer-Iiams (14:41):

Well, I think that changing large systems is hard. It is hard work, and we have been embedded in doing things in a certain way and to shift that really is difficult. And I think one of the keys to making change work over time is to have lots of ways to gather data about success and to share that out frequently. So, even when it's very small successes. So we have certain structures in place, such as what we call our "Monday message" where every week we're sharing out successes that we see around the district. So it helps people understand they're not in it alone, that other people are working through this as well, to be inspired by the successes of other colleagues and other students. That's a commitment that we've had and kept, you know, for these full nine years. Also to think about those, you know, what are, what are things that we can measure? That we all feel excited. I think about when you're trying to learn a new skill and you're feeling like it's really hard, but you have something that shows you, you're making some progress. People need that to feel excited about the work and to feel empowered and that they're, they're moving forward.

Jennifer Spencer-Iiams (16:04):

One of the focus areas that we talked about before was our emphasis on student voice. And so one of our concrete goals is that 100% of students will lead their own IEP meetings. So when we say that, of course we recognize what that looks like for a kindergartener and for an 18-year-old would be different, but we believe that all students really need to be captains of their learning, in the words of Ron Berger, and that there are developmentally appropriate ways that even our youngest children can be part of that learning. And so we also added that question onto our IEPs. "In What ways did the student participate in this?" And so we have graphs that we can measure: "Are more students leading their IEPs every year?"

Jennifer Spencer-Iiams (16:54):

And we've had some years where we didn't go up as much as we thought we would. And that's pushed us to go back and say, "What were some barriers to that?" We discovered one of the barriers was sometimes families aren't sure that their, their child should participate in their IEP, or maybe they don't want them to. And so we, we thought about that. We took that to our parent collaboration group, which is another structure we have to work with parents on moving this and keeping us rooted in inclusive cultures. And we realized that they maybe didn't know why. What are the benefits of a child leading their own IEP? That it actually leads to academic growth. It actually makes it much more likely that they'll achieve their goals. It actually reduces stigma and allows them to know themselves as a learner and not have it be this secretive thing that the adults are talking about behind their back. It increases their ability to be advocates and to transition into adulthood with the skills to build on their strengths and get their needs met.

Jennifer Spencer-Iiams (17:55):

So we created a, you know, like a welcome packet for parents when their child either moved into our district already with special education services or that were newly identified for services through special education that included a lot of things to try to help them understand our beliefs about inclusive education, but also we included a great article and I'm not thinking of the author's name right now, but the title is "Why is this Cake on Fire?" It's a great article about students voice in their IEP and why it's important for them to be in it. And so sharing that with families early on, helping them get them into the why has been something that has helped us move that dial and get more students positively and actively engaged in the IEP process.

Tim Villegas (18:50):

Well, that's great that I love that idea of the welcome packet. So I just, just want to compliment you on like, as far as from communications, cause my brain is all communications right now, but just how well, well thought out it is, you know, cause all I'm hearing from you is "We want to make sure our families know what's going on. We want to make sure, you know, families who their children are identified for service, you know, for services. This is what we're going to tell them." I mean, all of that stuff is just so I think, you know, it's such a obvious priority for you in the district. So I think that will obviously trickle down, you know, throughout the whole district. So anyways, that's, that's great.

Jennifer Spencer-Iiams (19:49):

Tim. I want to say that it's we keep discovering more that we need to do in terms of communication and more stakeholders that we need to think about. And a couple of years ago we had an opportunity through our district what we call a leadership forum. So it involves all the, all the principals and all the heads of departments. So HR and operations and maintenance and business. We had a leadership retreat in August before school started and our superintendent was amazing and I went to her and said, "Could we really spend a significant amount of time with this whole group talking about inclusive practices and showing everyone the why?" And really engaging folks in that more just was very well received. We were able to show some powerful videos, show some great successes.

Jennifer Spencer-Iiams (20:44):

And one of the outcomes that happened that later that year we had a high school student who uses a wheelchair for accessibility and very involved in her student body and activities. And she wanted to be at the football games with her friends to you know, engage in that social life of high school. And she reached out to me and said, "I am not finding this stadium to be accessible." And so I reached out to our operations department and they said, "Well, it is absolutely accessible. We meet ADA you know, compliance. There's a, there's a ramp, there's a place where wheelchairs can be." So we went out there to look at it and sure enough, it was by the book accessible, but where the students stood and sat to cheer on their team together as a student body was not near where the accessible part was. So it was technically accessible, but it wasn't really leading to an inclusive culture, which is our goal. So what was amazing was the physical therapist who knew that student really well and the principal, they just reached right out to the head of operations.

Jennifer Spencer-Iiams (22:13):

And I believe because we'd spent the time to really talk about the importance of inclusivity, he was just amazing and went over there and met with them, really heard what the student was saying. That was on a Thursday afternoon. Friday night football, a new platform had been built that was right there so that she could be right with her peers. And I think that as we think about communication, we have to keep thinking about all the stakeholders, where are our, do our high school staff really understand? Do our school secretaries really know why we're being inclusive? Do our nutrition services folks feel connected to the work? Do our business folks feel connected to the work? So I, you know, I thank you for the compliment and I appreciate that. And I think we still have more work to do.

Jennifer Spencer-Iiams (23:11):

So our book "Leading For All" is coming out, I believe on November 2nd from Corwin publishers. And we are excited to, to share that and see what conversations will come about as folks begin to dig in and hear some of our stories. Some of the challenges that we had are in there as well. Some tools that may

be useful to schools that we have found useful in moving forward in this journey and some of our future goals, what we're still working on, you know, we're still working on our preschool is not as inclusive as we would like to be. College opportunities. What happens after high school and working towards inclusive college opportunities for students. So there's work ahead but it's been an exciting journey and it has taken really our whole community to be engaged and on board. And I'm excited that to have this opportunity to speak with you, Tim, as someone I know has been such a champion for inclusion over the years, and I'm excited to keep learning alongside others throughout the country.

Tim Villegas (24:31):

Well Jennifer. Oh, you know what, before I, before I sign off I have, I have two questions. Well, actually one question, and if you don't want to answer that question, then I have another question. Okay. So it has nothing to do with inclusion at all. So during the pandemic, during all this stuff, everyone's been watching lots of TV and stuff. Right. So what, what do you think would be your, your guiltiest pleasure for binge watching? And if you don't want to answer that question, you can tell me what you've been snacking on or both. You can tell me both.

Jennifer Spencer-Iiams (25:13):

I'm not sure if it's my guiltiest pleasure, but I have three adult children who for years have been saying, "Mom, you have to watch Parks and Rec. You have to watch Parks and Rec." And they have talked about a little bit of Leslie Knope, perhaps being in my personality. And so anyway, we've been digging into Parks and Rec and I love it. It's so much fun.

Tim Villegas (25:39):

You're bringing some Leslie Knope energy. Very good. Well, Jennifer Spencer-Iiams, thank you for being on the podcast and sharing your thoughts with us.

Jennifer Spencer-Iiams (25:52):

Thank you so much. It was really a pleasure.

Tim Villegas (25:59):

Just a reminder. If you would like to hear the entire unedited recording of our conversation with Jennifer Spencer-Iiams, become a Patreon subscriber. It's easy. Just go to patreon.com/thinkinclusivepodcast and select the one, five, or \$10-per-month tiers, and you'll have access to over 10 hours of unfiltered interviews. Subscribe to the Think Inclusive podcast via Apple Podcasts, Google Play, Stitcher, or on the Anchor App. And while you're there, give us a review so more people can find us. Have a question or comment? Email us at podcast@thinkinclusive.us. We love to know that you were listening. Thank you to patrons Tori D, Veronica E. And Kathleen T. For their continued support of the podcast, as well as our \$1-per -month subscribers. Every little bit helps. 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. Thanks for your time and attention. Until next time.

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