

Making it Happen Podcast
Ep.3 " Making Everyone Happy"

Tamara

Welcome, everyone to this segment of season two of our SELPA podcast series. We are calling this a part two of our first podcast topic of the season, which was all about understanding SELPA governance. We're going to take it a step further today and really go beyond defining the issues and use some group think to find the way forward. In this episode, we are calling Making Everyone Happy: Reimagining SELPA Governance. We are really excited to welcome our guests for this segment, who are all educational experts from across the state.

Leah

It is my pleasure to first introduce Todd Brose, proud superintendent of Red Bluff Joint Union High School District and the chair of the Tehama County SELPA Superintendents Council.. Under Todd's leadership.

Leah

The Red Bluff community is committed to recognizing diversity and to making a connection with every student every day. He has been a longtime advocate for special education, for adequate funding for small and rural communities, and also served on the original one System Task Force. Todd also was one of our guests during our Season One podcast series. Welcome back, Todd.

Todd

Thank you. It's a pleasure to be here.

Tamara

We are pleased to welcome our next guest, Cali Binks, superintendent of the Yucaipa Calimesa Joint Unified School District, which is on the east end of San Bernardino County. Prior to that, Cali served as the superintendent of a large urban and diverse school district. Cali began her career in education as a special education teacher. She's experienced the positive outcomes that result from the collaboration that occurs between districts and their SELPA on behalf of students with disabilities. Cali also joined us for our previous podcast. Welcome, Cali.

Cali

Thank you, Tamara. It is a pleasure to be here.

Leah

Also joining the conversation today is Dr. Ed Manansala, the El Dorado County superintendent of schools. Dr. Manansala has spent over 25 years working in the public school system, first doing school counseling and social work for the

Sacramento City Unified School District. He has served in a variety of leadership positions since, including multiple roles with St. HOPE Public Schools. Dr. Manansala considers education to be key to students being able to reach their full potential. We are honored to have you joining us today.

Ed Manansala

Thank you, Leah. It's a privilege to be here.

Tamara

Finally, we are really grateful to have Adam Stein with us today.

Adam is the former SELPA executive director of the Sonoma County SELPA and the Sonoma Charter SELPA. And he's come out of retirement to help us make some sense of this very complex topic. Adam is also a former superintendent and longtime educator with a particular passion for the work we all must do around inclusion. Adam provided leadership to us as chair of the Legislative Committee of the SELPA Administrators of California for many years. And thank you, Adam, so much for being here.

Adam

Thanks, Leah and Tami. I'm really excited to be here and I appreciate the invitation.

Leah

Some of our listeners may not have tuned into the first governance podcast, so we want to just quickly share that the governor's proposed budget includes trailer bill language that would essentially freeze the level of funding that SELPA retains for administrative functions before allocating state special education funding to districts and charters. We talked about the problems with that proposal and others and pointed out how this appears to be another attempt by the administration to really remove local decision-making from superintendents as they go about collaborating to meet the needs of all students across all regions of California. What we are hoping to do today, though, is really use our time to be helpful to offer concrete solutions for the state. For legislators, for county, district and school leaders, and for our parents and staff as we embark on this re-engineering of the design and purpose of SELPAs for the future.

Tamara

Cali for people who haven't been a part of a SELPA or sat on a governance council, I suppose it may be hard to capture what that experience is like and what it requires in order to get the job done on behalf of students with disabilities.

Can you share a little bit of insight into what really goes on in those governing board meetings and how it all works?

Cali

I can and thank you, Tamara. It's it's really interesting because as you mentioned earlier, I came from a large urban district, and with that, we were a single SELPA. So I didn't

know anything different. I was in that district for 33 years and have been in my present district for ten years. So being a part of a multi-district SELPA was really new for me and I really, in the first three or four months, was trying to find my sea legs and adjusting to it. But since I've been a part of East Valley SELPA in the San Bernardino County, I have learned what benefits there are and what I've been able to do as a board member on that SELPA. And so we work really hard as a team all of our districts. We are not only individual districts with our own unique personalities, but we work really hard as a team and a governance board, which includes the superintendents across our districts as well as our county superintendent. And it's the collaboration that actually is probably the most valuable piece because that helps us to get the student outcomes that we want. We have secondary committees that our directors in our districts serve on. But the finance piece is something that I have had the opportunity as an ad hoc committee to sit on several times, and we look at the costs of how we can maintain a high level of service to our students, but also to work with each district so that we're sharing those expenses. It gives an opportunity now that I'm in a smaller district, significantly smaller than what I was in, it gives us opportunity to have the same kinds of services that larger districts do, due to the fact that they just have more money generated and the money goes to the SELPA, but in a way that we all have input so that we can decide what's best for our students and what we need. And so that goes from the administrative positions and the financial, the people that do the financial work all the way to the practitioners that are visiting different places where our students may be attending outside of our districts. And so the work is spread throughout the districts with the support of the SELPA and the SELPA board making those governance decisions. And, if we do have a disagreement because you might have five superintendents or however large your SELPA might be that are that are all running individual districts, it's like five different businesses, so to speak. We have ways that we work through that and we've had some of those situations occur where we've had maybe somebody that wanted to do something different and we use the same processes that we use with our parents. We have alternative dispute resolution ways that we listen and we put that into place and we also review our plans annually. So, if there are changes that need to be made, they can be made at the at the annual review or just given an update because we recognize something that needs to happen.

Tamara

Thank you so much, Cali. You talked about when disputes occur and some of the strategies in your region and your context. It makes me think and wonder a little bit about also the role of the SELPA administrator when those disagreements do arise. Any of you want to speak to that, whether it's the role of the the SELPA administrator in those situations, or whether it's just how disagreements are handled in your context and experience.

Adam

I can jump in, Tammy, and speak from a SELPA administrator's perspective that in the rare occurrence where there were and disputes may be too strong a word it was

usually a time to just sit down and talk about what the problem is and how you might go about resolving it. And, you know, with maybe one exception, in all the years I was a SELPA administrator, that led to an agreement that people could live with. And it really necessitates that the SELPA director really work hard to educate the members of the Governance Council as to what is important legally, what is important programmatically, and to make sure that the disagreement in allocation is understood in terms of how it impacts program and other LEAs.

Ed Manansala

I'll weigh in here briefly. You know, in El Dorado County we've had a long history of strong positive relationships in our SELPA, and I think that I'd attribute that success to the role of our SELPA administrator. I think it's a critical piece to the success of creating the conditions of helping understand issues, framing data and working through challenging circumstances. But once again, I do think that the SELPA administrator plays a critical component to the success of any SELPA.

Cali

I would agree with Ed that's beautifully stated in our county we have three different SELPAs and each of those SELPAs have their own unique personalities and which they should, because all of our students that we serve are all unique and have different needs. And so I appreciate the role of the SELPA administrator because they're able to work with the superintendents and their directors that serve in those districts the superintendents are representing and bring everybody to win. And it's it's a talent that they have when you're working with a lot of people that have have a lot of ideas, and I've seen it done very strategically. And that impacts our families when we're all able to work together, it helps. As I mentioned, ADR, those strategies that are being used with our parents, we use as well to help us resolve conflicts as and make sure that we are serving our kids in the best way we can.

Todd

Yes, And I'll just I'll just add that our SELPA, which has 14 small school districts in it, and I think it's not only the SELPA administration, but it's it's aligning your superintendents and making sure the governance from the superintendents is also along the same beliefs of of everyone can do this together. Right so so that that's important because when you sit down and talk about these disagreements, you have to have things and aligned in that in your in and the governance piece is very important. And I'd also add that in to Tehama County, we've I think probably half a dozen of us, and I think three of them, three superintendents have been through the Straus Institute for ADR. And we're a firm believer in that, not just ADR for our parents and tough IEPs, but also like in classroom settings. We're using that right now between an instructor and some of our EBAs and how on how we can make the classroom even better. So I think it's that that that whole attitude of better together that starts with and SELPA administration but that flows down to the districts as well.

Leah

As we've talked a little bit, it's clear that a lot of the time spent in governance meetings has to do with policy and finance as well as program decisions, particularly how to fairly or equitably meet the needs of all students. Which is a core function of SELPAs as they were designed. What do you think is the best way to educate our educational partners about that original purpose of ensuring access and opportunity across California, and the necessity of local control in the shared decision-making model itself? As I'm going to start with you, Todd.

Todd

Thank you. And I think this is a great question. You know, I'm a firm believer that SELPA models and planning through SELPA was the original LCAP. I mean, we had to bring everybody together when you're thinking about SELPA you have to bring everybody to the table. And with the number one goal in mind is how are we going to have better outcomes for our students and how are we going to provide the access for all of our students especially our students with disabilities? And so how do we communicate that out? I think obviously the state SELPA's done a great job, but also it's the school districts and parents and teachers who maybe don't know the intricacies of SELPA, but is getting them to be our voice that advocates as well, that, you know, this is just not you know we can take this SELPA model and dismantle it and put all the resources into the school district. But you're really losing the number one key component in is the and that is everyone together making decisions to better the student and the student and having one district make those solutions best for them may not be best for the local area. And so I think it's just not the voice of self that we need to get to the state is the voice of of the superintendents, of the school districts the LEAs , to push back and say, you know, we've got to we know what we're doing here to collectively together and not just rely on State SELPA or you know, or others on our behalf. We're in this together and this is this is our voice.

Ed Manansala

And I fully agree with Todd and I think just to, you know, build on that or the idea of building I think so is just need to build the story of the successes that are already being experienced. So what are examples where SELPAs have worked collaboratively with LEAs and improve student outcomes? Or, what are examples of where assemblies have provided professional development that's made a difference regarding inclusion? Or, what are examples where SELPAs have implemented ADR and turned a due process case around to benefit the child, gain the support of the parent, help the other way with a positive outcome. Right. Like there's just how do you celebrate the successes? I'll give you a recent example. Within these last two weeks, I took our cabinet to take leadership into our classrooms to see where the success is occurring in the field. So we just need champions telling the story.

Cali

I would add to that that coming from a single SELPA, a district, I felt very isolated in making those tough decisions and moving to the multi-district SELPA, the professional development occurs even at the table with the board, we are able to discuss how things are going and we can request certain presentations because I may know that my colleague to the west of me might be running a spectacular inclusion program that is better than what I'm doing. And, so it's built in collaboration. Every time our directors get together or the superintendents of the board get together, we get to learn from one another and we ask for those presentations to be brought in of those places where we're getting great results. And then it's replicated. And that's that's not paying for professional development. That's just being a part of collaboration and professional development so that we can all grow together, like you say we're better together.

Ed Manansala

I think one last piece in terms of that idea of, you know, acknowledging the success, I do believe that there is success as a through the self, a statewide network and structure. I think practices shared in respect to what's working throughout different areas of the state and how SELPAs articulate the success of that network is also important.

Leah

Absolutely. I, heard all of you kind of talk around just that built in almost a community of practice that you don't have to seek out, that it's just naturally there amongst that that collaborative group. And yes, we feel the same just as SELPA administrators within our statewide network.

Adam

Can I jump in real quick? So when one of the things that I always thought would be important would be for superintendents like yourselves who are very positive about SELPAs and very experienced to join a presentation, say, at the superintendent's symposium annually to inform people about what our SELPAs and what's the reason for them, and what's the history of the, you know, Todd, as you said you know original local control and as well as the good things that folks have shared here about the collaboration and the impact that it has on all the LEAs involved. I think that would be one way to do it. I also think following that up with going to CSBA to present to board members. You know, one of the things that I learned from the leg committee work, legislative committee work is that legislators in California have no idea what a SELPA is or what a SELPA does unless certain people have been very good at talking to their local legislators a lot about what SELPAs are. So, the problem is how do we inform people and get folks out there? And it has to be folks that are not SELPA directors. They can be part of the team that does a presentation. But if we get really strong superintendents out there to voice support and we get that word across the state, that would really help.

Tamara

Adam I'd like to follow up on that idea because you had some specific strategies you just mentioned around how we can spread the word about what SELPAs are doing and understanding not just SELPAs, but really how special education works in general statewide. Over the last decade, as you know, Adam, the administration and the state board, the legislature, have spent a great deal of time and money in an attempt to better understand the complexity of special education and SELPA governance. And there have been some concerns that have been framed around persistent achievement gaps for students, including students with disabilities. Some of the recommendations that have come out of that work have focused sort of on who gets the money as being a really important factor, if not the most important factor that would drive improved outcomes for students with disabilities. I'm curious your thoughts, Adam, and then I'll open it up to other panelists around that idea of is it as simple as who gets the money?

Adam

Of course, is not that simple. It's actually fairly mind-boggling that such a complex topic as achievement for students of disabilities gets eroded down to a money problem, and we have access to authentic and solid research around the world as to what works for students with disabilities in terms of advancing their performance. If you were to create a flowchart of that, you'd find money. Well down the chart. The fact that the folks who research this for the legislature didn't even mention this is really a problem. And if we were to consider why all of our students across the schools are not performing as well as students that disabilities in many places, we would need to ask why is it not happening and start to look at our evidence-based practices and how well we implement those. There is plenty of research to tell us what best practices are for all students, including students with disabilities, and that's where we need the focus to be. And in my view, the question is the wrong question about who should have the money to provide better services. It should be how to better services get provided, and who's the best positioned to provide the instruction, training and support to make that happen. So I think if we saw more of a commitment to the state around the inclusionary side of things, MTSS training for everybody and really expand that opportunity so that people can do that, which would include positive behavior intervention supports and programs like that, and make sure that administrators are trained well to support these programs and that LEAs are funded to support training of their staff. And for many places in the state SELPAs are the folks that have the expertise to provide that. So, no, it's a much more complex question, and I think it requires a more complex answer. But I think we have enough information and research from what's happening elsewhere to put together a much better comprehensive plan.

Cali

Adam said it very eloquently, but I probably won't be as eloquent because this isn't about the money. This is about the practitioners doing the work and our teachers and those that are serving our students are always seeking to do a better job, always.

Continuous learning occurs with our staff and so when you when you talk about who's going to get the money, it's really not about who's going to get the money. It's how are we going to use the money to better the support to the people that are actually doing the work. And while I am a superintendent and removed from the classroom, I pay attention to what my teachers tell me that they need. And then we're able to share that with our SELPA. And that's how we get the professional development that we need. They're the services that we need or the support to our parents. And so it's it's disheartening to me that someone who is farther removed from the work that's done than me would want to make a change in the funding source without hearing from us as leaders and as practitioners.

Ed Manansala

Going back to Adam's comments, I agree we know a great deal about what works and what makes a difference for students. And in 2015 there was the statewide special education report and put forth recommendations in multiple areas that were deeply interconnected, including Early learning, Evidence-Based School and Classroom Practices, Educator Preparation, Professional Learning, Assessment. And while the recommendations were detailed, you know, there was no note in the task force report that made any recommendations regarding changing who gets the money.

Todd

I can echo that because I was on that committee and the only thing we argued was the equalization raising the bar up and, and, and that was the whole point. And we talk about MTSS and PBIS. That's been around for decades. And yet we focus on the money or the state focuses on the money where it goes and it and I agree with Cali a hundred percent a year go back to the practitioners who know, who knows, who know best in the classroom, working every day for all of our students, and in this case, particularly student disabilities. And the fact that we're focused on where the money goes and how to report it and using student outcomes to drive that is backwards. And so we need to we need to get back to those practitioners. We need to get back to best practices in the classroom. We know what they are. We've researched it to death. Let's not focus on on who's going to get the money. Let's get us to give us the adequate amount of money into the structure we have already with SELPAs and we can do the work.

Leah

Thank you all and I really appreciate that link back to that that task force report. Ed, if you could chat a little bit about my next question, some of the ideas put forth in the current administration's proposed budget may perpetuate competition between districts. And I'm thinking along the lines of SELPA fee caps. I'm thinking along the lines of just shifting the educationally related mental health services dollars from SELPAs to LEAs and ultimately some of that competition could worsen

staffing shortages, could ultimately create barriers to programs, and reduce program quality. When we think about the benefits of not just economies of scale, but economies of thought and communication at work in the governance structure, how do we maintain a respect for and preserve the attention necessary for quality program development while at the same time addressing those achievement disparities in an intentional way?

ED Manansala

That's an excellent question. You know, if we want to address the achievement disparities, we have to address the entire system. It's often been said that to solve issues in special education, we have to begin with general education. And this is particularly salient when you consider that approximately two thirds of students with disabilities are in other high-risk categories. So, think of English learners, homelessness and poverty. So, it makes sense that we need to address ongoing improvement for our students. But recognizing that special education students are general education students first, it doesn't mean we need to dismantle the SELPA system, but it provides the opportunity for us to look at greater levels of coherence across this entire system of support. So again, leading a county office or being a county superintendent, I know it's easy for me to say that SELPAs with COEs are natural education partners and jointly engaging in this work. So understanding that professional development as well as other efforts involving bolstering options within the general education environment, it makes it critical that special education is not a silo, but rather is part and parcel of the entire system. So through all the various levels and roles, superintendents, LEAs, central office leadership, site leadership, teachers related service providers, paraeducators, parents, students, educational partners. The message needs to be coordinated, consistent and persuasive to move the system to improve outcomes for all students, including students with disabilities.

Todd

I would just add that, you know, it's just the disabilities are a part of the formula. We receive money for them first and we start at the district level with them. And you know, the SELPA and that model then comes alongside and says, what else? What additional supports do we need in our region? And I think if we remove that, then we remove the support that we can provide with each other. And in it you don't become so isolated. And because of isolation, it's just it's going to depend on your leadership, your board, your, you know, more union involvement. And it becomes a very difficult process taking out that we're focused on all students with disabilities. So I think I think we forget that, you know, we we just don't receive SELPA of funding just to solve all of our our special ed funding for all of our students. That's part of it. We start with our LCFF and that starts with tier one supports in the classroom. But again, that's a joint effort with LEAs and the SELPA and in our case a multi-district SELPA.

Adam

I'd like to jump in and Todd, I appreciate what you said as well, because I've been in your district and seen some absolutely fabulous programming going on there. . And Ed, I agree with you. Exactly. I think that the the other thing to consider is the fact that the majority of LEAs in the state are very small and they don't have the capacity to do this work on their own. And the process of constantly talking about the doing away with SELPAs realigning and putting the money somewhere else and all that, all of that systematically devalues the work of those people in the self as it have been, providing the high quality work that everyone else has been speaking about. And I think it's important to recognize that that is a damaging process. It forces people to consider their future and whether they're going to stay working for the SELPAs, whether they're going to move on, all those sort of things. And small districts. When I was a director, I had I had 87 LEAs that I worked with between my two SELPAs. That's a lot of LEAs. And, you can imagine most of them were quite small and they were terrified that the SELPA would disappear and they would have to figure it out to provide their own support and start to build the essentially what the SELPA provides over how many years it would take to build that. So, I think that's an important factor.

Cali

I mentioned earlier, coming from a larger district, I had 42,000 students in my district and I went to 10,000 students. But, the work didn't change. But what changed was the support for the work by going into the East Valley SELPA. And, I appreciate, Adam, what you're saying is districts that are smaller than, you know, maybe 100 students or 50 students, they're not going to have those resources nor the funding to address them. And we all know that education is lifelong learning And so we need to have those resources pooled. And the education for SELPAs not only is I we talked about it earlier that we need to share what they are, because sometimes as educators in the system, we just know what we know and we have to share it. But looking for opportunities to do that in our own communities as well as up and down the state and doing things like this podcast is probably just the beginning, because highlighting the differences in district size and what that means and knowing as a as a member of our Association for California School Administrators, there's small districts that work together on their own because there's not a system for it. We already have a system for support and just making sure that we use it to educate everyone and how well it works, I think is critical.

Tamara

We've chatted a little bit about LEAs and size and capacity and that there are so many small LEAs across the state of California that rely on SELPAs for an array of supports and services. Let's pivot for a moment to thinking about different size and capacities of SELPAs themselves, because SELPAs also have an array of responsibilities, and yet a self can be a team of one and a SELPA can be a really broad team with many staff out supporting districts in a variety of ways. So I'm, I'm curious what would be required in order to ensure equity and build SELPA capacity across the state. So we know that all

SELPAs can do the work that the state expects in terms of improving outcomes for students with disabilities.

Adam

I think the first thing that would be necessary is to really codify what SELPAs do. And I know that the current bill, the governance bill that states help, is carrying and sponsoring would move in that direction, which would be really crucial. As long as it remains essentially vague and subject to local decision making about what SELPAs would do, then you're left with the ability for outside forces to come in and say, it's not working. So first would be codifying what what happens and since so goes across the state provide a set series of supports for their member is you could start there and then look at what a majority of SELPAs do. And SELPAs are very different. As everyone knows, at least we think, as everyone knows from the single district SELPA that Cali talked about to huge SELPAs like El Dorado Charter SELPA with hundreds of LEAs is what do they do that is important for them to do to support everybody in their membership? So first of all, would be the codification. Second of all would be to provide a, an equitable level of funding for all SELPAs that would provide a minimum amount of guaranteed and codified supports, for example, ADR. And, that could be something at every stop when the state provides for its member LEAs. It could also be professional development in certain areas that are specific to students with disabilities But the provision of enough funding and guaranteed dedicated funding to make sure that each SELPA has the resources necessary to provide to support that local LEAs need would be the way to do that.

Leah

you referenced kind of this equalization of funding across SELPAs and over the last few years there has been a great deal of investment in special education by the administration with the most significant amount of funding being equalization and improving that base rate across SELPAs. They have suggested that in spite of these investments, they aren't seeing improvements in the performance of students with disabilities. There's been comments made, statements published around that. Our question is, is that fair? And when we look toward the future, what should the state do if and when they are able to increase funding to ensure that dollars are spent on the activities they have prioritized? Ed, I'd love from a county superintendent perspective. To hear your input on that.

Ed Manansala

Sure. So first I want to acknowledge and express our appreciation for the increased funding we've received for special education in these last few years, as well as a change in the formula that recognizes the growth and decline of LEAs and a SELPA individually, rather than just looking at the overall ADA numbers of the SELPA and therefore, you know, losing the support needed for each LEAs relative change so that you know, was significant. In regards to what we can do in the future to invest in positive systems change, I believe that having all student groups recognized in the

LCAP and requiring accountability as to how we prioritize the use of funds to meet the specific needs of students with disabilities would be most helpful, and it should be specifically addressed in the LCAP just as we address the needs of English learners, homeless students and foster youth. The needs of students with disabilities should be woven into the strategies being set forth in the LCAP for all students at risk. So when I think about SELPAs, SELPAs should continue to build partnerships with statewide educational organizations, and as I was saying earlier, just telling the story of success and making sure there are communication strategies in place to make this happen, revisit the statewide Special Education Task Force recommendations from 2015. And I know there have been advances already some of those recommendations. But I think, you know, you continue to move forward with those recommendations I would redouble our efforts to build just one system rather than having any of the student groups segregated and siloed, including students with disabilities, and just ensure that in all of our governance structures, we build leadership teams that include the perspectives and voices of all student groups and ensuring that our accountability systems are built to address the needs of all groups, including, and just again, as I was referencing, embedded in the LEA LCAPs as well. It's just important to ensure that policymakers understand and appreciate the unintended consequences related to direct funding of LEAs rather than employing the support through an intermediary such as SELPAs. And, you know, I can empathize with this idea of understanding the structure of SELPAs, because in 2013, during the reform with LCFF, county offices, their roles started to shift and there was a level question about the role and it just becomes important to help individuals at various levels be it from administration to the Department of Finance to the Legislature to understand the true value and work of what SELPAs are doing within these local communities.

Leah

Thank you. Ed. Any other thoughts in terms of the increased funding that has been allocated to special education, specifically maybe some of those comments around the connection between increase of funding and maybe not seeing immediate outcomes? Any thoughts on whether that's a fair expectation?

Adam

My feeling is that it's a complicated, and complex problem. We're seeing an increase in the numbers of students in special education with much more challenging problems happening across the state, which means that the dollar spent does not go nearly as far as it needs to as you get more challenging students coming into your districts. You combine that with declining enrollment in a lot of places and funding becomes a huge issue. And we know staffing is a huge issue. Just to find people in many LEAs really have to raise the amount that they're offering to get some of these really difficult to find professionals in play. Again, I think Ed hit it right on the nose, which is we need to really start looking at model inclusionary practices where the discussion about all students fully incorporates special education. I know it's a big fear amongst special education parents that the more it gets internalized into general education, the more they'll be

forgotten. So it's it's absolutely essential that we assure that their voices are part of any development of new plans. And I think going back, as Ed said, to the task force, taking a look at the work that was done there, and again, pulling up the research that we know from across the country and applying that systematically would be super helpful.

Todd

And I'm going to piggyback on that. and Ed too, as far as the LCAP work, we need we need to be heavily involved with districts in the LCAP with that student and parent voice for this disability. It's the system for all, not just for for some. And so so working through that process. But the other one is is we have some compliance issues too. I can't go on not to speak about compliance and and how that's run through the state and the amount of time and effort and resources that really is being not being utilized appropriately, I believe. If compliance is is focusing on technical issues rather than instruction in the classroom. And then in those inclusionary practices, the idea is that gets inclusionary. Well, let's put the resources into the classrooms, into the practitioners, into professional development to provide that opportunity for more inclusive practices.

Tamara

Adam, you spoke to an increasing number of students with disabilities and really more profound needs that we're seeing. And one of the adjustments that that made me think of was the adjustment that we experienced last year, where we saw a shift of mental health services dollars from SELPA directly to LEAs, which was surprising, especially because social, emotional and behavioral needs are one of those areas that we've really seen balloon in the last couple of years. With that shift, there wasn't a lot of opportunity, as you mentioned, Todd, for parents to weigh in and share their perspective on what that shift might look like and their concerns about how it might dismantle existing SELPA programs or programs that those dollars were supporting. So thinking about continuation of that trend in the current trailer bill language, what are some alternatives for special education, finance or governance that might work better for students, district staff, families?

Todd

Well, I guess I guess I would start by saying let's not fix what's not broken. So, you know, we have if you're looking at alternatives, I think we are taking the control out of the hands of the region, the regional system, so that in our case, multi-districts, you know, together we have I mean, a number of our districts have, you know, fewer than 100 kids. And so, you know, it's tough. It's tough to find an alternative for those those districts if we're looking at just funding directly to the school districts to the LEA. So I think it's I think in the case of mental health dollars, what we did as a multi-district SELPA is, we voted and we agreed that that money would still be pooled together and utilized for our ERMHS services for all the students in our region. We had districts who said we don't want that funding. It's not enough for us to even operate a program. And

so it's difficult to say, well, there's alternatives when we feel the system we have is as far as how we are operating it is successful. I go back to the adequacy piece of it and if you know, we have made efforts in the last few years to equalize. But I think every SELPA is in a unique situation. We're small and sparse. We have we have different needs than maybe, you know, a single large urban single district SELPA. And so for the state to say, well, we're going to have this one model, it's taking control out of our own unique situation when we know what's best for kids. So it was really hard for me to say, well, what's the alternative? When we have we feel have a system that's already working, it's an adequacy issue. And then also as we look at ADR and mental health, we have all these services that are additional to, you know, special education dollars that again, they don't generate enough money for us regionally to operate program as one LEA. So if we're gonna keep that funding going we should and it's big focus on adequacy. Let's keep the system that we have. I don't have another alternative way to do it that at least for our SELPA that would be successful.

Leah

Well, you've all been very complimentary of the current of structures within which you are working, and that really spans the entire state of California. as educational leaders, we're all committed to continuous improvement as well. So Cali, if you were anointed queen of all things, educational leadership and governance, etc., and were put in charge really of reforming the SELPA governance structure and getting the absolute best results in the process, who would you want involved in that process? How would you begin to organize that work in a way that would end up making everyone happy recognizing we have many educational partners that influence and are impacted by the work that we do.

Cali

Well, I've always loved to wear a crown. However, and this one I'd have to share because I would just start with saying what I when I was a special education teacher and I did a couple of different kinds of special education classrooms, I quickly realized that when you're moving in to support a student that has diverse needs, you need, you need a diverse team of specialists. And so, as I started in in my role as a special education teacher, I knew that I needed to work collaboratively with our speech therapist and our school psychologist and our school nurse. And and that was from a viewpoint of being a really a young teacher. And then I also knew that I needed to partner with parents and that the district was going to need to help provide additional support because there were things out of the scope of my knowledge and my experiences and my authority to do to help make sure that I got my students everything they needed. I, along with the parent and the student, depending on the grade level, were the first voices that would speak up in IEP meetings for services. But my professional development and growth as an educator did not ever get me to the place where I could make a single decision on my own. And if I had, it probably wouldn't have been the best for my students because I didn't have all the background that other practitioners had. And so when I have and I have three different credentials, and even

with that, and that's not a bragging thing. Even with that, though, I didn't come away with the ability to make all the decisions. And so I would equate that to how we work in the SELPA. So if I were going to reform it, I would say as queen of the land, I would like to have all of the different practitioners that go into supporting the teacher in the classroom be a part of that. I would like to have a committee where the parents get to sit in and they provide guidance from their point of view. And then I'd like to have a tool that helps us when we don't agree something that would allow us to move forward. I would like to make sure that the person that was going to kind of help be the leader, the mediator, the keeper of the records, the keeper of the quality and making sure we're all going the same direction was talking not only to me as a teacher, but to my principals, my superintendents, the other practitioners and the boards of education so that they understand and I would want to be able to share the good things that we would do in a format where they knew that everybody that had participated were experts in their own way and they were able to share the successes of students. And that may be different for every student. Individualized educational plan, individual success for every student. That's what we're about. So, if I had my crown, that's what I would want. And when I describe that, it probably sounds like a SELPA and I think we're doing an amazing job working together. The collective impact model is something that we have used in many different ways, whether it be to support our English learners or other students that have a designated needs to be addressed individually. So collectively, we work together to support them to do more. We have the expertise in our SELPAs. There's expertise there that I don't have. I don't have occupational therapists that I can call within my district, but I sure have it in my SELPA. And the organization has been the leader in collective impact work with us not even recognizing it. And it is the original LCAP. It is what we needed to have happen across the whole educational system. So, the SELPAs have brought that reform early on. And like I said, from being a practitioner to being a school leader and doing this for 33 years, I feel like that we have a great model. We just need to share what we do, how we do it, why we do it, and the outcomes.

Leah

Cali I had to smile when you said, When I describe this, it sounds like a SELPA, because as I was listening to you, I thought, "Gosh, this sounds like the process that we undertake when developing our local plan within a SELPA." So thank you for highlighting that. When we're thinking about reform, if there is reform needed amongst the SELPA structure, how do we do that? How do we ensure that students continue to receive great services that they're getting? How are parents valued in that system? And how does a super still maintain and be responsible to a level of accountability?

Cali

I think if there's need to look into what SELPAs are providing and doing and the outcomes, then you work to get the data. And I think that we have data that shows that that things are working, even in spite of a worldwide pandemic where our special education students probably needed us the most because of the extra assistance that

they get and the kinds of assistance they need. And so we've still made a lot of progress. But I think there's ways we always want to get better and grow. But I don't think doing that individually is going to help anyone. Doing it collectively, and not just looking at the kinds of accountability measures, the accountability measures aren't the things that are going to make the difference. It's the professional development. It's the inside look at the students that we're serving. And that's a spotlight in time. We need to always continue to look at those things. And so I think that as we're looking at maybe some kind of reform, adding additional practices that statewide we're using for statewide outcomes and that we're making sure that we have the opportunities to have a collective impact in a collaboration that extends because there are great things going on everywhere.

Thank you, Cali Thank you, Cali, you said it beautifully. Thank you. Thank you, Cali. You said it beautifully. Absolutely. She's a great queen for the day, Apparently we anointed the correct one

Cali

Well, I will say I grew up in a household with a severely handicapped brother. So when I get on my soapbox, it was he was 18 months older than me. And from an early age, I knew what I needed to do to support him and who I wanted to be for other students. And so it is a it's definitely a passion. And I know lots of our practitioners have those same kinds of stories. So thank you. I will accept my crown.

Tamara

So we've spent quite a bit of time talking about possibilities in terms of reform, For the second year in a row, the SELPA Administrators of California have been fortunate enough to sponsor legislation that we believe would improve student outcomes. Last year, the SELPA inclusion bill SB 1113 earned unanimous support at all levels of the process and is now SB 354 still on track to receive a vote on the floor. This year, we're also bringing forward AB 1517, which would codify the technical assistance support provided to LEAs by their SELPAs, which was a recommendation I think you had made, Adam. And also advancing the implementation of the annual Assurances Support Plan, which is an additional component of transparency and accountable for continuous improvement work within SELPAs and their member LEAs. How would this piece of legislation be helpful to the state in achieving its priorities and also extending that to how would this idea of advancing an inclusion bill lead us to some of the outcomes we're actually seeking for students with disabilities?

Adam

I appreciate the question. As Tami and Leah know, I was very involved with SB 1113 last year and was sorry to say, I mean, you left out this little important piece of information that even though it got unanimous support in both the chambers of the legislature was vetoed by the governor. And so the revised bill that's back that State SELPA is sponsoring, carried by the same senator, Senator Ochoa Bough has a much

better chance of being signed because the few objectionable things in that bill that the governor found have been removed. And I think that's a great bill for forwarding inclusion in terms of requiring certain things like mandating that the Commission on Teacher Credentialing assure that all new administrators are well-versed in inclusive practices and how to implement those and support their teachers in implementing them wherever they land. 1517 also covers some of the stuff that we talked about already on this podcast about codifying some of the things that help us do and really helping to assure their continuance in terms of their ability to do that. And I mentioned something earlier, which is the de-valuing of SELPAs and SELPA staff and this kind of psychic impact of that over time. And I think the furthering of anything that makes SELPAs have firmer footing in the educational administrative world will be helpful to practitioners, help us retain staff, help people really step out and take risks because they won't be so worried about the future.

Cali

I'd like to share that because of the expertise in the SELPA that I belong to, we've been able to get really up to date on our inclusion task force and inclusionary practices. It's been really helpful to have districts that have gone before us as well as the expertise at the level of the SELPA, to help us with that. And they're like a part of our team. They come and help speak and and I'll say it's a it's a collaboration also with people from other counties that have helped us as well. It's very helpful. And just Adam, to comment on Senator Ochoa Bogh, I just want to draw a connection. So Senator Ochoa Bogh was my board member and she also has been a teacher. And so, what she understands, she can support. And so I think it's our job to increase the understanding of those that may not have the expertise that Senator Ochoa Bogh has. And I will say that we have made a collective effort. And Dr. Metheny who I am proud to say is my SELPA Director, has had the opportunity to sit in on groups where our county is supporting our lobbying efforts for the good of all education, but specifically with special education to help form opinions with our local legislators. And I think that that is a job that we all should be taking on.

Todd

And I think it's it's important with this technical assistance, codifying technical assistance, especially with the small, small school districts we rely on, SELPA expertise. And I think the more resources we can give them for their responsibility and their help, not only through differentiated assistance, through LCAP writing, but they are they're the experts in the room. And so the small districts really depend on that. And I think if we can codify that and provide them the resources and increase their involvement and really give solutions along with the LEA for the inclusive practices to result in outcomes, I think that's that's critical for small school districts.

Tamara

I think it's important not to make assumptions. So I just want to follow up. When we think about inclusive practices or inclusion, can we spend a few minutes talking about

why is that so important when we're thinking about improving outcomes for students with disabilities and is advancing inclusive practices exclusively the responsibility of SELPA? Adam, I think it's important for us to spend a few minutes talking about why is inclusion important and is advancing inclusive practices SELPA work?

Adam

It's SELPA work in the sense that SELPAs support their LEAs to do their optimal in terms of serving all students with disabilities. But, it is clearly a general education function. I think just like empty says is a general education function, even though in many places it's pushed by SELPAs in order to make sure that that occurs and SELPAs often link LEA leadership to resources for training and research and all that to implement things like MTSS and other inclusionary practices. That being said, what you'll find in conversations across the state is that people think it's a special ed function. It's not only a general education function, it's a societal function and inclusion is a concept that that people really either understand by nature or they need to learn about it to understand. And a lot of that depends on where you were raised. in the US and a lot of places where we really talk about rugged individualism and sort of pulling yourself up by your bootstraps when one must recognize that many students disabilities will never be able to do that without the best possible support from their peers. Thus, inclusion. We also have research to support this and those practices are something that happen in a general education classroom. They don't happen in an isolated program somewhere. They happen in every general education classroom. And therefore, that's where all of this needs to take place within those structures that support that relationship between a general and teacher and student and parent.

Todd

I absolutely agree.

And I will say 100%, it starts with the LEA, it starts with the district inclusionary practices. and really the PD, the experts coming in alongside the district to talk about inclusionary practices. So it comes back to the integrity of the leadership to say, you know what, in my district we're going to do inclusive practices, We're committed to that because that's what we believe in. And then how does the SELPA help that? the district starts with a commitment and a goal, and then someone is there for that technical assistance, that support that professional development to come alongside.

Cali

I couldn't agree more with you. And I think that the way that my SELPA has supported us has really been the thing that has motivated my my general ed teachers, because when you when you talk about, you know, the expertise, I think some people believe they don't have it and they don't know what to do. And so the ability for those that have the expertise to be able to convey you can do this and here's how and here's why, it just it's the collaboration, again, the collective impact that we can have together in order to help our kids be the best that they can possibly be.

Todd

It's not just from the SELPA's expertise, but it's expertise in other areas who are part of the SELPA that can share across the SELPA. So what is Red Bluff High School doing that we can share with our other districts that that is successful? And it's not is not solely on the SELPA. SELPA a collaboration of us all. and we are better together and it doesn't have to just be Red Bluff Joint Union High School District or little Flournoy District out in the foothills. It's one SELPA, but serving all of our children.

Ed

I think learning and implementing practices of inclusion, it does not rest solely on the shoulders of SELPA administrators or the SELPA, but it is a collective effort as Cali's speaking to it. There's a societal element that Adam is acknowledging. So, to me it's somewhat of a Venn diagram when you look at various structures that are learning about inclusion and implementing inclusion. So I'll just speak locally for a moment. I think under Tamara's leadership with our El Dorado County SELPA, what we see is a reflection of, 15 LEAs in our county with very unique communities. But we are learning together. And when it comes to inclusionary practices, because each leader and practitioner comes with a different background as Adam's speaking to. So we have been learning about inclusion not only in a SELPA context, but in respect to our superintendents council, to our curriculum and instruction leadership committee throughout the county. So again, this is something that we are embracing, but we recognize it is a process.

Leah

Wonderful. Thank you all. And as we come to a close today, I want to thank all of our panelists for joining us and sharing around individual experiences, lived experiences within SELPAs

A few trends or a few topics came up really around collective learning as adults, We're learning together and we have that built in network to do so. Ultimately, the SELPA structure also allows us to authentically engage our educational partners, and we know that that group of educational partners is vast. And ultimately, this idea that SELPAs do work. I'm actually leaving a podcast with a list of to do's, one to find those stories throughout the state, those celebrations of where student outcomes are directly connected to the work of SELPAs and LEAs in a shared commitment to move those outcomes, one. Two, I heard one of our panelists say, "Hey superintendents, it'd be great if you could create a panel." And so let's do that. Let's look at those opportunities to, present and pull a panel of superintendents to talk about what SELPAs are, what is the value of SELPAs. And just in this last little bit of conversation at the end, I realize we have another podcast topic and that's really around promoting inclusive practices and inclusion. So again, I want to thank each and every one of our participants and to listen to more podcasts, see SELPA-produced videos or learn more about self as in general, visit us at www.SELPA.info and like us on Facebook at SELPA Administrators of California. Until then, keep making it happen, each student, every day.