

## OCALI Podcast 25

### There is Strength in Every Community: A Conversation about Special Education in Rural and Urban Settings

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**SIMON BUEHRER:** Welcome to "Rewind," the Inspiring Change podcast series featuring conversations and connections from OCALICON, the premier autism and disabilities conference. Each year, OCALICON brings together a cross-section of internationally-recognized leaders, educators, service providers, self advocates, and many others, for a multifaceted approach to improving the lives of people with disabilities across the lifespan.

"Rewind" is the audio showcase of some of OCALICON's best moments, the speakers, sessions, and stories that make it all happen. I'm Simon Buehrer.

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**GERARD CORTEZ:** Today, I wanted to talk about two things that are very critical and key, and those two concepts are intersectionality and educational equity.

**KIM FLOYD:** And we know that research has shown that students that are located in geographically isolated areas are more likely to experience adverse events than those that are living in urban areas.

**MATT JAMESON:** I really think that we need to be thinking about how we can create policies and structures to increase the value, increase the standing, and increase the import of our teachers in our communities.

**SIMON BUEHRER:** What comes to mind when you think about rural education? What's it look like? How does it work? And what comes to mind when you think about urban education? What does it look like, and how does it work?

Do these different settings have anything in common or are they polar opposites? And then what happens when you bring disability and special education into the conversation? What are some of the issues that challenges and opportunities that come up?

Well, OCALI recently convened a gathering of leaders from ACRES, an organization focused on rural disability education and members of the Urban Collaborative, an organization focused on

urban disability education for a frank and honest conversation about the current state of disability education in both rural and urban settings.

**BRITTANY HOTT:** I'm Brittany Hott. I'm at the University of Oklahoma in the Department of Educational Psychology, I'm an associate professor of special education, and most of my work is in deep east Texas and southeast Oklahoma where I study interventions for both teachers and students who have exceptionalities.

And so I've been really interested in rural ingenuity-- creative responses-- to address challenges that rural localities face. Clever intervention implementation-- most of our folks in rural schools are wearing multiple hats. For example, counselor may implement a bus intervention using technology. The principal in that district may also be the bus driver and coaching basketball.

And so everything's covered, but the way that personnel are used to provide intervention is interesting and unique. And innovative partnerships-- coordination across districts to form cooperatives or shared service agreements to provide special education services and to maximize resources, and also school university partnerships.

**GERARD CORTEZ:** My name is Gerard Cortez. I have the pleasure of serving as an Assistant Superintendent here in the San Antonio Independent School District. My areas of responsibility include disability and learning support services, which includes special education section 504, our school counselors, social workers. We also have the opportunity to provide support for social, emotional, and academic development.

Today, I wanted to talk about two things that are very critical and key in determining the provision of services for students with disabilities here in San Antonio ISD and other urban educational settings, and those two concepts are intersectionality and educational equity.

For students with disabilities, many times they are confronted with the troublesome reality of intersectionality and the simultaneous experience of social categories, such as their race, their gender, their sexual orientation, their socioeconomic status, as well as their disability. And so as all of these particular categories kind of collide and come together, they can create systems of disadvantage, oppression, and discrimination.

Now, I'm not quite sure how that impact is felt in our rural settings, but I know with regard to our urban educational settings, those things are very real and very troublesome with regard to making sure that you're able to provide equitable services for students.

**KIM FLOYD:** I'm Kim Floyd. I'm from West Virginia University. I am an associate professor in the Department of Family and Learning Sciences focusing on special education and early childhood. One of my main areas of focus now is looking at childhood trauma and adversity.

And we know that this is not just an urban or rural problem. It's a national problem. And also beyond just the impaired academic and social behaviors of children that are exposed to trauma,

they become highly susceptible to dangerous behaviors and then poor health and other outcomes.

And so when we look at why is this something we really need to focus on here in the educational setting is we know that these adverse childhood experiences or ACEs persist into adulthood. And we know that research is showing that students that are located in geographically isolated areas are more likely to experience adverse events than those that are living in urban areas.

And so what might be some of those factors that are related to rural education as compared to urban? Often in rural areas, we find a reduction in the availability of resources through government funding or some of the larger scale programs. Often, there's a lack of internet or high speed internet, at least, limited access to high quality medical or options of medical and behavioral professionals.

And then sometimes in rural communities, it's where everybody kind of knows each other. And so parents sometimes are hesitant to reach out because they don't want people to know there's the stigma associated with it. So with those barriers, it's paramount to explore practices that offer potential to mitigate those factors. And how can we help those students? And the one thing children, and the one way to do that is through schools.

**JENNIFER BARIBEAU:** I'm Jennifer Baribeau. I currently work for West Hartford Public Schools, but I have worked for the last probably six years now at the Urban Collaborative. And prior to that, I worked in Springfield, Massachusetts. I worked in Holyoke, Massachusetts. So I've had a lot of experience working in urban settings.

And my kind of lens that I bring to this and conversations that I've had with colleagues is really around, how are we defining rural versus urban education? And are there really stark differences between the two? And when we think about that, are we thinking about what implicit biases we bring to the table when we're looking at that?

I think oftentimes we see these as two binary systems. And really, there are a lot of similarities. As you've seen from Brittany and Kim's quick little fast and furious discussions, we have a lot of the same problems of practice that we are trying to tackle. So do we really define these as two really different systems?

Or are we really looking at education as a whole and thinking about, how do we support students? Are we defining or labeling students differently across these settings? How does this truly impact our continuum of services and supports when we're thinking about students that are going to school in urban versus rural settings? And then I also think about, how does this impact how we hire and retain highly qualified staff?

I think it's a problem that we're looking at across both settings. And I think that rather than looking at these systems as two separate systems, how do we come together and really share practices and best practices? And then thinking about staffing-- we're looking at high burnout.

How are we then bringing on highly qualified staff to support and then retaining those staff and making sure that we're taking care of those needs as well?

**BRUCE WATSON:** Next up, we have Matt Jameson who is going to speak a little bit about the rural side of the experience for future preparation.

**MATT JAMESON:** It's nice to be here. I run a special education department at the University of Utah, so I have my feet fairly well planted in both urban and rural teacher preparation. One of my biggest concerns I think is shared across both of the settings, which is the preparation of highly qualified and highly skilled teachers for both rural and urban areas.

So my passion and my background has always been in distance education and supporting teachers in the rural and remote areas get licensure and endorsement in areas where the programs are much more difficult to access, so sensory impairment programs, programs for students with extensive needs, et cetera.

As we move forward, though, I think-- thinking about OCALI and what OCALI does with their mission in terms of informing policy and practice-- I think all of us need to be concerned about, what is the content of effective teacher preparation right now? What do our teachers need to know to come out and be successful to support all students and all students in rural and urban areas?

What are the sort of supports and structures that need to be in place to support their induction into the field? So once they leave-- so their student teaching experiences, what additional supports are provided by the LEAs and by state education agencies to ensure that they are successful in these placements meeting the demands, again, of a very difficult time right now?

And then finally, how do we support them and give them the skill set in a profession, which I think is inherently being attacked, devalued? And at least from our teacher preparation program, we're seeing already impacts on our applications. So we have critical shortages in Utah in pretty much every special education area.

I really think that we need to be thinking about how we can create policies and structures to increase the value, increase the standing, increase the import of our teachers in our communities to, again, help deal with some of these very complicated issues that Brittany, Gerard, Jennifer, and other folks have raised.

**LAUREN KATZMAN:** I'm Lauren Katzman, and I run the collaborative at ASU. And prior to this in terms of this conversation, I was the Special Ed Director of New York City and of Newark, New Jersey. Jennifer and I have done a lot of work together, working in school districts, helping them kind of do deep dives around the special education practices.

And so my whole life has been in urban school districts. And I came to this conversation with so many assumptions that were wrong. Rural is much more diverse than I understood in my head. Rural is Indigenous populations. Where's the most disproportionality? The highest rates of

disproportionality are Native American students. And then we get to Black and Latino, and then we keep going down the road there in urban settings.

So there are things to learn from each other around disproportionality. There are things to learn from each other around inclusive practices, for example. In rural schools, it's harder to have self-contained placements. There's what somebody called inclusion by default. And in urban schools, it's easier.

So I think we can learn that together. We can learn more about more inclusive practices. I just think there's a lot more to learn from one another than I gave it credit for prior to this conversation.

**GERARD CORTEZ:** I wanted to know if the issues impacting intersectionality are as prevalent in rural settings as they are in urban settings. I also wanted to know, with regard to the provision of services for students with disabilities, how you are overcoming some of the factors associated with that intersectionality.

**BRITTANY HOTT:** That's a deep question. A lot of the challenges and issues that you raised are very similar in many of the districts that I collaborate with. That misconception that rural isn't diverse-- in fact, our rural schools in Oklahoma are some of the most diverse in the nation according to the Rural Trust Report that recently came out.

I don't want to overlook the strength of rural schools or over-generalize because we have some schools where they have a lot of funding due to oil money or other industry that has come in, but the school district may not perform well due to other challenges. We have rural poverty just as there is urban poverty. The way it manifests is different.

The way we have to address those challenges-- I think there may be similarities, I suspect, but much of it is nuanced. It's through collaboration and networked communities of practice that we're able to provide. For instance, there may be four students who identify as deaf across eight districts, and so we collaborate to have services in one district, and each district pays in.

We share a school psychologist across maybe nine districts. We have to address that windshield time because I don't want a psychologist driving two hours in a car one way, two hours back-- that's four hours gone-- if we can use technology effectively. Broadband is an issue. You can't park outside of a McDonald's or walk to McDonald's to access that internet.

Jobs, when children graduate, teacher shortages-- I think the issues are very similar. I think where it's nuanced is how we address them, which I think you're alluding to. And so I think that's collaboration. I think that's engagement with the community. That teacher turnover? We're all having recruitment issues.

And so what we can do in rural districts is make them community-based, and we can make them good places to work and supportive places to work. What are urban schools doing to overcome some of those challenges?

**MATT JAMESON:** There is this tremendous overlap between those pieces. And I think for both of them, I think the answer in my experience and the things that I have seen be successful, is engagement with those communities-- authentic engagement with the communities you're serving. So going back all the way to teacher preparation, trying to identify candidates in the area and train them where they are.

So what we have found in our experience in rural teacher education is if we can find a teacher who is Navajo who lives on the Navajo reservation and we can offer a training program to them where they are, they complete that program and end up being a support. What we have learned is we need to learn the content. So we need to engage with that community.

One of the things we learned with our engagement with the Diné or the Navajo was they had strong evidence that students who did not have native language skills were not doing well in school and post-school. So we worked with them to build a component of Navajo language instruction into our special education content.

But it all goes back in my mind to authentic engagement with the communities and trying in many ways to support them to grow their own educators.

**KIM FLOYD:** One of our recent grants in West Virginia-- we have talked about building capacity because we've seen so many kids that are struggling with trauma. And right now, we're all kind of experiencing a similar trauma, but teachers just weren't sure what to do or how to identify. And so a lot of times, those behavior-- it manifests in behaviors.

So there was an over-representation of students being identified as having behavioral issues when it was really related to trauma. And so we have received a grant to provide that mental health first aid training, and what we're going to do is hopefully reach every county in West Virginia. And we are training teachers and administrators and counselors, everybody.

And then there's one person there that then is trained as a trainer, so they will go and train at other schools. So hopefully by the end is that everybody can get training, but we're providing those services to the county so then they can then go back into other schools and train people.

And just like you said, building that capacity. Because if a student is suspended when they are ninth grade, they have such a significantly higher-- I think it's like 85% higher chance of dropping out of school. So we don't want those kids that have behavioral issues that are related to mental health then being suspended or placed out of school placements.

**BRUCE WATSON:** So on that note, Kim, what are districts that are seeing some success doing to provide teachers with a more livable wage and attract and retain teachers that are a little bit more representative of their student body?

**BRITTANY HOTT:** So we've worked with Grow Your Own programs, and it's really challenging because there are huge pay discrepancies often in districts that are commutable. For example,

a rural district-- however that's defined-- or a remote district, even, you can drive an hour and a half and make \$15,000 to \$20,000 more per year. So it's challenging.

And so things like supporting student teachers through their residency and internships, providing that financial support, providing really great mentorships. The one thing we can control in districts is the work environment. Can we make these supportive great places to work? Can we engage the community in a way that benefits everyone?

And that may look very different. That may be engagement with faith-based organizations. It may be engagement with business partners. It may be engagement with the mayor. It may be engagement with a university that's four hours away but willing to provide support.

And so I think it's the creativity, coming at it from a strengths-based approach. We're not going to change the income levels immediately. We're not going to change broadband access immediately. But we can certainly write grants and do that collaboratively with universities. We can work on those larger scale challenges.

But there is strength in every community. And how do we identify that strength and then use it and leverage it to bolster what's there? Bolster that not just for kids in schools, but their teachers. Principals, and superintendents need help, too.

**GERARD CORTEZ:** One of the things that we have tried to do is to partner with the local universities. One thing that Texas has done is the teacher incentive allotment, and that allows us to really focus on the development of master teachers. A lot of it is tied to performance with regard to their evaluations.

But the teacher incentive allotment for the master teachers allows those teachers to receive stipends on top of their annual salaries. And so what we really try to do in San Antonio ISD is focus on the campus level. For example, we did a massive overhaul of our compensation for campus professionals.

And so the emphasis is the theory of practice or our theory of action is at the campus level because they are directly tied to students in that student achievement. And so what we've really tried to do is to garner efforts around making sure that the profession is understood as a noble valuable profession and to really look at funding initiatives that support the state as well as looking at some other initiatives through partnering with universities by offering opportunities for teachers to get their master's degrees.

We have a program here called Paraprofessional to PhD where we make it possible for our employees to continue in higher education at a reduced rate. And so that partnership with the universities has been very effective through our organizational learning department and is something that we're doing to basically focus on retention.

**LAUREN KATZMAN:** Just to add to what you just said, Gerard, I think higher ed needs to step up. And now that I'm back in higher ed again, I mean-- one of my mentors, Pedro Noguera, he

used to teach a class every semester. He would take one of his classes, and he would teach it at the high school so people from the high school could be part of that class.

And I think if higher ed is really serious about supporting the development of schools, then let's give schools what they need. And so why aren't higher ed courses in some places done at the school? I know that one school I worked with in Boston-- they were a high school, and they were clear that literacy was an issue, period, the end.

And it was an art school. At the end-- just let me tell you the end result is they got 97% graduation rate of kids with and without disabilities. What they figured that was getting in the way of getting to that was literacy, and so they decided as a group that every single teacher there needed to understand how to teach kids to read at a basic level-- not at a deep level, but at a basic level.

And this is at a high school. They had a local university come to the school and teach them, and they got credit for it. And so I think more things like that where they got what they needed from the university, the university could play their part, and 97% graduation rate in a Boston City school of kids with and without disabilities because they could read.

So I think universities have more of a responsibility than that's being used. And I think universities are more and more having conversations about, what is the import, and what are they supposed to be doing? Should it be publish or perish? Should it be work good work in school districts? I don't know. I think the conversation just needs to be more substantive.

**JENNIFER BARIBEAU:** I think, Lauren, you hit on an excellent point because I think that's often that divide between research and practice. So at the higher level or higher ed level, we have all this great research. But then when you go into the workforce-- and we see it, Lauren, within our consultation work-- it's hard to bring it into practice.

There's a ton of research saying you shouldn't have paraprofessionals be one to one with students as much because it creates dependence. Trying to go into a district and change that culture and philosophy or thinking about literacy and thinking about best practice and then actually implementing it through MTSS or tiered instruction are two very disparate things that we haven't been able to really marry together to really get the traction that we want.

So I think that's an amazing idea to have it be a more collaborative effort. Same thing we're talking about with rural and urban with regards to, how do we come together and share best practice? Same thing with higher ed. And then in the field, how do we come together and actually make it useful in the classroom?

**BRITTANY HOTT:** So I think this is a really great conversation and a way to leverage what we do have. And I can only speak to rural ed because it's what I live and breathe, but we have an organization called ACRES. And we're asking these questions. We're saying, why aren't practitioners giving us these questions? Because what we know how to do is analyze and collect data well.



We know those resources that we can help connect. Practitioners know the right questions. We don't always ask good ones. We may do good research, highly publishable research, but it might not be the right question, nor is it getting in the hands of people who need it.

And so I'm really hopeful after this conversation, if we can work with ACRES and work to form partnerships and help make connections. And we know a lot about how to help kids with behavior and how to support families. Now, it's not perfect. It's not a magic bullet, but at least maybe we can put a dent in it and work to figure something out.

**MATT JAMESON:** I think that some of the efforts that we've been trying to make in special education have been-- at least for students with more extensive support needs-- have been really pushing the idea of an ecological assessment, so looking at where the kid lives and the skills activities and routines that they need to be successful in there. But by extension, I've also always wondered in special education-- we have that wonderful IFSP, the Family Support Plan in Early Childhood.

And I work with kids with significant disabilities and significant support needs, and the outcomes are that the vast majority of them stay with their families post-school. It seems irresponsible to not be focused continually on that support plan. But I think when it raises the bigger picture, and it might be-- I mean, this is going far afield.

But our field has really emphasized this notion of independence, and that might be a myth. Maybe what we need to be pushing is interdependence, that we all are dependent on natural supports and formal supports, and it's finding the correct balance of those supports for each one of us.

**SIMON BUEHRER:** That was Matt Jameson, Professor and Department chair of Special Education at the University of Utah. Before that, we heard from Brittany Hott, associate professor at the University of Oklahoma. We also heard from Kim Floyd, associate professor at West Virginia University.

Matt, Brittany, and Kim are all part of ACRES, the American Council on Rural Special Education. ACRES is actively engaged in advocacy efforts to influence policies, programs, and practices that impact special education in rural communities across the country.

Our conversation also featured members of the Urban Collaborative, a national network of more than 100 school districts committed to increasing effective and inclusive special education services and focused on decreasing the disproportionality of culturally and linguistically diverse student populations and classification rates, separate educational environments, and disciplinary actions.

From the Urban Collaborative, we heard from Gerard Cortez, Assistant Superintendent for the San Antonio Independent School District. We also heard from Jennifer Baribeau, Department Supervisor of Pupil Services for West Hartford public schools in West Hartford, Connecticut, and

Lauren Katzman, Executive Director of the Urban Collaborative and associate research professor from Arizona State University.

Special thanks to Bruce Watson for facilitating the conversation. Bruce is the Project Manager for the Urban Collaborative. You can learn more about ACRES at [acres-sped.org](http://acres-sped.org). And you can learn more about the Urban Collaborative at [urbancollaborative.org](http://urbancollaborative.org).

There were a lot of topics and issues covered in the full discussion, and we simply couldn't include everything in the podcast episode. We do hope that the dialogue and exchange will continue between these two great organizations and will lead to a positive impact on the many school districts staff, students, and families that they serve and support, and we hope to feature more of these conversations and connections in future episodes of Inspiring Change.

You're listening to "Rewind," the Inspiring Change podcast series featuring conversations and connections from OCALICON, the premier autism and disabilities conference. You can learn more about OCALICON at our website, [ocalicon.org](http://ocalicon.org).

Thanks for listening to Inspiring Change. Because the need for change is everywhere, and inspiration can come from anywhere. I'm Simon Buehrer. See you soon.

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