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Eric Neal:

Welcome to the State Support Team 11 Podcast. I'm your host, Eric Neal. And today our topic is teaching diverse learners. We're joined by Shawna Benson, she's the Program Director in the Center for Teaching Diverse Learners at OCALI. Welcome Shawna. Thanks for joining us. How are you?

Shawna Benson:

I'm good. Thanks Eric. Thanks for having me here today.

Eric Neal:

No problem. We're happy to have you, could you tell me a little bit about OCALI.

Shawna Benson:

Sure. OCALI is a state agency, and we work in partnership with the department of education and we have a vision for promoting access and opportunities for individuals with disabilities throughout our state and also across the nation. OCALI's work is really about linking the research around individuals with disabilities and real life experiences that inspire them to move forward and achieve all of the wonderful goals and dreams that they have.

Eric Neal:

Great. Can you tell me a little bit about the different centers and what you do in your position as the head of your center?

Shawna Benson:

Sure. OCALI has nine centers, so centers from autism, centers for young child, family and community outreach, office of policy, lifespan and transition, universal design for learning, outreach center for deafness and blindness, assistive technology, AT and ATM center, and also the Teaching Diverse Learners Center, which is the center that I lead. I'm the program director for the TDL Center at OCALI.

Eric Neal:

Great. So what specifically does the Teaching Diverse Learners Center work on?

Shawna Benson:

Well, we have a lot of scope to the work. We do focus of course, on learners with complex disabilities or low incidence disabilities. We really are working toward inspiring people to presume competence and provide equity to learners across all facets of the lifespan. But we do focus a lot in the field of education, so providing equity and inclusive practices in education. We pride a lot of guidance to the state regional and local level. And we definitely try to work with people in our education system to provide collaborative planning and integrated supports and services for students who do have disabilities across the subject areas and across the grade levels.

Eric Neal:

Yeah. Specifically, I know you guys do a lot of work on literacy.

Shawna Benson:

We do. Yeah. So right now we have a lot of state level literacy work, regional levels of literacy work and we on occasion through our SST partners, work with them to support districts as well. And a lot of that work really has to do with stretching or expanding the offerings of best practice or supporting best practice in language and literacy instruction and assessment to better include learners with complex disabilities or low incidence disabilities who may need additional supports and maybe a different depth of instruction or range of instruction to build their skillsets toward achieving grade level standards.

Eric Neal:

Yeah. A lot of times you hear equity, it's one of those buzz words that has kind of caught on in education. But, it seems like a lot of times students with disabilities and specifically students with severe disabilities that require a lot of support almost get left out of that equity.

Shawna Benson:

Yeah. Oftentimes because we are supporting learners who are marginalized for one reason or another, and the diversity range is very broad, so we truly are focused on providing access and equity to any facet of diversity that would be part of our system. But we really do try to provide emphasis and support to learners who, within that range of diversity who have those categories of disability or needs that are specifically a little bit more rare, so that the term or the reference to low incidence disabilities means that they don't occur very often. And so sometimes you're right, I think students who have those low incidence needs, they do kind of get left out. Because a lot of people may just not have had exposure to working with learners who have those kinds of complex needs. And they just may need a little bit of support to bring their skill sets up or just gain some experience maybe, with some supports to make sure that they can provide that equity in learning and equity in inclusive settings and inclusive practices around instruction and assessment.

Eric Neal:

No, absolutely. I come from a social studies background, teaching history and didn't know a lot about students with disabilities and then later on spent a lot of time working with students with disabilities. You just have some preconceived notions or things if you don't have that exposure that make you kind of just assume what people can do and what they can't do. I think it's great that you guys are really helping to bring that awareness so that people really do understand what they can do.

Shawna Benson:

Right. And we want people to be comfortable and feel supported. So I think most often when may not be providing the supports that learners need, it's not because they really don't want to. I think that would very rarely be the case. I think primarily it's just that they don't feel comfortable, they don't know what to do next, they don't know how to sometimes even interact or approach some of our learners who have complex communication needs or motor needs or sometimes sensory needs. And again, it's just because they just haven't had that experience. And so we really hope that the resources and information and professional learning that we provide just really gives people tools in their toolkit. And ideas that can promote their thinking beyond those limitations to really see what learners can do. I think seeing is believing oftentimes, and if they've never seen that happen before. I think we just need to help them see it through video clips, oftentimes in a professional learning environment or experiential stories that colleagues share. I think those are important pieces to the work that we do.

Eric Neal:

No, definitely. There is that misconception out there that they just can or can't do it, but we really do have to make sure. And I think there's a big push, not just for students with disabilities but for all the different federally recognized student groups through the MTSS framework as well to help make sure that we're making it accessible. It's no longer about, we're just going to deliver this and if you get it, you get it. It's really about being intentional and knowing the different needs of your students well enough so that you can, through all of these different strategies, help to make it accessible for everyone.

Shawna Benson:

Right. And that's actually, one of the things that I think is really inspiring about Ohio. Ohio is very committed to recognizing diversity in a very positive way and leveraging it. I mean, I think that, how Ohio has done a wonderful job with the each child focus and even honing in on Ohio's plan to raise literacy achievement. They're very committed within the plan, within the text and dialogue within that plan to make sure that no matter what the complexity or diversity that a learner brings to the language and literacy table, or accessing content and curriculum, that people have this mindset that there's always potential for learners to grow their skills and knowledge, including in the language and literacy skill sets. We just want to make sure that no student is left without those opportunities and I think that's evident in the state's work.

Eric Neal:

No, I think you're right. That plan to raise literacy achievement really does a good job of looking at it holistically. A lot of the work we do now is really focusing on helping districts with the least restrictive environment numbers that are going on. A lot of times it seems like you, you get students with disabilities who are pulled out during regular instruction time or put in a separate classroom or things like that. So having that plan and having them really spell out what they're trying to accomplish for everyone, I think can only be helpful.

Shawna Benson:

Yeah, what's interesting about that is, having brought up the LRE conversation, within the research, it really shows us that there are two main reasons are kind of barriers that students are experiencing, especially learners who have complex and low incidence disabilities. And the two main barriers that they kind of run up against in their kind of quest for learning and quest to achieve those graduation outcomes that they want is. Number one, they often have limited exposure or opportunity to learn some of the same grade level content that their peers have access to. And the second piece that actually contributes to that is that it kind of goes back to those old mindsets or old beliefs that people have that oftentimes there's this very low expectation, especially students who have significant cognitive disabilities and other low incidents or complex disabilities, there's just this attitude for, well maybe they can't do it. And then there's this expectation that really kind of becomes kind of diminished or becomes lower. And those are the two biggest barriers that learners face. And it's shown in the research over and over again and quite honestly both of those are adults barriers, not necessarily from a learner perspective, it's kind of what we're doing that puts them up against those barriers.

Shawna Benson:

So if we can get those things turned around for students and really give them the world, make sure that they have that full exposure to everything that their peers have access to, including all of the skillsets to read and write, all of the content areas, all of those concepts in learning that the curriculum offers from kindergarten through grade 12. We really just want students to have all that information plus additional

information that may be unique to an individualized learning plan. So if we can do that part, I think that we could potentially change those mindsets and really show that learners can have wonderful outcomes if we put all of that in place for them.

Eric Neal:

Absolutely. I had a really fascinating conversation actually earlier today with a cultural competency expert and this person has a son with some serious needs and disabilities. And we were talking about cultural competency in general, which I think a lot of times people attribute to race or ethnic group, or just different things that they're more familiar with, but there really is an actual cultural competency to students with disabilities. And it was something that really clicked with me like adding... Right now, we're doing a lot of professional development and awareness and building up people's cultural competency skills. But this is one more of just many different cultures and things that we deal with.

Eric Neal:

So I think the work you guys are doing there is just completely helping us get to that point where that's just part of the regular conversation.

Shawna Benson:

Right. Yeah. Diversity is an exciting field and I think there are just so many facets to it. We always have so much to learn. We really come with our own culture in mind because that's what we've had most experience with and there's so much other perspective out there that we haven't yet explored. And so that learning could go on and on and on for our entire lives. And we may or may not really get the perspective of every other diverse cultural group and experience that other people are bringing. Always a learning opportunity there.

Eric Neal:

Yeah, absolutely. So what are some of the resources that you have that could support educators in including diverse learners and accessing the general curriculum?

Shawna Benson:

So on the OCALI website, I'm going to share a web address if you go to [www.OCALI.org/center/TDL](http://www.OCALI.org/center/TDL) for Teaching Diverse Learners, that will actually take you directly to the Teaching Diverse Learners webpage on the OCALI website. And there are a variety of resources there with regard to planning for instruction. Any educator would be provided and family member would be provided access to the range of standards that a student would be learning from kindergarten through grade 12. There are additional learning standards and resources there as well.

Shawna Benson:

We do have some collaborative planning templates that would allow educators from a learner's IEP team or any grade level or content area to bring together all of their knowledge about the content that they would be teaching. From an intervention or specialist perspective, bringing in all of that knowledge about diversity and access and supports and services that learners may need those collaborative planning templates, really diverse teams to come together and think about the whole child, whole classroom, a whole grade level of learners and how diverse that they are. And it helps the team focus in on what they want to teach. So what skills or targets they're looking to teach, maybe a plan or an outline

on how they see that unfolding, what are their each role and responsibility? What are their tasks involved?

Shawna Benson:

And then it also has a place, the planning templates have a place to bring in learner diversity. So if a student has a specialized learning need, we can take that from a specialized document, like an IEP, or like a plan that supports an English learner and we can bring that information directly in to our instructional plan so that we don't forget to provide some type of support or service that a student must have in order to participate in the instruction or the assessment on a daily basis.

Shawna Benson:

So there are a lot of resources there that also connect the dots between our system. There are a lot of agencies that support diverse learners within our system. So there are also resources there that can connect to other providers, other resources from other agencies as well. So we do have quite a few, we provide professional development quite a bit through the state support teams and in partnership with the department of education. And so there are a lot of resources that have come from that type of professional development that are also part of the planning and resource documents on the Teaching Diverse Learners' webpage

Eric Neal:

Sounds like you guys are really the one-stop shop there if you're looking for supports for students with disabilities.

Shawna Benson:

Yeah. I would love for people to contact us if they have questions, always feel free to visit the OCALI website. And they're also welcome to contact me directly. I can share my email address.

Eric Neal:

That'd be great.

Shawna Benson:

It's [Shawna\\_Benson@OCALI.org](mailto:Shawna_Benson@OCALI.org).

Eric Neal:

That's great. Thank you so much for that. And once again, I'd really like to thank you for joining us today. This has been Shawna Benson she's Program Director in the Center for Teaching Diverse Learners at OCALI. Really appreciate it, Shawna, it's been a pleasure.

Shawna Benson:

Sure. My pleasure. And it was wonderful to talk with you today. Thank you.

Eric Neal:

Thank you. If you'd like to know more about supporting diverse learners and the other work we do here at the State Support Team 11, you can go to our website. We're at [SST11.org](http://SST11.org). You can give us a call at

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