

Melissa: Welcome everyone to the Collaborative for Inclusive Education's podcast: EdVenture. I am Melissa Katz. I have the honor of hosting the podcast this season and the honor of leading the collaborative. I'm very excited to welcome today's guest, Stacy Marshall. Hi, Stacy.

Stacy: Hi, Melissa.

Melissa: So the title of our podcast is EdVenture. And I'd love to just kick off this interview by asking a little bit more about your own EdVenture. What do you do and how did you get there?

Stacy: Absolutely. Thank you, Melissa. And thank you for the warm introduction. I'm really pleased to engage with your stakeholders. So I'm Stacy Marshall, and currently I serve as the director of parent and family engagement for school age programs in New York City with an organization that is called INCLUDEnyc. INCLUDEnyc is a nonprofit that was first lifted up 40 years ago. It's actually our 40th anniversary this year. And it started off as a very grassroots endeavor by three moms who are parents of children with disabilities, wanting to kind of circle the wagons and have more support for themselves, but also seeing a deep and broad need for support of the community in all five boroughs for families to navigate the educational system and the other entitlements and services for their children in order to have the most positive outcomes for their kids while they're in school and beyond. And so at INCLUDEnyc, we work across all five boroughs and we do that with some proprietary work that we conduct as well as with partnerships with community-based organizations with the New York City public school system and with NYSED, the New York State Education Department. And so we kind of balance work that we do, that's very grassroots with families and with children with disabilities, with the work that we do to build capacity in schools to better serve and have more positive academic outcomes for students with disabilities. So that's kind of where I sit right now. And how I got here is a common path, I think, for a lot of folks who are working in education in the city these days. I was a career changer. I used to work in a political landscape in Washington, D. C. and I wanted to circle back to my own passions in ways I thought that I could make a positive impact by being involved in education. So, I was a New York City teaching fellow in one of the early cohorts in 2003 and I taught in New York City for several years. And as I worked through teaching as a social studies teacher, I started to have the desire to want to take my work to scale and really be thoughtful around how to support all students to have the best possible outcomes as New York City public school students. And so, after working as a teacher, I then went to go work at the central office at Tweed, as a lot of people refer to it as, as an administrator level, where I was involved in developing formative assessments and then building capacity for teachers to not only use those assessments, but also interact with the data that results from those assessments in order to be reflective in their practice and to use that information to inform how they instructed students, where students may need more assistance

and be able to progress monitor throughout the year to kind of gauge their own impact on what they were presenting to students and where they may need to evolve in certain areas to reach the broadest swath of students as well. And so after a few years of working in a central capacity, I then wanted to really deepen my work specifically around supporting children with disabilities. And so I worked in a variety of nonprofit landscapes in which I was able to learn more about special education from birth all the way through to adulthood and being able to augment what I knew about being a school-age teacher with early childhood and early intervention and preschool needs as well as with the transition out of the school-age years into adult services. And so working with nonprofits that work with those demographics allowed me to build those capacities and bring that knowledge base to what I'm doing now for INCLUDEnyc. And so I currently oversee a team of professional development specialists who have varied expertise in special education, as well as broad general knowledge of what special education looks like both for New York City, as well as at the federal level. So, everything from the regulations and laws that protect individuals, the way that individuals seek evaluation and identify what they're entitled to in terms of their services and then drilling down into how schools and support staff can be a part of that circle of support for families, and more importantly, can leverage families as the resource that they are to learn about what a family is experiencing with their own child, and to have a 180 communication between schools and families about how to best support that child based on their individual needs.

Melissa: This is not a visual medium, but I'm nodding and smiling the entire time you're talking. Thank you so much for sharing that EdVenture. I see some parallels in both our journeys, but I'm aware of time. It feels like now that I could probably talk to you for an hour, but I'm aware of time. We have to move on. But something you're saying, it's making me think. So we are—the Collaborative is getting to partner with you and INCLUDEnyc on a three-part series on Understanding IEPs. And this is most likely going to be newer teachers. We have a lot of new teachers in the sector—new special education teachers. And something you said about being data-driven—I think one of the fears I have when we're having the data conversations is sometimes the focus is on a deficit mindset, right?

Stacy: Yeah, for sure.

Melissa: How do you think that may play out in the series that we have coming up with you?

Stacy: Absolutely. So we're very excited—myself and my colleague, Kim McCoy, who leads a sister team in early childhood doing similar work I do with my school age team, to deliver a three-part series on IEPs where I think that we can really scaffold folks' understanding of the basic principles behind an IEP and the power of that legal document, both for schools to be able

to demonstrate what they do to support individuals with disabilities, and for families to be able to track the progress and ensure that their children are receiving the services to which they're entitled. In building that scaffold, we will dig in deeper into what present levels of progress look like and what we know about a student's performance to date by looking at a variety of different pieces of data in the form of assessment data, whether it's state assessment or internal formative assessment that a school may be conducting, looking at report cards and progress reports, previous IEPs, to be able to kind of connect the dots to see this is where the current progress lies, this is where we need a student to be. How do we bridge that gap by designing goals with an IEP that are able to be measurable and progress monitored throughout the year? And that goal setting piece, we recognize that that is a formidable lift for a lot of folks both in the time that it takes to really be thoughtful about how those goals are written, but also in creating a goal that is specific enough that everybody's clear on how the student will be supported and how families can also support that student at home, but it's also broad enough to allow for shifts throughout the year as we see how the student is performing so that it's a living breathing document. There may only be specific moments where folks are required to come together, but throughout the year we hope that we can demonstrate for teachers the way in which to utilize those goals, to share information with families more regularly about how differentiation or certain accommodations are working in the classroom, about how the student is experiencing and engaging with the material both at school and at home so that you can really be nimble and make shifts throughout the year to support the child for where they're at. They may have started in one place in September, but by, even December, they may be in a different place. And that could be scaling back supports or could be needing to increase supports, but we don't know that if we don't design goals that really lend themselves to looking at what the student is producing work wise, what the teacher is observing qualitatively, and then quantifying that in terms of—these are the standards and this is where student needs to be and we're not going to change that bar for anybody, but we are going to think about what a student needs to be supported given their disabilities or learning challenges to be able to meet that standard.

Melissa: Yes.

Stacy: And so, we hope, you know, by the end of the three-part series that we have laid a foundation so that everybody kind of has that foundational knowledge. We're not making any assumptions about whether some people may have more knowledge than others. So let's all get on the same page about what we all should know foundationally. And then let's look at some exemplars of how to write SMART goals that are measurable and can be progress monitored without it being a heavy lift. And then in the final session, actually workshopping and

engaging with the teachers to create their own goals and get into that mindset and kind of work and build that muscle to be able to bring that thinking to their IEP meetings.

Melissa: Got me really excited.

Stacy: I'm excited too. As we're talking, it's helping me to really formalize. Because Kim and I, my colleague who's going to present with me, we have a larger package that we're really customizing for your audience, which is where our expertise comes in. Like knowing that you have newer teachers, that's helpful. And knowing that, wanting to build folks capacity around how data is utilized and some really low hanging fruit on ways you can gather that data so it doesn't sound so overwhelming. Like you don't need to have 12 different Excel spreadsheets. You could just pull together some existing data that you already have that can help everybody to have a fuller picture of the child. It's really prompting my thinking about how we'll walk folks through that process so that it feels empowering and not intimidating.

Melissa: Oh, so appreciate that. And your expertise and passion is really shining through.

Stacy: I'm excited. Thank you. One thing I will say about our organization is that I've worked in a lot of different modalities and a lot of different groups of folks. The folks at INCLUDEnyc not only have deep and broad experience in the field being educators themselves, but the passion that folks have really resonates with me and was why I wanted to join this particular group. Everybody really takes this extremely seriously. And I would say 90% of the organization are also parents of their own children with various disabilities. So we're able to bring our real life experience and bring that heart to the work that we're in this with you. And we know what we'd want for our kid. And that's what we want to help encourage you to provide for other people's children as an educator.

Melissa: Yeah, I guess that that leads me to my last question. So one, I'm letting listeners know the description for the episode will have a link to the series. So hopefully, folks sign up. And then you had mentioned now a couple of times, this link to families and the Collaborative is not a family facing organization. We really support schools and teachers. And yet the families are such a huge part of being a teacher in a school. So I was wondering, you know, I think when I think about the pandemic, there was increased appreciation and purpose around family-school partnerships. And I think a little bit of the chaos as we transitioned back to brick and mortar and just tried to get a lay of the land and adjust to this quote-unquote new normal, I think, it got lost a little bit. And I'm wondering as we go into school year 23-24, do you have hopes, renewed hopes, around how we can better partner with—how schools and teachers can better

partner with families? And what do you think that would look like? And what do you think it would take?

Stacy: Sure, that's actually, you know, front of mind for us all the time every day is building folks' capacity around buying into and understanding the importance of leveraging families, but also understanding what that looks like in practice, right? So from our view of our organization and my own personal view, parent and family engagement is not in addition to or separate or aside from any of the work that we're doing when we're engaging with schools to build capacity to assist children with disabilities. And so anchoring in kind of the IEP series that Kim and I are gonna be delivering, what we hope to do is to be able to share some through lines that we see where having families at the table, being able to share their experience of their child in different settings, what may work at home, or what they may be struggling with creates a fuller picture. And the way in which you invite families to that table and solicit their feedback and responses is part of creating that warm and affirming environment that's so important to having a culturally relevant educational experience. So when we talk to schools, these are like a lot of buzzwords. When we drill it down, it's, you know, who greets a parent when they come in? And what happens after they're greeted? Where do they go and sit? Does that room feel like a cold, punitive environment or is it an inviting environment? Right. And when you're inviting parents to the meeting, are you thinking about what you might need to front load with them, just as you would for another professional about what the IEP meeting is gonna look like, who's gonna be around the table, and maybe even peppering them with a few questions for them to think about and be prepared to share out on, so that they're not coming to a table with a bunch of professionals who may be more adept in the English language, may be a lot more knowledgeable, using different buzzwords and acronyms that are not familiar to families, or even speaking to people they've never met before about their child, feeling as though they understand, like, why am I sharing this with these people? What are you gonna do with this information? And I'm not comfortable speaking off the cuff, so could I have some advance notice about what the meeting is gonna sound like and what kind of things you might wanna hear from me and also from my child. And being able to have that kind of information shared on the front end, and then also thinking about, in terms of a 180 communication, what happens after the IEP meeting. A lot of times parents come away and they say, well, they're going to type up the documents and it'll go in the system. And that's it. Right. But having parents being able to walk away with what can they reasonably expect? Who are their points of contact? How are they going to know how their child's doing throughout the year? And that's on both sides of the table. Because that can be an opportunity for a teacher to say, what is the best way to reach you? What is the best time? Are you able to come to the school? Are there barriers to you participating in this meeting? Do you need childcare? You know, does it conflict with your work schedule? All those different logistics and pieces, being mindful about them the same way

you would be about the other professionals in your building that you're inviting to the IEP meeting, making sure they have the documents, they know what the scope of the meeting is, especially for new teachers, right? All the things they would want, parents want that too. So putting themselves in that shoe, right? As a new teacher, if you're first invited to an IEP meeting, you may feel a lot of anxiety. You may not know what to expect or what the outcome is or what even you should be prepared to share. Families feel exactly the same way. So even though they may have a different lens, a different perspective, and a different purpose for being at the table, we want to make sure that we are from the get go launching a positive experience for them so that when they come to school, it's not always punitive, which is often the case, especially with kids with disabilities who have very high rates of disproportionality in graduation, in suspension, in behavior approaches and lack of positive behavior reinforcement because the disability may present in certain ways. Thinking about behaviors always as being a form of communication, what is the child trying to communicate, which doesn't give them a pass if they're breaking known rules, but it helps you to unpack and understand their perspective and how a behavior may be a way in which they are demonstrating they have a need that's not being effectively addressed. So we see it all as being one, what's the word I'm looking for? It's really one sphere of influence, right? In terms of working with families and being able to leverage their support and being able to see them as a resource for a teacher to know more about the student and what the family is experiencing and every opportunity that you have to engage with them is that opportunity to build that trust and that buy-in, that you're here to help, that you want to be able to better understand what the child's needs are and what their needs are so that you can provide targeted assistance that's really gonna make a difference.

Melissa: Yeah, for sure. I think you said so much in that, very valuable. To me, the trend I'm thinking, or like a theme, is empathy. And I do think when there's burnout, sometimes we don't see as much empathy as we would like. So this is my final question to you. This is—the first season of this podcast feels like a time capsule a little bit. It's more during COVID and we talked a lot about just self-care in that moment, taking care of ourselves to make sure that we're not burning out. So my final question to you will be like, what do you do to make sure you don't burn out in this hard work you're engaging in and sometimes work that can feel disheartening? Or maybe what advice do you have for our listeners on taking care so that we can have empathy?

Stacy: Absolutely. I actually want to circle back just for a minute because I don't know that I really illuminated what you had wanted me to share around like what my hope or dream is for this year.

Melissa: Oh, yeah, sure.

So I'm going to step back into that for a minute and just kind of capture it in a couple sentences for that purpose, right? So my hope and dream really and all the work that we're doing is to shift the thinking around parents being involved versus what it looks like for parents to be fully engaged. And for folks to really embrace what the value is on the teacher and administrative side of the table for having families really feel that they are engaged in the process and they're not just being invited because they're legally required to be at a meeting. Right. So for everybody to have that buy in and really have an appreciation and understanding of the ways in which families can be leveraged in order to have improved academic outcomes for these students. That's really my goal for this year. And to your second question about self-care, that's really an important and significant question. I'm glad you lifted that up. For people working with all students, but particularly students with disabilities and their families, how I really keep a touchstone to the importance of the work is through our direct assistance work. So in addition to all the other types of training and services we offer, INCLUDEnyc has a helpline that we have an intake department where anybody in New York City can call in with any questions or concerns they have that connect to having a student with disabilities and their education. And then intake gets the information from them and then they're connected with an expert who can help walk them through what their options are, what resources are available. And having that one to one where you know that you're hearing someone individually, what they need, giving them a chance to vent a little bit and to share and to unpack and unload. But then guiding that conversation towards how we can actually be of assistance by putting them in the right direction as to who to contact or what forms need to be filled or who do you call or what do you do? Gives a lot of re-centering to our folks who are doing really broad and deep systems work that takes time to really build capacity, and we're constantly evolving as new challenges come out of the pandemic, come out of the influx of migrant students. So we're always having to be nimble and adapt. But by having this one-to-one connection, you can walk away feeling as though you really have just made a difference in that family's life, even if it's a very small way. And then especially if they call back again and they wanna continue to work with us, which the vast majority of folks do, that gives us a lot of, I think, confirmation that the work we do is important and impactful and we are making a difference regardless of how micro that might be. Right. And it helps us to maintain kind of the grassroots feeling of the organization as it's become a little more operationalized and formalized with contracts we have with the city and the state. And additionally, we as an organization are really trying to lift up the importance of wellness and self care. And we do that through supporting and providing ample opportunities for folks to be able to have time away from work and to have a work-life balance that works for them with flexibility, but also in taking the time yourself to decompress and unpack and recognize that a lot of what we hear from schools and from families is kind of stress provoking because we're talking about people and we're talking about what they need in order to be able

to be successful. And that resonates, I think, with folks who have come into this field and have the heart for this work, that you need to give yourself that grace, whether it's you take a walk or you have a cup of coffee with a colleague and you unpack, having some way for you to then release that energy so that you can then refocus on your work is super important to give yourself grace, to give you that emotional space to process and to be able to then pick up the phone and take the next call, not knowing necessarily what folks are gonna say and wanting to be able to help them as best you can.

Melissa: And I lied. That wasn't the last question.

Stacy: No worries.

Melissa: The real last question is, what song would you like us to play as the outro of this episode? We have access to all of Spotify's library so almost any song you name, we should be able to play.

Stacy: The song that I would like for you to play is "Stand By Me" by Ben E. King. And I picked this song because it's my grandfather's favorite song and he was the one who inspired me to go into education and think about the impact that I could make on the world in the smallest of ways to change a person's life.

Melissa: All right, we're gonna make it happen. Thanks so much, Stacy, for taking the time to chat and to share your wisdom and your passion. And we're so excited to have you back with us in just a few weeks.

Stacy: Super excited to meet with your stakeholders and to share our knowledge and learn from them as well. Thank you for the opportunity to share a little bit about myself and about INCLUDEnyc.

Melissa: Thank you. And thank you, everyone, for listening. We'll catch you at the next episode.