

Melissa Katz: Hi everybody. My name is Melissa Katz. Welcome back to another episode of Edventures. That's the Collaborative for Inclusive Education's podcast. I'm honored to be able to host this podcast and to lead the Collaborative.

I love the work we do, and I'm excited for today's guest, Jennifer Pierre. We, through the Collaborative, work with her school, and we have a really great topic today. We're going to be talking about advocacy, which I think is on a lot of minds—for educators, but particularly our special educators and our multilingual learner educators. So welcome, Jennifer.

Jennifer Pierre: Oh, thank you for having me.

Melissa Katz: Of course. Thank you for being here. I know you're very busy. You are the student support services manager and related service supervisor for Brooklyn Prospect High School.

So I know you have a lot on your plate and your day to day is jam packed. So thank you for squeezing us in.

My first question to you, knowing that we're here to talk about advocacy, I think coming out of the pandemic, a lot of educators we're hearing from are saying, you know, they're seeing a wider range of needs in their students than they did pre-pandemic, and so special educators are often in a position of needing to name needs and wanting to advocate to make sure needs are met, but also needing to maintain positive working relationships with their colleagues. So I'd love if you could share from your experience how you navigate that tension.

Jennifer Pierre: That tension is real because people feel like they're giving a lot already. And so when you come from a place of asking for more, you could automatically hear a no instead of a yes. For me, whenever I'm advocating for students, I use my data points. So I use the data to really drive what I'm asking for. And I'm not afraid to ask big.

The reason why I go big is so that I get the ideal out the way and that people could kind of see where I'm coming from. And then I know we're going to work our way down to something more reasonable. And I kind of, in my head, I'm always okay with that. I'm not shooting for the ideal. I'm telling people what the ideal looks like so that they understand that we have to get there eventually. And it doesn't have to happen today. Because people need a big picture whenever they're thinking about solutions.

You don't want to just keep putting band-aids on problems. You kind of want to name what is the bigger solution and so that when you have to work slowly towards those solutions, people are kind of like aligned with you.

So don't be afraid to ask big. Don't be afraid to get people who are already aligned with their goals. Like I'm really good at creating allies, even though it kind of feels like my whole school is kind of like my best friend, but there are people who have boundaries. They see me coming

down the corner and they're like, "Oh my God, she's about to ask me something". And usually those are the people that I'm not proposing big ideas to. Those are the people that I know are just going to do the small tasks. But the people that I'm asking for larger, bigger tasks, I have really good relationships with them. And I've kind of shown them the results from these kind of collaborative works.

So, that's like number two: create allies. And also, keep good reports. It's not about asking for things. It's also showing how it's effective and how it's helping all students and not just the student that you targeted. You also want to use your student as a case study, and not just like how can this kid benefit from this. It's like, how can we use this kid scenario, which is probably many kids' scenario, to kind of help all learners in the long run.

Melissa Katz: Oh, you're dropping so much wisdom. I'm going to try to repeat it back to you. I like that you're numbering it. You're already thinking. There's people listening and they're like, I'm listening to this woman, but I need to be able to take something away here.

So it's, you've named the change and you're already starting to think about naming what the big picture would be. Knowing that you'll be able to then get some buy in on like the smaller steps that'll get us there.

You are also within that big picture thinking you're highlighting how it would be helpful for multiple students. Because yeah, sometimes it does feel like, "Oh my gosh, you're asking me to do hours and hours and hours. And it's just in the benefit of one child. Is that equitable?" Like, and then that raises questions. Right. But we're, we're thinking when we do this work, it will help current students and future students too, right? Once we've built it.

And then you're also saying you're bringing data both to name a problem, which I really appreciate because I think that can take the personal out of it, right? It's like, I'm not saying, "I've got a feeling that this isn't what this child needs", right? You're showing the data, which feels more impersonal, but then you're also saying, and here, if we were to do these improvements, other data shows that that's why this could work. And that's why it's worth the investment of time and energy to do the work.

And then of course, path of least resistance. If I could already pull in the folks who I know are my allies in this work and I've built the relationship, that'll start the ball rolling. And then hopefully bring in other people who maybe were a little slower to jump in. Does that sound right?

Jennifer Pierre: That sounds perfect. I

Melissa Katz: I guess this next question then is, is an extension of that, which is, I think if we have listeners and I think naming those steps is really helpful and wondering if you have any other nuggets of advice for anyone who feels like they've done some of those things and they still feel like maybe they've gotten shut down when they were trying to advocate for a change that they really thought would benefit students. What advice would you have for folks like that?

Jennifer Pierre: I mean, sometimes it's like also maximizing your resources. Because other times, the reason why we're hearing no's, especially when it comes to special education, is that we just don't have the funding or the bodies. So sometimes you got to get really creative and start building relationships with other organizations.

You might even have to go within your network to kind of start that place. You know, I work in a charter school, so I might hit up our middle school program and see what they're doing, or vice versa. I don't even stay in my little high school hub, like, I know that there is more resources that I haven't tapped into, and if I'm hearing that no, I just have to keep spinning the wheels until I hear a yes.

I think for me, hearing a no might be hard because you kind of have an idea that this is the solution. This is the exact solution for our kids, but sometimes we also have to be flexible. So when you hear a no, you got to reflect on why is it a no, and then see, is there anything else I could do that could be just as good.

So for me, I could give you an example. We are doing RSAs for occupational therapy because in the high school setting, the numbers are smaller. So no one's trying to pick that up, but we created an executive functioning club. With older students who have really good executive functioning skills. And then we have an executive functioning coach who comes outside and work with the whole group. And it's just like spinning your wheels like, yes, it's not the same thing as occupational therapy. But at least kids are getting something they could benefit from.

So when I hear a no, or if there's a barrier, I always try to think of what are some other external resources I could reach out to, and then also what are other ways that could be just impactful.

Melissa Katz: That's great advice. When you get shut down, you hear a no. It's a no for now. All right. I'll go, I'll go back to the drawing board and I'll figure out if there's a way for me to address the main reason it's a no. And if I can find a work around, but that, yeah, totally. That might mean going outside what my initial kind of, when I had put out my initial feelers, maybe, and had made that plan going even outside of it. That makes a lot of sense. That's a great, great piece of advice when it's like plan A didn't work. So if we hadn't already anticipated that, let's think about a plan B now and think about going outside of the original scope. That makes a lot of sense.

I think we have time for kind of bigger picture question, which is zooming out from just your school, knowing that we're talking about advocacy. You know, when you think bigger than necessarily what's going on at it within your building, you know, what do you think educators could be advocating for on behalf of students on a larger scale?

Jennifer Pierre: I feel like that's like a really big question. What pushes me to advocate is that I'm a problem solver. So for me, especially in education, a lot of people, like, you know, teachers, parents, students, we do a lot of complaining. We do a lot of complaining and we kind of feel kind of bugged down about systems and what's going on.

I think for me, what I want us to advocate as a whole group is to teach our kids how to problem solve. How to kind of think of these things as things that are within my control. Because one thing that I'm a little bit frightened of is that these type of agency or action, you know, like calling to action isn't really highlighted in curriculum or as like things are intangible for students to learn and do and are encouraged.

I went on school tours, like I visited Nashville and LA, and I feel like advocacy is becoming more of a younger kid conversation. Where they're trying to push kids to really talk about what problems they see in schools and what solutions they want, they think will work. And I think advocating for all kids to be in these conversations and us as adults not making all the decision-making will actually help a lot of these problems because kids will also feel like people aren't making decisions for me.

Melissa Katz: Yeah, for sure. Oh, I so appreciate that. There's lots of things that we could advocate for. We know this. Working in special education, we know this, but a change that we as special educators could be really fighting for is more student voice and more student advocacy and making sure that any solutions that we're advocating for, we're including students in that.

Thank you so much for joining us to talk about this really important topic. And thank you for all the work you do supporting your community. And thanks folks for listening. Hope to catch you at the next episode. Bye everyone.