

Better Together – Panel Discussion

Moderator: Now let's meet our panel. So why don't we kick it off at the end down here with Holly, and Holly would you say a bit about your practice work, your background, and maybe what you most want to explore tonight.

Holly: I am a Speech and Language Pathologist. I have been for almost 24 years now, and my whole career has been in the public schools but I've also done some outside work with private clinics. Early on in my career I just became very very interested in those kids who have the more complex needs, and just developed a passion for trying to figure out what we can do to make their communication stronger and how to support that within the school system. I love working in the school system because I get to reach so many kids, and I love that. So, as far as, I've been in Washington for almost 10 years now. I was in southern California before that. And then as far as tonight, getting to know the parents, and I agree with a lot of what I've heard too - just how to make the IEP process and the teaming and the networking amongst team members stronger - how to also include other members of the team that don't always get to be, or aren't always part of the IEP process itself - helping them to understand the kids that we work with and what their needs are, and what our needs are as a team.

Moderator: Cyndy Knight from the Walla Walla Valley Disability Network.

Cyndy: There you go. Although tonight really the hat I'm going to try to wear is less the Walla Walla Valley Disability hat and more the parent hat. And I will say that tonight we were hoping to get a panel that was pretty evenly split between professionals and parents and it's not. So, I'm going...

Libby: I don't know how you do it but I go, "You're coming, you're coming you're coming." I'm just kidding. {laughter}

Cyndy: I really hope as parents if you don't hear me represent your story, I want you to speak up because I know that every one of our stories is unique in how we engage in the IEP process and our needs. So, and I have, I'm married to him. We have 3 girls. Our 16 year old has Down syndrome and is at Pioneer Middle School.

Alicia: I'm Alicia Quackenbush. I'm the School Psychologist at Walla Walla High School, and I've been a school psychologist for a long time and in several different states, so I think it's interesting that you say everywhere you move it's different because the Federal law is the Federal law. So, it should be more similar than different. I have been at all levels, from pre-school through the transition. So, birth to 21, so whatever age your child is, I have been the school psychologist for that age group. And I am just here to answer any questions you have. The things that you were concerned about were not what I thought you would bring, so that's interesting. It seems like, from my perspective, sometimes we just feel like you've gone through so many IEPs that, you know, we assume like, "Oh, you know what this is or what that is." And so, so I am really interested to hear what's frustrating about that and what you would like to see from the IEP process.

Libby: Well, I'm currently the Director of Special Education here. I taught for 10 years, all at high school level. I've taught mild to severe, so the whole spectrum of students. This is my 3rd school district. Before I came here I was Assistant Director of Special Education in the North Thurston School District which is in

the Lacey / Olympia area. And, what I'm looking for tonight? I'm just really looking to answer any questions and I want everyone to go away with the feeling that I am accessible. I try to make, I try to do that in everything I do with parents and staff, that I'm always open for a meeting, a phone call, whatever is needed from everyone. I want this to be, I want it to be a good experience for parents. I'm passionate about kids and teenagers with special needs. I am passionate to do the very best that we can do as a school system so that they can be the very best adults that they can be. And that's why I'm so passionate about our STEP program, and I actually, in my interview talked about the need for a 18 to 21 year old program.

Katie: Hi, I'm Katie. I'm new to Walla Walla. This is my first year here. I'm in the RISE program over at Green Park Elementary. Let's see...

Moderator: Would you pause a moment and share with us what RISE stands for?

Katie: Reaching Independence through Structured Education.

Libby: Yes! One year people and she's got it! {laughter}

Katie: I have it over my desk. We love our acronyms in Special Ed for sure. Let's see, so I am a certified teacher. I am certified to teach Special Education and General Education, so I have both certificates, but the majority of my time has been spent in Special Ed at the elementary level for most of my teaching career. But I did spend some time in a high school program. A little bit. Wasn't my cup of tea. But most of my time was at the elementary level and in the setting that's called "self-contained." At the end of this school year I'll have taught for 10 years. That's what I've spent most of my time doing.

Moderator: Glad to have you here. Thanks for coming to Walla Walla Public Schools. So I have a number of questions I'm going to ask our panelists, and we are going to get to those questions. And I think I see where I'm going to close out where we're going to ask Libby to talk about her vision for Special Education in Walla Walla. But based on our opening conversation, I think a good place to begin is to talk about this topic of teaming and networking. And I want to introduce this concept of "Stormin', Formin', and Normin'," which is usually what happens when teams get together, is there's conflict and then they form kind of new relationships and then it becomes more normalized. So I guess the word I want to focus on there is the "stormin'." Can we talk first about conflict and how parents should best fight, if you will to use that word, or "storm" with the schools. What's, in your experience, the best way to address conflict between parents and schools, regardless of your role. So maybe let's lob that provocative question to you all...

Libby: Wowzer, Lawson. (laughter)

Moderator: If you were talking about a great way to address a difference that someone would have, how would you like to have that happen?

Libby: Well, I guess I'll open it up because, guess what, I deal with the most conflict, in Special Education for this district. So, at the teacher level, I would want it to be respectful and with the teacher being able to listen to your concerns and talk about them, knowing that it can't always be solved at the teacher level, or even sometimes the building level. Because I do, I'll just be honest about this, I do have some parameters on my teachers and buildings that, before spending district funds, they have to run it through me. So there are some things that they cannot do, and at that point then it needs to come to

me. So, I am fine with...I understand when parents, I've been doing this a long time, and I understand when parents are frustrated, that it comes out a lot of times in yelling or accusing, and I'm okay with that at my level. Like, I, if I have a parent that's really upset, I will ask them to come in and I will listen to them. And if they yell, I'm okay with that. What I'm not okay with is having them yell at the teachers. Teachers are out there every day trying to do the best that they can, and so, if it comes to a level that you're very upset about something I would ask that you either sit down calmly and talk with the teacher or the building principal, or if that's not possible that you come to me and we start to work on that. I guess that's my...

Moderator: Good approach.

Libby: I have shut down IEP meetings before where I feel like my teachers are being attacked. Because they are not in this because they don't care about kids. Maybe they don't, aren't seeing it from your perspective, and we can work on that and talk that through and maybe we need more facilitation and that, but I don't think it's fair to ask teachers to have to take that like in an IEP meeting. So I have a couple I have, I have shut down and we've rescheduled.

Moderator: So, Cyndy from a parents' perspective, what are your thoughts?

Cyndy: Yeah, I was just - my head was kind of spinning. I know that at the beginning of every IEP we're given like the safeguards for our kids, right. We're given, like what are some, what are our rights as parents or what are the rights of our children. It's a pretty meaty legal document like most of what we get, and most parents honestly don't have a lot of time to look over that. I think we really need to know if this conversation stops here, what are the next steps, which you just identified. Like, if I take this, you know, my concerns to the teacher and it's not being identified or, you know, maybe the teacher isn't the one and it's the para that's working with my child. Can I have that relationship or talk with the para about how that is being handled? Is there, that kind of communication, I think, is where parents are wanting, is how do I express my needs in a way that we can work on this problem together? I think moms are really good at owning a lot of guilt, so I think that's in some ways that's where you might see some of the frustration and anger.

Libby: Oh yeah, absolutely.

Cyndy: It's this big question mark of what can be done for my child and it's fear and it's anger. But I trust in that the relationships we have with our schools we need to keep it like a marriage in that you want to work on it together, that divorce gets really ugly when you bring in legal systems, and that I've always found, at least when I've had issues with my teachers, that they've been very receptive to my interests or explained to me why something may not be possible. So, or come up with a totally alternative approach that I had never thought of. So lean heavily on their backgrounds on their expertise, but never feel shy as a parent of sharing your needs and wants.

Moderator: We've got an audience member that has something to share.

Audience: I just wanted to say as being involved with Parent to Parent, Walla Walla Valley Disability Network over the years, Angie and Cyndy and I will all agree that I just wanted you to be aware that we tell the parents, when you're building a relationship with the teachers, tell them when they're doing things right. So you build that rapport.

Libby: That's the same as we need to do with parents - is tell when kids are doing good things, and not just when there's problems.

Audience: Exactly. And so I tell them what they're doing well, then when you come to a point where things aren't right you built that rapport and it's easier to have that communication and conversation.

Moderator: Thank you. Any other panelists?

Alicia: Yeah, I would like to just be maybe more nitty gritty to answer your question. So, as a school psychologist you're kind of in the middle. You're not in the classroom, but you're not an administrator. But you kind of know what's going on in your building. It's almost like all things Special Ed kind of come through the school psychologist in your building, and so I know, I think it's really important when there's conflict to start at the classroom. Can the classroom, can we, you know, have a dialogue? Can we have a meeting? Ask for a team meeting. Ask that the school psychologist be there. It's really hard on relationships when I'm getting a call from the Director of Special Ed saying hey, you know, this is, you know, a parent has a concern and we haven't really even had a chance to address it as a building. And then you know we're kind of behind because we don't, we didn't really even know something was wrong, so I would really.... And you know building administration is great. I feel like you should also go to them before you go to the director of special ed. A lot of times they'll then come back to me and say, "Hey, what do you know about this situation? Or they'll call you, but still it's, it's difficult on a working relationship if something's happening that you don't think is right or you're concerned about or you want something different and then you go straight to the top. I think it's better, when you're wanting to work as a team, to start with the team.

Libby: Yeah, and I think that's the best way to do it too, but I also want to empower parents that if they are super frustrated and they feel like they need to come and talk to me, that is fine with me. And what I usually will do is I will contact the teacher. I'll probably contact the psych, and I'll say you know, "Do you know what's going on?" and I will have a conversation with them so that when we meet, I kind of can hear, I kind of know from the school side what's going on and then I can listen to your concerns.

Katie: And I would say don't be afraid to be persistent. You know, if you feel like, "Oh they didn't..." I might have just forgotten you said we wanted to meet, and it might not be anything personal. Because I get a lot of information all day long, and so if you send it in an email then I've got it in writing. Like, "Hey, I want to meet with you." So just remind me that you said you wanted to meet and discuss an issue too, because it might not mean to be mean or anything. It might just slip my mind and like, "Oh yeah, I needed to call somebody but I can't remember who it was." So be persistent if there's something really bugging you.

Libby: And you can call - I hope you all know this, but you might not - you can call an IEP meeting as a parent any time that you want to. It doesn't have to just be once a year. So, we can reconvene that IEP meeting at any time.

Audience: Is that something that the teacher's know?

Libby: Oh yeah.

Audience: Because that's been an issue in the past. Sometimes they're like, "no, it's only once a year or it's this date." Ok. So if there is an issue we'll send them to you?

Katie: In that handy little book she mentioned...

Alicia: Sometimes when you say, sometimes it's maybe it's just a wording issue. Like you can say, "I want to have a team meeting where we sit down and discuss how the program is and then if changes are necessary to the IEP we'll make them at that time." So sometimes if you say, "Oh, I want an IEP meeting," the teacher might not really understand what you're asking.

Audience: Ok. Team meeting.

Alicia: The other thing that I would strongly encourage you - special ed teachers sit like on conference days they sit in their rooms all alone.

Libby: As a former high school special ed teacher...

Alicia: Take advantage of those times to come and if, you know, and at those times especially when it's like a scheduled conference, schedule a conference and then the gen ed teachers that your child has will come to that conference and tell you how things are going. So really, you know, I think, we strive to view your children as students first, and I guess I would encourage you to do that too. Your child is a student first so if there's a parent teacher conference happening, make an appointment and go.

Libby: And that's just, I mean, universal in the three districts that I've been in is that, um, is that parents just don't show up. As a former high school special education teacher, there were 3 Thompsons in my high school, and I never had a line and the other 2 were both, they were married to each other, they were both math teachers so their line would go out the door. And the only time I got someone is when they thought maybe I was one of the math teachers, and I'm like, "no, you have to go in that long line over there." So, we're there, I mean, we're there during the, we're there the same amount of time as any other teacher, so we would love to see you and be able to talk.

Moderator: So Holly do you want to add anything to this topic?

Holly: Well I agree with what we're talking about. When it comes down to it with conflict and issues, you know, communication is the key and being able to meet together at any time, whether it's just a team meeting or an IEP meeting, the more you do it the more all team members understand where the other team members are coming from. And you can get perspectives and, you know, that persistence thing is really important because maybe we don't understand what was being asked or, you know, what the different perspectives are. So, I mean, having meetings, I just, you know you don't have to have meetings all the time, but honestly I think that when we have meetings together and talk about things that's when we all understand a lot more about what's going on and then you're able to resolve conflict before it gets to that point.

Libby: And face to face meetings. Email conflicts and trying to, you know, there are some people who want to try to resolve a conflict in email and you know, you never really get the right meaning in an email. They can be taken so far off of what the other person means, and so if there's conflict meet face to face because otherwise it's just...

Cyndy: I'm trying to put on my parent hat again tonight, but I feel like there are, there is some miscommunication sometimes in schools in that as a district program in a school sometimes parents are really not given the school information. Like, we don't know is conferences - is that for me too? Like I would almost say if there was some, like, information given out we are - your special ed teacher will be

at this school during this time, please schedule an appointment with her - I think that parents would absolutely be on board with that. They either aren't told that there's even conferences that day -

Audience: Or you show up and there's no one there.

- Oh, that's happened so many times it's not even funny.

Cyndy: I've been a few times where there hasn't been one there.

Libby: Really?

Cyndy: Yeah. So, just as a, from a parent's perspective, I think if I'm...already it's hard to get out of the house, that if I knew that that was either scheduled or I could make that happen it would happen more.

Holly: Well, I think it's a good idea to schedule too because just like you're saying, sometimes some of the teachers will be in another classroom in an IEP meeting or they'll join one of the gen ed classes for that student's conference. I know that that happens sometimes, so especially when it's the drop in ones, and I know this because I'll sit in on those meetings in the gen ed classrooms, so there might be times when, you know, the teacher's gone but it's because they're at another meeting during that conference time.

Audience: That's also like the, like high school when they have the "Come Meet the High School" for the Freshmen and you go and no one's there. Or go meet the ones for Middle School and you go and you're like, "Well I guess it's not for Special Ed." Especially on the transitions, and you're just like, "I guess it's not for them."

Moderator: There was quite a remarkable effort by the Special Ed program at the high school, so if you don't have a high school student yet, um what time of year was this Shamra? Was it...

Shamra: The Freshmen Orientation?

Moderator: Yeah, the...

Shamra: August.

Moderator: No, no, no. The meeting where we....What was it?

Shamra: The info night.

Alicia: It ended up being March I think.

Moderator: It was in March. So just file away March-ish, if hopefully it happens again it was in association with Gear Up.

Audience: It's a very new program. Is this the first year?

Moderator: It was the first year, well it was the first year we were going to have a Freshman.

Cyndy: It was called "We Are WaHi."

Moderator: We Are WaHi, and the Special Ed faculty was at the, kind of, general assembly and then there was a pull out to go to the Library and they ended up just having a parent forum with the entire faculty which was a really nice opportunity to just share philosophies and begin a relationship....

Libby: So the problem that we run into like when Garrison has their August barbecue and everyone comes is that that is not a teacher contracted time. And so we can't tell a teacher that they have to go to that. It's really those teachers that want to go and be there during that time that are there. It's, because it's not a regular contracted day, we cannot mandate who goes and who doesn't, so...

Audience: But you do mandate that they be there for conferences? Is that correct?

Libby: Absolutely. So they get paid the same amount as, for the same amount of days as a gen ed teacher and so, yeah, they should not be leaving. And I know, Alicia was saying no, but here's the thing, if...

Alicia: You can, if you choose not to go to the evening conferences then you don't get paid for Friday. But you still can choose to not do the evenings.

Moderator: So I want to head down a path that was opened there around this difference between schools and districts and that the special ed programs often are district programs based in schools and explore some of those things. Cyndy opened an interesting idea there about that, so can you provide some other examples of where you've seen points of difference because it's a district program?

Cyndy: Well, I think it depends on the parent. It depends on all of our energy, but I really...because I was really adamant that all my girls were in the same school, because I was worried that I would be getting some information and not others. And I would say it was pretty consistent, and sometimes it's PTA messaging and this is more for elementary school, but the PTA messaging would get to all the gen ed but not to the special ed class. And I would, and I would often get questions like, "How did you know this was happening?" and I'm like, "Well because of my other two daughters that are in this school." So I guess I would strongly just...how helpful it was to have all of my children in one school. That was very meaningful for our family, mostly around that information gathering.

Libby: Is that still happening? Like are you not getting things that are happening at your schools for all kids?

Audience: Well in high school you have to sign on and then get on the internet, but half the time you don't really look at that because you're doing other things. But it would be nice to get information. You get the robot calls. But they're like 3 minutes long.

Libby: We don't figure that people want to listen for a really long time.

Audience: We have like this running thing at home like, "Let's see how long this one is." *laughter*

Libby: Hey, Cyndy's and mine are long.

Cyndy: They are long.

Audience: The theater one is the winner though.

Moderator: I think one significant area for us has been supply lists. So, that, like if you go in July in to Staples and they've got this kiosk with all the supply lists for all the classrooms and there's never a special ed list.

Audience: That's right. You really have to dig.

Moderator: That would be nicer.

Cyndy: I want to give you more, like latest example, and it was remedied and there was a lot of apology and I get that it was an oversight, but the Gear Up. We had an all 8th grade experience of going out to Walla Walla Community College and I have a teacher friend who's like, "Hey I looked at the list and I don't see Molly on it. Do you want Molly to participate?" And it was the day of, so I - in order to let her go I had to go into the school, sign her out and drive her to the event. It just felt like, whenever a parent feels like their child is being excluded from something...I mean when you...my blood pressure...I mean I get very sharp. The lady at the front desk at Pioneer was telling me, "Oh no, it's too late. She won't be able to..." I'm like, "No, see here's the deal. Give me something to sign. I am taking her." I mean it was, I had to be...an uncomfortable feeling for me was just having to be that strong of like a "No. She will be included." It's those moments of exclusion that...it wasn't the first time it's happened. It probably won't be the last time. Every time I treat it as a learning opportunity that we're going to get better, that maybe next year that class will not be forgotten, that this particular...they won't be left out of whatever school programming it is. If it's a science fair, encourage your special ed kids to enter a science experiment. I mean these are all extra-curricular, maybe, some projects, but it matters when we feel like they've made an effort to make sure we know and that we are a part of this team. We're a part of this school.

Moderator: And to put a fine point on that one, if you haven't been on Facebook and seen the Pioneer students...

Audience: Oh, yes. It was wonderful.

Moderator: Man. That was good. Yeah.

Libby: So I think, you know, talking on that and not getting the things, it's something that our principals and office staff need to become aware of and I have been - it's been my mantra - Students in special education are general education first. Which means they should get all of the same things and notices and all of that that go home. Now, I'm ending my 4th year and I wish I could say that we have it in place in every building, but we're still not there. And that's a good case in point. But, at council, which is all the administrators in the whole district, I will, when I get a chance to talk because I always do, I will again say, "Remember - these are general education students first, so they need to have all the same things."

Cyndy: I think this whole, this Better Together format too, it's like, how can we help you advocate for our kids? Like I guess that's the thing, we see you as an advocate for our kids in the district. How can we also, you know, wrap around you to be that voice of like, "Remember us."

Libby: Well I think, you know, like you just said, "Hey, this isn't okay."

Audience: Some parents aren't able to know about it until after the fact and that's really...

Alicia: I think that's also something that our special ed teachers need to be better at. We shouldn't judge. Oh we think, "this student will get something out of this and this student won't." So I feel like that has to kind of happen.

Moderator: I want to provide a case to highlight, Alicia, in that way. I was in an IEP meeting and we had even gotten to a place with our daughter where I thought maybe she wasn't ready for the general student population as those on the faculty did and Alicia made it clear that no, she is and she will and ended up in 3 general ed classes which was unbelievable and that kind of dovetails I think with an idea

that you wanted to explore, which is how do you integrate students with disabilities, and perhaps even severe disabilities, in the general education settings. And how do you determine when a student is ready. Maybe you even have cases of where parents don't realize that their children are...won't you field that idea.

Katie: Yeah. Goodness. Well, one of the hard...when I got this question I was like, "Whoo. That's a big one." Because it's so specific to each kid, so that's where it gets a little bit tricky, because I've had some parents who were very insistent that their student spend all day in a general education setting with a one-on-one. I taught that context. I've also had a context of "I don't want my student to ever leave your classroom." So it's been a big gamut, but ultimately it comes down to the student themselves and what skills they're presenting and what is the opportunity we're trying to have them be a part of and what is the support that that student needs. And sometimes are they ready and are we going to try it and see what happens? And sometimes it's a let's see what happens and ooh we need to reel that back in and fix it or, "Hey, this was great. Let's look for another opportunity." So it kind of...it's really student specific, so I know I'm answering it kind of broad.

Moderator: Can you give us an example of both sides of those? Could you like what a situation was where that happened and the action taken?

Katie: Let's see, so I guess one of the things just this school year, coming in I was new and learning everything and my students didn't eat in the lunchroom, and I was like, with everybody else. They ate by themselves. I was, "Why?" was my question. And it was like, "Well, 'cause it's too loud." "Do they have headphones?" "Yeah, we have them somewhere." "Okay, let's figure it out." So we...now everybody eats in the gen ed setting and it's not a big deal and they eat with their same age peers because that's important to me as well, that it's not... You don't always just look at where are they as far as...maybe their academic levels might be different, but it's, this is a 5th grader and I'm a 5th grader and I'm going to eat with other 5th graders. 'Cause it's a dignity piece for me as well. So that was just like something that was like just asking 'why?' "Well, why do we do it this way? Why do we..." and I think that's when parents bring that into IEPs. Ask why. Say, "Hey, Why do we do it that way?" Because it might make us go, "Oh, wait a minute. Why do I do it that way?" You know, it makes us pause and it makes us think. But I've also had the other side of things where a student wasn't ready and that was very difficult for me because I watched him fall apart in a situation that I just had to keep doing because it was litigious, because there was a lawyer involved. He was in a gen ed setting that he wasn't ready for and it was really hard to watch it because he would not want to go in the door. And he was just not ready and we needed to get some more skills for him. And so that was tough to see because it wasn't the student's choice to be there. It was pushed on us. So that was a little bit more tricky of a situation, but eventually we got to where we could figure out another way for this student to try and do what we were trying to accomplish. But in the meantime it was kind of hard to see that.

Moderator: Alicia, you've been in a lot of different contexts, all grade levels. You've got a lot of I think successes under your belt. Talk about that from your perspective.

Alicia: Yeah. So, it, so starting at Pioneer...so the Life Skills kids generally went to, I think, are they called "specials" in middle school? Exploratories. Exploratories. 'Specials' in elementary. And so they would go with a para and all the 6th graders would do the rotations and 7th graders would do what all the other 7th graders were doing. And the 8th graders would go and they were always with a para, and so I wanted to get away from that and start building peer mentors. And so we did start with a couple kids

that were a little bit more socially capable, and Molly being one of them. And so she went into Science. And I talked to the Science teacher and I was like, "Hey, you know, I really want to put a Life Skills student in your class without a para. Trust me, it'll be great." My famous line, it'll be great. And so, Cyndy actually came in and spoke to the class a little bit. And then Molly came in and I went to watch her. And so Molly was in her comfort zone so she was in Science and she was coloring on, just coloring. She...I'm like, "Where did you get that coloring sheet?" You know. "I don't know."

Libby: Where? Because Mrs. Thompson is going to burn the book!

Alicia: And so anyway, and so I'm like, you know, "No. You're in Science." And so, you know, the next day I was like, she needs a Science notebook, she needs to take things to write, and some of it was trial and error and finding the right peer mentor who would encourage her to do...with the class, she wouldn't join the class at first. And it took a little bit of time, but then she figured out that she was in Science. That this was her Science class and then we branched out from there and we started having less paras go to...out with kids to general ed classes and having more peer mentors. And boy, the students that want to mentor the kids are amazing. And so this year at the "We are WaHi" I had a booth where kids got to sign up to be peer mentors. "Is this something you would be interested in?" And so we have a list of students and I approached the administration and said, "I would like kids to be able to get credit for a class that's called like, Peer Leadership or Peer Mentorship." And no problem, so it's exciting. So one of the things that I have found has worked really well at the high school, and for those of you who I know what classes you've requested through the transition meeting for students, like for Olivia and Molly who are coming to the high school, and I would love it if they could come a day and go to that class. And what I have done before I've put kids in general ed classes is we go and we visit together and I'm there. And we, and the students...like I took one student to US History because he said he loved history. And he was like this (makes a face). And then I took him to Acting Workshop and he was out of his seat, you know doing it and I'm like, "So which class, you know, I think you have room in your schedule for both." He's like, "Well I'm not quite ready for US History, but I'm ready to join Acting Workshop." And then, and now next year he'll be in American Government and something else that he chose. But this is a student who had not really been in any electives before. And so it is a mind shift. So we're going to have kids all over. Some of the classes I'm like, "Really?" Like office, Microsoft Office. I think there's where Olivia and Molly signed up. I'm like, "Okay. Why not?" You know, and I think what helps I think what really helps is when a) they're with a mentor and when they, the expectations for them are based on their goals for the future. So their goal should not be that they are going to get a grade in the class or, but their goal should be "My transition after high school is I think I want to work in an office" or something like that, "so I am going to learn to use...I'm going to learn to type...or use an Excel sheet...or whatnot." So that's really where I find that it works really well. I have a student that was put into Art this year. I don't think he was asked if he wanted to be in Art. He's really not having a good time. You know, and so you see him and he's not interacting with his peers. He's just not...you know, he has fine motor issues and art is just really not what I would have thought he might like. But, you know, I think we forget to ask sometimes, and I think that is where parents can really, really help in this situation is because you are asking. You, you know, and let us know, because we sometimes just forget to ask. I had a student who asked if her daughter could be on the swim team. My eyes were like this (makes a gesture). Like, "Can she swim?" "Sort of." "I'm on it." That's what I said.

Moderator: I see a couple questions in the back.

Audience: Well, mine is just a comment. You know Haley's gone, oh what is it now, four years, five years through WaHi, and before she went into the STEP program, I mean the accommodations they made for her to be in these the other classrooms, general ed classes, Choir - you know she can't carry a tune and you would hear her during the concerts. Um, it was always a wonderful experience. Even - they had a lot of changeover - and it was still just because of the kids, because of the peers, natural. I don't know that they were even asked. It started with her sister, but then she tried Pottery and all these other different things - I can't even remember any more - but it was just, I feel like at WaHi especially - we didn't have that experience at PiHi, but I think it's changing there now. They're much more open minded. But it is, you do have to ask. Sometimes you have to push because it's, we were told, "Well that's not happened before." "Well you don't know until you try." And sometimes they fail and it's okay. That's how you learn.

Audience: So, the example you gave about students basically that are in a class that they're not enjoying or they're not succeeding in, is there a notification process - when do the parents find out? Because in 7th or 6th grade I found out when the school year was over that Olivia was going into class and putting her head on the table and going to sleep. That didn't help her in the moment and I didn't find out until it was done. So is there, you know, if Olivia's in Office class or she goes to Drawing and Painting and she does not like it, are we going to make her do it for a semester or is there, when do we find out?

Alicia: Yeah. So here's that. So part of my job as a school psychologist is to help you always kind of be forward thinking. So I would say, "Yes, she needs to do that for a semester because that's what general ed students do. And she can't move to a different elective because you're in high school and you do it for a semester. So what do we need to change for that to work for her? You know, is it too much. Maybe she doesn't need to go every day or let's work." But yeah, she...I...you know, to the extent possible I would not want to have her not be there. And so what I would encourage you to do as a parent, because I don't know either, because I am kind of you know sometimes involved especially if they're having reassessment, sometimes with an IEP or if a parent contacts me I'll, you know, can ask questions or whatever, but I'm not, I'm not in the classroom and so I...you...like I would encourage... like I did with my children and I'm sure what people do with their students who don't have disabilities - email the teacher, her teacher. Just say, "Hey, I'm Olivia's mom. How are things going in class?"

Audience: Is that...one of the reasons that I love the idea of this is because I want to be a team member. I homeschooled her all through elementary school so I might have ideas, but if I don't know until it's over then I can't help speak into the situation, and try and support whatever the teacher is telling her. If she's hearing the message at school and at home, then it's going to be more successful.

Alicia: Right, right. So if, there's kind of a difference because I think Olivia's experience is when she was going to those exploratories, or what they were called, her electives, she was going with a para, correct? So, so that information should have been relayed to you through the teacher, or whatnot. It's my goal to not have paras go in. So paras may check the general ed teacher as the, or the special ed teacher as the case manager will be checking on her, but your student is enrolled in that class. You have as much access to the general ed teacher as any of our other students. And they will know your children. I found out like later that there's been an issue with a student in class and the teacher has contacted the parent and they've gotten more information and they worked it out, you know. I didn't know that, but that's, you know, that's how it works in the general ed setting.

Moderator: So, I'd like to moderate here a little bit. I'm watching the clock. We're at 7:00, 20 minutes until we're done. We have not yet talked about IEPs. I'd like to give Libby some time to talk about a vision and also leave each panel some time to maybe give us a parting shot and comment. So I'm going to transition us to IEP meetings, and I'm going to start with you, Holly. You've been in a ton of IEP meetings. If you think about some of the best ones that you've been a part of, why do you think they were great and what made them successful.

Holly: When it comes down to it, the best IEP meeting experiences I have is when everyone is there and talking about concerns and being able to plan and looking at it as truly that, you know, this is the rough draft of it. We want ideas. We're going to make changes right here and now based on what everybody is saying. We're going to talk about what the needs are. We're going to talk about the successes and, you know, the strengths, the weaknesses, and, I don't know, to me that's where...those are the best. The best meetings that I come out of is when we know we've done our job as professionals, as teachers, when the parents feel relaxed enough, or trust enough to be able to say, "But wait a second. Why are we doing it this way? And here, I have this idea," or, "I appreciate those suggested goals, but I really would like this to be the focus." And when you can talk about that and trust each other and trust the expectations that everybody's there to work with the kids and to plan a program and, you know, when it comes down to it when that communication is open, then we can problem solve.

Libby: I think one of the things that a lot of...teachers especially...it is a draft IEP when they bring it to your meeting. You can write all over that as a team. Somebody write all over it. For whatever reason, teacher's don't like to make it look messy. It's fine. It's still a legal document even with writing on it and not just typing. We used to do those in the old days when I was, first started out. So, we used to do them by writing and then the teacher can go in afterwards and make it all pretty on the computer, but you can write and make changes to goals and all sorts of things, anything on the IEP at the meeting. So, it's not like that's a stagnant document and this is what we're going to do. So, and teachers know that. They want your input. So just know that you...it's okay. And if they don't want to write on it, it's like, "Libby said it's okay."

Cyndy: I would say that parents would really feel like you want our input if they had a chance to review the IEP ahead of time. I think presenting the rough draft at the table at the IEP meeting gives parents no ability to review it or offer....

Audience: Feels like you're getting shaded - here you go.

Cyndy: ...feel a little bit like it's a professional presentation rather than a joint partnership.

Libby: I do get that, and I have said to teachers...at our teacher meetings, "You know, it's..." We can't do that for an initial. I mean, we can't do up front, but for a renewal of an IEP, absolutely. It's a best, best practice to send it home a week or two ahead of time. The problem is is that teachers have every intent to get it done. We are, they are all, teachers and...Katie and Holly, they are all like working all day with your kids. They are trying to get all of these IEPs. Realistically, they don't always get to them two weeks ahead of time.

Cyndy: It would be nice if it was standard procedure if it was just ready a week in advance. I mean, if you just moved everyone's IEP a week in advance it's the same then load, it's the same busyness, but you're now informing families about the decisions - that you want their input, that you want - let's have this

real conversation about those plans. And it may, I know with a legal document it's always iffy, but if that was a standard operating procedure for Walla Walla Public Schools I really feel like that would be a real strong indication that you want the parent voice at that table.

Moderator: The other parent perspective I'd like to lend, as I change caps, is if you think about allocating time - so if we have 60 minutes, most of the allocation of time in the IEP meetings that I've had are allocated to a review of the past goals and the assessment that was used to understand where we are and that that's taking 40 to 50 minutes of the 60 minute meeting. So the last 10 minutes, and then an overrun in the meeting is that best part. So it's, for me, the - if we could move the best part up, you know, and get there faster, or start there, that'll be great.

Cyndy: We've sat through some amazing IEPs and because there's a clear leader of the IEP, they're there, there's a "this person can't make it tonight," we all knew this in advance, sign here. It's like, let's get on to business then. And it is...it's always nice when someone can be that administrator and say, "Let's give this teacher a chance to share because they really need to go," and just moderate the meeting. It just feels like, "Oh good. Someone is in charge." Because there's been a lot I've sat through where we're all kind of looking at each other like, "Who's supposed to be leading this thing? Who's - are you supposed to be talking now? or you?" It just, if there's some thought into like just a business protocol or, I don't know, maybe...I go through a lot of meetings.

Audience: No. I totally agree with you. So I've been in a bunch of IEP meetings too and some have been better than others and I agree with your point where, you know, there was one case, and you were there, where the teacher took probably 20 minutes to talk about all of the things she had done. All the great things she had been doing. And it was nice to hear of course, but if someone would've been like, "Okay, we have..." or maybe an agenda with the times. I don't know if that's...if we have those typically. I don't remember.

Libby: I have wrote protocol on how to run a good IEP meeting - with an agenda, you know, what to talk about...but the really great thing about sending a draft home for parents for educators is that we don't necessarily then have to go over every single point, but neither do I think you have to read everything on the IEP. That's a whole other story. But, 'cause I've sat through some really bad ones and some really good ones, and...

Audience: They all need to have the references for any abbreviation too. I've had that before where you're like, "What does that mean?"

Libby: And just, yeah, and just ask because I think we get so used to talking in acronyms to each other that sometimes people forget. I've been in meetings and I have said, "What does that mean?" to like, you know,

Audience: I have a question. Sorry I'm taking up.

Moderator: Question from Angie and then I'm gonna...

Audience: Ok. It'll be quick. So, we sign something saying we attended the meeting, right? We don't sign the IEP anymore?

Libby: Not in Washington.

Audience: So that went away? 'Cause I remember signing it, I thought before. Signing it, saying we approve of it.

Libby: It just, it just says that you participated as a participant in the meeting.

Audience: So how do we say we approve of what was in the meeting?

Libby: So, an IEP is not an approve or reject. For parents, it's a team so that's why it says you participated in the meeting, we all - and it says that for everybody - we all participated in this IEP meeting. Now, if you don't agree with something, and it's in there, you can write a rebuttal, or you know, do those kinds of things. But oftentimes, you know, parents will think, "Well I just, I don't want this so I'm saying "no." Well it's, that's not the kind of process it is. - Right.

Audience: How come they don't have the kids in on the IEP as well as part of the plan for their education? I know the School for the Blind has the kids at middle school start being part of the IEP in their classes and their planning. How come here doesn't do that with the kids?

Panel: Well, some people do and some people don't. It depends.

Libby: At the age of 16 we, legally we have to, we need to invite them. So whether they come to the meeting or not, it's kind of up to them and their parents. But legally it starts at age 16.

Alicia: And at 18, they have to tell us that we can invite you.

Audience: And if you have full guardianship, is that also the case?

Libby: So, if you have full guardianship, then you have guardianship. But at the age of 17, or within that year of the IEP of 17, we legally have to let the student know that when you turn 18 you have a legal right over your IEP and who comes to it and who doesn't.

Moderator: Well we are nearing the end of our time. I want to give Libby a few moments to talk about maybe a vision for special ed. You've been here 4 years and you've made a lot of progress. What do you see as what's next?

Libby: Well, we still have a long ways to go with inclusion, and so I've been working steadily on that since year one, and that is in every aspect. I'm working super heavily right now on our mild to moderate students being included in general education as close to 80 to 100 percent of the time as possible, so we have a rollout of that. Now every single student...some students may need a little bit different, but for the majority of students, they are going to be able to access English Language Arts curriculum and Math curriculum, especially at the elementary level in their general education classes. And research shows us that kids learn better with core curriculum and not an alternative curriculum. So we're moving towards that. Special ed teachers are being trained alongside general education on all new curriculum that comes in, so we are...we have started that process last year. We adopted Springboard for 6th through 12th. It's a English Language Arts curriculum, and our Resource Room teachers in those grade levels went to training right alongside their general ed peers. In the middle school and the high school we have been teaching like that curriculum in the Resource Room to help get kids' rigor up before we put them into a gen ed class at the middle school and high school. So that's my vision is to get all of the kids that can access general ed into general ed even in their core subjects, with support. So I am training all paraeducators this summer on how to work with students in the general education environment. I have

a few other people that are helping me with that. So that's upcoming. We are going to another school district, a bunch of us, in the Fall to look at how they're doing inclusion. They're kind of a model for the state. So we're doing a lot of things in that area - a lot of training for teachers. The two middle schools are doing some co-teaching next year. So we have at Garrison, we have a math teacher paired with a special ed teacher and they're teaching the same...they're going to teach together. We have an English teacher and a special ed teacher at Garrison doing the same. And at Pioneer we have a English and a special ed teacher teaching over there. So we're moving forward. It's definitely a mind shift for a lot of staff. And so, I have...I have the backing of our superintendent, our assistant superintendent, and the executive director of Teaching and Learning, and we are all four working together to move forward for inclusion for kids. So that's been my mantra. *applause* And that was my mantra before the State Legislature convened this year and said you'll get more money if students are in general ed 80 to 100 percent of the time. I've been saying that for way longer than that, so...

Moderator: So, I'm going to give each panelist, starting with Holly, a minute just for some closing thoughts and comments, and when I go like this you've got 10 seconds left...

Holly: Ok, well I just think all the communication that we're doing and trying to make connections and networks between parents and staff, teachers, the people who are working with the kids is just so important. And I would love to continue to see more and more of that to make plans for kids. I totally agree that kids learn best from their peers. They learn a lot from the adults around them, the skills, but they really learn so much from their peers and I think that really needs to start at preschool and elementary as far as, you know, having kids be a part of their peer group so that they learn language and, you know, learn to communicate. And also so that their peers learn who they are and it goes to the "why?" When kids know that, "Oh, they might just need a little help with social skills," or "they just might need to use something like this" to talk to you, no big deal. Let's just do it, so I think, I'm a strong advocate for that.

Moderator: Great, thanks.

Cyndy: I wrote out all my little points I want to say. Ok. When we want our kids included in gen ed, it really did help to go to the gen ed classroom and speak on behalf of your child. There's HIPAA laws out there. They don't...the teachers are not allowed to share your child's disability with the class. But how confused and interested maybe those students are in what your child has and ways that they can help them, the ways to communicate, the way they can have something maybe in common with them so that it can spark conversation. So I strongly advocate for parents going into the classroom, especially in the gen ed setting to explain maybe to the class maybe with your student open to suggestions, open to questions about maybe about your child. Second thing is we hate "it depends." As parents that is...we don't like depends anyway - aren't they a diaper - but that saying, "it depends" is always just really frustrating. And it always helps when we have strong advocates in the school district that we feel alongside of. It's not so much it...maybe it is a "it depends," but it's "let's make it happen." It is a strong show of support and I feel like that "let's make it happen" piece on inclusion is half - are you kidding me? Shoot. *laughter* Ok. Paraeducators should be "secret service," that our kids should be in these peer groups that kids when they know and they can respond to their peer, they become the best advocates for - I know I'm going to go over, but I don't care.

Libby: That's why we're training paraeducators how to do it in the gen ed classroom.

Cyndy: Oh, and just the importance of our kids that are non-verbal...the parents, or the teachers...the only information we're getting as parents is through the teacher. Because our kids, if we ask them, "How was your day?" It's "fine" everyday. We get zero information from our students - so how important that email exchange is. Vital. Make sure that that is happening, and if you have to advocate as a parent, that's just how it goes. And, oh, in terms of modification, Molly, so she had this class right? And they were doing coloring sheets, well I just got a picture from her Science teacher. She put an electric circuit together all by herself. So I mean assume competence in our kids. That's the last piece of the message to the schools is always assume competence, and then make the accommodation. But assume competence, that's my biggest ?? word. Ok.

Moderator: Thank you, Cyndy. Alicia.

Alicia: I guess I would just add to that, Cyndy, and this is something that is just really resonating with me in the last couple weeks is assume that all students have preferences, or what they want, or you know. I had one parent tell me that her daughter told her, "I don't want to be in Modified PE. I want to be in general ed PE." You know, so assume that they have a mind of their own and that they need a voice at the table. That's what I would say. Thanks for being here. I can't wait to have all your kids be at the high school. We didn't really talk about the STEP program, about what happens next. But I'll...but we can talk to you after, okay.

Cyndy: Or write the question down and we'll respond to you.

Libby: Okay, my turn? Ok. A couple things. I don't...somebody wanted to know about how to have better IEPs and I think we talked a little bit about that, but one of the things that I've offered - and I know Cyndy wants to take me up on it - is especially for middle school and high school, as kids are transitioning those IEPs sometimes need to change from like an elementary model IEP. And so I've done some pre-meetings with parents where I've asked them, and I've done it with the case manager, I've asked the parents to think about goals, what their child likes, where they want to go, where they see their child going. And so then we have a...they come to the table prepared with those kinds of things in hand, and it...and we do a pre-meeting before the IEP meeting so the IEP isn't 3 hours long. And then we talk about, ok so here's where your child wants to be and here's where you see them, let's figure out how to get there and write that process into the IEP.

Moderator: Bring it home, Katie.

Katie: All right. Thank you for coming. I guess something that I really appreciate is when you're real at the meetings. And I know that IEPs can be hard. They can be an annual reminder of things that suck, but it can also be a great opportunity to celebrate growth. And some of the best things that have come out have been when you say, "I don't know what is going on with this behavior," or "This thing is really stinky. Do you guys have a way that you're working on and addressing it in the classroom?" or, you know, when you bring up your ideas it really makes our IEPs richer. It makes our opportunities to work with kids so much more informed, and so you are their greatest advocate and when you bring in what's important to you, what's important to your family, you are a critical piece to this process. And don't let your voice be silenced. Make sure that you share what is important to you, what is important to your family, because ultimately your advocacy is what's going to get your student what they need.

Moderator: Great. Thanks.

Applause

Moderator: A couple "thank yous." Thank you to our panelists for your insights tonight. *applause*
Thank you for translation services again. Thank you very much. *applause*