



April 29, 2003

Transcript of NCSET Conference Call Presentation

Developing Cultural Competency: Improving Adult Outcomes for Youth With Disabilities

presented by:

Rory Gilbert, Executive Director
National Conference for Community and Justice

MS. MACK: My name is Mary Mack and I am the Associate Director for the National Center on Secondary Education and Transition, and I want to welcome everybody to the call today. Today, we have the honor of having Rory Gilbert, who is the Executive Director of the National Conference on Community and Justice as our presenter. Rory comes highly recommended. She's worked with children, youth, and families for over 25 years and has her focus on human relations, communication, conflict resolution, breaking down barriers that separate people.

For the past 12 years, Rory has worked in the prevention field, helping young people and their families learn and practice the skills necessary to be healthy and successful. As the Associate Director of the Scottsdale Prevention Institute, a substance-abuse prevention organization, she's responsible for over 20 plus professionals providing education, training, and support-services at 35 different community sites. She's also been involved in presenting on the subject of cultural competency to a national audience. So with that, I'm going to talk about a couple of housekeeping rules and then just turn the call over to Rory.

For those of you who are using a speaker phone, when you're not speaking, would you please put the phone on mute so that we can avoid background noise and make sure that when you put something on mute that it doesn't go into elevator music. We've had some problems from time to time. This is going to be a little bit different from our standard calls in so far as I think Rory would like this to be a highly participatory, interactive call, so we hope that everybody on the phone is going to help us

with their stories and their questions to make this call successful. With that Rory, I'm going to turn it over to you.

MS. GILBERT: Thank you very much Mary. It's a pleasure to be with you all today and I hope as we get through the time, we get acquainted, and know who all is out there. I'm excited to be there and it's an honor for the National Conference for Community and Justice. Just for you to know, I'm the executive director for the Arizona region and my experience is a lot here in Arizona. What I would like to talk about, we were talking about this notion of cultural competency and how that is connected with improving outcomes for our youth with disabilities, and I like to start just with the terms cultural competency because in today's society we kind of have a mixed bag where words like diversity and cultural competency tend to be loaded.

People start feeling pressure that they need to know what to do all the time. They're supposed to get it. They're supposed to be politically correct and then they feel angry when it looks like the rules change or there's a new wrinkle in the situation and most of all, I think all of us in our work environments as well as in our social environments want to feel comfortable and when we work across cultures, we take a little bit of that comfort away. So as far as I'm concerned, when I work with groups, the first thing I like to do is diffuse the high-stress expectations that have become associated with words like diversity and cultural competency and the expectation that somehow we can do it right.

So I guess I want to assure you that we never will. The bottom line is that if we are supposed to know it all and have it all, I think that's going at this no-

tion of competency from the wrong angle. I don't care how many books I read and how many presentations I listen to. The bottom line is that every person I meet has to be met as an individual and I think for me, cultural competency has more to do with the act of living with people who are different from me, which is everybody else in the world, than it is about having all the facts about how to work with this group or that group.

So, I find it interesting just even doing this by phone call, in terms of the notions of cultural competency because so much of our presumptions about people wind up being visual and we don't have either that luxury or perhaps that hindrance so we'll have our voice tones, our accents, our phrasing, that are going to tell us who we're talking to and who we're working with and that's going to be an interesting piece as we think about this notion of cultural competency. So I thought the first way to start since we're all out there some place, is I want to do a quick visualization. I'm going to ask you to close your eyes but of course I don't know if you're peaking or not.

I'd like you to picture the following: I want you to imagine that you're walking down a street and that you come up to the front of a house. Right by the street there is a fence and in the fence there is a gate. I want you to open the gate and I want you to go up the path to the house and I want you to get to the front door and I want you to let the people inside know that you're out there. OK. Everybody have a picture? This is where you say yes.

MS. GILBERT: OK You're there. So you were with me, right, but I couldn't hear anybody answering. Right. Well there you go. So now I can. Can anybody tell me what that fence looked like? So tell us about it.

UNIDENTIFIED PARTICIPANT: It was a wooden fence, white, about five feet high, beautiful engraved wood carvings on the fence gate.

MS. GILBERT: Oh wow, and carvings on the gate ...

UNIDENTIFIED PARTICIPANT: I want to interrupt ...

MS. GILBERT: OK. Does anybody have a different fence?

UNIDENTIFIED PARTICIPANT: Mine was

metal – short, metal black wrought-iron type of fence about four feet high at the most with a gate with one of those long metal bolts. That was it.

MS. GILBERT: Does anybody have another fence?

UNIDENTIFIED PARTICIPANT: Mine is just a white picket fence.

MS. GILBERT: So how about the path. Describe the path that you walked up?

UNIDENTIFIED PARTICIPANT: My path was white stone marble.

MS. GILBERT: White stone marble, how nice. OK, does anybody else have a different path?

UNIDENTIFIED PARTICIPANT: Mine was a cement path.

MS. GILBERT: Cement.

UNIDENTIFIED PARTICIPANT: Mine was red brick.

MS. GILBERT: Red brick, all right.

UNIDENTIFIED PARTICIPANT: Mine was cement.

MS. GILBERT: You had cement also. OK, and you got to the front of the house. Tell us about the front of this house. What did you see?

UNIDENTIFIED PARTICIPANT: I saw a double doorway with glass windows all the way around the door.

MS. GILBERT: OK, were there steps up or ...

UNIDENTIFIED PARTICIPANT: There were about eight steps up to the door.

MS. GILBERT: Eight steps, OK. All right, and did you happen to notice the color of the house?

UNIDENTIFIED PARTICIPANT: The house was – I'd say about – kind of a whitish color, maybe off white.

MS. GILBERT: OK. Does anybody have a different picture of their house and the doorway?

UNIDENTIFIED PARTICIPANT: I had a storm door and then a wooden door on the inside of it and there were like four steps up – wooden steps. I don't know what color the house was.

MS. GILBERT: OK and anybody else.

UNIDENTIFIED PARTICIPANT: Well excuse me, I'm joining the conference so I'm not sure what you're talking about.

UNIDENTIFIED PARTICIPANT: ... it's just cultural competency.

MS. GILBERT: We just kind of did a brief visualization of walking up to a house and just gave some very brief cues and we are finding out that people had different images even though we asked everybody to see the fence, the gate, and a path, and the front of the house, and just kind of getting a sense that we had a whole lot of different pictures about that. How did – I just want to ask a couple more questions about that. How did you let somebody inside know you were there?

UNIDENTIFIED PARTICIPANT: Rang the door bell ...

MS. GILBERT: Doorbell.

UNIDENTIFIED PARTICIPANT: Knocked on the door.

MS. GILBERT: Knocked, OK ...

UNIDENTIFIED PARTICIPANT: I could not get to the house because there are the steps and I use a wheelchair so I could not ...

MS. GILBERT: OK, so you were stuck down at the bottom and you couldn't get to the door.

UNIDENTIFIED PARTICIPANT: I am stuck.

MS. GILBERT: OK, there we go. So because there were steps on your house, you couldn't get to that door.

UNIDENTIFIED PARTICIPANT: That's right.

MS. GILBERT: Yes. So I would imagine that your mood as you approached the house might have been different from somebody else's, you know, oh here we go again kind of thing. Got to take some rocks out of your pocket and throw them at the door or something.

UNIDENTIFIED PARTICIPANT: And most houses are like that.

MS. GILBERT: You bet. Absolutely.

UNIDENTIFIED PARTICIPANT: Without steps, it doesn't look beautiful.

MS. GILBERT: It stops being beautiful when it means you can't get up the steps. So clearly we had different perspectives and observations. Were any of you surprised that the images were different from the one you visualized?

UNIDENTIFIED PARTICIPANT: No, no, kind of expected that.

MS. GILBERT: So it's interesting We could use the same words which were there's a fence, there's a path; there's a house, there's a door; all common

language and all of a sudden we had very, very different stories that emerged from that. My question of course is do these differences show up in our daily lives?

UNIDENTIFIED PARTICIPANT: Yes, all the time.

MS. GILBERT: All the time. What are the results when we think we are using the same terms for the same things and we wind up with such different images? How does this play out in our lives?

UNIDENTIFIED PARTICIPANT: It interferes with communication.

MS. GILBERT: Yes, it interferes with communication. Why? Why does it interfere? We all know it's a door. We all know it's a fence. How does it interfere?

UNIDENTIFIED PARTICIPANT: Because everybody is different.

MS. GILBERT: Yes, and we're making the assumption that everybody sees what we see. So, obviously – and if it interferes with communication, what happens? What happens in our schools environment when these types of things happen? How does this affect the results we get with our kids?

UNIDENTIFIED PARTICIPANT: There's a breakdown.

UNIDENTIFIED PARTICIPANT: Misunderstanding.

UNIDENTIFIED PARTICIPANT: It affects our reactions.

MS. GILBERT: OK. Talk about that a little more. How does that affect our reactions?

UNIDENTIFIED PARTICIPANT: How we respond to these differences and that leads into I think our expectations.

MS. GILBERT: So we have a vision, we react to it. It affects our expectations. It affects our communication. So we talked at the beginning – the title of this is Cultural competency. How does this relate to cultural competency? What does this mean in terms of cultural competency?

UNIDENTIFIED PARTICIPANT: Again, I think it's our expectations. You know, as a teacher you think of your students and how they will perform in the class.

MS. GILBERT: Sure.

UNIDENTIFIED PARTICIPANT: We put

them in slots, put them in different – organize them in a different way, because we are reacting to them in different differently. We try to classify them.

MS. GILBERT: So we try to classify them and one of the things I think about with this notion of cultural competency which is yes, I need to be aware and familiar with other people’s cultures and histories and values which is an important part of cultural competency, but I need to be careful that I just don’t impose one new set of stereotypes for another. So that I say OK, well, all people, you know, perhaps all people in wheelchairs are going to get angry every time they see steps, you know or all people from this part of the country are going to visualize granite walk ways, you know? And all of a sudden I’ve got a whole new context. I didn’t know anything about that, but now I can figure it out, and I think that’s a danger in a very simplified form of cultural competency.

I think what I want us to be thinking about today is the fact that cultural competency is our ability to navigate respectfully and effectively in arenas where people come from different backgrounds, experiences, values, and traditions. It’s far more than knowing you know, some of the – even what we might consider positive, normative trends for people that Hispanic families have strong family ties or in many Native American cultures eye contact could be considered a sign of rudeness or disrespect or European Americans value independence. It’s nice to know that there’s that kind of stuff out there, the cultural competency has to go much deeper and I want to go back to what the person said. The notion of expectations, cultural competency goes deeper and recognizes that we cannot make assumptions about others based on our culture.

UNIDENTIFIED PARTICIPANT: I was just thinking about what you were talking about as individual differences and we all come from different backgrounds and have different experiences, therefore different expectations.

What I would be more worried about is the expectations that the system has as a whole and how to change those impressions. We have cultures within cultures, but however there is a predominant culture that expects people to act in a standardized

way.

MS. GILBERT: Exactly.

UNIDENTIFIED PARTICIPANT: That would be, I think the problem of cultural competence is, is not as much as the individual level as the institutional level.

MS. GILBERT: I think it’s a combination of institutional and systemic stuff that does that, as well that it winds up being individuals who act it out. So, we start with – so the question becomes, “How do we address it?” and I think there are levels for addressing cultural competence that go from the individual level, what happens in groups and across groups, as well as looking at institutional and systemic ways that groups are treated differently and with different results.

I like to start in house, the group I’m speaking to, I don’t know and this is a piece of cultural competence – , I don’t know if I’m speaking to upper level, classroom teachers, if I’m talking to parents or advocates, so I want to make sure we hit something that’s relevant to all on the phone. What I’d like to do is walk us through what we do at all the different levels and how each of us can impact ... Reaching outside of one’s comfort zone and watching for cues, asking polite questions, taking risks, figuring out that sometimes I am going to make mistakes, correcting those mistakes, it’s really – The initial piece of it is having to be able to step out of my world view and learn about others.

It becomes truly, at the individual level, a way of living and being – not a knowledge bank to be achieved. So I think about what we do at the individual level, recognizing that number one, I have a world view. I have a way of seeing things that is related to my culture, my age, my gender, the geographic region I have grown up with/in, my class, my race, my ability or disabilities, and I think that, my sexual orientation.

All of those things come together in my world view. And it’s very easy, and we’ve all met people who think, well, everybody sees the world the same way I do, and they function like your job is to fit into my world view. So the first piece of the work is recognizing that. Because if we don’t do that, we don’t have a prayer for cultural competency.

The next challenge with that, if we move up in

level, is as a group. When I'm hanging with people who are a lot like me, it's very comfortable and it's very easy to say "You know we really understand what the world is truly about. And when I connect with your group I just kind of think "Well they're whacked, they're nuts." And so inter-group, we have to figure out, "Well, we do things differently. And how do we come together group to group?"

If we can do those dialogs, then we – or I – start being open to the fact that I have to be able to see how others are being impacted to an extent, and I start looking at what's happening institutionally – which was what one of the gentleman had asked about, which is – What are some of the protocols?

I think about one of the schools I worked with, which had a very unique design. The entire school was housed in a circle. All of the classrooms were on the outside of the circle facing in, and then in the inside of the circle, you had the library and media center and, all the resource information. Well of course, the school got too small and so they put portables on. Guess where they put all the special-ed kids and all the ESL kids? Out in the portables. They were not in the circle of the school at all.

So these kids never felt connected to the school. That's that institutional level. Nobody probably sat down and said, "We're going to put these kids out there because we don't like them and we don't want them seen." But it institutionalized a system in which being an ESL student or being a student with disabilities excluded you and made a total official statement about how valuable you were to the school. And so the school – of course, not right away – didn't figure it out instantly, but after there was a big fight – particularly between the ESL kids and some of the, you know, inner-circle kids – thought, "You know, I wonder how we're participating in contributing to the alienation that's happening on this campus."

And also interestingly enough, of course, the ESL kids' English was not getting that much better because they never had an opportunity to interact with their peers and really challenge their language skills. So they actually – the school did, after much reflection and, you know, some bad press – recognize that they needed to move their ESL students and their students with disabilities into the circle

and really rethink the structure of their campus.

So you can see that just that level of institutional decisions that impact the value that is placed upon people and their ability. The other types of situations we see certainly with our students in wheelchairs is – I have had kids tell me over and over again about saying, "Well, you know, you can't be in this class because we don't have the space facility to accommodate your wheelchair. Well, guess what. If I want to take this class and if I'm in a wheelchair, you need to figure out a different location for the class, rather than saying you can't play. And that's a mindset piece, where we have to step outside of our world view where what's in my world view is convenient and if it's not well, y'all just deal with it.

And then there's the more subtle level, which is not policy per se, but it's is the way people act, and I think that's the other part of that question – which is "What are some of those attitudes and expectations that I automatically see?"

I had an interesting experience with a young man I worked with who was born in the United States and spoke English without an accent. But his parents were from Korea and they spoke Korean at home, and he did not speak English until he started school. Well, he was very smart and handled things very well and seemed to be managing wonderfully until he hit middle school. And suddenly in middle school – it was a fairly high income level area and they demanded a lot of their middle school in terms of the quality of classes so they had a humanities class where they studied the arts and this and that and the other thing, which, amazingly enough, didn't happen in the other end of the district. And suddenly he was failing. He became the class clown, and he was disruptive and problematic. What was going on here? You know, had he suddenly decided he needed to be a bad boy?

What became very clear, through discussing it with him, was that his language capacities for abstract thinking were still much more comfortable and grounded in Korean than they were in English. And the expectation – or what was happening in the school was saying – "You're a disruptive influence, and you need to behave better and we don't know why you're not doing well – rather than putting him in support services in which he was able to

gain the comprehension skills he needed at a pace that worked for him.

And those are the types of situations that I think happen at those upper level areas. It still takes people to make the decisions, but at the same time, we make judgments about kids, about their capacities. We know that it is a common trend to look – if you look at the high school level – at your accelerated and AP- type classes and things like that, there’s a disproportionate – an uneven representation – of upper middle class and white students compared to students of color and students of lower socio-economic class areas. Does that mean that they’re smarter? No, that’s not the case. And yet the expectation is – and again, I have had kids who want to go into the accelerated classes who are told, kids of color, who are just told “Why don’t you take the regular class so you can do well in it and not put yourself at risk of getting a bad grade?”

They would not say the same thing to a kid who they considered more the proper type. And that’s where I think the expectations and the judgments are made that have a considerable impact on our kids’ futures. And I think we see that with our children with disabilities to a great degree in terms of the types of services that are offered based on race and on socioeconomic status and, a lot of times, on parents’ language skills and ability to relate and advocate. And that’s another place where cultural issues really come into play in terms of “What is appropriate advocacy?” And if it is considered rude to challenge authority, we need to figure out a different strategy to ensure that the kids aren’t being pushed around.

So I think that step – if we think about the levels that we need to get to in terms of addressing competency, first we have to be aware ourselves. I think that we look at how do we embed – that term is so common anymore – cultural competency and respect for the -- program planning and implementation. And I’d reference not just race and socioeconomic status but the fact that when we think about diversity, we have to think in a much broader framework. Marilyn Loden talks about a culture wheel in which she talks about both primary and secondary diversity arenas. And we have to be conscious of the fact that we are addressing

all of those. We know there are big gender issues in terms of how kids are taken care of – as well as race, culture, language, nationality, socioeconomic status, abilities – so I’m going to pause for a moment and see if there are questions and thoughts, and then I want to talk a little bit about how do we proceed and actually implementing this on our campuses. OK? So are there questions or comments before I move forward?

UNIDENTIFIED PARTICIPANT: Well, move forward..

MS. GILBERT: OK, we’ll do that.

All right so here’s the deal. When we think about how we do this, the first thing we need to do is think about, “Who are our key players?” And we need to make sure so we think about is systemically. We think about it institutionally. You’re in your school, and the first thing we have do is to say, “Does anybody even know that there’s a problem?” You know, because if nobody thinks there’s a problem, you know we’re doing great we’re taking really good care of our kids, you know. We have learning resource rooms, and we have classes for our higher functioning MR kids, and we have this, that, and the other thing, and everyone’s happy and it’s all good...

So first thing we have to do is look at it. And one of the things we like to do is an assessment – where we talk to parents and we talk to kids and we talk to the staff. And a lot of times, you’ll get – your parents are probably – sometimes they’re going to be very vocal, sometimes they’re not. But you also really need to hear from your classified staff as well as your teaching staff because your classified staff will frequently see things that your professional staff – the faculty – may not notice. And your administration is another universe altogether. So I think the first thing is to say, “Is there a problem? What do we need to do about that? What are the issues? Have we started noticing what’s going on?”

So we have to raise the awareness. and I think one of the things that’s really important as you proceed with this is recognizing that most people in the profession – I’m not going to say all, but I would say most people go into the profession because they really do want to do something good. I don’t think, you know, what is it that old phrase, “Those who

can do ...”

I think that people who are teachers are incredible and extraordinary. How’s that for a generalization? But I think that – and most of us don’t like to see ourselves as biased in any way – you know, -- I’m not racist. By the same token, I think that we all have to acknowledge our personal biases. The activity I did with you on the phone is one way of getting at “You know what? We really don’t see things the same way.”

I use a lot of other activities that we can do when we’re in person that can help us practice and see that we see things other ways and to challenge stereotypes. And I think it’s really important to do this in as non-threatening a way as possible.

You know, it’s just like – you know – if bashing people over the head would make them change, then I’d say we should do it and do it fast because it’s the most expedient way, but generally it doesn’t work. So we have to help people come to this awareness that things aren’t really the way they ought to be.

So it’s focus groups, talking to people, helping people listen to each other – maybe some fish bowl kinds of things. Surveys even for schools are terrifying. You know, you know this. They don’t want it in writing. But to sit down and have some conversation and find out some information and teach some good skills of dialoguing so it’s not just finger-pointing and yelling.

Learning and listening with each other is a really wonderful way to start. You know, what ideally we want to do is start before there is a problem. I mean one that’s become a media attention problem. That’s always the back-to-the-wall kind of thing, and then the school district has to be protecting its butt, and you lose that sensitivity of what’s really going on. So it’s finding what some of the issues are and we really want to open it to you all to some of the issues you’re seeing in your schools, and then we can take practical application.

Who knows about these? What has been tried? OK. What are the barriers to making changes about some of these issues? And I think the first piece is just saying, “What are they? Who knows them?” and then starting to find your champion. So, the next level is educating people after we get done with

the awareness. What? Why is this a problem? What difference does it make? I think about the school that I referenced. What’s the big deal if we wind up having the special-ed students and the ESL students out in the portable? Why is this a problem? As a matter of fact, we thought it would be more convenient because it was closer to the parking lot for them. OK. So we have to help people understand how our children and our community hurt, and then bringing all our stakeholders together to get their perspective. OK.

So we talk about dialoguing on that. We talk about really educating about what are the implications for this, and that’s really where we embed it. We start asking what are the questions we need to ask to challenge us to go outside of our own world view.

And I presume when I’m speaking to you on the phone, you’re the folks who are interested in this stuff, that you probably are seeing this stuff or are aware of it, and know that there’s a lot of other people who are not. I guess what is it? – the Socratic method of just asking questions and pulling it out from other people. because when we come in, there are times when we have to come in and, you know, wag our fingers and say this is wrong and this is not OK and force the issue. And there are absolutely times when we have to go with legal means. It must be done. If we’re looking, though, at changing the culture of the school to be more inclusive and accepting, we need to tell them why is this important.

Well we know – we know our special Ed kids feel different right from the start. We know that – I think about kids who in some of the – like our LD kids and our conduct-disorder kids – they feel like aliens anyway, and we know it has huge impact on their academic performance but on their behavior, on their ability to even graduate.

We need to be able to tell people, “This is the stuff. This is the information you need to have.”

When our kids feel alienated from school, they are at greater risk. They are at greater risk for dropping out. They are at greater risk for drug and alcohol abuse. They are at greater risk for all kinds of things.

So I think that’s really a critical part of it is helping people understand what are the consequences.

What do we all lose? And once we've done that, once we've gotten that buy in, then we kind of get to a really interesting area and this is more – this is kind of within the – if I was thinking about one of the critical places, I am assuming that terms go nationally but you know that “All of our special-ed kids need IEPs.

What happens when we do those? What assumptions are we making about the child in the family? And do we find that that when the group comes together to put this plan together, do we make different assumptions about the capacities of our poor children, our children of color, our children from single parent homes, teen mothers, new immigrants?

Start asking questions about that. We know that there are a lot of assumptions about compliance. You know. If I have a mixed group – and I know in a lot of schools where you have really stratified socioeconomic groups – I assume everybody is going to have a desk and a well-lit place to work and quiet at home and, you know, parents who will say “OK, now it's five o'clock, and we're going to turn the TV off and the radio off and you're going to study.” Well the bottom line is – that's not true for every home.

By the same token, do I then say well it's probably not true for all those you know poor families so I'm not going to assume that they can ever do any homework? I think we have to be very careful, and we need to be monitoring ourselves and each other because you hear it and you kind of, you know, you go “There's something not right about this assumption.” And we have to challenge those assumptions and gently challenge it with each other.

How do we make an IEP meeting respectful, culturally sensitive, and more meaningful? We presume – I mean the ones I am familiar with here is, you know, it's the parent and if the child is in high school, usually the child, but if they're younger, then they're not usually even in the room. And you've got all of the different people.

Well, does this work across cultures? How comfortable are people going to feel who are new immigrants when they are facing a panel of experts telling them what is best for their child to say, “Wait, but this isn't right.” – as much as the people

sitting in that circle really want to hear from that parent.

It's not generally not going to happen because it would be considered disrespectful because of just the feelings that are engendered with being new – perhaps with English not being the first language – how quickly people can catch up on the language.

So I think one of the things even would be to say “How can we more effectively do an IEP that allows for true parental input – rather than “We're just going to tell you everything, and if you don't say anything against it, we're just going to proceed.” Because if I really want to be doing the best for this kid, I really want to know what that parent thinks about that child's capacities, interests, skills, and abilities.

So I think that we look at some of our formal structures and say, “Who does this work for and who does it not work for?” And then say, “How can we change that?”

I think the other piece we have to do at an institutional level is we need to evaluate our progress. First thing we have to do is find a safe way to start noticing patterns or trends of how students are served. We all know the kind of parking lot conversations that happen, where people talk about, “Well, we all know blah blah blah.”

What are some of the patterns that you see? As I mentioned, certainly out here, patterns in schools is that, unless it's a school that is predominantly non-white, you're going to see predominantly white kids in the accelerated classes. Are we going to see predominantly kids of color in the conduct-disorder type classes or the EH classes? And that's a pretty common phenomenon. We know that we're seeing more kids of color being labeled emotionally handicapped or conduct disorder – rather than looking at what are some of the other issues going on. And what happens when the goal is to provide resources and services but when we wind up limiting their access to a full and complete education.

Now schools are not going to want to look at those patterns and trends. You know we can't just come in and say we want to do this survey, but I think we have to find a vehicle for asking some of the safest questions first so that the schools can go, “OK, I'm comfortable with asking this question

and I'm comfortable with looking at 'do we need to speak to this piece?' "

And once they've built on some successes and the school starts appearing responsive and capable of working collaboratively with parent groups and advocate groups, then they may be more willing to challenge more difficult questions. Just capacity building, just like we have to do with the kids, I think we have to switch it around and say, you know what? We have to do it with our administrations and staff as well because the risks are great. The stakes are so high right now that we need to be as respectful of – if we want to grow – again if it's really blatantly, you know, racist and horrible, then, you know, that's absolutely where we go for – You know what? Don't wait around. Get somebody to speak up and talk about legal action.

But if you're talking about more the subtleties that you're not going to be able to identify that way – which is more of what I think happens – then I think you have to start with a process, but you really need to keep kind of gentle pressure. I always think about – you know, what is it? Saplings in the wind kind of thing, you know – they can bend and stuff like that and as long as the wind is gentle and pressured, they may bend in a certain way but they won't snap. But if we try to hit too hard, then we kind of lose everything.

So I think those are the things that I would look at. How do we work towards change in attitude – especially when we're not talking about policy but actually the personal implementation of that policy? It does require a good education. It requires education – not just, "OK, we're going to do our one day diversity training a year. Everybody does it. They listen to it. They walk away and say, 'OK, now we go back to business.' "

It's much more of an integrated "How do we be aware of the attitudes that we are bringing with us into the conversations?" What are some questions when we are doing an IEP that before we perhaps meet with the parents and the kids, we need to ask ourselves in terms of some of the assumptions we have made so that we can challenge our own comfort zones.

So with that, I'd like to hear some more from you. OK?

UNIDENTIFIED PARTICIPANT: My question. This is great because right now in Missouri, we – in fact, tomorrow – I am going to go for the second session. We are involved in improving – I don't know how to put it – we have high dropout of disabled students from school, not coming to school and not getting a job and so forth. But what we are trying to do is identify why. What are the causes? And so I was hoping maybe if you could help us with this – kind of, on the phone, identify some of the causes and then finding the solutions. What are some of the causes that cause a student -- to drop out of school and not get a good job, etc. etc? I mean are they just attitudes from society?

MS. GILBERT: I think that – and I encourage other people to respond also – I think there are a number of pieces to that puzzle. One is that a lot of time students with disabilities, particularly learning disabilities, they just feel stupid in school. You know I always remember a group of kids I worked with and they were in the LRC class, which was the learning resource center, and they said they called it the "little retarded children's center." That's how they named themselves. They want to be in an environment where they feel competent and so, if we don't have vehicles for the kids who are struggling in certain areas to feel competent in other areas, they're going to go to those other places. So that's one piece of the puzzle.

They also feel, a lot of times, different and disapproved of by their peers and shunned. And I think it's really important to have a design within your systems to help your kids – our special-ed kids – to feel that they are included in the general school population. And that requires some very concentrated work at breaking down the barriers that exist between, you know, the different groups on campus. So I think those are a couple of the reasons...

UNIDENTIFIED PARTICIPANT: But why do they feel that way?" Do you think there is some underlying causes Society make them feel that way?

MS. GILBERT: Absolutely.

UNIDENTIFIED PARTICIPANT: Yes. Exactly.

MS. GILBERT: School is designed for – it's a hierarchical system, and you want to be an A student. And you want to be the crême-de-la-crême. And you want to be prom queen. And you want to

be the captain of the football team. And you want to be – you know – popular. And you want to be approved of by your teachers and your – and we get kids with disabilities – get treated differently. Absolutely. And I think that's where that consciousness of, you know, of understanding it. That's why that was able to happen at that school I pointed out. It never even occurred to them.

What were they doing? They were formalizing the fact that these kids – I don't want to look at them. I don't want to see them. I don't want to know about them because what we really focus on here are our – quote – normal kids. And until we can normalize all of our kids on campus, those kids are going to feel excluded. And none of us like to go back day after day and be told, "You're not as good, you're not as important. You're not as worthy. And we don't particularly like you."

UNIDENTIFIED PARTICIPANT: Can you hear me? I've had the experience. I think a lot of it comes from fear and ignorance that just perpetuates itself. My son is in high school. One of his teachers in a class said, "I don't buy this ADD stuff." And she was saying in reaction to a kid who had that and wasn't paying attention. And my son stood up and said "I have ADHD, and how can you say that?" and then he went on to talk about it.

And she continued with her belief about that so I went to the principal after hearing this from my son because it's not typical for him to advocate for himself. And I said, "I don't really know what was said. I don't know what the teacher said so I really don't know the other side."

And he said, "It doesn't matter what the teacher said. What matters is your son's perception of what was said." And I've never had that experience with a school administrator ever before in ten years.

MS. GILBERT: How did that feel?

UNIDENTIFIED PARTICIPANT: It felt great. It felt like he knows how to work outside the box and is willing to change. Unless there's a willingness to change and acknowledge what our prejudices are, the kids will continue to suffer.

MS. GILBERT: Yes.

UNIDENTIFIED PARTICIPANT: I have a question.

MS. GILBERT: Yes.

UNIDENTIFIED PARTICIPANT: I was just curious. I think in the diversity dialogue here, there are still those issues that are more difficult to bring out – specifically sexual orientation. And I'm wondering how you would address that specifically in a school setting and with children with disabilities – which we also tend to not want to talk about any sexuality whatsoever.

MS. GILBERT: Well I think, again, one of the first things is that we need to be aware of it totally on the whole campus and be conscious of the fact that this is a major civil rights issue of our time. One of my favorite quotes from an administrator in one of our largest districts in the state was – because there had been an effort for students, or gay and lesbian students for friends of gays and lesbians, have little signs in their rooms that indicated that this was a safe place. And he just said, you know that's outrageous. He said, "Our entire campus has to be a safe place for all our children."

And I think the first piece of the attitude is we we're dealing with the religious piece. We're dealing with the fact that on an institutional level – both nationally, state, and locally – it is still totally acceptable to discriminate against people who are gay or lesbian. And as a result, there's no – you know, the kid's favorite term is, "Oh that's so gay." That's as derogatory a thing as you can get.

So I think part of it is awareness, again, on the part of the entire school of the fact, "What does this do to our children?" And, you know, we know we have a lot of statistics in terms of what happens to our GLBT students. When you talked about dropout rates, they have a very high dropout rate because of their feeling of being so totally unaccepted on school campuses – as well as high suicide rate, high drug-abuse rate – and not because of the disease of being GLBT. It's because of the disease of a society that doesn't accept the fact that these people are different in another way. So I think that part of that whole awareness, when you think about the notion of inclusion, is including sexual orientation as something you talk about.

Now here in Arizona it's a little difficult because we actually, in our state statutes, say that we cannot talk about sexual orientation in any manner that could be perceived as positive. So some schools take

that to one degree or another.

What we are seeing, which I think is very exciting, is – and I assume you all are seeing it also – is a great growth in the number of gay/straight alliances, or GLSEN chapters. It's the gay/lesbian something. I can't remember what the 'S' is – straight education network. And that's national efforts – particularly on school campuses – to create allies so ... And by doing gay and straight together, it diffuses, "Oh my goodness, everybody who is walking into that room must be gay." But it really generates allies.

One of my favorite ways that a school handled even getting that started was they decided to do a book club, and they had about three or four different clubs on campus all read the same book. And it happened to be a book addressing issues of sexual orientation. And then they invited everybody to come and discuss. And people were coming to a book club, and they just had a chance to talk and it was an interesting way, non-threatening, to start identifying who are our allies on campus. Who understands this issue? What do we need to do on this campus – without having to – for people to out themselves? And that's especially difficult for teachers because there's no legal protection for teachers to be able to keep their jobs if they're out. And yet, this way they don't have to pretend it's not an important issue, and they can do it in a way that's respectful within the community.

I think that one of the other pieces of that is being able to address, both in classes for students with disabilities as well as our regular students, the slang and terminology and explaining why it's not OK. You know, we wouldn't want to do that for any of us, and we need to be aware of differences, and that's again that very, very gentle but constant awareness in the classroom. We don't use terms like that in my class.

UNIDENTIFIED PARTICIPANT: I've got a couple of kind of observations from my own life. One is a friend of mine who was a state administrator in special-ed for a particular state, who also had a son with a disability. And the real eye-opening experience for her was she sat on numerous IEP meetings as a state administrator and was respected, was an authority. All of a sudden when she is sitting in the same meeting with friends of hers, talking about

her son, she suddenly has no knowledge whatsoever. She couldn't believe how she was being treated. Like – "That happened to me. I walked into this room. As soon as it was my own kid, I suddenly had no value. I had no information. And I think that happens probably all too often in IEP meetings.

The other is from my personal life. I've got a grandson who is on IEP. And at one point, I said to my son he should be a part of my IEP meetings. And my son said "Well mom, I don't know if it would be good for him to hear all of the things people are saying about him." Well my response was this isn't about bashing my grandson. Maybe if they're saying those things, maybe they shouldn't be saying them. They should think twice.

So you know I just. I guess another thing is that as a professional, I've been to a lot of high schools – particularly because that's my area – and there is something about a campus that is respectful that you honestly can feel when you walk onto the campus. There's just something about the air that you breathe, and I think that, you know, we need to really look at how we can make all of our campuses respectful places for everyone.

MS. GILBERT: I really can't agree with you more, and I think – I wanted to, if I could, address a couple of your comments. One is thinking about IEPs as really being collaborative with the families and, especially, at least by the time they are in high school if not junior high, should be collaborative with the kids as much as possible. And I think it's not just lip service but really thinking about how do we bring them in as valuable and knowledgeable people.

We've all been to those situations. I think about going to the doctor and having him think I don't know, you know, my own self. And I think it's the same setup. We need to really trust the wisdom that these people bring because they know their kids. We all can be blind to it but we really need to think of it as a partnership.

The other piece about creating inclusive schools where there is that atmosphere of respect, I think that, in addition to the individual things that can be done, there are some wonderful programs out there that can help build that and generate momentum and energy for that. If, you know, I think resourc-

ing some of those programs that create inclusive campuses and have been shown to really make a difference are important to instill and making sure they include our students with disabilities, because a lot of times they have some really good stuff, but darn, somehow they never figure out that piece of the puzzle. And I think that's an important part of it as well.

MS. MACK: We've got time for a couple of more questions.

UNIDENTIFIED PARTICIPANT: Can I ask a question?

MS. GILBERT: Yes.

UNIDENTIFIED PARTICIPANT: You mentioned earlier the concept. This is Lawrence Dennis from the state of Ohio – The Office for Exceptional Children. And one of the things you asked – or mentioned – was the concept of the small tree and the bending.

MS. GILBERT: Yes.

UNIDENTIFIED PARTICIPANT: Give me – I guess your reaction, I guess two questions – one, you mentioned that we've created systems that are sending a message to our disabled children nationwide that they're not held to the same standards as any other child with such things as alternative diplomas and IEPs, waiving there or not allowing them to be held to a standard set.

Take that concept and then think about the tree and thinking about what's happening in our state, we don't appear to have a whole lot of time. You know it's blowing. It's actually breaking the branch because the standards-based reform is pushing so fast on children and schools. How do you see school personnel balancing that need for standards-based reform and some of the negative messages we've said that disabled children can't meet those standards?

MS. GILBERT: I think that that's a really good question. I think we should have an entire hour just on that. Because I think there's a number of things.

Number one is – we had somebody who for a short amount of time was in office here as our state superintendent of schools who recognized that there had to be more than one way to meet the standards – that everyone did not respond to a single test.

And I think, certainly Arizona is also, you know,

I mean the train has left the station in terms of the national initiative that everybody has to do this thing. And we are all on these time frames. And, quite frankly, the sad part about it is that until we catch up with ourselves and go this is really kind of goofy, we are going to sacrifice our children to the cause. And that grieves me a great deal.

I think we have to recognize that people are going to meet standards in different ways, and to say there is only one way to get out of high school and it's this test on this day is crazy. So I mean there has to be – we know that – there has to be accommodation for time, you know, if you have slower readers or if you have somebody with dyslexia or if somebody who has to have somebody else's help to accommodate in terms of physical capacities. There also has to be accommodation for different learners, different styles of learning.

These tests are great if you happen to be a linear thinker and you're good at answering short answer, you know. It's not looking at everything that's been – what I think I'm seeing and I'm probably stepping on all kinds of political toes so bear with me. It's my personal opinion here you're getting – which is that education is a profession. And what I see happening right now in our society is that what educators are trying to do to looking at multiple intelligences and different learning styles is being kind of looked at as, kind of ivory tower, poo-poo stuff and that we the people know everything about education and we think everybody should pass this test because we could. And, of course, the people who didn't pass the test aren't saying anything because they aren't usually in positions of power.

I think we have to find a balance, where we need to certainly talk about levels of skills and proficiency, but I think we have got to recognize both within our students with disabilities as well as in our general student population, that there's more than one way to reach that.

Are we going to pull that off right now? It's going to take time and again it concerns me a great deal because I think that at the same that we are having extraordinary drop out rates, we are now making the stakes even higher – which I think for a lot of our kids is going to be “Why even bother?”

So the interesting thing that we'll see happening

is what is going to happen with GEDs – and with people saying I’m going to do my own alternate route.

UNIDENTIFIED PARTICIPANT: I was just going to say that.

MS. GILBERT: Yes. So I think diversity needs to be looked at in terms of diversity in how we learn and if we – I think – we are seeing the old kinesthetic, auditory, and visual learners’ notion that our kinesthetic kids have always fallen out of school anyway. And it’s not because they’re not smart and they’re not capable. It’s because they don’t process that way. When you have visual teachers teaching auditory or kinesthetic learners, they feel totally disengaged.

I did an activity with a group of teachers where I did a ten-minute lecture in the dark and then asked them if they were ready for the quiz and they were just ready to hurt me because they were so predominantly, preponderantly visual learners.

I think we have to get back to saying, “You know what?” There is a history of pedagogy in education that needs to be respected. And until we do that and we just figure we can shoot from the hip, I think we’re in trouble.

MS. MACK: Thank you. Thank you very much, Laurie. This has been a wonderful, wonderful call. There will be transcript of this call on the NCSET Web site and, as part of that transcript, we will also have an opportunity for you to get hold of Laurie directly via her Web site.

Next month, the call is going to be on May 28th, and it’s going to be a conference call on education, disability, and juvenile justice. I hope all of you will join us next month, and thank you very much for participating in this call.

UNIDENTIFIED PARTICIPANT: Can you give the Web site address, please.

MS. MACK: It’s www.ncset.org.

END OF TELECONFERENCE

This teleconference was coordinated by the National Center on Secondary Education and Transition. This transcript is copyright free. Please duplicate and share with others.

Contact us at:

National Center on Secondary
Education and Transition
Institute on Community Integration
6 Pattee Hall, 150 Pillsbury Drive SE
Minneapolis MN 55455
(612) 624-2097 (phone)
(612) 624-9344 (fax)
ncset@umn.edu (E-mail)
<http://www.ncset.org> (Web)

