

Tamara

I want to welcome everyone to this segment titled "Making It Accessible" Delivering Quality Mental Health Services. It's a pleasure to introduce my co-host for this episode, Leah Davis, the executive director of the Riverside County SELPA. Leah serves on various committees of the SELPA Administrators Association and the Coalition for Adequate Funding for Special Education. And she is one of the SELPA system improvement leads and resource leads in the area of IEP, technical support and assistance.

Leah

And I am thrilled to introduce Tamara Clay, the Executive Director, Special Services SELPA and System Improvement leads for the El Dorado County Shelter. Tammy also sits on the steering and other committees of the association and has been my partner as one of the SELPA system Improvement leads. I am glad you get to share this experience with her today. We are most excited and honored to welcome our guests today and we are looking forward to some rich conversations around Tier three mental health services for students with disabilities. We'd first like to introduce Trina Frazier, assistant superintendent of student Services and SELPA for the Fresno County. Trina has served as a SELPA administrator here since 2005 and presently oversees special education across 31 member districts and 17 charters. Trina currently serves on multiple committees of our association and is one of our former state SELPA chairs. Thank you for being here today, Trina.

Trina

Very happy to be here with all of you today.

Tamara

We are also fortunate to welcome our next guest, Pam Bender, who has worked in the education field for over 25 years. Pam has served as the special education coordinator and director as well as SELPA director for the last 20 years as chief executive officer for the Desert Mountains SELPA, also known as CAHelp. Pam provides leadership to 21 LEAs across what is perhaps the largest geographical SELPA in California. And Pam operates one of the most robust model mental health programs in the state. We're so happy to have you here, Pam.

Pam

Thank you. I'm really excited to be here with all of you today.

Leah

Next, we would like to welcome Dr. Amy Alzina. Dr. Alzina is the superintendent of Cold Spring Elementary School District, located in Montecito, California. Amy has a notable career with more than 25 years in education and a history of improving the lives of students and the quality of the education they receive. She has significant experience the delivery of student mental health services in small and rural areas, and she serves on committees for various statewide agencies. Thank you so much for being here.

Dr. Amy

Thank you for having me. It's a pleasure to be here.

Tamara

I'd like to welcome our final guest today, Veronica Coats, the assistant superintendent of special education and superintendent for Tehama County. Veronica has provided steadfast leadership to her SELPA for approximately ten years after having held various positions of leadership in special education and serving as a school psychologist. She is also an executive officer of the SELPA Administrators of California. So glad you could be here, Veronica.

Veronica

So honored to be with you all for this critical topic.

Leah

I'd like to start with you, Veronica, for our listeners who may not be aware. If you could give us kind of a nutshell version of the history of educationally related mental health services, or as we frequently refer to Erhms in California and how that came to be under the responsibilities of special education, local plan areas or SELPAs.

Veronica

That's a great question, Leah. And a little bit of a history lesson for all of our listeners out there. In June of 2011, under then Governor Schwarzenegger's administration, there was a budget bill. And in that budget bill, there was some reform around the way in which money was allocated for mental health services. Prior to this budget bill, it was allocated directly to county behavioral health departments and county behavioral health departments. SELPAs and LEAs had to work together in order to have those services that are on the IEP delivered. There was not as much cohesion in the education realm around how to adequately serve students and their mental health needs. There had been some advocacy around trying to get that money directly funded to LEAs, but not a whole lot. We all just kind of had this dream around that like, wouldn't it be great if we could have that funding allocated directly to ourselves or LEAS and be able to make local decisions around that funding? And lo and behold, in 2011, that's what happened. It ended the mandate to fund county behavioral health directly and then funded SELPAs directly. Fast forward almost ten years later. There have been programs developed across the state, model programs that meet the unique local needs of SELPAs and districts. And in a very interesting and ironic turn of events, the budget bill in 2022 did the same thing, except it reversed the allocation to help us directly and instead funded it directly to districts or LEAS. So taking that mandate to pool our money in a consortia to be able to have purchasing power and just fund each LEA directly based on the same mechanics and methodology, instead just doing it with, you know, 2000 lives rather than 140 SELPAs. That's it in a nutshell. I would be happy to dive into more of that if needed.

Tamara

Amy Veronica gave some background on the statewide shift in funding mental health dollars. Can you talk a little bit as a superintendent of a school district, what that looks like for your district in terms of the provision of mental health services to students?

Dr. Amy

Yes, I'd love to. So, you know, for a small school district, our resources are very limited and we really rely upon the SELPA to give us support when we need additional resources for those students that need those supports that we just don't have in a single school district. So for us, when those students we've exhausted our school counseling, we've exhausted all the least restrictive environment resources that we can in our district and we then go through the process through the summer to where possibly we need a wraparound services. And what does that look like with a wraparound service, with a referral? And really, that is providing intensive counseling to the student, but also more importantly to the parents. Right. And so that they're in partnerships working with the social work support in various settings. So it's the school, the home, the community all coming around the student to ensure the success of the student. And so we all know that children can't learn if their social emotional needs aren't met. And so we're doing everything possible to ensure that they're successful by meeting the social emotional needs of the students and then we provide that by at least 180 minutes a week that the student gets of these supports for 6 to 8 weeks. And then we monitor those 6 to 8 weeks. We come together as an IEP team to see if our interventions and supports are really, truly effective. And if they are, then we celebrate those successes and continued to monitor that student to ensure that they are continued on that path of success. And really those are the big celebrations that we have. And for again, for small school districts, the gratitude that we have for ourselves that ensures the success of all of our students.

Tamara

Thank you so much, Amy. I'm curious, as you talk about those wraparound supports, Veronica talked about many SELPAs have a consortia type model or look, we call them multidistrict SELPAs. Can you talk about the SELPAs role in ensuring you said you're from a small school district in ensuring that your district has access to resource, particularly for those students who are coming in with acute trauma, chronic mental health issues? What does that look like and what is the interaction with the SELPA look like?

Dr. Amy

You know, I think that the interaction with the SELPA director as a small school district superintendent is essential. And having that amazing open partnership and being vulnerable and saying these are the resources that we don't have and these are a need, is there a way that you can come together and support because we all want the same thing. We want to ensure the success of our students. And for us, we have a psychologist on our campus two days a week, so you can imagine what do you do the other three days and what do you do when you have those intense students that need additional support or need maybe even a residential placement? Right where we're a small school district that would bankrupt us? You know, did this send a student as a residential placement. And so to have almost like that insurance policy under the SELPA really protects us, but also more importantly helps the student be successful. When we encountered multiple disasters and I did not have the support staff, I reached out to our director, Ray Avila, and I said, Look, I need support. And it is the fifth anniversary of the January 9th debris flow where I

lost two students and he was on it immediately that next day sent his team of counselors and psychologists over to give support and put in in the classroom and be here not only for my teachers, but my staff. Right. So if my teachers are needing the mental health support that they need to feel safe and comforted and they can do their job as teachers. And I really feel that's the kind of the secret sauce in our success that Cold Spring is taking care of our staff so they can take care of our teachers.

Leah

I really appreciate you underscoring the idea that mental health isn't scheduled, right. Mental health doesn't happen on Tuesday and Thursday. We don't get to choose the days. It could happen at any time. Pam, I know that Desert Mountain SELPA has a very robust mental health system and I'd love to hear you speak to what does that look like in Desert Mountain to ensure that students have that access to mental health each and every day at any moment those mental health needs might arise.

Pam

You know, we have here a contract with behavioral health. And so we developed that because we found that by doing a contract with them and having matching funds with our special ed arms funding, we could provide services to more students and that would be able to reach more students. We have about 140 clinicians, so they're intervention specialists, behavioral health counselors, social workers that are assigned to various districts. And what we've tried to do is keep people in the area. So we have very small districts. We have several that are under a thousand students. And so we try to have those people that live in those communities actually be the service providers in those communities. So they're actually part of the community. So they're there in the district throughout the day each and every day.

We also have our crisis unit that goes whenever we need it, and it could be up to 15 of our staff members depending on the situation. We've had a small district that's had significant deaths in their district with accidents, and it seems to happen year after year and it's a very dangerous intersection. And so we've had our staff out there and they stay there as long as they need to. And again, like any said, if we're not taking care of the adults, they can't take care of the students. And so we have found times where we're having to have people out there to provide the support to the students, but also to the adults and make sure that we're out there and available when they need us. So we do have counselors that are assigned to school sites, assigned to districts so that they're there each and every day.

Trina

Can I add to what Pam just shared? We have a program similar in Fresno County and actually Desert Mountain helped us get started. And I don't know if Pam's is set up exactly the same way, but the services that we provide from the clinicians and case managers are Tier three specialty mental health. And so it's your highest level of care. The Erhms dollars. What it allows us to do is sort of the Tier one and tier two that a lot of the preventative mental health prior to them reaching that Tier three and without these dollars, there's a lot of needs that are going to go unmet because of the program that we have is the absolute highest tier. So they have to get to that highest tier before they get those services.

Leah

You know, I'd love for you to expand a little bit more in terms of just how have mental health services for students with disabilities specifically changed over the last decade. Veronica gave us a little bit of a history of funding shift, but what has that actually materialized into with regard to services for students?

Trina

I think that the services every year get better and better for our students, actually allowing us to look at all the gaps that exist within our systems that we've created. You know, initially when the dollars did shift from Department of Behavioral Health to SELPA, we sat down with our 32 LEAs and we came up with a plan about what are their needs, what would they like to see and what will that look like? And, you know, we identified that they would like a behavior intervention team to go in with determined they'd like an Erhms team of professionals to go in. They really needed assistance with NPS placements, those types of things. And so over time, we've been able to evolve, look at the gaps where they exist, create a centralized referral process, and really where all students with special needs have access. And I think that's the important thing. Whether you're large or you're mid-sized or you're small, you still have access to those services and the system that we created. And I think that's really, really important.

Tamara

And I'm thinking as I hear both Trina and Pam about the robust services and also the time spent and effort in building those interagency agreements and just those communication pathways. So with this shift, what does that look like in terms of the agreements that have been built or the services that have been built through interagency or multi-agency approaches? Can you talk a little bit about that?

Trina

Yes, we actually in Fresno County last year had to dismantle our Erhms program because we needed to meet that March 15th deadline. And so we either needed to give layoff notices or reassigned the staff. And what it's meant for us is that we had this continuum of care, and now who it's really hurt are our small and midsize districts. By the funding shifting, they they will receive funding, but it's not enough to hire staff and it's not enough to provide the services or have an entire team who comes in to assist them. The larger districts, you know, they will get an amount that's going to be large enough to be able to provide or hire staff or provide those services. But it's really our small and our midsize and our rural areas that's really going to feel the impact of these dollars.

Tamara

And, Amy, I see you nodding your head. I'm wondering if. Do you have anything to add to that. As a small district superintendent?

Dr. Amy

I wanted to say thank you to Trina for mentioning that, because she is 100% right on. And that's in all areas of special ed. You know, at Cold

Spring, I have a blind student, a deaf and hard of hearing student, emotionally disturbed student autism. And we have 192 students, Right? But yet the funding for low incidents is \$6,000. And like, that's not going to buy me anything. Right. And so it can bankrupt a small school district where you're just spending 25% of your budget on special education. Right. And so going back to that partnership is so, so important. And, you know, when I hear some of my colleagues talk about, oh, well, I'm going to do it on my own, I'm like, no, no, no, no, no. Let me help educate you and let me help you understand that the support that we get from the South is in valuable And like with what Trina was saying, that access, most importantly, access to exceptional resources, right? So it's not just support, it's you want to make sure that you have the best of the best and the way that the vehicle that actually gives us the best is the support and without that support, at the small school districts, which are 60% in the state of California, we'd be drowning. Thank you for mentioning that.

Veronica

Can I piggyback off of that as well? First, I want to just thank Trina for being honest and really authentic about what is happening in her salsa and the difficult decisions that allies and boards have had to make because of this one decision and how impactful it is to students. And some of my colleagues have heard me say this before, and I'm going to continue saying it. Your zip code should not matter the level of service that you get. And that's what's happening based on this decision. So I'll offer a little contrary standpoint, as Trina had to make those decisions, not Trina, but her board had to make those decisions. Our supper made a completely opposite decision the moment this was even thought about as an idea ourself, a board got together and said, We want nothing to do with that. We want to vote right now unanimously to continue our model however we can. We don't really care how the money is flowing. We want to flow it right back to the salsa to ensure the access that Amy was just talking about. Because all of my allies are under 2000 ADA and Amy's point that 60 to 70% of the allies in California, which would not be able to purchase one clinician with the amount that they will be allocated in this new model. So there's been decisions made in a snap rather than the thoughtful process we usually go through in developing programs or transferring programs. So I think those are two examples of two very different sofas that had to make decisions that have impacted students.

Tamara

Veronica, I'm really glad you brought up that dynamic of decision making and governance within the SELPA structures. We had the opportunity to have a conversation about that in another podcast. I'm curious specifically to Trina and Pam and Veronica, how do you handle it or did that happen where as you were making decisions about how to leverage these dollars within the governance structure, maybe one district did want more psychologist time and one like the idea of a behavior intervention team. I find that at least in myself, that that happens a lot. And people often don't understand the facilitative role and how we have conversations moving towards those decisions. So can you share a little bit about what that look like?

Pam

I can share because I'm right in the middle of it right now. We've had the last three governance board meetings have been all about Erhms we've talked about what does it mean? We have gone into the weeds as to what each district would get and I broke it down into, you know, this is how much you know, you're getting and this is how many services you get right now. This is how many counselors that you have right now. This is what you would need to with the money you're getting and with the services you're providing. This is the number of counselors that you would need. And so it's worked out. I have five very large districts who also support our our smaller districts, which they have, too. But I do have a situation where they were very nervous. We have a lot of new board members in the school boards, and so they don't understand the history of the desert mountain SELPA and so how we support each other. And what does that mean? If I'm supposed to get almost \$1,000,000 and you want to just transfer it back? So the superintendents are feeling like they have to be able to give a history lesson to their boards during their board meetings. So we're working on that right now. We're also working on we have our one superintendent who is really just looking at the money, brand new board member who doesn't know the culture of the area. And so it's it's been a struggle and we're still working on it and we're still working on what does that look like? And if one district decides to pull their money out, what does that look like for everybody else? We also have a little bit of a fee for service from our larger districts to help our smaller districts, and so that costs would go up. So there's a lot of you know, unfortunately, I probably had like four special board meetings this year to be talking about the terms and where does it go. It feels like everybody is kind of on board, but I have one or two that are constantly asking those questions. So we're having to get more and more information. I brought people in. I brought, you know, Dr. Ron Powell, who is the former administrator here for the supper, who was the one who implemented the contracts with behavioral health to be able to give a history lesson to everybody. So it's been a struggle and we're still struggling. And we have another special meeting to talk about terms again and really look at the specifics of what does that mean for each district if one district pulls out. So we're really struggling. And, you know, Amy, I so agree with you. I have a small district who has two students who are residentially placed. They don't get enough money funding to even pay for one student who's residentially placed. And so that that district will really, really suffer if we end up going that direction.

Trina

SELPAs are like an insurance policy. I mean, we have small districts and it really isn't about large districts supporting small. It really is that we have small districts that are paid into the SELPA for many years and then all of a sudden they may have an impact placement, but then it will be covered. So it's not it's not necessarily that the big support, the smalls, it's everyone supporting each other. So they all have access. And I think that that's a really important distinction. I think that that's exactly the way it is and that's how our salaries are set up. If you're multi district far.

Veronica

And also the quality of service, right? As a former mental health practitioner, it is the one service that is so person dependent at times

based on the on the student's mental health needs. And if we're divvying up every little piece of our pie and you only get the small sliver, you may only be able to purchase or hire a half empty. With the consortium model, you have a plethora of people to have at your will to be able to meet the needs of the child. It really gives the opportunity to say These are the needs and we have this whole pool of resources and what best fits the student, because as Amy mentioned earlier, that could be parent counseling, right? Well, what if you hire the counselor that says that's not in my repertoire or doesn't have time because you can only purchase ten sessions with your little piece of the pie. So it isn't just big versus small because the bigs will have access to more people as much as the small. And if we go to worst case scenario, I do want to go back to Amy's point about it could bankrupt this could actually bankrupt small districts. This is not a fear tactic. We aren't saying that to scare people up placement or students who have access costs in this area could literally bankrupt small districts if they do not have access to a public service model.

Trina

And, Veronica, it really is about that consortium creating that economy of scale. You know, that's what we're able to do. Look at where all the needs are and where are all the needs, creating that economy of scale to be able to provide those services.

Tamara

We've heard some great comments about the importance of the SELPA consortia. Some have said that that consortia concept can still continue if arms funding shifts from SELPA to LEAs. And that LEAs will have the option to work together, facilitate discussions among one another, and ensure that the consortia concept continues. Any responses to that idea?

Veronica

Sure, it can continue and it will continue for some that have voted to continue that model. There is a lot of different avenues or ways that folks can continue the consortium model. But I guess my question back is what problem are we trying to fix? And if something isn't broken, why are we trying to fix it? I think we get into the mistake of making more work for educators when we already have enough work already that takes away time from services. So is there a way to do it? Absolutely. Will we do it? Absolutely. It will require every SELPA or every LEA to make those local decisions. In my own SELPA, we will be writing this in our local plan to ensure that we have a three year commitment to continue this model because we believe that your zip code shouldn't matter and you should be able to get service wherever you live and the same quality of service in every boundary of our county. We don't want to have to go through this every year. So we will be developing this in our local plan and approving that within each LGA board to ensure we have that commitment of shared responsibility, shared risk and shared service. I think other suppliers in the state are each looking at what fits their model the best. Some may be going towards an MRU yearly model. Some may have only partial consortia agreement and maybe pooling that way. I think it is going to be it's going to look different in many different regions.

Dr. Amy

And I think what a lot of people are forgetting is the SELPA guarantee, right? That IMO you that you just mentioned is that that guarantee of services. So if you're a district and you enter into an agreement with another district, there is no guarantee. So there is no, you know, so what happens if they don't have a placement or support for that district? For me, if I need it right, I don't have a guarantee like the SELPA gives me. So that is a scary place to be. And I think people aren't necessarily thinking about that. And that to me is the most important aspect of it all, especially that you're going to we talk about dollars and cents. You're just hoping yourself up for a lawsuit there and you're like, Well, I don't have the services, but you don't have the services do you don't have a guarantee anymore.

Leah

Veronica, you mentioned, you know, what problem are we trying to fix doing know what problem we're trying to fix?

Veronica

Do we know what problem we're trying to fix? I think we could be trying to fix a misperception problem. So perhaps a perception that SELPA is the big bad. SELPA takes all the money and hides it away and doesn't release any of the funds. So I think there is room for doing an additional study to see that many of us are overextending these funds on the very students that are they are intended for. Veronica

But I do not know what problem we are trying to fix. I'm just very concerned about the impact that it will have on our students with the most vulnerabilities in the state of California.

Trina

And I agree with you, Veronica. I think that if there is that perception out there, then let's fix the perception. But let's not create winners and losers and make it so that students don't have access to the services they need.

Tamara

I think one of the pieces that continues to come up for me is wanting to understand what this will actually look like for students. And I guess maybe it's worth going back and asking each of you within your context. And Trina, you did talk about it a little bit. I think it was you in terms of the March 15th notices and really having to disassemble programs that had been put together over years to support students. Amy, I think you talked about it as well. So what to folks who may not understand how cell towers work and the shared governance models, especially multi-district suppers, but what would you want people to know about this shift from SOPA funding to earlier funding, especially if it's signaling additional shifts? How would you want what would you want people to know about how that impacts students?

Trina

But I would want people to know is that, yes, we will make it work. As Veronica said, we always do, but it's not going to be as easy as that. If you had to dismantle a program just for our rural districts and our small districts, they're not going to be able to find the staff to do this.

They struggle now to find the staff to be able to do that. We know the shortages that we face across all of our programs right now. It's going to be very, very difficult. And when you look at the survey that was done of the SELPA directors, I mean, we're talking about, you know, nearly how, you know, have some sort of regionalized program right now or some sort of cost sharing method. And so we're talking about a lot of lives. And I think that there are a lot of complicated things that we're going to have to deal with, you know, just trying to get for the federal dollars, the 1600 or whatever it is, what signatures for staff that turnover yearly sometimes. And there's a lot of complicated pieces to this that I don't think have been thought through fully.

Pam

I would agree with you, Trina. We aren't even fully staffed, so I can't imagine the districts trying to find staff to be able to provide those services. So it makes it, you know, very scary for kids getting their services. The other part that because we're right in the middle of getting all of our notifications right now is when kids are not getting their services and CD coming down and now we're going to be penalized and having to do corrective actions for them because we didn't provide those services. And it's not fair. It's not fair to kids because we can't as a collaborative, we can provide that. And I think it's going to really hurt, especially our small districts are rural areas I'm very concerned about because they have a hard enough time finding people. And so I think that's going to be a significant issue for our more rural areas.

Veronica

I think it also SELPA districts. Charters always stop us, all of us, up for unnecessary dispute. Amy kind of led into that. If these programs are dismantled, yes, it impacts students directly. They won't and cannot receive their same level of service. But it also then puts this imbalance of power between superintendents sitting at this all at the table and perhaps handshake deals. And that doesn't feel good to me. That's why the super model does work. As Amy said, you have a neutral playing field. It doesn't matter who's sitting in the SELPA chair or who is sitting around the table. When you start taking those things away and pitting people against each other, the only people who lose in that are our youth and families.

Leah

When I talk a little bit more about the school reporting and our obligations that we as allies and helpers have to the state, but I'd love to hear a little bit more about what this looks like logistically for folks. We know there's going to be harm to students. We've we've definitely identified that piece. But just in terms of workload, what does this look like?

Trina

So currently the funds flow to our hundred and 40 something cell. And if these dollars flow directly to our areas, that means that for the federal dollars, they're going to have to collect a wet signature for each of them. And we all know what turnover is like in our districts. And so they're going to be sent probably to the wrong, wrong people in the districts. They're not going to get them back. So not only does it create

all this additional work for our employees, but it's also going to create additional work for CTE. To me, it just sounds like you're creating a lot of work for no reason.

Veronica

I can give a tangible example. So our Juvenile Justice Center has a total of 14 students. I'm throwing a number out and that entity who doesn't hardly have any real staff, right? They contract everything out to the south, the county office, etc. work with multiple areas, multiple counties will have to track down and get signatures for these forms for 1100 dollars. This is what it comes down to right. So do you think that CBO or that person they contracted out to her has this workload when she sees that 1100 dollar expenditure form is she really going to track it down, get it to the right person where they've never had to do this before, never been trained to do don't know the process and get it back to the state of California to get the money back? I also think millions of dollars are going to be left on the table because of this issue.

Leah

And a logistical issue that potentially puts districts at risk of not receiving their funds.

Veronica

Correct.

Tamara

So that's a good segue way to the next question, which is really about the training and support that the state is offering to assist sellers and liaise through this transition. I mean, you've described really dense mental health programs, robust reporting and fiscal responsibilities. Can you talk a little bit about what has been provided by the States to help prepare for this transition?

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Pam

Well, for me, I could say nothing. I can say that my support has come from the summit directors, you know, just really trying to figure out what direction do I go being new to a multi district SELPA, I was kind of at a loss. And what direction do I go? How do I go about this? And, you know, all of the support from within the support organization is where I've relied on finding my information and being able to talk through What about this and the people in our organization have been there to help us. So being able to go back to my superintendents and talk with them, I've not had any specific conversations with anybody from the state, from my perspective.

Dr. Amy

And I'll piggyback on that one. I have the same right for Smalls. I don't think this is even on their probably the radar, to be honest, of a lot of small school districts. Right. They have their plates are so full, especially if you're a superintendent and principal and you're doing both and you're just working on this 21 plans, we have to write that, you know, when it comes to professional development, you know, I was thinking, Tamara, a piece that the support is just so valuable to for

Smalls is the professional development component. And all they have to offer teachers, administrators, parents. I mean, it is a wealth of information so valuable to districts.

Leah

Veronica, would you mind expanding. A little bit on the type of expertise and leadership that SELPAs bring to the state, bring to our Member LEAs when it comes to mental health advocacy?

Veronica

Sure. There have been a number of committees and work groups SELPA Administrators have sat on relative to mental health. The ones that come to my mind right away are those that were integrated around the continuum of Care Reform Act, around how foster youth are placed in short term residential treatment centers. We sat on work groups around the education piece of that to assist the state on how those youth are integrated into our schools and how mental health supports positively impact them. We have also done some work around the AB 2083 interagency A.U. requirement between behavioral health, child welfare, education and mental health supports in schools. Some of us do sit on the California mental health advocates for children and youth, where we are advocating alongside parents and advocates as well as practitioners. We been leading a webinar series around supports for students with fetal alcohol spectrum disorder as a result of some legislation passed. So we're always looking at how to support not just our own member allies, but how can we support the state of California in general. And in a big picture way, best practices, evidence based practices, model programs for students, youth families, and our practitioners.

Trina

I agree, Veronica. You know, California is facing a mental health crisis and COVID has only exacerbated the problem. And we are seeing more in our schools right now the need for mental health services than we've ever seen that I've ever seen in my career, anyway.

Tamara

Amy, I think about what you said because we talk about the dramatic impact that this will have on students and programs. You had highlighted that this isn't on many small districts, superintendents, radars. They're not even aware of this. And it's not for a lack of interest. It's just with so much going on, staffing shortages in our area, power outages right across the state, fires and all end plans for those people out there who might be hearing this information for the very first time, but who want to make sure that students with disabilities are getting the quality services they deserve. What would each of you want to suggest? What do we do now for those people who want students to get the services they're entitled to?

Dr. Amy

You know, for me, I think especially if you're a newer superintendent out there, which we have a lot of new superintendents, I think a hundred, A little over 100, Right. Reach out to yourself SELPA director, and really take time to, like, understand what the SELPA does for your district.

Because I think if you're a small school district, you may be in that, like you just said, survival mode your first years and you're just trying to put all the pieces together. But if you're not forward thinking and you're not thinking about your students with disabilities and the mental health crisis that we are in right now and how you're best going to wrap around to give support to your students, into your teachers, and then you're going to fail. I mean, as a as a superintendent. Right. And so I think it's so important to also reach out to your, you know, partnerships with Axia and small School Districts Association. I think they're working really hard on advocating for the needs of our students.

Veronica

I would say to continue advocating for more local control. I think that sometimes we think that the policymakers aren't really hearing our voices. And I, I think then that propagates that myth. The more that we can speak out and engage with our local representatives, whether that's your assembly or Senate whether that's the state board, whether it's your own local school board, whatever that venue is, to educate. As Amy said, there's folks out there that don't even know this is happening, let alone the impact. But it's so important to get that word out on how it will impact our students and families At advocating at the advisory for special education, the state board, the governor's office. I think the more we can show that we are standing up for our families and our students, that's what's going to ultimately make change.

Dr. Amy

Everybody good, Because I think you're so right. We have to tell our story. The great work that is do that we are doing. And I sometimes we shy away from that. And it it's not bragging. It's like showing, look, this is what we're doing. This is how we're meeting the needs of our students. So we don't tell our story. They're going to tell it for us, Right? We all know That.

Trina

And I agree with Amy and Veronica. SELPAs were the first local control. We really were. And we are. I think before we make huge decisions like this, we really need to understand what the ramifications are going to be and not act on someone's perception. Like to really gather the facts, learn about it, and don't make it based upon the perceptions. And if there is somebody that's not doing what they should be doing, then let's address that issue. But let's not, you know, let's not do something that's going to affect the lives of our children and youth and our families based on a perception.

Tamara

So there is a mechanism in ad code called program transfer, and that actually does play in to this conversation about the shift that mental health funding that previously going through the SLP, a structure supported programs hoc a little bit about first what a program transfer is and how this shift might impact program transfer.

Veronica

When we think of program transfer, there's education code around this to protect students and services, also to protect staff. The program

transfer law is is linked heavily with personnel. If there are decisions being made about, you know, different pots of money and changing them all over the place, how would our staff ever have confidence that they have a job next year? So there is program transfer law within education code that allies and these consortiums, I suppose, are supposed to go through to make these drastic changes to ensure that during this transfer of program and services that not only are student services being discussed, so there's no lapse in service, but also to protect the staff who are currently in the program that's being funded. So this disbanding of programs is happening around the state based on our funding. Qwest is actually breaking program transfer law all over the place. And that's essentially what I told my own board is even if we want to do this, we employ these people. We are serving over 100 students and families, and we can't just disband this without going through program transfer. This is what's in our local plan. This is how we handle program transfer, which got them thinking about that in a different space, not just the student services phase, but also, Oh wow. Yeah, you employ ten people. We can't just lay them all off and disband that because what if we all can't collectively capture all those folks to serve in each little individual district? So I think when we think of program transfer, we we're this has blown that up and we really need to consider how that has impacted not only students and families but the staff and the level of confidence they have in being able to work in an industry that is at a crazy shortage right now.

Tamara

I'm really glad that you highlighted the staff piece because that is a substantial consideration. I mean, clearly that was contemplated in the development of that Ed code. Another contemplation that I wonder about that's so clear is really students rights and entitlement to the same level of programing and service that they receive before. And as part of that parent input to ensure that parents and other stakeholders are involved in the conversation. So when you think about all of those rights that come through the program transfer process, it it highlights a lot of the very concerns we've discussed, which is how will those quality programs to be offered if offered in a totally different LGA and especially given the economy of scale we've spoken to several times. So thank you for highlighting that.

Leah

As we wrap up, there's a couple of themes that have popped out today, one being that whole idea of economy, of scale as well as this whole idea of zip codes not determining a student services. we talk today a little bit about the fact that mental health service need has increased drastically. And so really the obligation of us as educational leaders to ensure that those services are available to students whenever they might need them educationally love to just turn over the mic to each one of you. And for a couple of last words or just something that resonated with you today. Let's start with you, Veronica.

Veronica

I am just honored to be with this group today and to listen to my colleagues and fellow leaders in a space that is really advocating for

student rights and the right to receive service no matter where you live. I think I guess I just would say we have to continue advocating for what we know is best. We are the experts and we we need to continue advocating for what we know is best.

Leah
Pam.

Pam
I think it was so helpful to have Amy here today from a small school to really hear from a superintendent of a small school district. Really the impact this is going to have on her programs. It helps me to understand my small districts even more so, and just really appreciated that and just my colleagues that we're all in this together. And, you know, fighting this together and working with each other together to try to figure out the why, why is this happening?

Leah
Trina.

Trina
I just like to thank you for this opportunity and thank you to my colleagues. You know, we talk a lot about this and we say all the time when you've seen one self, but you've seen one so far as we're all so different. But thank you for the way you advocate for kids. It was a pleasure being here with all of you today.

Leah
Wonderful. Thank you for being here. And Amy.

Dr. Amy
I just leaving this conversation, just feeling like so blessed to meet like we are all amazing, strong women leaders here. I'm looking at this call. I mean, to make new friends with Trina and Pam and Veronica and not knowing you ladies. And, you know, sometimes as a small school district, you feel very isolated and alone and leaving this conversation just so empowered by your strength. And you're doing what's right for all kids, right? There are all of our kids. And at the end of the day, we serve all kids. And that's what equity is about.

Leah
Thank you, Dr. Alzina. And I actually have goosebumps and a little bit of emotion, so thank you. You're absolutely right. They're all our students and that is the true work of equity. To listen to more podcasts, see SELPA produced videos or learn more about SELPAs in general, visit us at WWW.SELPA.info and like us on Facebook at SELPA administrators of California. Until then keep making it happen. Each student every day.