

Tamara

Hi everyone, and welcome to this segment entitled Making the Connection Understanding SELPA Governance. 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 SELPA. But 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 to get to share this experience with her today.

Tamara

And we really are excited and honored to welcome our guests who are experts in the state for this episode.

Leah

It is my pleasure to welcome Garth Lewis, superintendent of the Yolo County Office of Education. Garth has served in education for over 27 years, starting out as a paraprofessional, educator, teacher site and district administrator, and as the assistant superintendent of instructional Services and Equity at the Yolo County Office of Education. He believes access to a high-quality public education is a significant factor in improving life outcomes for all children, particularly those experiencing poverty. Welcome, Garth.

Garth

It's a pleasure to be here, Leah.

Tamara

We are also happy to welcome Judy Bishop, a parent from the San Gabriel Valley South. Judy is the parent of 18 year-old twins, a boy and a girl on the autism spectrum. She served on the San Gabriel Valley SELPA CAC or community advisory committee since 2012 when her children were in the second grade. As is the case with most parents of special needs students, Judy was overwhelmed by the diagnosis of both of her children and decided she needed to dive in headfirst to learn as much as she could, not only about their disability, but also about educational services and programs offered to them. Judy, it's so great to have you here.

Judy

Thank you very much for having me. I'm very excited to provide some parent perspective.

Leah

Also joining the conversation today is Dr. Anne Hubbard, superintendent of Hope Elementary School District and JPA board member for Santa Barbara County SELPA and has served as a teacher and administrator for 33 years and is in her seventh year as the superintendent of Hope School District in Santa Barbara. Anne was on the SELPA a board in San Luis Obispo

County for two years and joined the Santa Barbara County SELPA board in 2019. We are so happy you are with us today, Dr. Hubbard.

Dr. Anne

Thank you. Thank you so much for this opportunity.

Tamara

And last but not least, we are pleased to have our colleague, Aaron Benton with us. Aaron is the director of the Butte County SELPA, and he served as a special education director or cell co-director since 2004. Aaron currently provides leadership for superintendents and special education directors in 14 school districts and seven charter schools. Full disclosure Aaron serves on several committees of our SELPA administrators of California. Happy to have you here, Aaron.

Aaron

Absolutely. I've been looking forward to it.

Tamara

We are truly honored to have all of our guests joining us today. So to provide some background, some of our listeners may not be aware that the governor's budget includes trailer bill language that would essentially freeze the level of funding the SELPA retains for administrative function before allocating state special education funding to districts and charters. Garth, can you start us off by talking about what your understanding is of why this is coming about? And what do you think are the implications for your county students with disabilities?

Garth

You bet. So I'm going to start with the second component of that question and essentially the implications for our students. The SELPA provides an essential function for really operating as the backbone to our collaborative structure across Yolo County. This function allows us to have an administrative unit that really understands from a high level the various needs of our students as well as ways in which we can leverage the strengths of various programs to meet the needs of our students. So from my perspective, freezing the funds that are available for that essential role, that essential component really raises a lot of concerns for me. First off, it potentially causes us to really continue in this state of instability that we've experienced over the course of the pandemic. I think about the fact that the state has really responded in its general strategy towards funding for school districts, really trying to protect school districts from the sort of fiscal cliff that that folks had predicted was going to come about as a consequence of lower enrollment as well as lower ADA.

This would be a departure from that commitment in my mind and would really place SELPAs in a situation where when we look at the state budget for education, SELPAs would be the one area in which that particular our commitment towards protecting our system from this fiscal cliff would be outside of that norm. This trailer bill language really in my mind removes that ability for the local leaders to make those decisions. That that's a concern for me.

Tamara

When you talk about the decision making at the local level, you use the term "we" and sometimes people have this belief that self as are an independent entity that are making decisions independently. So can you speak from your perspective about your involvement in

that decision making and how you are a part of that? We in the self, the decision making process?

Garth

Absolutely. So our local governance structure, which is very similar to many multidistrict SELPAs across the state, includes input from all the major stakeholders in our venture to support our students, the program administrators, our chief business officials, our superintendent from each of the allies, as well as our our families and caregivers. So from my perspective, when I say we, one of the strengths I find with our functioning as a SELPA is that we move from six allies, the five school districts, plus the county Office of Education, plus Families. We move from those individual sort of entities into a single identity as a as a local decision making body. And so I lead with we it actually just comes out naturally. I didn't even think about it as a conscious decision to use that word because it's just how we function. In fact, as as I think about many of the whole child equity initiatives across the state, as I read them as a as a whole, they really are moving us as a as a system towards greater alignment. They're moving us towards a system that is that that defaults to collaboration as the first way to resolve issues, to recognize our interdependence as well as the value of diverse areas of expertise, diverse thoughts, diverse perspectives to develop a better informed system to serve our students. And in my mind, the SELPA structure really provides a model for ways that we can do that in other areas of our system.

Leah

Thank you Garth. Judy, I'd love to hear as a parent hearing that, you know, there's a potential freeze on the dollar amount that SELPAs can keep seeing this language in black and white. What was your initial reaction and what does it mean for your children or the students within yourself?

Judy

First of all, thank you for inviting me. I'm always excited when parents are invited to these kinds of conversations because we have a totally different perspective on the impact of these decisions. But I mean, honestly, I wasn't surprised. Unfortunately. There's been numerous studies and kind of pushes to change how SELPAs are structured, even up to just getting rid of them altogether. So I almost feel like SELPAs are always under some kind of microscope, and it could be for a good reason to look for opportunities for improvement and that kind of thing. But as of late, it just seems like it's almost looking for something to be wrong as opposed to something to be right. I know for my kids, you know, they've been in a system since they were three, so they're 18 now. And just the whole SELPA structure has been great for them. It allows for the parents to have choices in placement there for their kids, whether it's in their home district or a neighboring district. It's looking for the most appropriate placement and program, not the one that's necessarily close to home or in your home district, which is huge because so my kids there are disabilities, autism spectrum. If you've met one person with autism. You've met one person with autism, right? Even my kids being twins, they're like night and day. So I couldn't put them in the same program. It wouldn't meet their individual needs. So we've had to cross districts, and that's just been a godsend in my eyes, because I've been able to find the placement that is best suited for them as opposed to the placement that is offered to me because that's just what's available. So I think that's huge. I think also the way the SELPAs kind of combine their resources, like in our SELPA, but we have different districts that take on a specific disability so they can kind of become like the expert on that and the resources for that particular disability kind of get funneled to that district so that they're hiring the correct people

and the best trained individuals as opposed to diluting that by trying to cover it in all the districts. So to me, I think that's huge. There's such a there's such a competition for resources to begin with because there's you know, there's not enough people in all the different areas that we need. And so having one SELPA contract in four different districts as opposed to, you know, ten LEAs trying to contract for the same resources that that to me makes a huge difference.

Leah

It reminds me of, you know, one of the things that we frequently kind of lean on as SELPA administrators is this whole idea of your zip code, right? Shouldn't ultimately be the deciding factor around program, which has been one of the huge benefits of this office structure, is that we can really leverage those regional supports across boundaries. Right. So thank you. Thank you for that.

Aaron

If I could add something kind of on both of those questions, the first question was about, you know, where do you think this is coming from? And it seems to be the result of, in my opinion, kind of a narrative that's being told about SELPA that and by people that don't truly understand necessarily the SELPA model and how students and families and staff benefit from the support that we provide. And, you know, the language in the trailer bill, it kind of feels like some assumptions have been made or people are trying to convince others that SELPA are, you know, some separate bureaucratic entity making its own decisions about how much money we're going to withhold from our districts or something. And that's just not how it works. Like Garth explained and like Judy talked about it, it's it is true teamwork in action. And we're not the big bad SELPA but we're just really we are operating under local decision making and teams of superintendents are making those decisions. So my 14 superintendents of the governing board are basically working together constantly on allocation issues and with limited funding to make sure we have enough programs and services for the various needs that we have in our community. And like was said, you know, this language removes that local control from them and kind of gives people the impression that the SELPAs should be suspect when really it's just going to make our work and the teamwork that this requires that much more difficult.

Judy

And if I could I'm sorry, if I could piggyback off of what Aaron just mentioned. I know in talking to other parents, they have no idea what a SELPA is that they're even in a SELPA. They just they're relying on their particular child's teacher or that that particular school. And so when they hear this other like you mentioned, Aaron, like this layer of bureaucracy, it's all of a sudden like, whoa, wait a minute, we don't want to get more cooks in the kitchen. We I want my kid to get what they need without having to get all these special permissions. But I think a lot of that is just lack of education and understanding what it is. So I almost feel like there should be a SELPA level, some kind of push or drive to really educate parents as to what SELPAs do and what they don't do and what their purpose is. Because at the parent level, there's not a lot of understanding.

Tamara

We should do a podcast, right? Judy, I think your story from the parent perspective is so powerful though in highlighting that connection and dispelling that myth and really tying the SELPA structure and the consortium model to the parent and student experience and the

outcomes that you've seen, the impact you've had, You've spoken about parent choice and agency, and that is a powerful piece for people to understand how that has benefited you and your students. Anne, pivoting to you. Can you speak a little bit to this idea of student outcomes and how we see SELPA and the participants in the governance structure, whatever that looks like, because it can look different in different SELPAs. But how do you see that having an impact on outcomes for students?

Dr. Anne

Sure. First of all, I'm I'm very appreciative that this is an audio recording only because I look like a fool over here in my square, nodding vigorously. Yes, yes to everything. Everybody is saying because it's like, I know I want to be shouting. Yeah, you know, I mean, just everybody has hit it on the head. You know, it's a it's a funny thing. I'm also a parent of many children and two of my two of my children had IEPs. One is now 31. One's still in high school. So I came from that perspective. Like you said in the beginning, I was a teacher for many years and even a SELPA administrator. And it wasn't until I really got into the superintendent role that I dove deeply into what SELPAs do and how to help us are helping LEAs through through the system. You know, I love what Garth was saying about this system. Education is truly a system. You can't operate with just one piece of it. You need it all. And, you know, it's a funny it's a funny question. It's almost a loaded question, which is how do SELPAs impact student outcomes? Because it's it's through a filter. Judy was talking about this choice and how to help us can help broaden the choice of how we as allies serve students. And that's my reality that I'm living right now. I lead a small district. It's three elementary schools, and yet we have students with varied needs and we don't have the capacity to build the best program for some of our students. And so if it weren't for the SELPA and supporting regional programs throughout our area, working, helping us work with other local, larger districts, I wouldn't be able to serve all my students appropriately. It would be a huge challenge, and I feel like my students would be the ones that were negatively impacted because I would be limited in what I could do for them. This choices that Judy was talking about are so important. And so for me, the benefit of a of a SELPA and the way I can improve my student outcomes is really in I don't know, I'm a shopper, so I call it like bulk buying or buying power because with while working with the SELPA to find out what's the best way for us to support a student, I've got so many more choices in front of me and I've got such better buying power through a larger entity because we are so teeny. Just my three little schools that it really helps me, you know, connect the students that we're serving in our district with the best services, you know, and then it's on me. I mean, honestly, that answered that question about student outcomes that really falls squarely on me. We the LEAs are the one that that holds that. It's a funny question to ask how SELPA would impact student outcomes? It's through the filter of the LEA of supporting the LEA that SELPAs would impact student outcomes. It's really the SELPA helping the LEAs so that the LEAs can positively impact our student outcomes.

Tamara

As you describe your LEA as being small, I reflect on the fact that the majority of LEAs.

Dr. Anne

Across almost half the LEAs in the state are under the

Tamara

Small.

Dr. Anne

The definition is 2500. Yeah, and it's almost a thousand out of the, you know, almost 2000 school districts.

Tamara

So, Anne as you share your experience, again, as a leader in a small LEA of having the power to walk alongside and provide supports, especially in those areas where that would be challenging with the finite resources within your system, do you think that's a shared experience across small LEAs, or do you think that's unique to your system in your context?

Dr. Anne

No, I can't imagine it's unique. I would say that's going to be pervasive throughout the state. I've led other small school districts in other counties and same, you know, same thing. An example of this is, you know, let's talk ERMHS, money. That is one of the areas that, you know, there's some challenge to in SELPAs, you know, a nonpublic school placement in our SELPA we have designated through our CBOs and through the support governance board, we've created a model to support all our districts in, you know, with help with nonpublic school placements, which are very costly and very challenging because of the restrictions on our state. So you're talking out a state placement. Yes. And how to keep the family connected. There's so many facets to that situation. Well, it's rare at an elementary level school district for that to happen. It can happen. And if we didn't have that model in the Santa Barbara super to support all the districts with those NPS placements, if that were to happen in my school district, I can't even imagine how I would deal with that on my own. I there's like a, you know, a sense of security, an insurance policy, so to speak, the way that our model is set up and even though that ERMHS funding last year we saw a challenge to it, we're seeing a challenge to it. Again, we as a as a Santa Barbara SELPA are working together to come up with our own model. One of the beautiful things about working with the SELPA is that we can then adjust and create and work together across our county to create something that will continue to work for us.

Tamara

Yeah, great perspective. And just to provide context for our listeners, what Anne is referencing is a shift in the funding model for mental health services specifically intended for students with disabilities. Those funds or a number of years have come through SELPAs and through local decision making about how to leverage those dollars. So starting July 1, 2023, we will see those dollars being distributed directly to districts, which does, as you mentioned, and call into question. So what happens to all those local decisions that were made, those programs that we're running? So that that is a key issue. And thank you so much for highlighting that.

Leah

Aaron, as a SELPA administrator, we know that SELPA structures differ, there's variability in the SELPA structures. I'd love to have you comment a little bit on how as ensure transparency, how do we ensure accountability for our LEA's? What does that look like at that SELPA level?

Aaron

The whole notion that SELPAs are not somehow transparent, that kind of made me chuckle. You know, our budget plans have been public for decades. You know, all of our meetings are

Brown Act meetings were open to the public posted agendas. Our local plans, our budget plans are posted on our websites. Every district's website has our local plan for our SELPA. So anybody that doesn't really know how we do what we do isn't really trying hard enough to learn about it. It's all there and accessible to everyone. Our allocation plan literally says that in our decision making we're going to adhere to four key allocation principles, and those are equity, accuracy, transparency and sustainability. And that's what we live by. And whenever we're considering those decisions about funding issues. And it goes on to say that we work together to serve all of our students in Butte County and that we pay special attention to our small and our rural districts to make sure that those students don't get left behind. And so that, you know, equity is built into the model itself. And that was the original design. And I think that people don't really understand that either. You know, you asked about improving outcomes and accountability, and the original SELPA model was to ensure access and opportunity, since the seventies, that's that's the model. That's the way it was designed. And somewhere along the way, accountability and, you know, improving outcomes became a big focus after No Child Left Behind. And we're supposed to be getting kids to achieve at higher and higher levels. But that's not exactly the SELPA's work. The SELPA as Anne was explaining the SELPA is working through a filter. And everyone knows that the biggest factor to improving outcomes is quality instruction and what goes on in the classroom each day. And so we assist them in getting those outcomes. But it's not exactly fair to suggest that, you know, it's the model itself that's causing this. It's it is a shared accountability system, a shared responsibility (unclear). So I would say I'm concerned about everybody just believing that, you know, that that they're going to get their dollars and they're going to just figure it out. It's really it is it is very, I think, unlikely that districts that are that are small are going to be able to provide the variety of services and supports for students without working with others, which is what we're already doing. So the whole thing is is just very confusing. You know, my districts ask me for my recommendations about, you know, fiscal and legal and programmatic issues and, you know, just like quality IEPs require the efforts of a whole team to make those decisions. A quality continuum of programs and services requires that we come together and talk about how we're going to provide all these things. And and with people who possess specialized knowledge and expertise about it. So and I think that's that's where we live. It's that oversight and support of districts and who, you know, if left to their own with their funds, they may be able to figure out how to provide all those programs.

But they might choose to do something different with those funds or they might not know what to do with those funds. And that's where the danger lies. So, you know, I think that the oversight that we provide makes it much more likely that students and staff and families are going to get their needs met in the right way.

Dr. Anne

I have a great example to add on to what Aaron was just saying and that that just came to mind. And it's kind of it's about that buying power, so to speak, that that you're talking about is that like most districts, we're seeing an increasing need in the area of supporting student behaviors. And you know, my first place to turn to when the staff we were looking at the staff to see, okay, how do we get our staff some support to build their skills. I turn to the SELPA and we have an amazing behaviorist who because she's in that role for the SELPA, she can spend all her time and expertise on developing these just phenomenal professional development ways to support the staff. And, you know, in helping us get those student, you know, improving the students outcomes. She she comes in does does an across the board training for all my staff. Then ten times throughout the year she's meeting specifically with my staff from the special education programs and getting them that training that without the SELPA, without her

being able to really fine tune and hone those skills and bring together those materials to share with the staff, I wouldn't have been able to bring that. And believe me, the feedback from staff, she came at my at my district kickoff and I was hearing even from my cranky teachers, that was great. That was so helpful because it was it was useful. She knew everything she was talking about. She had all kinds of experiences to pull from and share with the staff. And now I've got Gen ed staff that are jealous and asking to jump on these these trainings for SPED staff because they want that. And that, again, is just an example of how if I didn't have that opportunity to tap on the SELPAs shoulder and say, Who do you have? I need some help in this area. It was really exceptionally helpful. And again, you know, I heard Aaron say it. I think Aaron is even a little bit wrong. I think that when people are looking to where to where the student outcomes are changing, look at us. Look at the LEAS. We're the ones who have our kids right here. SELPAs are standing shoulder to shoulder with us, helping us. But really, that's on us.

Leah

Garth, I'm going to move over to you for a minute because I know equity is a real area of passion for you as a leader. How would this proposal impact the SELPA ability to really lean in in terms of ensuring equity for students? I'd love your perspective.

Garth

I want to go back to maybe emphasize using something that that and was speaking about, and that is the the implicit and explicit role of the SELPA really is around alignment systems alignment. It is around providing the ability for us to leverage all of the resources, fiscal, human knowledge, all of the resources available in the SELPA and aim that at the support for our students. Right. So when we take a when we when we take an approach that puts the needs of the child at the center and then brings the service plan, brings the care plan around the needs of that child, it creates another layer of complexity. That's the SELPA, a sweet spot in my mind. The SELPA allows us to really have, again, a greater understanding of the resources that exist so that we can make more equitable decisions, more informed decisions, and then create a circumstance in which the ability for decision makers to place students as well as to provide an avenue for us to build up our know how and our capacity across the region really is maximized through this structure. From my perspective, this issue around whether this the SELPA retained funds are frozen, whether it would bring around a bring about greater equity. I just can't see that happening from my perspective. I think it runs the risk actually of weakening the current structure that we have in place and the value of collaboration. It actually interferes, interrupts that, that that notion. I think that we have the ability to make decisions together as a governance team. Superintendents all across the SELPA structure also allows us to take into account the needs of our families. When we think about equity, the end user, that family voice, the student voices is critical to informing our practice and for the Community Advisory Council structure includes opportunities for our families to continue to build their know how, their knowledge about serving as parents, as well as partners in their education. One of the things that I think is very powerful when one of our parents recently walked into a professional development session with our staff and while the content was it wasn't geared towards parents, we were able to share with the family, with the caregiver. We had a similar professional learning session scheduled at our CAC and so that the ability for us to both respond, to recognize and then respond to the needs of our families, of our of our students, that's at the heart of equity. And and that's what in my mind that that provides again, that that sweet spot for our going back to the very beginning of the conversation sort of you know where is this coming from. I would agree with Aaron that there's somehow a lack of understanding or a lack of depth of understanding of the value of having an infrastructure that



facilitates joint decision making that doesn't happen on its own, that takes the ability for us to, again, scan the landscape and develop a deeper understanding of the expertise that exists within the region and then also develop programs that are innovative. Innovation happens as a consequence of differing points of view and coming to a joint understanding of the end goal, but getting there through discourse that is not always, you know, we're not always on the same page from the very beginning because we have different points of view in that. But (unclear) of opinion that that really allows us to create a, in my experience, a much more innovative and responsive system for our students and for our families. So in my mind, the way that we have structured our our system really is aimed at helping the state to achieve its goals in meeting the needs of our students with special needs.

Tamara

I appreciate your perspective because we all know when you bring more than one person into a room, we have different perspectives and different drivers. I just love you bringing in and highlighting collaboration, but also the health of the times, bringing those different perspectives and working through that sort of for the greater good too. Judy, Do you think that's an important piece for us to help listeners who may not be familiar with Community Advisory Committee or CAC? You know, we want to make sure they understand what that means and looks like. Can you talk about what that look like for you and how this community structure has allowed for parent or caregiver voice in into some of decision making?

Judy

Yeah, well, you know, ironically, I was invited to serve on the CAC after kind of a rough IEP for my daughter when she was in second grade. And I had I had fairly started to even learn about SELPA, and somebody asked me to serve on the CAC because they thought I could be a good parent advocate based on how I had advocated for my child. And I literally sat there and said, What are you talking about? So again, we don't know what we don't know. But have you joined the CAC? And having talked to so many different people at the top level, at the LEA level and just fellow parents, it's been a really eye opening experience to see that gap in education about what's available and also to just build those bridges between parents and administration. I know our CAC has made a huge push at not only making sure we have representation from each of the districts, we're trying to make sure we are educating parents not just by doing like these parent training and education sessions, but to let parents know what the CAC is. And we're we're trying really hard as far as letting parents know that part of serving your own kids and making sure their needs are getting met is becoming involved, goes a long way.

Aaron

You know, it's true what guys we're talking about. You have more than one brain in the room. You think of other things. And I'm just sitting here listening to all of you and thinking of all the other things popping into my into mind right now. And, you know, in terms of the SELPA model or its weaknesses, if there are any, that's definitely one of them is that we're so busy behind the scenes getting all this done for kids that we're not we're not advertising ourselves. We're not branding, you know, selling ourselves. We never thought we had to do that. But the fact is that, you know, special education is a huge cost driver. And so there's a lot of interest and attention right now on that. I would like to see us shift the conversation from what's wrong with SELPA to what's the solution. You know, what can we do? Because I think if you ask us, we could probably give you some really good ideas about how to refocus the energy and attention toward strengthening the SELPA model toward the direction that the state is interested in, rather than, you know, removing layers of oversight and accountability that the SELPA

provides. You've got 130 some SELPAs around the state just sitting there already a structure in place to make that what you would want it to become if you were going to drive improvement activities. So I think if you if you allocate specifically and target your investment in those franchises, if you will, around the state, you could probably get a lot more done. And you could kind of flip the script on this whole conversation.

Leah

Aaron, you started your comment with, you know, SELPAs haven't found it necessary and years past to promote themselves. So, I'd like to give you an opportunity to promote SELPAs. And and that said, a few years ago, California really committed to a single statewide system to support. And within that statewide system of support, there was a recognition that we needed to work specifically on improving outcomes for students with disabilities as part of the statewide system of support was basically a cycle of leads in the state that really worked to improve those outcomes included the System Improvement Lead project as well as a number of content leads. I'd love to hear from you. What has that work been over the last few years? How has that really influenced the work of SELPAs and how we see that impacting outcomes?

Aaron

Yeah, definitely. It's no secret I'm pretty outspoken in support of the SELPA system improvement leads and in fact, if anybody ever says content lead or system improvement lead, I always say you mean the SELPA System Improvement Lead or the SELPA content lead? Because I feel so strongly that people don't know enough about all the ways in which our group has volunteered and stepped up to really lead change activities. So, over the past five years, the the SIL team and the content leads have delivered just cutting edge professional development, you know, top quality resources, high powered data tools that, you know, I, I rely on in the work that I do now. And I'm a skeptic. I'm going to tell you it's very hard to make me happy, but I'm extremely happy with the with the products that this group has put out. The various groups have just been solid in their philosophy, their design, their relevance, and, you know, SELPA staff here in Butte County have participated in a lot of trainings on improvement science and root cause analysis and, you know, things that we did not really have a lot of information or focus on before disproportionality systems change. And those are just a few of the things that we've been able to access through these these grant opportunities. And your work. You know, as both of you, I'm talking to you because our hosts are actually two of our system improvement leads, your work is an essential part of the statewide system of support at this time, and it's foundational to the CDE's own compliance and improvement monitoring design at this time. The individualized improvement coaching that your staff has provided has gotten rave reviews from our leadership and from our staff. And I just at this point can't imagine doing system improvement work for students with disabilities without that vision and the expertise and the leadership that you've provided. And it's really it's been a game changer here for sure.

Leah

I think, you know, what you're what you're speaking to is this idea of continuous improvement. Judy, as a parent, I'd love to hear from you what you see as potential areas of improvement. What are those areas of improvement? Where do you see the SELPA structure having that opportunity.

Judy

You just Aaron, said you have to advertise to, for lack of a better way of saying that you have to let parents know what the SELPA is, how it works, what it's what it's for. What what is it? What's its purpose? Really focusing on things like giving parents choice, I guess a drawback might be if the resources are there but parents don't know about them, then it's almost like they're underutilized or they're not really serving the purpose that they are intended for. I also think another important thing is I know testing and outcomes and data and all of that is important to show student progress and to show how the samples are serving the students. But I think it's important not to lose sight of the whole student. And what I mean by that is I mean, one big thing we saw coming out of the pandemic and distance learning were the mental health issues. You know, yeah, my kid can do math, but my kid is depressed now because they sat at home for a year with no social interaction. And so I think we have to focus on the entire person and not just the academics of it. You know, if somebody is doing really good and has straight A's, but they're, you know, they're withdrawn and depressed and not able to function socially, that we're not really serving the students needs. And so I know there's limited resources and mechanisms to address all of these issues. I just think it's important not to lose sight of them and to have the open communication with the parents to make sure we're meeting all of the students needs, not just focused on academics.

Garth

If I could just jump in and what I'm hearing and Judy, in your comments, really this issue of an awareness for our families building that practice of of ensuring awareness. And then second to that is this idea of providing and increasing the navigational skills, right knowledge for preparing and maybe coming doing a better job of us coming shoulder to shoulder with families, with caregivers to assist in the navigation of the system. And so just hearing your comments Judy, I'm thinking right now about ways in which we can innovate and and just go deeper with our practice. So I'm using this as an example of the power of having different minds in the room. At the same time. I'm learning from you as you speak, and we'll be having conversations with our team here as well. This is SELPA Live and in Living Color right here on the podcast. Thank you for those comments Judy.

Tamara

Judy and Gary, you both talked about this idea of the whole child and we both spoke to it very poignantly. The state has a motto, one system building one system for all, and some have posited that the SELPA structure in having a separate system statewide in their minds, that maybe it would be better if these conversations and services and activities that we've talked about were actually folded into a different structure. Or let's say we allow leaders to create their own consortia and some can operate independently. I'm curious your thoughts and Anne maybe you can lean in for us on this. Why why not a different structure? Why not have these services that we've talked about occur within a county office model or a different model? What are the benefits to maintaining a current model in terms of supporting the whole child? And this idea of one system?

Dr. Anne

I don't have a super great answer to that because what you're basically saying is what if it was something else out, you know, out there? And I that's too best for me to even try to comprehend or wrap my brain around. What I can say, though, is that I'm picturing as you were talking, I was picturing my district having to pull back and own all all the responsibilities that I currently, you know, count on are a model throughout the county. Even just building a consortium like overwhelms me when you said it's because in order to do that effectively and

efficiently, it takes time. You've got to go and consult legal. You've got you know, you've got to really take the time, you've got to monitor that, you know, in special education, in mental health, there's a lot of turnover right now. So you're constantly, you know, having to manage that. To me, it's just rather than me being able to go to that SELPA that is set up and established and hyper focused on serving students in special education, we would be creating all of those pieces. And that sounds horrific to me and overwhelming. I don't know how that would be folding in into, say, a county Office of Education. I don't know how that would differ except for the fact any time I have a special education related question need, you know, I know exactly where to go and when I go to my SELPA that they they know our county, they know all the other LEAs and their special ed needs. And who's thinking about this regional program or who else has that need and I just can't imagine it a different way. But maybe there is something to that. I just I know what I know and I know what I count on are supposed to do for for my students and my school district and do it really well. And I think you're wrong response, though, and it's really helpful because there have been entities who have looked at some of the structures and and said, well, certainly liaise with you know, have the opportunity of the SELPA structure change just to get together and talk and come to agreements. And as a SELPA administrator, you know, my perspective has been, as you say, there's a lot of context and facilitation that goes into that decision making. Let's look at turnover rate of superintendents. The average superintendents, you know, tenure in California is under three years. And so every time there'd be a change, you'd be, you know, subjecting that that model like so let's say I was in a consortium with even three other districts in my county, and every time there was a change of leadership, there could be some who say, Well, I don't want to be part of that because it's just it's overwhelming to think about.

I just don't think it's a it's a sustainable way to look at how we would serve, you know, our students and how we would ensure that we are connecting to the to the best possible services. I just I don't see it, especially for those models. I mean, there would be nobody else in my district who would do that arranging but me. And I just can't see having the capacity to constantly manage that, you know, that consortium.

Judy

One of the phrases said, like literally made me cringe and that was one size fits all because that is rarely a good idea. And in special education, it's come completely counterintuitive to serving our students and meeting their needs. There is no one size fits all, and special education just doesn't exist. And if you try to shoehorn that concept into it, it's you're going to be doing a complete disservice to every student, every educator, every administrator it's just not going to work. And that is my biggest fear in in kind of taking this helicopter view and pulling it up to the county level or the state level. I mean, just different sizes of counties alone. I live in Los Angeles County. It's a small state of its own practically. And to think that, you know, something that big is actually trying to trickle down to individual students is I just don't even see how that would work. I think that is right now the collaboration, the opportunity for collaboration is still there. They can still talk to their, you know, their SELPA and talk about what programs they need or are working or not working. So this idea that the SELPA somehow removes that concept of districts talking to each other or collaborating with each other or having these conversations doesn't make sense to me.

Dr. Anne

Another point to add on to that is, and this hits on something that Aaron was talking about as far as support leads in the state. Let's take the vexing problem of disproportionality. And we in Santa Barbara County had presentations and support from the lead on that disproportionality

work. The idea that we can that a district can do or a SELPA, it can do a deep dive into one of these challenge areas and then spread that statewide. And we were definitely the beneficiaries of that work.

Garth

Absolutely. And I considered this as well. I've read the reports regarding the the studies on SELPAs and this notion that that SELPAs could, you know, be sort of absorbed within the county office structure. Currently, the way that things are set up here, Yolo County, I already evaluate our SELPA director along with one of our superintendents, so we have a subcommittee for evaluation purposes. I'm not sure how widespread that that particular model is, but certainly here in our county we have an accountability system where there's a relationship between the county office and it also is responsive to the needs of our school districts. My bias is that collaboration in my mind should really be the default to solving or even understanding those vexing problems that Anne has spoken about. There are complex problems that are difficult to solve and there are vexing problems that are sometimes difficult to even define, and then to begin to understand the path forward to resolving those issues. And in my mind, this issue of disproportionality, it's been with us for decades. It would be difficult for me to draw a through line to the SELPA structure as the reason why it persists. I just don't buy that. There are so many social issues, so many social factors that come into play. And collaboration is a facilitator of us being able to define and begin to work on those issues together. I do greatly appreciate the design of our statewide system of support. It's been in place for about since 2013-14 now, but I think we're just getting to a place as a as a system where we are where we are really able to leverage the power of that system of support. Obviously, we had the pandemic in the midst of that, but I see our current model of the system of support, the design project around disproportionality, specifically as a way for us to begin to accelerate our impact. So I'm excited about where we are, frankly, as a state. I'm very excited about the promise that the greater attention around the need to catalyze collaboration and coherence across the system. And again, this is what sort of perplexes me around this this conversation we're having about the structure of a collaborative system that already exists, the collaborative network that already exists, the collaborative structure that already exists when everything else is in that moving towards as a state is either very strongly, implicitly, but in many cases explicitly calling on us to a greater level of cross department or cross agency cross-sector collaboration. We have a in organization where this this exists already. And so in my mind, the question is really is around what do we do to improve the responsiveness of our system? How do we ensure that and students who we intend to serve in the system, that their voices are centered in our practice? How do we continue to leverage improvement science and what we know about systems work to bring about the kind of impact that we want to have on behalf of our of our young people?

Leah

I think just talking about who's on this podcast, right, we have the perspective of a parent, the perspective of a county superintendent, perspective of an ally, a superintendent, perspective of a SELPA administrator. Right? I don't know that I noticed it until you just said that. And I thought, Oh, this is probably very intentional. I'd love to hear from Garth or and we've talked about in the trailer about language and SELPAs there's a freeze on the amount of dollars that SELPAs can maintain to continue to provide this level of technical assistance. What does that look like? What does that look like for you at the county office? What are the plans at the LEA level to ensure that we are still doing the work with or the appropriate resources from the LEA

perspective in in our county? One of the concerns is that that not only would our supper look different, they literally couldn't operate big because of this.

Dr. Anne

I know impacts like over 60 outputs in the state, the same type of situation where that funding model with declining enrollment would actually create a multimillion-dollar deficit. And I can't see how the SELPA could continue to operate in our county. You know, I don't even want to put in much thought. It's really hard for me to give it to continue to run the district and pay attention to the needs that are right in front of me to really do the deep planning and consideration that would need to be done in order for my district to start operating without a subpar what we're working on in our county is trying to be a united and unified and strong voice and advocacy. That's really where we're putting our focus right now, working through our special education directors, working through the superintendent group, you know, with the self that interests trying to get the word out about what will happen if it moved forward. I mean, we would have to go into overdrive and really stop paying attention to other things going on and really dig in to how we could move forward without that that current SELPA structure. It would be devastating. And not just for my district. I know for most the districts in my County.

Garth

I would agree with Anne's statements. In my mind, it would really send us into a crisis planning mode. You know, we recognize the impact it would have on us. We've we've done the calculations already where it would be over \$1,000,000. And so that would definitely put us into a crisis planning mode. Our team, my hope is that it doesn't go forward. Is there room for improvement in any system? Absolutely. And and there's room in room for improvement in the manner in which we operate within our individual SELPA. And I'm sure up as across the state as there is room for improvement in every organization. I think the critical thing is what are the right questions for us to ask? What are the right areas for us to focus on as a collective? You know, in my mind it really is around, you know, how do we continue to get better at collaboration? How do we continue to get better at utilizing data to drive decision making? How do we continue to get better at partnering authentically with families and with students who we who we intend to serve? That's where I would love to spend my time and energy, and that's where we are now. And, and I really don't want to take our focus off of the improvement efforts that that we're engaged in to respond to, Again, what I what I see as would put us really into a crisis planning mode.

Dr. Anne

That's a great term crisis management is exactly what it would be. Thank you Garth.

Aaron

I think one of the things I'm most concerned about is just the lack of collaboration and consultation with, you know, parents and educators on how to go about a systems change if that's, in fact what's needed, seems to be like some of the decisions that are happening, you know, behind closed doors or with people that don't really understand what's going on well enough to be making those kinds of program calls. And that's very frustrating. And it shuts parents out of the picture. And I'd be curious, I mean, Judy's already kind of talked about that. But, you know, if you have a really great idea or you have a plan, then, you know, please, you know, share it out loud and let's vet it. You know, in the normal course of legislative process and let's debate it and if it takes, then great, you know, so be it. And we go in that direction. But I think the way in which it's being handled right now is just causing us all to stop everything and

have a go into crisis planning mode and have a podcast so that we can explain exactly who we are and what we do. I think one of my concerns is that the question is, you know, what would this look like going forward? And that's the problem, is we're not supposed to be the ones figuring that out. If somebody is going to make a change, they should have already thought about what that plan is going to look like. And what we have is a couple of lines in a trailer bill, that's set for a one year timeline. Are we thinking about an entire systems change on a year to year basis, or are we having a larger conversation with all of the people who need to be consulted with who are doing this work about how to do this over a longer period of time? So I would just say air it in public and let's talk it through so that it's not going to, you know, be to the detriment of our students and families.

Judy

You know, Aaron, hearing you say that, one of the first things I thought when I when I read the trailer bill language was, has anybody thought through? Yes now we're giving the LEAs the money that theoretically they have better control. But as everybody has mentioned, the the administrative infrastructure to control the funds and put the programs in place is not there. So half the money that they're getting to have better programs is going to go to setting up the administration for these better programs, which just makes no sense.

Dr. Anne

Great point, Judy. That's an excellent point. And your spot on with that. That's exactly it. And let's not forget that this is an area of education that every LEA is struggling with as far as hiring goes right now. So now you're going to put that responsibility for multiple supports for students onto this tiny little district. And by the way, you've got to find these people that you can't find in order to support your your students. So.

Judy

Right. And the funds now are being spent more on administration than on the students who we're supposed to be addressing to increase outcomes. It's we're not doing it.

Dr. Anne

Exactly.

Garth

And it's not to say that that that districts, LEAs don't have the intellect or the capacity or the capability of doing so. Right. The reality is that LEAs are at the table already. LEAs are already decision makers are already drivers of the manner in which we structure our budgets. Any time you have that many entities coming together around complex issues, endemic in that proposal is conflict and tension. That's just part of the environment, right? One of the things I often share with folks, again, and I am biased, I will continue to say this is towards collaboration. And when collaboration is everyone's job or taking care of collaboration, organizing collaboration, convening collaboration is everyone's job. It's no one's job. And right now we know clearly who has the responsibility for convening. We know who has a responsibility for organizing and helping to catalyze this collaborative infrastructure. You know, so again, I'm challenged to understand, you know, why the focus here versus really on continuing to improve the infrastructure that we have in place going forward?

Leah

Absolutely. I think that that's a really nice way to wrap this up today is that we need to kind of step back, find those areas of improvement and move forward. There are a lot of great themes today. I want to thank each of our guests, Judy, Garth, Anne, and Aaron for being with us today. You know, we talked a lot about collaboration. We talked about parent and student voice. We talked about shared resources. It's that opportunity for especially our small LEAs to come together, right, to ensure that our students within California receive the supports and education that they so, so, so deserve. So with that, again, I want to thank our guests. I want to thank my co-host, Tamara Clay. To listen to more podcasts, see SELPA-produced videos, or learn more about SELPAs in general, visit us at [www.selpa.info](http://www.selpa.info) and like us on Facebook at SELPA Administrators of California. Until then, keep making it happen. Each student, every day.