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Welcome to the Autism Classroom Resources Podcast, the podcast for special educators who are looking for personal and professional development.

I'm your host, Dr. Christine Reeve. For more than 20 years, I've worn lots of hats in special education, but my real love is helping special educators like you. This podcast will give you tips and ways to implement research-based practices in a practical way in your classroom to make your job easier and more effective.

Welcome to the Autism Classroom Resources Podcast. I am Chris Reeve and I am your host. Thank you so much for joining me. I am excited to share with you an episode of one of our podcasts from the Special Educator Academy. I have pulled it specifically for our series on IEPs. One of the things that I think is extremely important, but sometimes very difficult to do is being able to advocate for your students as an educator. And I know that this can sometimes feel a little dicey because it's always really hard sometimes when maybe you're disagreeing with people in your district. And this is an episode that I recorded for the academy members a while back to give them some tips on how to do this in a way that hopefully keeps your job, keeps you in good standing with your district, but still serves your ethical responsibility to advocate effectively for students that you serve. So I hope that you enjoy it and that it gives you some ideas about how to advocate successfully for the students that you serve. Let's get started.

Hi, and welcome back to the Special Educator Academy show. So glad you decided to join us this week. This week, I am going to be talking about advocacy. And when I say advocacy today, I'm going to be talking about our need to advocate for our students. One of the things that as a classroom teacher, or as a paraprofessional who spends the most time with them, or a related service provider, all of you know the students in the classroom environment at a level that neither the administration, nor even their family can know. Now, you know that I am the first person to say that there is a big difference between being a teacher and being a family member. But this is one of the areas where you have knowledge and skill because first, you ask students to do a lot of things that they probably are not asked to do at home. And in addition, you're a very different environment. And so I know from experience that many of our students behave very differently in your environment than they do at home. Sometimes that's a good thing, sometimes a bad thing.

But one of the things that I feel very strongly about in the classroom is that we as educators need to advocate for our students. Many times we are their voice and we need to make that voice heard, but that's a tricky situation if you have tricky parents, if you have administration that doesn't always go along with what you think should be done. So I'm going to talk today a little bit about how we navigate all of that.

You know that I talk about the fact that we always need to keep the student at the center of the discussions at IEPs, in planning our classroom, in all of this things. And that means that sometimes we might disagree with other members of the team, both from the school and from the families. So I want to talk about some ways to do this productively so that you preserve all those relationships involved because all those relationships are what allow you to do your job as well. So you don't want to sabotage those. Then it's not going to be effective because they're not going to listen to you anyway. So keep in mind that advocating for your students doesn't always mean that you get to tell everyone what you think, and it doesn't always mean that people will listen or that they will see it your way.

And only you know the atmosphere of your administration and your school district. So keep that in mind. I can only in this situation, give you general principles and tips to help you advocate and hopefully make your advocacy more effective and less problematic. But given the differences of administration and school district, it may be a little different.

Tip number one is to listen to others. Now, sometimes this goes without saying. I would like to think that we all work really hard to listen to others, but in the mess of things that we have to do every day, it's very easy to get caught up in our advocacy and our passion about the student and the student's situation and forget that we need to make sure that everyone on the team is heard. Not listening and charging through with your ideas is a sure way to get people to stop listening to you and to stop taking you seriously. So you really want to make sure that you are taking time to say, "Tell me what you think," and really listening to the answer. That you're recognizing that they may have views that are different than yours and you don't want to just blow them off in your idea that what you have is right. Do not walk into it with the assumption that you have the only answer. There are many different answers to problems. Many times what you're doing when you're advocating is going to be bringing the problem to other people's attention.

Tip number two is use your data. Not surprising coming from me, but make sure that you're sharing the data with the team and that you're basing your recommendations on the data itself. It never hurts to show people why you think something needs to happen because data speaks louder than words. Data makes a more objective statement than a person can do. So use your data, graph your data. If you're not sure what that graph means, then use the instructional troubleshooting quick-win form that we have in the academy. And I'll link to that below the podcast so that you have, "I looked at the data and this is what it's telling me." It's kind of like using visuals with our students. Data says, "This is what we're facing."

Number three, talk to your district first. Especially if you think that what you're going to recommend is going to conflict with your district, definitely talk to the admins first, before you walk into the meeting. But even if you don't think that what you're saying is going to go against what they think they need to do, you really should have those conversations before you walk in. Now, let me make a differentiation. You are not predetermining placement strategies or anything like that. You're not coming to a conclusion when you do this. So I want to make that very clear. There's a difference between, "I see this problem. Here's some things I was thinking." And, "I see this problem. He needs to be in this class." So you want to make sure that when you're having those conversations with admin, that you're talking about the problem more than you're talking about the outcome, because the outcome is something that really does need to happen in the IEP team meeting most of the time if it's an IEP issue. Sometimes it is, sometimes it isn't.

But share with them your observations and your data, and recognize that they may have reasons for disagreeing and they may not want to share your recommendations with the parents. And it doesn't necessarily mean that they have an evil child approach. It doesn't mean that they're not doing their job. They may have a bigger picture than you have. Remember our social story for going to an IEP. Everybody has a different perspective. Your perspective is your students in your class, your administrative's perspective is the whole school district. So they're going to look at things and know about resources you may not know about. They're going to have information that you don't have. They may even have information about the family that you don't have. So just recognize that just because they disagree with you does not necessarily mean that it's something that they are trying to get out of.

You want to be very careful, as I often say, I think I said it in our IEP workshop about committing assumecide. Our assumptions sometimes are when schools say, "We won't provide the service," we assume that means they don't want to pay for it. When in reality it may mean that, "We don't think it will be effective." Or, "This has been tried two years ago and we have data that it wasn't effective." Or, "We have a different strategy that we want to use." Or whatever. There can be a lot of different reasons. That's one thing.

Another is that you work with the school and your recommendations are important, but the school is the one that makes the decisions 50/50 with the families. So recognize that it's not a voting situation. I've had a lot of families who think it is a voting situation and they've brought every family member they could find to outvote the school district. And unfortunately for them, it doesn't work that way. Generally, unless you are your LEA, then you are not the person who makes that decision. There's usually a district representative of some kind, unless you are serving as the LEA. In which case you are the one who makes the choice about whether or not you can allocate the services in these funds.

Second, you may want to ask for the reasoning from the district. So you could share with them that you feel uncomfortable, not sharing your suggestions with the parents, and they may have suggestions for how to handle it. You may find that it isn't that they don't want you to share your suggestions, but that they want you to share it or them to share it in a different way. Now only you can decide how far to go outside the lines with your district administrators and how hard to push and how to address it. But most of the time you can resolve the issue before it's an issue by having this conversation first. And it's important to recognize that there are going to be times when you're going to have to say, "I don't have control of this situation," and let it go. And that's okay. You can only do what you can do with what you have. So keep that in mind as well.

Finally, it's important to recognize other perspectives. And I alluded to that in number three, but this is particularly true if you're advocating in opposition to something that the family wants. It's important to recognize that they see their child differently than you do, and that they are the ones who are going to have to live with the outcome of the child's education and addition cost to the child. So they will make decisions based on their perspective and sometimes we have to respect that.

On the other hand, sometimes the district may decide that they need to move forward in a specific way. And this may be because legally the district has a responsibility to assure a free and appropriate public education, FAPE. And they may disagree that the family's request is providing that. So they may not feel that what the parents are requesting is going to meet that standard and they will be legally liable for it. They will be liable, not you. So keep that in mind though, that when a family comes to you with a request or wanting to get specific service, find out what's behind it. Sometimes it's that they've gotten information from an outside provider that may or may not be accurate. And you may or may not be able to change their mind. Sometimes it may be that they're recognizing something down the line that the rest of the team isn't. And so I'll give you two examples.

One is where a mom came in and said, "I want my kindergartner to learn how to ride a bike." I guess he was in first grade then actually. And of course the physical therapist is like, "We don't teach bike riding in school." The scope of practice for a PT in a school is typically to provide physical therapy, to allow the student to access the school curriculum and environment. That's what all related service providers do. Riding a bike is not part of that. You don't need to ride a bike to go to school. And so their immediate response was, "No, absolutely not."

When I sat down with mom and over the course of time, I had built a relationship with her and said, "I get that this is really important to you. And it isn't something that the district is required to do. It isn't something that they would normally do. So tell me where this is coming from?" And what she said was, "We live in a really small town and we do not have a good bus system. I do not see my child growing up to drive. So I want to make sure that we have enough time to teach him an alternate form of transportation so that he can be more independent in getting around the town when I'm no longer able to take it. It's going to open doors for him in that way."

Well, that changed things. And to be honest with you, I cannot remember whether we decided to put something on the IEP about it or not. I think we did because that changed our perspective. Now we're no longer talking about it for the reason of, "I just want my kid to be like other kids." We're talking about it as, "I need this for a life skill." So that was one example where we sat and talked about the perspective and it changed the point of view.

I've had other families that come in and they want a specific provider in their community. And that provider may not even be licensed, they may not be certified, they may not have any credentials to back them, but they talk a really good game. They convinced the parents that they are the only answer and they're not providing the service. And some of this they do on purpose. Some of them are doing it unconsciously. They don't realize that they're having this impact on the family. So the family is now convinced that this is the only thing that will reach their child. And again, they are the ones who have to live with them for the rest of their lives. So they are the ones that are going to want to hold on to whatever is going to yield the best outcome for their kid. But at that point, it's not a matter of the school doesn't want to provide an outside service. It's a question of the school cannot provide a non-scientifically based intervention provided by a non-certified, non-licensed professional or not professional.

I've seen a lot of really weird situations in this way that I won't get into, but it's really important to recognize that at that point the mom's driving you crazy, but the school district may need to take a stand and say, "No, this is not something we're willing to provide, but this is why. If it was somebody who was certified that we felt had a program that we weren't able to offer, we would do that. We've done that in the past, but we won't do it when we do not think that it's going to benefit the student, because we don't have these things in place. We have a mandate from the state to do what we do." So it is really important to get the story behind the story and recognize other perspectives.

Let me talk for a minute about what not to do. And this is probably to me, the biggest thing. There's lots of things that we can do to make it work. And sometimes people are going to say, "Yes, I'm going to be advocating for that." And sometimes they're going to say no, and you can live with that. Here's the way I look at it life. I want to know that I've done everything I can, and if I've done everything I can, and it's still out of my control, I have to accept it. It's my control. I cannot do anything about it. There are things that I cannot change. It's like a Maya Angelou quote that I've always loved, which is: "If you don't like the way something goes, change it. If you can't change it, find another way to think about it." And the same is true with this kind of situation.

But one of the things that I see happening frequently with teachers is that they get very invested in their families, which they absolutely should. And they get very invested in the student, which they absolutely should, but they get very passionate about something that they feel a student should have. And when the district says no, their solution is to go around the district and tell the parents to object or share your disagreement. That is a sure way to get your district not to trust you. So do you need to advocate for the student? Yes, you absolutely do. And ethically, you absolutely do, but you can do that in a way that doesn't go behind people's back. You also don't want to say to parents, even that veiled, "Well, they respond better to parents than they do to teachers." That's giving the parent the green light that says you're on their side.

And I get that it's a fine line that we walk, but you don't ever want to find yourself in a situation where you have to defend that kind of action, unless it's something that's so significant that ethically you feel you need to do this. Again, you are the only one who can walk that line. You are the only one who is seeing that situation. Clearly, if it was an issue that was harming the student, if I thought there was a neglect issue, or I thought there was an abuse issue, there would be no question. I would do whatever I

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could. Ethically, I would need to do whatever I could and I would accept the consequences, because as a special ed director that I used to work with used to say, "Yes, I may not have a job, but I can sleep at night," when she would make a really expensive decision on the part of a student. I've always remembered that.

So there will be situations. Hopefully you will not face them or face them very often that ethically you feel that you must do something. But before I get to that point, I would try to exhaust all other avenues first, because you are going to burn bridges when you do this. So even if you're telling the parent not to tell the district what you told them, don't count on that because if they go to due process and if they get put on the stand and someone says, "Did the teacher ask you?" I guarantee you, the district is going to find out.

So I'm not trying to set this up as you against the family, or you against the district. I'm actually trying to promote the collaboration among the team, because I think all the things that we do before we even get to this point, hopefully will resolved 95% of the issues. I'm just saying that if you really need to think long and hard about whether or not you want to go to a parent around the district and burn that bridge, and you want to make sure that you've done all your other things before you get to that point, and then make an educated decision, knowing your district, knowing your situation about whether or not this is meaningful.

So those are just some thoughts to take you back to the positives because I hate to end on the negative. You want to make sure that you're really listening to others. I get very passionate about certain things in classrooms and that's when I get myself in trouble. That's when I open my mouth and I have a tone of voice towards somebody that maybe I shouldn't have. And my old boss used to say, "Yeah, you got that sound in your voice." And I'm like, "Oh, shoot." And I have to go back and fix it. So I am the first person that's there being caught up in the passion of really wanting somebody to do something, really wanting something for a student or a classroom and being so passionate about it that I can't let it go. So I get that, but don't get so caught up in it that you miss what everybody else is saying. Make sure that you're listening and not just charging through with your ideas.

And a good way to do that is to bring the problem to the table, not the solution. Bring the problem to the IEP team. This is the issue. He's not learning phonics. At what point do we want to say we need to move on and just focus on sight words? And I'll do a podcast about that in a couple weeks, about that specific issue.

Number two is use your data. Present your problem with your data.

Number three is talk to your district first, find out what... Again, there may be things that you don't even know that you need to know. And recognize that everybody has a different perspective on the team and find out what that perspective is because it will inform your approach. Always just think about it as I'm bringing the problem to the team rather than this is our only solution, because there's always more than one solution to every problem. Sometimes it's just harder to find.

Those are my thoughts for this week. If you have any questions or you've run into this problem before, I'd love to hear about it in the community. So hop over there at the link below the episode, and I'm also going to put some quick wins and some workshops that are helpful in dealing with working with teams, making the IEP functional, those kinds of things that I think will be helpful resources for you as well. Bye guys.

I hope enjoyed that episode of the Special Educator Academy show. The SEA Show is one of two private podcasts that are part of the Special Educator Academy, which is a membership site with training and support for special educators just like you. We have a wide variety of tools and resources as well as a

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