

*Michael:* Welcome to the Evidence-to-Impact Podcast, the podcast that brings together academic researchers, government partners, and others outside of academia to talk about research insights and real-world policy solutions in Pennsylvania and beyond. I'm Michael Donovan, the Director of Policy and Outreach at Penn State's Administrative Data Accelerator.

Today on the Evidence to Impact Podcast we have Carole L. Clancy, Director of the Bureau of Special Education at the Pennsylvania Department of Education, as well as Dr. Paul Morgan, who serves as the professor of Education in the Education of Policy Studies Department and is the Director of the Center for Educational Disparities Research at Penn State University. Also, joining us is Dr. Adrienne Woods, who serves as a post-doctoral research scholar, also in the Educational Policy Department at Penn State. Thank you all so much for joining us today. I really appreciate your time in these challenging circumstances.

Just to start things off, I'd love to have our guests have a little bit of an awareness of your backgrounds, and some of your research interests, and your actual content of your work. Maybe if we could start with you, Carole, that'd be wonderful.

*Carole:* Sure. I have over 25 years of experience in the field of special education. I started as an educator. Then I spent some time in lead teacher positions, eventually moving into leadership positions within a variety of school districts across Pennsylvania, urban, suburban, and rural. I've been at the Bureau of Special Education a little over a year. I started July a year ago.

*Michael:* Great. Thank you so much. Paul, could you give us a little rundown on your background?

*Paul:* Sure. I have about six years of experience working in special education or clinical settings to assist children, adolescents, adults with disabilities to thrive. I've been at Penn State since about 2004. Much of my research focuses on trying to empirically understand who starts to struggle early on in school either academically or behaviorally, what happens to those children over time, and how can we better assist those children to thrive. A particular focus on that research is the needs of students with disabilities.

*Michael:* Great. Thank you. Welcome. Last but not least, Adrienne.

*Adrienne:* Hi. I'm Adrienne. I am a post-doctoral scholar. I work with Paul in the Ed Policy Department. I've been here—this is starting my third

actually. I got my Ph.D. in Education and Psychology from the University of Michigan in 2018. I think this is my ninth year working in research. I look at the intersections of development in schooling. I'm specifically interested in educational disparities, particularly for our children with disabilities. My goal is to try and understand the experiences of children attending U.S. schools in hopes that we can improve educational and societal opportunities and outcomes for these children.

*Michael:*

Great. Once again, thank you all for being here today. Before we really get into how the pandemic has really changed so much for students and members of the education community, I really wanted to pose a question to Carole to really understand what special education service delivery typically looks like in Pennsylvania as well as a framework of the Federal and State regulatory requirements that we're looking at in a typical environment.

*Carole:*

Sure. Special education is known as specially design instruction or related services for students with disabilities that are eligible under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, which is the Federal law mandating the services for students with disabilities. In Pennsylvania the state law is Chapter 14 of the PA Code. Both of those laws articulate the requirement for the public school system to provide a free and appropriate public education for students that are eligible under that particular law. The services are individualized. Each student who is eligible has something called an individualized education program, an IEP.

That particular document articulates what are the services, and how are the services delivered to ensure that these students with disabilities make meaningful progress in school. What it looks in schools is really different student-to-student. Most schools have an array of services within their school system ranging from specialized classroom, specialized instruction, occupational therapy, physical therapy, but the majority of the students with disabilities are educated within the regular education classes with services coming to them in that environment.

*Michael:*

Understood. We really should as we discussed in our prior conversations, we really need to address at this point some of the unbelievable burdens that are on the workforce, our teachers, our administrators, our paraprofessionals, counselors, and all of the other support staff that are truly going on right now in these heroic efforts undertaken by these groups. Could you really discuss what you're hearing from the frontlines?

*Carole:*

Yes. We have daily communication with the field in some capacity. It's been a very undaunting time for educators. They are working diligently to try to shift the entire educational system from how we used to know it to this new learning environment. They are working very hard, but it requires them to do a tremendous amount of planning, preparation as well as a whole new array of resources that need to be provided for students whether they are in a hybrid environment, which means they are spending of the time in school and some of the time at home, or if they are in a full remote environment, which means they are spending all of their time at home receiving instruction virtually online either synchronously or asynchronously. It's been quite a struggle.

The sands continue to shift. So it's very difficult for the educators to work in a predictable environment when as they start to plan forward for tomorrow's lesson, or the next day's lesson, or a week in advance as we have trained them to do, things suddenly because of the transmission rate of the virus. They have to go to plan B, C, or D with all of the variables that go into that decision. At this moment in time, the entire educational system and everyone employed there from the school administrators down to the teachers, paraprofessionals, custodial staff, to bus drivers are just in this continual flux of uncertainty. Just doing the best they can to provide education to our students.

*Michael:*

Yeah. This is such an unbelievably challenging time for so many, notwithstanding all the challenges to the student body, of course. I do wonder there has been the ability to ascertain best practices, and to shift from what really was the emergency period as here in Pennsylvania the transmission rates of the pandemic were so great in the spring. It really shifted from emergency to the ability to really learn from some best practices in what the fall would look like in the 2020-21 school year. Now we're currently well into that at the time of recording here in mid-November. Could you discuss some of the ways that the educational models have been modified or technology has improved, or what have been some of the differences between the emergency period and the fall?

*Carole:*

Sure. First and foremost was the health and safety of all of our students. Each school district needed to create a health and safety plan which articulated every step and protocol that was going to be followed as students transitioned to and from school. Then schools, based on what their transmission rate was at the start of the school year, made a plan through their school boards whether they were going to open full in-person, whether they were going to have a hybrid schedule, or whether they were going to be full remote. In

Pennsylvania it's a local control state, which means the school boards or the local school districts make the decision what's best for their community.

Across Pennsylvania from the southeast up into the northwest, it's very different region-to-region. Each school district made their best plan on how to open in the fall. There have been enhancements across the Commonwealth regarding the ability to provide synchronous virtual services. In the spring there was a very quick pivot into the homes, and not all school systems were equipped with the technology, or the bandwidth to offer synchronous virtual services across the Commonwealth. It certainly did reveal the needs across the Commonwealth.

Since that time, there has been expansive efforts from the State, from the school districts, from the intermediate units to increase the capacity for students to have synchronous learning experiences. There's been an array of resources, Chromebooks, laptops, robots, virtual occupational services, speech and language services, partnerships with the Public Broadcast Systems television stations where they are projecting lessons on the television, excuse me. Students are able to gain instruction if they're in very remote settings from the television.

We have two strong initiatives that are occurring right now, the distance learning initiative which is partnered with Penn State where we are working with school districts to enhance their learning management system. Our most recent endeavor is our connected learning initiative where we're working with PBS to expand the internet capacity through data casting that would enable more students to access the internet, or access synchronous learning across the Commonwealth to support some of those areas where we are still remote.

The Pennsylvania Department of Education created the road map to success. The leadership for equitable school system was designated six different area that school districts need to focus on when they opened school to make sure that there was equitable approach across the Commonwealth to the best ability. That included the need to address the social/emotional wellness of our students and our staff. We are all in very, uncertain times, and very isolated. Our students who have depended on the school system for a lot of their cares, a lot of their connections to life, their basic needs such as breakfast and lunch, and so on have not had access to their school buildings.

There were initiatives to make sure that the meals were continuing. That the basic needs were continuing as well as school systems preparing for students to transition back to school and ensuring that they are being aware that they may need additional supports for their social and emotional wellness.

*Michael:*

Thank you, Carole. Thank you to yourself and the rest of your colleagues at Pennsylvania Department of Education for all the hard work you're doing to support our work forces under exceptional burden right now. I'd love to turn to Adrienne and Paul. There's really yourselves and your colleagues and the subject matter expert space around the country and the world have been watching the developments of the last 10 months with much concern about the longitudinal outcomes for the children, and also for all those affected including the workforce, which are really dealing with a significant amount of trauma.

I wonder if we could just open up the floor to discuss what some of the science that you all study tells us that we could give to policymakers to best help students with disabilities in the coming months, as well as general educational delivery. What have we learned from the last eight months? What are we missing?

*Paul:*

I would say from my perspective that I'd note a couple of things. One, I think schools have been engaged in enormous efforts under short turnaround times to make things work for children attending schools in the Commonwealth as well as across the United States. My heart goes out to all the educators who are working under such difficult circumstances, the families, the children. It really has been an enormous challenge. I would say speaking from my standpoint as a researcher, I'd say a couple things. One, the impacts are likely to be negative. Two, they're likely to be especially disproportionately experienced by certain student populations.

School service community backbones for their communities when children go to school, parents can go to work. When children go to school, they have experiences that help them thrive both academically, cognitively, physically, behaviorally. When schools are not in session, many things don't happen that might take place. Teachers noticing a child's struggles, some potential awareness of something that might be going on in the family, children aren't able to do music lessons or PE, or career-oriented typical education the same way.

As we shift to remote, I think there's learning loss that takes place. Then if we can't get children to access the instruction remotely

because of limitations in their access to technology, and if the instruction that we're providing is limited, it's likely to keep good things from happening for children to learn and develop. I do worry, especially for certain populations, children's rapport, children of color, children with disabilities who often times experience even more disadvantages that can interfere with their learning ability to benefit from remote instruction. I know that educators have taken enormous strides and working under really difficult circumstances. I applaud their efforts in a very heartfelt way as an educator myself.

I'm speaking more broadly to focus on policymakers and our discussions in how we're arranging our community efforts for the pandemic. We really need to take it seriously and reduce transmission. We have to be aware of having schools closed, or shifting mostly to remote, is not optimal, and is likely, especially disadvantaging certain student populations.

*Adrienne:*

Yeah. I would echo that I agree with everything Paul said. I think we were approached by the Social Science Research Institute here at Penn State to write a blog post about COVID-19 and how that might be impacting students in Pennsylvania, specifically students with disabilities. We published this in May. That was at the end of that first lockdown where schools that had moved entirely remote for all students K through 12. There were schools who just shutdown entirely and the school year ended early.

Our focus at that time was trying to understand what do we right now to prepare for the fall, and to prepare for students who might've experienced not only the learning loss that occurs during the summer months when students aren't meeting, which we know can be especially severe for, as Paul mentioned, students from historically marginalized or disadvantaged backgrounds. There might be extra learning loss that's occurred because schools have either ended prematurely, or gone online. To reiterate what Carole was saying, this is a very unprecedented time. Everyone is trying to figure out what to do as it happens.

I think one thing that's really important to continually do is to look back over the past several months, and look at things we've tried and see where we've been, and how to move forward. Even if we look around at other neighboring states, I know this past weekend the State of Michigan just restricted gatherings again, imposed more lockdowns because their rates are rising there as well as they are here too in Pennsylvania. One thing they did that I found especially interesting was they've moved all high schools to virtual

learning. They've left K through eighth schools opened, and classes can meet in person through middle school with the exception of students in special education. Students in special education are still allowed to go to their in-person classes if they're in high school.

The reason they said they're doing this is because we have a better understanding now of transmission rates, and of how this virus is spreading. I think they were worried that students at these older grade levels have more clubs and sports and activities where they're meeting in groups. That might be a risk for the virus to spread. It's a stark difference from early in 2020 when everything was closed, and you were trying to do virtual learning for kindergartners through high schoolers, which it looks very different. I think that was a challenge that we faced in writing this blog post.

A challenge that everyone faces is not what do you do, but there are so many resources out there for parents, for teachers. It's difficult to sometimes ween through all of those resources that are potentially available. We try to point to a couple of different sources. I know there are some really great sources on the Pennsylvania's Department of Special Education website. One of the main sources is from the Office of Special Education programs, OSEP, ideas, that work series. Teachers can go there. They have a wide variety of topics. There's a filtering function, so you can search for different instructional activities that are demonstrated to work with evidence-based practices. You can search by age, by the audience, by the topic or the academic subject.

The Council for Exceptional Children has forums for teachers. If teachers are looking for resources or wanna bounce ideas off of each other, they can go online and join a forum and read through what other people are doing, what's been working, what's not been working. Then the National Center for Learning Disabilities is a really great place for parents to connect with each other, and to find resources, and to informally and formally share what's been working and not working. I've also heard that there are a lot of parents that might be connecting through social media sites, and Facebook sites, and social networking pages for parents of children with disabilities. That might be ways for ideas to be spread and shared. Not that that wasn't happening before the pandemic, but I'm sure it's especially relevant now.

Then the other thing that I wanted to say was I do tend to be somewhat of a glass half full person. One of the things that I think we can take away from this is the opportunities for the future.

Remote instruction can be especially challenging for some students, and especially students with disabilities in many different ways. At the same time, one sentiment that I've heard echoed by a number of different researchers, scholars, parents is that there are some students who they're finding that they're actually thriving in a remote setting.

Some students who for whatever reason are doing better when instruction has gone virtual. Maybe students who have had trouble self-regulating in the class room, they might be more disruptive to other students, but somehow the way that they learn is by moving let's say. Whereas that might be difficult to manage in a classroom setting with multiple other students, when they're at home and they're able to have multiple different stimuli going at the same time, or they're able to walk around the room, or take more frequent breaks than happen in a typical classroom. They sometimes seem to be doing better. One of the things we might wanna think about moving forward is how we can incorporate some of these changes into the future, and continue trying to provide the best education for every student to their maximum extent.

*Michael:*

Thank you, Adrienne. That's really a number of wonderful resources, which we'll be happy to link to in the show notes for our podcast episode. Purely from anecdotal perspective, I will say that my fiancée is a ninth-grade health and wellness teacher here in State College at the high school. She and her colleagues have just been really overwhelmed at the maturity and the resilience of some of her kids coming in. Really, it's been one of the best things to watch. The challenges of teaching in this tumultuous period have not been about student behavior in the classroom or remote. It's been about technological challenges, educational model shifts, and the moving target as Carole talked about.

While anecdotal, hopefully that is impact felt across the Commonwealth and across the U.S. I think, Adrienne, your points are so well-founded as well as we enter into dark challenges of the fall, in the late fall and the winter here as resurgence of infections brings up further discussions of shutdowns. I would like to talk a little bit about how our two communities can better partner.

Knowing that there's a wealth of insight and expertise coming from our academic community, and unbelievable amount of expertise in practical experience coming from our Government partner community, I wonder if we could just even brainstorm about ways to better find synergies or opportunities for synergies



there. I don't know if anything comes to mind from any of you here today.

*Carole:*

Well we currently are—the PDE is currently partnering with Penn State for the distance learning initiative where Penn State is providing training to any LEA that wants to participate on developing strong learning platforms management systems. It certainly has not been the business that most public schools have been in. They had to design it on the fly in the spring without a lot of formalized training. The expertise of Penn State is helping us support all the LEAs across the Commonwealth to enhance what they tried to develop over the summertime knowing that we are unfortunately in this circumstance a little bit longer.

That's just an example of higher ed supporting K through 12 education through the conduit of the State being the in between. We're just really appreciative of that partnership and the feedback from the LEAs that are participating has been very positive.

*Paul:*

I've been impressed by our local schools which seem to have adopted a workable schedule of in-person one day, remote the next. We're getting notices every week from the superintendent about the case counts and the numerical indicators that are relied on in terms the decision to remain open. They're doing contact tracing and quarantining with staff for children that have COVID-19. They're letting parents of the school system know quite quickly when that occurs, which I've appreciated it as a parent. I think if I was gonna sit back and say, "What should we be doing?" I'd say based on what I'm seeing from the academic research, probably lean towards a couple things.

One of which trying to keep schools open whenever possible safely. I think it's—from what I'm seeing in the academic research and policy statements, keeping schools open has many benefits. The transmission rates in schools tend to be lower than some of the other gathering places that we see, say in gyms, or bars, or rallies, things like this. Children don't seem to be very affected on average. There are some tragic instances. If possible, try and keep schools open when we can and when we can do so safely. When we're doing remote instruction, especially for kids with disabilities, try and keep it individualized, consistent, of high quality I think is beneficial.

I think for those students that we really have concerns about their ability to benefit from regular remote instruction, I think there's a good case to be made for certain populations coming into school

with more regularity. Receiving services in person, or more broadly beyond just students with disabilities, other students that are struggling, having those students come into schools in person to receive ongoing tutoring, particularly when we know that the students are struggling academically. They're behind. We have a pretty good inclination to think that the remote instruction is unlikely to have them catch up or maintain pace. Those would be some suggestions I would tend to make based on what I'm seeing from the academic research.

Differentiating the instruction, making it of high quality, teaching skills directly with lots of opportunities to practice, monitoring students' performance over time using some curriculum-based measurement or goal, tracking of academic performance or behavioral performance are just standard recommendations that you would see in the academic literature. Extending those to remote settings I think is a good bet. Also, for those kids that we know are especially likely to be struggling increasing their access to in person instruction I think makes a lot of sense.

*Adrienne:*

Yeah. I wanna echo too that harking back to something Michael said earlier, and I can't claim this as my own words. It's actually from Preeti Malani, who's at the University of Michigan in the Center of Infectious Diseases and Geriatric Medicine. She said that the return to learning is trying to make a boat out of a car. It's imperfect, but we can get it to the point where it more or less floats. We're all trying to put a system together that works. It's challenging for everyone, but it can be especially challenging for students with disabilities. Like Paul said and like Carole said, the whole point of special education is that it's individualized. It's dependent on what the students' needs are, how they're learning, what works best for them. I think those points are all very well made.

I also really like the idea that we should be keeping schools opened to the extent that we can. Maybe we just—again, like what we did in March, and in April, and in May was to close all schools right off the bat. Now we're realizing that might not be necessary for the reasons Paul mentioned that the rates of transmission are somewhat lower in schools. That a lot of schools are actually when they follow the social distancing protocols, and the personal protective equipment, wearing masks, they're actually fairly safe places to be.

We're recognizing that it is possible for students to be learning in the building, and to be attending in person classes, especially those

students who, for instance, might have emotional needs that require them to be around an adult. I think finding a way to keep the schools opened is probably one of the best ways to go. I would also like to reiterate that I think we're all trying to work together to the best extent possible, not only to make sure that the children are taken care of, but to also make sure that adults are being taken care of. That the staff in the schools that they're emotional well-being is being addressed.

One thing that I have been thinking about, and the first thing that came to mind, Michael, when you asked the question about how we can be partnering. A lot of websites, a lot of advice, a lot of scholars are calling for increasingly monitoring data. Part of me as essentially a data scientist, mostly spends all day working with data, I wonder how we're collecting that data. How we're individualizing it, and who's analyzing. If there are ways that we as researchers can be partnering with schools and communities and the State to help not only collect the data, but to analyze the data and make sure that students, especially students with disabilities, are meeting the goals of their IEPs. That they're making appropriate growth.

The Supreme Court in 2017 actually clarified that IEPs have to enable students to make progress. That it's not just enough that they're getting services, but there has to be some measurable marker of progress, which, of course, has been thrown into disarray with COVID. Because we don't know what progress is going to look like. Everything has been very individualized. It's left up to the schools. It's left up to the teachers, the caseworkers, the parents. My gut reaction is to say, "How can we help with that data aspect of it? How can we be alleviating some of the burden that's falling on teachers and parents and caseworkers at this point?" Just an idea.

*Paul:*

Yeah. I do think there are certain student populations that we can reasonably expect the pandemic to have additional negative impact on. Therefore, we should be proactive to try and provide additional assistance to those student groups. Low income students, students with disabilities are especially likely to be disadvantaged I think in some ways by the pandemic, and the necessary triaging that we've had to do educationally. If there's ways to provide additional supports for those students with the idea that we're expecting those groups to be more likely to struggle, and so we're anticipating that through additional supports proactively.

We all know from our careers and vesting time and effort to children is that you can pay for it now, or you can pay for it later. When you pay for it later, you tend to pay a lot more. When students aren't getting high quality educational experiences, when they're having difficulty accessing educational material remotely, when they're more inclined to drop out, these things tend to aggregate in terms of costs later to society. If we spent proactively and wisely in investments in children and youth now, we're likely to avoid later costs and experience greater economic productivity as a result. I would just encourage us to look at this as a necessary time for investment, particularly in those student groups that we should be especially worried about.

*Michael:*

It's very wise words. I think it makes so much sense. Also, it came to mind as we were discussing some of the other competencies of the academic community that really could be of support to our educational partners now. As you mentioned, Paul, the local response here in the State College area school district certainly I know has leveraged some of the expertise of epidemiology in some of the teams here the Center for Infectious Disease leveraging the skill sets that academics have in other disciplines.

I also think about the benefits that could come from innovations in instructional design, especially in remote delivered curriculum, especially while that's incredibly challenging on a tailored individual basis, there certainly must be room for growth, especially in improving the hastily thrown together programs I'd imagine. There's just a couple more ideas that came to mind. Carole, are there any gaps in particular that PDE is experiencing that you'd like to bring up that maybe academic partners could be supportive of?

*Carole:*

I think we highlighted many of the challenges through this conversation. Areas we always are trying to enhance is the instructional delivery in this new environment. The PTTN website, as Adrienne mentioned, Pennsylvania Training and Technical Network, has an array of resources for students with disabilities, educators with disabilities, and families who are just a critical partner in this process who are struggling as much as the educators. The PTTN website provides instructional supports as well as live coaching for families and educators. In particular areas such as behavior, autism, or a dyslexia pilot, so the gaps pretty much are revealed. It's just the more there is to help fill them during this transition is critical, and we keep adding to that system. All of the websites that Adrienne spoke to provide a plethora of supports to fill the instructional gap.

We are continuing to work on the internet capacity across the Commonwealth in areas where children are having difficulty even accessing cable television. We have an initiative where the intermediate units are working with families and PBS stations to provide school in a bag, which includes antennas, and resources, and Raspberry Pis, so that they can go into the home. A Raspberry Pi is a piece of technology that can simulate the online experience offline. It can go into the home, have all the resources that the school has loaded on to it. Multiple students in multiple grade levels from the same school system can log onto it, do their work.

Then it can connect to internet and upload all of their work.

*Michael:* Thank you all so much for really an excellent conversation. I do wanna give you all an opportunity for any closing comments or future oriented food for thought as we go forward. Carole, any ideas, thoughts going forward?

*Carole:* I just thank you very much for inviting me to be here, and the attention that you're giving to a very important cause. Something that we're very passionate about is the education of students with disabilities. I appreciate you putting this at the front of this conversation because these students need a little bit more, a little bit extra. Certainly, we can't forget about them during this transition. Adrienne and Paul's perspectives are really spot on regarding their advice, and what we need to do to continue to improve the outcome for students with disabilities, and not allow them to suffer unintended consequences of this situation.

*Paul:* I would just like to applaud Carole and her staff, and really all the teachers and parents who are trying to navigate this just extraordinarily challenging time. If we can do our best to think creatively and also in anticipatory manner about how to best help those most at risk, I think it will have many returns to both the individual, the child, their families, and our society. Providing those extra supports to children that we know are struggling and would benefit, I think are investments well made from my perspective.

*Adrienne:* Yeah. I just wanna echo everything Paul said. I completely agree with. I wanna thank Carole. I know that you've spent a lot of time working on those resources for parents, the websites that you've put together, the guidance especially for students with disabilities in schools navigating IEPs at the beginning of the year and how to

evaluate and monitor what's been going on in the summer. I would say that I have some hopes moving forward. I hope that we are able to use this time as an opportunity for increased partnership, both at a university research level partnering increasingly with local schools.

As this is an evidence impact podcast, I hope we're able to forge these connections and move forward with them in the future. I also hope that, as Carole said, there's a really gargantuan effort going on by not only educators but parents. Everyone's lives have been disrupted. Everyone is rising to the challenge in a pretty inspiring way in many cases. I hope that we use this as an opportunity for parents and educators to increasingly partner, and to work together with empathy and understanding, and that those connections that are formed now continue in the future. It's important for everybody. It's especially important for kids with disabilities.

As Paul mentioned, kids with disabilities who might experience other disadvantage beyond just having special learning needs. I wanna thank, Michael, you for having us on this podcast. I think this is an awesome opportunity to spread our expertise to a wider audience. Thank you for having us.

*Michael:*

Of course, thank you so much. I would like, again, to thank my guests today, Carole Clancy who serves as the Director of the Bureau of Special Education at the Pennsylvania Department of Education, Dr. Paul Morgan, Professor of Education and Education Policy Studies, and the Director of the Center for Educational Disparities Research at Penn State University, and Dr. Adrienne Woods, post-doctoral research scholar at the Educational Policy Department at Penn State as well. And finally, I'd like to thank Melissa Krug, our producer of the Evidence-to-Impact podcast for all her hard work.

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