

Lauren Clouser [00:00:06]:

Welcome to the LDA podcast, a series by the Learning Disabilities Association of America. Our podcast is dedicated to exploring topics of interest to educators, individuals with learning disabilities, parents, and professionals to work towards our goal of creating a more equitable world. Hi, everyone. Welcome to the LDA podcast. I'm here today with Hannah Blumenfeld-Love, the program manager of the DC Special Education Hub. So, Hannah, thank you so much for being here. Could you tell us a little bit about yourself and why you were drawn to support the DC Special Education Hub?

Hannah Blumenfeld-Love [00:00:40]:

Sure. So I started working in DC as a middle school English teacher right out of college, and I really almost immediately fell in love with special education. I love truly being able to support kids on a unique individual level. I love the creativity that comes out of it, and making sure that education is really meeting them where they are and with what their needs are. I saw some really incredible growth in students when they were matched with the right supports. And, unfortunately, I also saw the frustrations that came when students weren't matched with the right supports. I also saw that this wasn't unique to my classroom. It wasn't unique to my school.

Hannah Blumenfeld-Love [00:01:29]:

So I was really thrilled when I found the opportunity to build the DC Special Education Hub.

Lauren Clouser [00:01:35]:

Absolutely. And then how did you draw on your background of what you saw and what you experienced? How did that impact your work at the Special Education Hub?

Hannah Blumenfeld-Love [00:01:44]:

I always approach the work that we do from a place of when I was a special education teacher. What resources did I wish I had to share with families? As a teacher, I received training before I entered the special education classroom. And once I was there, I received coaching and feedback. But parents were just sort of dropped straight in, and expected to participate to the same degree, but without any of those supports. That can make special education feel off balance at best, and it can make it feel adversarial at worst. So when I decided to leave the classroom, I knew I wanted to do something to bridge that gap and make sure that families really felt confident in taking their seat at that table as experts in their child.

Lauren Clouser [00:02:36]:

Absolutely. Well, and then could you tell us more about how the DC Special Education Hub helps to serve that goal?

Hannah Blumenfeld-Love [00:02:44]:

So we are an initiative of the DC Office of the Ombudsman for Public Education. And the Ombudsman works as an impartial third party in resolving questions and concerns having to do with all things public education in DC. The office has always received a significant number of

special education cases. Because special education is so individualized and so complex, often there are lots of questions and concerns that come out of it naturally. But we really saw a significant increase in special education related questions and concerns with the start of the pandemic. During remote learning, families were really seeing their students learn in a way that they hadn't been able to see before. And a lot of questions came out of that. Families of students who already received special education services had real questions about how are those services being implemented, what are the long term impacts of remote learning for my kid.

Hannah Blumenfeld-Love [00:03:49]:

This is a difficult time for everyone, as I'm sure we all experienced, starting in 2020, but particularly, for kids who already may have additional support needs. Families of general education students, though, were also noticing things they hadn't seen before about how their students learn, and they were looking for a place to start exploring the possibility that their student may need more supports than they previously thought. So in getting all of that from families and seeing this really, really increased need in the district, the office of the Ombudsman For Public Education founded the DC Special Education Hub in 2022 to make sure we were directly specializing in serving families with special education questions and concerns no matter where they are in the process, whether they are just starting out, or if they're years in but looking for new resources or new answers to questions they maybe didn't have before.

Lauren Clouser [00:04:56]:

So in addition to answering questions, what are some of the resources that the DC Special Education Hub offers?

Hannah Blumenfeld-Love [00:05:03]:

We support families in 3 main ways. The first is that one on one support which we offer through our hotline, email, and our web contact form. But we also provide in person and online trainings on top special education topics, like the eligibility process or what discipline rights does a special education student have? What do supports look like for students who are struggling in math? Whatever it may be. And we offer printed and digital resources. And right now, we're at 11 different languages. Through this, we're really able to translate the enormous body of special education policies and information in a way that makes it accessible for everyone, regardless of how much or how little experience they have with education or disability.

Lauren Clouser [00:05:52]:

Well, what are some of the most common requests or questions that you get? I know you had mentioned there was an uptick during the pandemic. Are you still seeing a lot of the same sorts of questions? Have things sort of moved on?

Hannah Blumenfeld-Love [00:06:04]:

I think we're seeing similar questions, although they might sound a little different than they did back in 2022 or 2021. The most common questions we receive are still from families who just wanna know where to start. They've noticed something that they're not sure about, but they

don't even know who to contact. They don't know what to say. And so they're looking for support and really navigating that initial first step. There are a lot of different people that may be saying a lot of different things, mostly trying to be helpful, but it can be really, really overwhelming when you're just starting to explore what a new diagnosis or potential diagnosis might mean for your child. Other than that, families primarily just want a better understanding of the services that are out there and how to ensure their students are receiving the best possible programming for their needs. I think there's always a little bit of worry that, oh, there may actually be the perfect thing for my kid, and I just don't know it exists.

Hannah Blumenfeld-Love [00:07:14]:

One example of that is with dyslexia. Dyslexia has been a huge topic in DC for the past few years and families really want to better understand, number 1, what dyslexia is, because there is a lot of misinformation and confusion out there around what dyslexia even is or looks like in the first place. And also how students with dyslexia are supported so that they really can best advocate for their children's needs.

Lauren Clouser [00:07:44]:

Absolutely. Well, and could you speak a little bit more about how this access to knowledge and resources about special education, how this knowledge is really power, and why is it so important for parents and caregivers to be armed with this information?

Hannah Blumenfeld-Love [00:07:59]:

At the beginning of all of our trainings I always share that special education is, at its core, designed to be a collaborative effort. That is part of really the DNA of special education as well as part of the law. Each person on the team, whether that's teachers or specialists or caregivers or even the student themselves, bring vital expertise and a really unique perspective to the table. It's so important that caregivers feel confident and equipped to fully take that rightful seat at the table and to understand the value of what they do bring. While a parent may not be a reading expert or a school psychologist, they are still an expert in their child and bring a unique perspective that the other people at that table just don't see in the same way. So when they do that, that really enriches the experience for everyone, and it undoubtedly improves outcomes for students.

Lauren Clouser [00:09:04]:

Absolutely. But what are some of the main challenges that can hinder parents and caregivers from accessing this information? I know we talked about how parents are just sort of dropped into the middle of everything.

Hannah Blumenfeld-Love [00:09:15]:

One point really is not having a starting point that they feel like they can trust. Particularly for families just starting out, they may not even know who the special education point of contact is for their school. Often that is something that may not be shared as clearly with families or it may be, you know, on page 58 of the handbook. And in cases where things may have gotten

contentious, they also might not feel confident in information coming from the school alone. They may be looking for something else or someone else to let them know, hey, you're on the right track, or yes, what they're sharing with you is absolutely true.

Hannah Blumenfeld-Love [00:09:56]:

There's also a lot of misinformation out there, between cultural stigma, which can really discourage families from engaging with special education at all, or resources that intentionally or not are sharing out of date or incorrect or confusing information. Families can feel incredibly discouraged and they may be put off of special education altogether. These issues also become even truer, we found, in our work, for families who speak a language other than English at home. There is a serious lack right now of quality multilingual resources, and families are even more likely to be hesitant to reach out to staff directly. Those are really the top places where we see some barriers that hinder parents and caregivers from accessing the information that they have a right to.

Lauren Clouser [00:11:02]:

Well and how can we go about making this information more easily digestible, more accessible for parents? How can we make this a less intimidating process for parents and caregivers so they can become involved in the process?

Hannah Blumenfeld-Love [00:11:18]:

Absolutely. Schools have to be really thoughtful about how they break down barriers to access, and they have to ensure special education teachers and support staff are given the time and the resources they need to truly center family engagement in their work. So often I know I felt it as a teacher. There are a thousand and one things on your plate, and something does tend to fall through the cracks. So it's important to make sure that teachers really have that built into their daily roles. That can look like a special education specific welcome packet at the beginning of the year that shows families what to expect. Here's when you're gonna get IEP progress reports. Here's how we'll reach out to you about meetings.

Hannah Blumenfeld-Love [00:12:03]:

Here's who to contact if you have questions. It can also look like training staff in how to be really thoughtful and truly break down IEP goals and present levels of performance into clear accessible language, instead of those acronyms and jargon that we as special education professionals can so often fall into. The most important thing though is really just about building relationships and trust between school teams and caregivers so that families feel how much their input is valued and needed.

Lauren Clouser [00:12:02]:

Absolutely. Well and then before we wrap up, Hanna, is there any last thoughts that you wanted to end with?

Hannah Blumenfeld-Love [00:12:46]:

I think the thing that I've learned the most through all of this is that there's so many people out there supporting students with disabilities, and we all, at the end of the day, are working to do right by kids. And so it is just so important that we're all coming with that mindset and really looking to engage everyone at the table in the conversation.

Lauren Clouser [00:13:15]:

Absolutely. Well, Hannah, thank you so much for your essential work, and, thank you again for being on the podcast. We loved having you.

Hannah Blumenfeld-Love [00:13:21]:

Thank you so much.

Lauren Clouser [00:13:29]:

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