The Think Inclusive Podcast

Season 9, Episode 5

Michael McSheehan | How MTSS and UDL Fit Into Inclusive Education

Tim Villegas (00:00:00):

There are times when an interview is just so good that it's almost impossible to find what to edit out or leave in. And this is one of those times. Earlier this year in March, we published the unedited version of our interview with author of a "Punished by Rewards," Alfie Kohn. And to date, it has been the most listened to episode of the year. And I think there's a reason for that. A lot of you like longer podcast episodes. So for today's podcast with Michael McSheehan, we're going to do something a little different. This podcast exists to build bridges between families, educators, and disability rights advocates to create a shared understanding of inclusive education and what inclusion looks like in the real world. To find out more about who we are and what we do, check us out at thinkinclusive.us, or on the socials: Facebook, Instagram, or Twitter.

Tim Villegas (00:01:06):

Also, take our podcast listener survey. Your responses will help us develop a better podcast experience. Go to bit.ly/TIPodcastSurvey to submit your responses. We would really appreciate it. Today on the podcast, we interview systems change expert Michael McSheehan. We talked about what started him on his journey for advocating for inclusive education, his work with SWIFT schools, the connections between multi-tiered systems of support and universal design for learning. And if he agrees with the statement "inclusion done badly is still better than segregation." His answers might surprise you. We're so glad you're listening. And now our interview with Michael McSheehan.

Tim Villegas (00:02:03):

Okay, so I'm going to go ahead and just do an intro and then we'll get right in. So today on the podcast we have Michael McSheehan, who is the owner and lead technical assistance provider at Evolve and Effect LLC, assisting education agencies to evolve their systems with focus and utilize teaching and learning practices that result in a positive effect for students. Michael currently works around the country, assisting schools, districts, state departments of education, to improve education for all students and implement MTSS and UDL. Michael's interest in school and district improvement began with learners with significant disability labels and has evolved through his collaboration with other leaders. Welcome to the think inclusive podcast, Michael.

Michael McSheehan (00:02:55):

Thanks for having me, Tim. I'm very excited to be here.

Tim Villegas (00:02:58):

Likewise, we are. We're excited to have you on. So there's so many things I want to ask you, Michael.

Michael McSheehan (00:03:06):

Just jump right in, Tim.

Tim Villegas (00:03:08):

But I think the first thing I want to know is, you know, you've been advocating for inclusive education for a long time. So, you know, what has your journey been like as an educator and an inclusive education advocate? Have you always had this vision for inclusive education like you do now? Like tell us a little bit about your journey.

Michael McSheehan (00:03:36):

Okay. you know, it all started in one class in undergraduate. When I was taking my first intro to exceptionality class at the university of New Hampshire, gosh, now 35 plus years ago. And you know, there I sat in this class was my first introduction to people with disabilities. And the professor in the class was really good at bringing in guest people to teach the course. And we had been reading about people with significant disabilities, but I never met anybody with a significant disability. So I had no preconceived idea of what things were going to be like as we were starting to learn about people with significant disabilities until one class, when the professor had a guest come in and I saw him waiting to come into class and he had a wheelchair and he had a person supporting him and he had a guide dog and I could see physically, he looked different and I thought, aha, this is a person with a significant disability. I'm finally gonna meet somebody. And I thought at that time that she would give the lecture about him. Not for one second when I laid eyes on him did I think he was about to give the course lecture. And sure enough, he rolled in and he pulled out this big green plastic letter and word board because he made sounds, but most people could not understand what he was saying. And he proceeded to give the lecture. And, Tim, I was blown away. I was beside myself. I didn't know what to do. All I knew was whatever this thing was, that was happening in front of me. It was something I had to get my head around. And how is it? I'm about 20 years old and I've never had this experience. I was, I was upset.

Michael McSheehan (00:05:49):

I was like, how, how have I not ever met anybody with a disability before? So that the beginning of my journey and then trying to understand how that happened. How did I not know people with disabilities. And did some as I proceeded in my coursework I came across this legal case called the Timmy W case from the late eighties. And it's based on this town, Rochester, New Hampshire, and that's my hometown. And Rochester, New Hampshire had gone to the courts to say that Timmy W was too severely disabled to benefit from public education. And so that let me know, you know, my hometown, my school system where I grew up had invested in excluding Timmy W and really fought through a series of court cases to keep him out of school. So that helped me understand why I'd never met anybody.

Michael McSheehan (00:06:53):

My school was segregating kids with significant disabilities, and I just felt in my bones that that was wrong. It was wrong for Timmy W, it was wrong for me. It was just wrong, just all kinds of wrong. So, you know, as I did my first intro classes, I had professors who said, this is how life should be. People should be included in their neighborhood schools. So I didn't, as I learned about education, that was the message that I learned in that made perfectly good sense to me. So from that point forward, all of my work has somehow hunkered in on that question of, are we including more and more kids in our neighborhood schools? I studied speech language pathology. I wanted to be a speech pathologist when I

grew up. And I after my experience in that classroom, I was most interested in augmentative and alternative communication and people who were non-speaking.

Michael McSheehan (00:07:57):

And so in my graduate studies, I developed a focus on augmentative communication. And when I got out of grad school, that was the work I did was working with individuals who are non-speaking, getting communication systems in place for them, helping them get included in their neighborhood schools. And the more and more I did one kid at a time work, the more and more I saw there was a systemic problem that was happening in schools. They weren't, they weren't ready and they didn't know what to do. And, you know, I hear, I saw these great, good hearted educators and administrators and family members who wanted good things for their kids, but just didn't know how to make that happen. So that really became my focus. How do we help educators, administrators, family members make this happen in their local schools? And I've come at it from a number of different vantage points over the years from doing work in alternate assessment and, you know, student specific planning models, and then moving up to more systems change projects. And working with, you know, through one of my most recent partnerships on a systems change project situated us with the SWIFT education center.

Michael McSheehan (00:09:17):

If you're, I think that you're familiar with the SWIFT education center. And I started working with them when the center was formed and we had the great opportunity to work with five different states, 16 school districts, 64 schools around the country to look at a school wide framework to transform education, such that all kids were included in their neighborhood schools and were thriving. Right. Not just physically there, but having a sense of belonging and thriving in that, in that local environment. And so that pushed me quite honestly, because I had kind of always with the one student at a time work, I was always pushing for more and more time in the general education classroom. And the experience with the SWIFT education center allowed me to step back to say, well, if we rearranged some of these school-wide structures, all kids might learn in a variety of places.

Michael McSheehan (00:10:18):

And if everybody's learning in a variety of places, then all of those places are general education places. If we get rid of those labels, and we just look at what space, resources, materials we have available, it's a different conversation than is my child in the general ed, the general ed classroom, you know, 80 plus percent of the day. It becomes, how are we all structured for all kids to learn in a variety of ways in places? So short answer: Yes, this has kind of always been my vision in my work and that has evolved as I get new understandings.

Tim Villegas (00:10:53):

Sure. I'm glad you brought up SWIFT because I remember as being a special education teacher and learning about SWIFT and kind of not really being able to wrap my head around what was happening. I just knew that something exciting was happening. Right. And I, I remember when I was in the classroom, just saying, you have to look at SWIFT, you have to see what this, what what's happening here and, and, and all of this. But I did have questions. I'm not sure if I actually put this in here, but let's just, let's just run with it.

Michael McSheehan (00:11:31):

Let's roll with it.

Tim Villegas (00:11:33):

So, as you were implementing in all these different schools, how different was the it to implement? Because, you know, traditional, how we've been doing it for years is IEP placement, you know, 80%, right. We're looking at all these numbers and stuff. When you were implementing SWIFT, was that just not like, did you have to work within the constraints of IDEA or was it something else? Did you like kind of transcend that? Does that make sense?

Michael McSheehan (00:12:26):

I think I understand your question. We can have some back and forth as I answer it. And let me know if I'm, I'm giving you what you're asking about here. You know, IDEA stands as it is. We, we, we did not have permission to like rewrite federal law while we're doing this project.

Tim Villegas (00:12:42):

Oh darn.

Michael McSheehan (00:12:43):

Um th that unfortunately was, you know, just not within our, our abilities. Although we did push to say that, you know, the braiding of a variety of funding sources and the, the braiding of policy and centering on good general education is important in the work. So we were in a constant conversation with policy folks about that. I think what implementing the, with the work of the SWIFT center helped me get my head around was the importance of coordinating across state district and school arenas. That it is difficult for an individual school to transform if the other schools in the district aren't also open to that change, or at least willing to create space for that change.

Michael McSheehan (00:13:39):

And it's challenging for a district to do something very different in a state if there's not again, support and space for that, that difference. So I think one of my big takeaways in terms of kind of shifting my understanding, evolving my efforts around inclusive education was the importance of coordinating across all of those arenas of work. It did not move me away from the importance of kids with disabilities being in general education settings. I have seen people. So let me provide this context, the SWIFT centers framework at the time that I was working with them, I, I can't speak to their most recent work, but for the five years, that six years that I worked with them, the framework has MTSS multi-tiered system of support as the kind of heart of the instructional anchor for the framework, with other domains of work like administrative leadership and district policies, staffing arrangements, all of those things, supporting the work in MTSS with MTSS at the heart of it.

Michael McSheehan (00:14:58):

I continue to see that if students were spending tremendous amounts of time outside of general ed settings and the engagement with good high quality general instruction, they're not making the same kind of progress that they would otherwise make. So it reinforced for me that any additive model of education, where everybody gets this first best teach, and then we provide something in addition to that has to hold true that all kids are engaged in that first best instruction or else you're trying to just intervene your way, intervene the kid out of some kind of struggle without maintaining the base of support for learning. And that learning is not just about the content standards. It's about being part of a community of learners. And that was definitely reinforced for me in the SWIFT work. That if we don't preserve that sense that I have of, I belong in this school, I belong in this classroom, right. When I arrive

in the morning, I don't first go to some other classroom and then kind of drop in and out of this general ed classroom, I'm a core member of that general classroom that has to be preserved. I may have gotten off track from what your question was.

Tim Villegas (00:16:27):

Yeah, I think you answered it more eloquently than I certainly asked the question. My other question because you kind of talked about MTSS. Well, let me ask it that at the end, because what I want to do is, since, since we rolled, we kind of talked about MTSS is how you can help explain how MTSS and UDL fit together because some people may not know that they do. You know, they may have heard of MTSS and heard of UDL, but what's the connection?

Michael McSheehan (00:17:23):

It's a, it's a great question. We have three hours for this podcast, right

Tim Villegas (00:17:27):

Yeah right. Three minutes.

Michael McSheehan (00:17:30):

I'll try to do the short version three minutes for this answer. So this is, and I want to be very transparent here. My understanding of UDL has dramatically changed over the past few years under the mentorship of Loui Lord Nelson, who is just a universal design for learning guru. And she and I have been working together on how do these two things truly braid together. And so MTSS and UDL are both frameworks for teaching and learning. They both provide a structure, a set of guiding beliefs and principles for teaching and learning. They provide a set of tools for learner and teacher success. UDL centers on variability. The kind of acceptance that the notion of average is a myth is often said within the UDL community. It centers on student voice and it centers on removing barriers, right? So if I expect all kids will learn X in this lesson, the end of the lesson, when I ask, did some students not learn that or did some students not fully engage or have a sense that they even belonged in this lesson? Then I, as the teacher backup and I ask, okay, well, what were the barriers?

Michael McSheehan (00:19:04):

Let me, let me remove those barriers. And the more barriers I remove, the easier it is for all of my kids to engage and learn. MTSS centers on preventing failure, preventing a struggle, and having a rapid response. If students look like they are at risk of struggling. So MTSS is going to organize from the beginning to say, let's get some kind of a measure at of all of our learners in different areas, academics, behavior, social, emotional learning, who might be at risk of some kind of a struggle here. And let's get some things in place for them quickly. You bring those two things together. If you truly braid them well, you can have a system for teaching and learning that is very proactive and very responsive to the true variability of learners that we have in our neighborhood schools, where you're not differentiating after the fact, but you're always asking the design question upfront over and over again.

Michael McSheehan (00:20:17):

How can I design my school? How can I design the environment for teaching and learning? How can I design this lesson with this curriculum, the goals, the methods, the materials, in a way that all of my students will be able to engage? And that means as you'll hear with kind of quick UDL lingo, creating multiple ways for students to engage in learning, providing multiple ways for students to take in and

receive information and providing multiple ways for them to then demonstrate their learning and their understanding for you. And then continue to up the game with more options based on who your learners are. So in short, UDL and MTSS both bring a framework for teaching and learning. They both provide a set of tools to educators. I think of UDL as kind of the foundation for the house, right? We're built on understanding the true variability of all of our learners and centering on student voice. And then MTSS are like the walls in the rooms and the elevator that we might need for some. Like it's then the structures for decision-making about how to carry out that vision of centering on students' voice. Does that help?

Tim Villegas (00:21:40):

I like that. Kayla, can you make that into an infographic?

Michael McSheehan (00:21:51):

And I want to acknowledge, like, I've seen places that are fully implementing MTSS, like to the T right. They've got their screening, they've got their collaborative teams, they've got their database decision-making, they're monitoring. And students are excluded. Students with disabilities are excluded from the system. I don't see that as much with schools who are fully implementing UDL, I think in part, because of that centering on students' voice and the importance of all those voices being in the system. I don't know exactly why, but I still see kids excluded in schools that are doing MTSS.

Tim Villegas (00:22:38):

I mean, yes, absolutely. Do you have a sense of like how many schools, you know, are implementing? And I'm not saying the fidelity or anything. Cause I mean, there's a whole like, you know, level, right. But just, just like, what do you have an idea? Like even if it's like the majority, I mean, I would guess the majority of schools are not implementing MTSS. Although I would say this is just, I don't know if this is true or not, but I would say that the majority of states at least have MTSS in there somewhere, right. That like, Hey, we're doing MTSS.

Michael McSheehan (00:23:33):

And that's where it's hard to answer the question too. Because there have been a wide array of ways that MTSS has been described across the country. And because we don't, you know, we're not all using the same ways of measuring it. It's hard to say who's really doing it or not. I see particular practices that are very widespread. So the notion of trying to get an early measure on how all kids are doing at the beginning of the year, this thing we've called screening which needs to be a screening process, not just a screening assessment. Like I see that very widespread. I see so many more schools looking closely at data now to make decisions which is exciting to see those two things so widespread. I still do not see the level of collaboration that is required for full implementation of MTSS. I don't see it in leadership teams. I don't see it in teacher teams in the majority of schools that might say that they're do doing MTSS. I put that in air quotes.

Tim Villegas (00:25:01):

So yeah, I mean well the collaborate like screening is not easy, but it, it seems easier than having to figure out how teachers are going to collaborate with each other. Right. Because you have, you know, screen there's tools that schools use like.

Michael McSheehan (00:25:28):

Technical things you can put in place that will make it look like we are screening

Michael McSheehan (00:25:34):

The screening measure in reading, we have a screening measure in math, we must be doing screening. Right, right. In the same way that you can say, well, we have all of these times for teams to meet doesn't mean that those teams are truly collaborating. Right. So I administer a screening tool. Well, that's, that's great. Now what do we do with that is what matters. Right. Right. And for the kids who couldn't access that tool, how are you coming back around to get a picture of where they're at? Right. So, and that's where we need to create protect, support, hold up, love educators and their collaboration time. We've just, you know, first place we draw from when we need time in schools, as we take away from teachers planning with one another and you know, you get a bunch of good teachers in a room, you give them the time and the space for good thinking, they're going to come up with great stuff.

Tim Villegas (00:26:35):

Right. Yeah. Teachers are amazing people,

Michael McSheehan (00:26:40):

Teachers rock.

Tim Villegas (00:26:40):

I mean, yeah, yeah. When I first was it, when I first got my first teaching job I, you know, didn't know what to expect, obviously. So, you know, being in a room with educators, some veterans, right. Everywhere I've ever been teachers are collaborators, are collaborative everywhere, you know, and, and the people get the teachers get a bad rap because of, you know, summers off and blah-blah-blah teachers unions, yada, yada, yada. Right. but there's I've met very, very, I mean the vast majority of teachers are just they're in it because they love kids. So why can't we support them to do the thing that they love. Right. yeah.

Michael McSheehan (00:27:46):

Yeah. Well, I'm going to, yeah, I'll just, okay. I'll wait for the question before I go to hat spiel. But go ahead.

Tim Villegas (00:27:54):

Well, let's okay. Let's talk about barriers. So you know, what do you think is the biggest barrier to systems change in schools?

Michael McSheehan (00:28:06):

Us.

Tim Villegas (00:28:09):

Us as in humans?

Michael McSheehan (00:28:15):

The adults that are leading the change process right now and, and you know, I'll include me right. How we're going about it, I think is part of the problem. You know, if we approach this, like we're asking a favor, will you please include this kid? We're, we're missing it, we're missing it. We need to both kind of warmly demand, but at the end of the day, expect the change. And I think we have accepted incrementalism and kind of this, well, we're not quite ready to change yet. Which means you haven't had the experience of what it feels like when you include a kid with a disability in your classroom. All the general educators I've ever worked with, once they have that first moment of, oh my gosh, I can reach Jack. Like I am now connected with Jack and Jack was a student I never knew I could connect with. That teacher's on fire for the rest of the year. They're good. They need that moment.

Michael McSheehan (00:29:20):

But if we're always in this getting ready for the change thing, and we never put the kids physically in the room, people don't get those great experiences. I mean the other piece, I would say the other big barrier, I would point to, well actually, let me fill out that to say I don't. One of the barriers is we haven't focused on general educators enough. We need to lift up general educators as leaders. There are general ed teachers who are doing amazing things, and we keep trying to come in the special ed door and we're missing it. This is a general education problem. This is not a special education problem. We need to support some, some of the great things for happening in general education and just blast them out there because there are wonderful things happening.

Michael McSheehan (00:30:12):

We're actually trying a new approach this year in New Hampshire, we've started a statewide project. Our state department of ed is behind it. And I'm partnering with a classroom teacher. He's an amazing general educator who is now an independent consultant, and we're working with 12 different schools around the state of New Hampshire, 12 different sites. Some of them will be districts. And our focus is general educators and high quality in general instruction. That's the endeavor. And it's going to result in, and the focus is how do we do high quality instruction with learners with disabilities in mind and in our classrooms, we haven't invested there well enough. I think so. And the last barrier I just want to point to is, is leadership is a huge, it's a huge barrier at the local level. Right. It takes that principal, that superintendent, that associate superintendent for curriculum and instruction, who set for teaching and learning, who says, you know, I want this to happen and to have a sustained presence with that passion and clear-headed leadership that really recognizes when it's time to transform the system, versus when it's time to improve the system and to have the, the wherewithal, the will to dismantle stuff, as much as they want to build stuff.

Michael McSheehan (00:31:42):

When there are strong clear-headed leaders who have a sustained presence in a school or a district who get it and are moving, it's more likely to happen. But when we have turnover with those leaders and we have to say goodbye to them from our districts or our schools, things fall apart.

Tim Villegas (00:31:59):

Hmm. So what about this idea that inclusion that's done badly is better than segregation. So I think this fits with what we just talked about because you, we have situations where, you know, for whatever reason we, you know, whether it's a family or an educator who is just like, this is happening, right. But people aren't ready and it's a, it's a horrible experience for everyone. And then that gets labeled as this

is inclusion and it didn't work. Right. So is it really that that situation is better than if the student would have just been in the segregated, special ed classroom,

Michael McSheehan (00:32:58):

This is a hard question. I don't like this, Tim. I Do not like this question. It's right in the heart of, of the real challenge here. No, inclusion done badly is not better than segregation. And in my opinion, and let me give you at least one student example as to why I now believe that

Tim Villegas (00:33:26):

I like stories.

Michael McSheehan (00:33:28):

And I got to find it in a pseudonym for him. We'll call him Andy. I was working with Andy two years ago in his local K-eight school, rural schools, small, small overall student population, maybe three, 400 students, K to eight, right? So not big. And Andy was having the series of meltdowns every day. His sensory needs, he was getting totally overloaded. His attention needs were not being met. Quite frankly, some of the teaching wasn't all that gripping, shall we say, and was not based on his interests. And at the age that he was, his interests were really important to him. And if you're not on my interests, I'm not sure that I'm with you. And when that would happen, he would start to act out. Things would get thrown. People would get hit. And the school community really rallied.

Michael McSheehan (00:34:38):

I mean, they tried everything that they had the capacity to try. They had limits on their capacity. That was more I wanted them to do that were different things I wanted to help them do. And they, they just weren't positioned to do them. So by the end of probably a good five month, six month process of trying stuff out, Andy was going into school every day and ended up at some portion of the day in the conference, teachers' conference room secluded from everybody or sent home. Which meant every day, Andy was getting traumatized again, right? Every day he was being told you can't make it here just by the sheer action of needing to keep him and others physically safe. So, you know, if I have to trade off repeated trauma and harm for a child with a separate place for that child, at least to get them out of crisis, I'm going to go with the separate place.

Michael McSheehan (00:35:45):

We found a separate special ed school for Andy. We visited several. And there were several, there was no way I would have allowed him to, to enter. We found one that where the, the educators, I think really got his needs and his dynamics. And last, it took us a few months to find a place and make the transition. Of course then we had a little pandemic, so he was on remote learning. Anyway, when they came back he started back in late January, early February to in-person. Since that time he reports loving school. He's happy when he comes home, he's developing friends, he's being invited to meet up with his friends. He's grown two years in reading achievement levels. He's gone up two grade levels in reading. That's huge for him. Now, as we've entered this year, we've put on the table: If he ocntinues to thrive in this way, we need to have a conversation about a transition plan for him to come back to the neighborhod school. And everybody's okay with that being on the table, but it needs to be really thoughtful. So, yes, I think if you're in crisis, there are times when you've got to get away and you've got to get yourself out of crisis and the family needs to get out of crisis as well. And then we work on doing it better next time.

Tim Villegas (00:37:28):

I think, I think that's what people need to hear, Michael. I think that's what educators need to hear. Especially the ones that like my, like myself when I was, when I was a, a teacher in a school that, you know, still had special education classrooms, which by the way, I think I have this in one of our questions, the, the majority of schools are that way, you know? So let me get to that in just a second. But I do think that also people who are hesitant to buy in to inclusive education, or even even think about what would it look like for students with disabilities, you know, any kind of disability to be included in, in a regular classrooms in order for them to even think about it, it immediately goes to, well, what about Andy? It doesn't work for Andy, you know, but I think that, and I don't want to put words in your mouth, Michael, but I think that what Andy experienced, right, wasn't actually inclusion. It was, they had Andy in that class, but Andy wasn't supported.

Michael McSheehan (00:38:55):

No it, and, and there was, there was there wasn't pressure in the system of education to say to that school, you have to figure this out. You have to create a safe space in your building where kids can go and unpack if they need to, right. To, to deescalate, to regroup, to, you know, just take the time that I need. He needed that safe space. He also needed certain environments that were structured differently for him. And there, there wasn't the pressure in the system to force the school, to have to go to that next level. They had the staff that they had, and that's all the staff that they had. Now, you know, sure the family could have, and, and trust me, the state disability rights organization was involved in this situation. And we had conversations of do we press this from a legal perspective and forced the school to actually put in place the supports that would be a movement toward inclusive education. Well, yes, we would love to put the pressure on the system and do that change work. Meanwhile, we have Andy here and Monday's coming and he, he needs to have a place where he can feel safe and connected for learning. So, you know, I think the pressures on the system are still not strong enough. Clear enough. I, I think I may have gone off from your question, but I was liking what I was saying, so that's happy to go.

Tim Villegas (00:40:43):

Did I have that question? Maybe I just thought I, I wrote it down. Oh yeah. You know, it's here. Is it? So it, the question is, is it fair to say that the majority of school districts are not implementing inclusive practices?

Michael McSheehan (00:40:56):

Yes. That is a fair statement. The majority of school districts in the United States are not implementing inclusive practices and that, and I would tag on there, especially for the kids with the most significant disabilities, right. That population of learners, kids with autism, down syndrome any kid who needs augmentative and alternative communication, right. They're the fastest to get pulled out if they've ever had the opportunity to be in and to be with other classmates without disabilities. Yes. I think it's fair to say the majority of places are doing that. That would actually be a kind way to say it.

Tim Villegas (00:41:35):

Okay. Yeah. Well then here, here's a follow-up to that if, if this is the state of education and the vast majority of, so like people like you and I we're way in the minority here, like we're just, you know, it's a, it's a small world that we live in. So if that's the case right. Then how, like we, we've made very little progress, we've made progress, you know certainly, you know, because of a case law and advocacy and

in systems change and everything like that. But you know, what's the next step here, Michael, like, where do we need to go in order to really make change?

Michael McSheehan (00:42:36):

Oh, if I were only in control of the world. You know, part of this is a willingness to acknowledge all the things that we have tried to support the change process, right? There have been tens of millions of dollars poured into projects, federally at state levels to help schools and districts move this work forward. And we still have a really short list of places in this country that we would say are truly fully built on inclusive principles and practices. And I think they're there. I think that there's a couple of things that we could do differently going forward. And I want to be cautious here to say that I'm going to speak from a system and a policy perspective. This is not about individual teachers, because I think individual teachers given the right supports can do incredible things. The system is fundamentally broken.

Michael McSheehan (00:43:47):

The policy is fundamentally problematic, right? Our current policy in IDEA, which is the one that we continue to anchor on in this conversation is civil rights legislation. And so often in education, we do not actually interact with that law as civil rights law. We interact with it as kind of educational guidance for kids with disabilities, and that, that needs to shift. And I think part of the shift of how we view that policy and act on that policy comes one from changing part of the, where we have this enforcement of a continuum of placements or a perception of continuUM of placements that have to be explored and available. And we don't have, we have insufficient accountability for actually trying supplementary aids and services in the general ed setting before placing anybody else out of that classroom. So I think there's some policy changes that have to happen with IDEA. That said, if we glance over to Brown versus the board of education, when that, when those in that time period, we weren't saying to teachers, are you ready to teach a student of color? How can we help you get ready to teach students of color? We said, this is a civil rights issue. These students will now have access to these schools. We changed all kinds of things to say, this is going to happen. Strong, clear message to all schools and districts across the country. This is going to happen to the point where, and I don't remember which branch of the armed services, this was the national guard I think was called out to say, we're sending in the national guard to make sure that kids have access.

Michael McSheehan (00:46:01):

That's really different than how we've approached inclusive education. We've tried to help people slowly change and, you know, build their ability to teach kids with disabilities. And I think we need greater pressure on the system than that. You know, financial incentives are fine. That's fine. You can fiscally incentivize including kids with disabilities, but if you don't back it up with no, really, we mean you're going to have to teach kids with disabilities and that they have to have experienced general ed settings first. If we don't have that level of accountability, it we're going to be right where we are now 20 years from now, right? The flat line of exclusion for kids with the most significant disabilities will be maintained. That line has not moved substantially in 20 to 30 years. Those numbers have not substantially changed. So there needs to be different pressure on the system. Now, I think it's time for us to get, get mad, get loud and say, this has to shift because the current approach is insufficient. So, you know, the both hand, if you're going to have that level of accountability, then also be ready to provide support to the teachers who are going to have to make it work. Cause they can, they can do it.

Tim Villegas (00:47:32):

Oh, I can, Michael, let's start a revolution.

Michael McSheehan (00:47:37):

Well, I mean, yes, let's.

Tim Villegas (00:47:40):

I'm not, I'm not really kidding.

Michael McSheehan (00:47:43):

No, I'm with you, I'm with you. And I'll, you know, and I will gladly show up on Monday with this school and roll up my sleeves and help make it work. Right. Like I think with any level of. If we're going to up the level of accountability, we've gotta be ready to up the level of support and I think we can do it.

Tim Villegas (00:48:01):

Absolutely. so let's get about 10 more minutes. So one more question, and then I want to know, I want to ask the fun question. Cause I like to, I like it's, it's my show. So I get to do things. All right. So we can, do you have an example of, you know, what an inclusive school looks like? Feels like, smells like, kind of stuff like that.

Michael McSheehan (00:48:37):

Yes.

Tim Villegas (00:48:39):

Doesn't have to be real. I guess.

Michael McSheehan (00:48:42):

I like real, like real, all right. Let's stay with real. You know, would that question, I, I struggled to want to like describe it or put it in words because I think it's a much more rich experience to see it. Right. So my first part of my response is to say, check out the videos that are available online that have I think been really well, well produced to capture what it could actually look like and what it has actually looked like in schools in the United States in really different states around our country. So there are three SWIFT education center videos that I will point to: the together video, the whatever it takes video, and the SWIFT features at Henderson school video. The first two videos together and whatever it takes, capture classroom experiences, school-wide experiences in schools from Maryland, Mississippi, Oregon, really different places that are making great things happen for kids.

Michael McSheehan (00:49:55):

Right. See you, you see, and you, you feel in the videos, the level of investment that leadership has, right? You see the assistant superintendent in Cecil county, Maryland say, you know, this is the right thing to do. And when we bring kids together and support them well and support the teachers, well, great things happen when we hold high expectations, kids reach up to them. You see a building level principal who says my guiding thought is if it's good for kids, then we should be doing it. Right. You, you hear the voices, you see kids saying things like one of the middle school students in that same video who

says segregating kids with autism is like apartheid. If this were, if this were a school only for kids with autism, I would feel really sad. So when a kid with autism tells you, I want to be included, listen.

Michael McSheehan (00:50:59):

And I think that's part of what an inclusive school looks like. It's listening really hard and very carefully. And then building and rebuilding the teaching and learning structures to respond to the students that are in front of them. Right. We, you see in those videos, a real strong sense of community. You see learners coming and going from a variety of places in the building. You see, not only people allowing kids to learn in different ways or to learn at different rates, but celebrating that. So first I would watch those videos if I were anybody in your, in your audience right now to, to get a feel for what that looks like and, and, and feels like and, and what's possible at the teacher level at the student friendship level, as well as at that upper administrative level.

Tim Villegas (00:52:06):

I like we'll put those in the show notes.

Michael McSheehan (00:52:08):

That'd be great.

Tim Villegas (00:52:11):

And direct links to them. And they're great videos.

Michael McSheehan (00:52:16):

They really are. You know, those three videos together are probably the three that I go to the most. When people say, what, what can this look like? And then allowing them to, yeah, but the video, right. To like ask all your hard questions, because I, we often will shut down the hard conversations in the change process. And those hard conversations are the best place for growth. Right? So I have some New Hampshire educators who have said to me, well, you know, we just can't afford to do inclusive education. And I queue up the SWIFT film where I've got a Mississippi principal talking about their annual income of around $19,000 a year per family, and how they're making it work in Mississippi. And I'm like, okay, so now let's talk about how you use your resources here in New Hampshire. And, and tell me what, what would be, what, what is it you think you need? And let's, let's unpack it further, right. But it's stepping into those hard conversations is sweet. That is the sweet spot for the change. Sorry, I'm going way off.

Tim Villegas (00:53:37):

No, I like it like it. Okay. Is there any, before I ask you about, you know, what kind of recharges you and stuff like that is there anything else you wanted to mention just that you're like, oh man, I really wanted to talk about that.

Michael McSheehan (00:54:02):

Just briefly, one of your questions was about why should administrators want to do this work from an, from an administrative perspective? And aside from, you know, hopefully as an administrator, you're coming to the table wanting to do well by kids. You know, I'll talk in number sense, return on investment, man. Like you're the return on your investment as a school leader with your school budget,

by building up inclusive communities in your schools and across your entire system, you're going to get so much more back than just student learning outcomes, which are also going to go up. You're going to have a community of support in your local town if you invest in school in inclusive schools. Return on investment is where it's at, administrators. Pay attention here. If you shift your resources to this value, you will get so much more back.

Tim Villegas (00:55:12):

Thank you. Thank you for bringing that up. I appreciate that. All right. So Michael, tell me what, what recharges you, what, how do you keep on going? What do you do to just, you know, bring the joy?

Michael McSheehan (00:55:33):

Yeah. quite I'll, I'll be completely honest. And I didn't actually write this in my notes in preparation for this interview. So I'm just going there with you. Quite honestly, I feel like this work for me is, is a calling. I, I love it. I get charged up by being in hard conversations. I get charged up by, you know, getting a eight o'clock at night call from a colleague across the country who needs to talk through a challenge that they're having like that, that does feed my soul because I know one more kids included. I know one more school is, is taken that step, which means one less kid is excluded and feeling alone in the world that does charge me up um. All work then aside, my family and friends rock, I love, you know, go into camp, seeing my parents sitting around, just hearing about the camp politics and the camp activity.

Michael McSheehan (00:56:40):

Like if it's playing cards with my parents, like, I love my family. I think they're great. And I have very regular time with all of my friends, even if it's over Zoom, right. I've friends that I like to have breakfast with and we'll do zoom breakfast is now and you know, you get to stay connected with folks. I also really love dancing. Anybody who knows me, knows I love dancing. Country, Western dancing in particular, two step, west coast, swing, east coast swing, line dancing, all of it. I love it. Birdwatching is another favorite thing. My house is a little tiny house with about 18 other houses in this area, but they're technically condos and we sit on about 209 acres of this great rural wooded area. And there's amazing wildlife here. And I can sit on my back deck and see a black bear, a porcupine, skunk, deer, and hundreds of different kinds of birds. And I just love sitting out there taking in the wildlife. It does it just feeds me.

Tim Villegas (00:57:52):

That sounds fantastic. Have you seen the movie "The Big Year," Michael?

Michael McSheehan (00:57:58):

I have not seen it.

Tim Villegas (00:57:59):

Oh my gosh.

Michael McSheehan (00:58:01):

Do I need to see this movie?

Tim Villegas (00:58:02):

It's about birding.

Michael McSheehan (00:58:05):

Oh, really?

Tim Villegas (00:58:05):

Yes. It has Owen Wilson. Jack Black. Is it Jack Black? I feel like it's Jack Black. Steve Martin. It's amazing.

Michael McSheehan (00:58:20):

Well the casting definitely works for me.

Tim Villegas (00:58:21):

Yeah. Yeah. You need to see it. And my wife and I saw it, I don't know, years ago and it's, it's PG. And so we were looking for a family movie one night and, and I have, I have like a, a 15, 12, and nine-year-old, and, and so, and so I like let's watch the big year, you know, and I'm fully expecting my kids to just completely lay like, oh my gosh, this meant why did they watch me and make me watch this movie, but everyone loved it and were just riveted. You need to see it. Okay. And you need to, you need to see it as someone who appreciates wildlife and birding and stuff like that. I think that you would enjoy it. There you go.

Michael McSheehan (00:59:11):

I'll add it to the list.

Tim Villegas (00:59:12):

Add to the list. Yeah. I know. We all have a long list. All right. Well, we're just about out of time. Did you want to plug anything, Michael? Like, I know you have evolve and effect, but is there, you know, how people can get ahold of you and you're on the Twitter, you know, blah, blah, blah.

Michael McSheehan (00:59:32):

I'm on Twitter @MCMcSheehan, M-C-M-C-S-H-E-E-H-A-N. Can follow me on Twitter. I am shall we say an intermittent shiny object Tweeter. So you will not find sustained tweets for me. I go through fits and spurts. I'm in the process of setting up a business Facebook page. So soon there will be an evolve and effect Facebook page. But for now you can visit the website evolve and, and spell out A-N-D, evolveandeffect.com. You can check out some videos that I'm in on that website. You can read up on some of the work that I'm doing, see where I'm going to be next. And you know, folks be on the lookout because this project that we're doing in New Hampshire, that's focused on general educators. On the other side of that project. Next June, we're going to have stories to tell, and we're going to have general educators that have great exemplars of teaching practice that we are going to hold up and shine brightly around this country.

Tim Villegas (01:00:39):

Well, we are excited to hear about that. So that sounds like Michael, you're going to be a recurring guest.

Michael McSheehan (01:00:45):

I think we see a return coming. Yes.

Tim Villegas (01:00:47):

All right. All right. Well, Michael, it was a pleasure having you on the podcast. I appreciate it. Don't so, okay. I forgot to mention this. Don't go. I'm going to sign off, but don't hang up. Yeah. Okay. Michael McSheehan, thank you for being on the think inclusive podcast. We appreciate your time.

Tim Villegas (01:01:12):

That will do it for this episode of the think inclusive podcast. Subscribe to the think inclusive podcast via apple podcast, the anchor app, Spotify, or wherever you listen to podcasts. Have a question or comment? Email us at podcast@thinkinclusive.us. We love to know that you're listening. Thank you to patrons, Veronica E, Sonya A, Pamela P, Mark C, Kathy B, and Kathleen T for their continued support of the podcast. When you become a patron, your contribution helps us with the cost of audio production, transcription, and promotion of the thinking inclusive podcast. And you could even get a shout out like the fine people we just mentioned. Go to patreon.com/thinkinclusivepodcast to become a patron today and get access to all our unedited interviews. Thank you for helping us equip more people to promote and sustain inclusive education. This podcast is a production of MCIE, where we envision a society where neighborhood schools welcome all learners and create the foundation for inclusive communities. Learn more at mcie.org. We will be back in a couple of weeks to talk with Jenna Rufo about what it means to reimagine special education. Thanks for your time and attention. Until next time. Remember inclusion always works.

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