

## NCSI Schools On The Move Podcast: Episode 2 Transcript

### Episode 2: Professional Learning Communities and Improving Outcomes for Students with Disabilities

#### **Matt Navo (00:01):**

Welcome to Schools On The Move podcast brought to you by the National Center for Systemic Improvement at WestEd and the Fresno County Superintendent of Schools. Schools On The Move podcast highlights innovative and promising school practices across the country. That enhance outcomes for students with disabilities and create teaching and learning opportunities for educators. Your hosts for today's podcast are Matt Navo, Director of System Transformation with WestEd and Dr. Annie Sharp Director of Differentiated Assistance with the Fresno County Superintendent of Schools. Today we're in Arkansas at the Fort Smith unified school district at Spradling Elementary with 5<sup>th</sup>/6<sup>th</sup> grade teacher, Ms. Darla Sampley. Our topic today is professional learning communities, improving outcomes for students with disabilities. Darla, welcome to the show.

**Darla Sampley:** Thank you. Glad to be here.

#### **Matt Navo (00:54):**

So, Darla, tell us a little bit about Arkansas. Tell us a little bit about Fort Smith Unified School District. Tell us a little bit about how Spradling Elementary is set up. And "T" us up and our listeners with what is it that you're doing that's innovative and is improving outcomes for students with disabilities?

#### **Darla Sampley (01:12):**

Okay, well, Spradling is one of 19 elementary schools here in Fort Smith. We recently just received accreditation as a highly effective school through Marzano research. We are in our fourth year under the following the PLC process. Last year we received PLC model school. We were part of, so Arkansas is really pushing for schools to start the PLC process. They've actually had schools encouraging schools to write grants, to be part of cohorts. And Spradling was one of their very first ones and the first cohort. So, we, that meant that people from PLC solution tree came to our school and coached us through the entire process. And they helped us write our mission statement or vision or collective commitments. They walked us through RTI, they walked us through assessment, and they just coached us all along the way. And then the end result was filling out the application for a PLC model school. And we were able to get it where one of, I believe three in Fort Smith that have a PLC model school.

**Matt Navo:**

It's quite an accomplishment.

**Darla Sampley:** Yes, yes. It's a PLC is not a meeting that you attend to. It is something that your school becomes. You have to be willing to collaborate with everyone in the school. People walk into our school, and they know exactly what we're about just from looking at the walls and just from the way that they're greeted at the door, they know exactly what our schools about.

**Matt Navo (02:55)**

So, your school has accomplished a lot, received a lot of accolades. And also sounds like you're taking the PLC conversation beyond just words. And it's becoming part of who you are and how you behave at Spradling

**Darla Sampley (03:07):**

It is absolutely who we are, as a matter of fact, we just had a high school in the area that they are moving towards the PLC process. And the first thing they wanted to do was come and talk to our school, to our guiding coalition. So, the guiding coalition is a group of teachers in the building. I'd say a group of leaders that every teacher in our building as a leader is just, we needed one representative for each grade level. And so, we help guide the culture of our school and make sure that the PLC process stays true to itself, but they came in and that's what they want it to do. They want it to find out what it was about. And so here was this group of high school teachers to come talk to elementary. How are you, how does this work? And so, it was nice to kind of help guide them through there and answer all their questions. And they sent us an email saying, we know exactly what our next steps are. Thank you. You know, so that was great.

**Matt Navo (04:10):**

Fantastic. So, tell us, Darla, what is it about what's happening there that is improving outcomes or putting a focus on students with disabilities that hasn't happened before?

**Darla Sampley (04:23):**

So, one of the very first things that we had to do as a team was create our mission statement for our school in our mission statement includes all kids, all kids will be successful, all kids. And we felt like we were really living that. And after about the second year, we realized, okay, so all of our kids in general ed are starting to make gains going through the process, following everything our coaches told us, but our SPED students still were not making gains. And so, during the meeting, we said, you know what, if all, if we're saying all kids, it means ALL kids, regardless of learning disabilities, we have to make sure that they're getting the same opportunity as everyone else. And so that got the conversation rolling. And so, one thing that we started was we looked at our resource kids and we had just hired a new resource teacher and she made a suggestion, "Hey, why don't I push in"?

And so, we said, okay, we've been wanting to start inclusion. Instead of having our resource kids pulled out, you know, during the regular classroom, we now have the resource teacher pushing in. But one thing she did differently is she didn't just pull her resource kids. She pulled any student who is having problems. She all, but she always made sure she had her resource kids. Well, that took away the stigma of human resource. I need extra help because no one knew who was in resource. They just saw this lady come in and she was just a teacher helper for all they knew. I mean, they had no idea cause she always, she always pulled, you know, just the resource, but she'd always add an extra kids. So that was where we, that's where we started the change. And then we realized we needed to go a step further because at our school we also have a self-contained classroom, which is more mild to moderate students.

So, the self-contained, they, they have their own teacher, they have a para in the room, but their grade levels, fourth, fifth, and six. So, it's a range we realized they needed to be in on the conversation. So, we did not have a representative on the guiding coalition for SPED. So, we brought one in. So, because we needed to get them on the PLC process. They needed to understand the same things that we were doing. Then we started to our, I think it was our third-grade teachers volunteered. They said, hey, we will take all of those kids into our room and get them used to the process. So, they invited the teacher to come sit in on team meetings, which we have once a week to plan out units, plan out assessments, discuss assessment results. She was invited to all those meetings with the third-grade teachers.

Her students attended her that's in it, the third-grade classrooms for core subjects only. So mostly just reading and math. So now we have this group they're fourth, fifth and sixth grade. They're all way, way below level. But now they're being exposed to third grade, which was still higher than what they were getting in their, in their self-contained room. They were able to show gains. They were now starting to show gains. They could do the assessment. They could, they understood about documenting what they still needed to work on setting their goals. So, this year we decided if they're a fourth grader, we're putting them in the fourth-grade room. If they're a fifth grader, we're moving them to the fifth-grade room and same thing with sixth grade, because we did have a speaker that came from Solution Tree. And she said that their fourth, fifth or sixth grade, they're still in the third-grade room.

You still need to put them in their grade level because when they take that as that nationwide assessment at the end of the year, it's on their grade level, it's not going to be on a third-grade level. It's going to be on a sixth-grade level. So that's what we did in it was it's hard because I don't have training on how to, on to do as someone, you know, and also don't have access to their, to their IEP because I'm not their teacher of record. So, I don't have access to that. So that's where I have to work really closely with the self-contained teacher, just as closely as I will with the resource teacher, from my resource kids in the room. But at least I have access to their IEP because I'm their teacher of record, but we have to work really closely to figure out what's working, what do we need to add in? Do we need to modify anything for them? So that way they can meet their goals. We really had to collaborate. Whereas before it was, they were doing their thing, we were doing our thing and we just had some extra kids in the room, but no one really knew what to do.

And so, we had, like I said, we had a guest come in and she kind of helped walk us through like some things we could do. And it about bringing the resource teacher and the self-contained teacher into the team meetings. So, they're helping with unit development, they're helping with assessment development. So, they can say, "oh, when you do this assessment, let's do this for this student." You know, it's still the same assessment, but maybe we need to, instead of four choices, they only need two choices. Or can we do this part, this part oral rather than written.

**Matt Navo (10:15):**

Annie, I'm wondering what you think. This is really, I love the, the translation that Darla has given on the journey and how they've evolved. What are you thinking?

**Annie Sharp (10:24):**

Oh well, I've got, I've got a couple of questions Darla that I want to ask you. One of the questions I have is I heard you say that you started with a volunteer. So, there was a teacher that volunteered to, to bring these students into their classroom. And I also heard you say that maybe one resource teacher pushed in. So that kind of leads me to start thinking about how you guys started this journey. It wasn't something that maybe everybody just a hundred percent jumped into. So, can you talk about that a little bit and how it started and how that might have maybe led to either some successes or failures along the way?

**Darla Sampley (10:59):**

Well, I think because the students were fourth, fifth and sixth, and so we knew they were still so far, like when we looked at their reading levels, they fit more like third grade reading level. And our third grade works very differently. We have one, I mean, there's three third grade teachers down there, but there's two. They are actually from the university they're called apprentices. And they, they're doing like a year, almost like a year-long internship. And then they have another classroom teacher who models for them, guides them through everything that they're really like working through the university. So, the one who helps guide them, she's, she's the one who was like, they looked at their reading levels and they fit more. Like they could probably do third grade reading level. That's why she's sort of stepped up and said, hey, we'll take them.

She's also one of the leaders on the guiding coalition, she and myself we're called leader of leaders. So, she's one of the leaders. And so that's why she kind of stepped up and said, hey, we will invite the self-contained teacher to come and sit in on our team meetings. And because she was also doing a book study with her two apprentices through the process. So, it made more sense for the self-contained teacher to go sit in with them and go ahead and start the book study with them. So, because they're doing like the beginning of the PLC process. So it was, it made more sense for her to sit in there. So, she was getting all the things that we did in the beginning that she never got.

**Annie Sharp (12:47):**

It sounds like obviously PLC's is something that you guys are proud of. It really is the core of who you are and who your school has really become over the last couple

of years. I wonder if you could talk a little bit about communication, you had said earlier that you've had to become really close with the teachers that you share students with because you don't necessarily have access to an IEP or different things like that. Are there any communication structures within the PLC that you've really had to leverage in this process of supporting your students with disabilities in this way?

**Darla Sampley (13:23):**

Well, we're lucky that if we had, we made it fit in our schedule where on every Tuesday we get 80 minutes to have team meetings. Every grade level, it just works out on Tuesday. So, we get 80 minutes. And so that's when the self-contained teacher. So, she has students right now in a fourth-grade room in a sixth-grade room. So, she makes sure she attends the sixth-grade team meetings and the fourth-grade team meetings because, and they're not at the same time. So that works out so she can attend both meetings and she can sit in on unit planning. She can sit in on assessment development if she has just questions, you know, like what can I do to help with this? Or would you need me to do, because she also now pushes in because in order for the self-contained students to have their minutes met, she has to be there with them or her para.

And so, there's only two students. So, one's in fourth, one's in sixth. So, she sits with one in the para, sits with the other and they they're right there with them. But since she's already sat in through all the development of everything, she knows exactly what we're about to do. She knows everything. She knows exactly what that assessment is going to look like, what the topic's going to be, what type of texts it's going to be. And so, when she's sitting there with them now, she can easily guide them through grade-level content material that they weren't getting before, because they were getting everything that was just on their level. And now they still get, cause they're like I said, they're only in there for core. She still pulls them for like a guided reading group. So, they're still getting things on their level to bring those up. But now they're getting a lot more exposure to grade level content and the way they're going to see the assessments at the end of the year than they ever got before.

**Matt Navo (15:28):**

Darla, it sounds like communication and collaboration have been greatly enhanced as a result of the PLC process. And as a result of the PLC process, you've put a focus on inclusive opportunities for students with disabilities, giving them starting with just a resource teacher who was pulling students with disabilities and students who don't have disabilities together. And you started with that little bit of a change. And now you're really focused on all students with disabilities, having access to the general core grade level content standards. And you've, you've really made this transition because it's stems. It goes back to your mission statement, as I understand "all means all". And you really took a stock of that. But I'm curious about, for those that don't understand the importance of this guiding coalition, you've mentioned it a couple of times as a, is a linchpin to this work. And I'm curious, can you describe what the guiding coalition is, why it's important and what it did for you as a school to move outcomes for students with disabilities?

### **Darla Sampley (16:40):**

Well, first of all, we had to change our name from a leadership team to a co guiding coalition because we're not just taking directives from the principal and, you know, giving it out the team. It is the principal is on the team, but it is a representative from all grade levels, including the pullout teacher, SPED teacher interventionists. Everyone has a representative and we meet twice a month for about an hour and a half during school. And we look at data, we look at assessments, anything to make sure that our school is staying true to the PLC process. So it may be, especially at the beginning of the year, we may start out, let's revisit our mission, make sure that's what we still, that is the heart of who we are, and it hasn't changed. But one thing we did do this year is we, we added it to our collective commitments, which are the promises that as teachers and educators, we're going to make to our students to meet our mission. And it was adding in the chain, making sure that we allow chances for those students to redo assessments. So, we, we knew that some teachers were, or maybe some teachers weren't. So, we put it as a collective commitment. So now we're all promising that we're going to do that, to make sure that students are all going to be successful.

We, we are, what's considered the "culture keepers" of the school. That's what your guiding coalition is. They are the culture keepers of your school. And so, we know that our culture, we are going to be collaborative. We are going to communicate, and we have to make sure that we keep that. But we also know we have a viable curriculum. We got to make sure that everyone's keeping up with that. Especially this year, we got a bunch of new teachers in the lower grades. I think we had a new teacher in kindergarten, a new teacher in first, a new teacher in second. And so, we had to make sure, like I said, Ms. Burdick is the third-grade teacher. She and I are both the leader of leaders. And so, we take it upon ourselves to go in and check in, hey, are you with our veteran teacher. Hey, are you making sure that you're doing this with the new teacher? Make sure they understand the unit plans, make sure they understand how you came up with them. And some are like, oh yeah, I forgot to do that. And thanks for reminding me.

We also provided PD at the beginning of the year for all of our new teachers about what is the PLC process. What is RTI? And so, we did two days of PD that we presented to them is because when we bring teachers in, we bring them in knowing that this is what our school is like, you have to be willing to do it and we want to make sure they understand it. So that's why we started doing the PD. And then they also know if they have questions or concerns. They can come to anyone on the guiding coalition and ask, and then we'll put it in our agenda. And the next time we meet it comes up for discussion. Here's some issues that we're having.

But it's teachers that solve it. It's not the principal over there going, hey, so this is what I want y'all to do the principals. They're kind of like as a mediator almost, but it's all the teachers is every teacher putting our brains together, trying to figure out how to solve problems. We might do a book study if we need to figure out. So, we were having to do academic behaviors this year that we were trying to set up we'll some of us couldn't really remember. So, we knew it was a book where like, hey, everyone read these pages. And when we meet back in a couple of weeks, we'll discuss it. So, we gave ourselves a book study, it's a research and we came back ready to meet and we solved the problem

**Matt Navo (20:41):**

Darla, Is this guiding coalition. I love, by the way, I love the, the, the connection to culture keepers. I think that, so if I understand it correctly, what this guiding coalition has done is its empowered teachers to solve problems and to engage in dialogue around things that they would like to improve. And it's anchored the school Spradling to not only talk the talk but walk the talk. And one of the things that came out of that was that we were going to not just talk about improving outcomes for students with disabilities. We were going to change the way we do our work together. And that wasn't a top-down principal kind of charge. That was a teacher collective guiding coalition that came together and said, this is what we need to do. I think, as did I, did I synopsis that correctly?

**Darla Sampley (21:40):**

Ms. Dawson, my principal will claim that. She's pretty sure it was me. Who said it, "Hey, if we said all, we mean all" like everybody, it's not just the general education will be successful? It's everybody's going to be successful. We got to figure out how to do that. She claims it was me, but I don't really remember. It had to be someone on the guiding coalition though. Cause that's where that conversation would come up is someone had to have said something in. And that is because when we started working on the mission, that is one thing that our coach told us. If whatever it is, you have to be willing to do it. And so, if you're saying all you mean all everybody. And so, we're like, okay.

**Matt Navo (22:28):**

That's so important. And Annie, I'm curious as what you, what you think because we run into, I'm sure in your work and you run into a lot of coaching situations that have missions and visions on a wall, they don't necessarily always translate to behavior. What, what are, you're curious to hear what you think? Well, missions

**Annie Sharp (22:47):**

And visions on a wall, different ones on the internet, different ones in the binders, right? I mean, this is a practice that a lot of people have is this practice of creating missions. But over time, people who stay at a school site for a long time sometimes can go through a couple different ones. But it sounds to me, Darla that you guys have really decided to make this mission, something that you live and something that's not just words on a wall, which I really come in. And I really appreciate that because that's not easy.

**Darla Sampley (23:18):**

No, no, none of this ha I mean, I might, it may sound easy, but we're four years into this. We're four years into this. And so, it's become easier. But the, the first year there were plates spinning everywhere. And we were, some of us were barely staying, you know, above water because like I told the high school that came the other day, you had to move. I mean, this is my 20th year of teaching. So, I was having to move from traditional way of teaching to, oh, you mean everybody. And so having to make that bridge over was not easy. And I would even say our new, our brand-new teachers, it was probably difficult because it was very different from

even what the university was teaching or the university in the area is starting to embrace the PLC process. But we still run into people who say, oh, I have PLCs on Tuesdays. PLC is not a meeting that you attend to PLC is who you are. We attend to team meetings, and we discuss the PLC process, but it's not a meeting. It's who you are in our school. We, it really is. You could have talked to any teacher here today and every teacher would be just as impassioned as I am right now about it, because it is who we are.

**Annie Sharp (24:41):**

That's awesome. Darla, I, one thing I do want to say, you said you're four years in, right? And this is a little bit, it was difficult in that first year. So, when I think about, you know, this podcast, and when I think about people who might be listening to your message today, what are some things that educators can do in order to cultivate more opportunities for their students with disabilities and maybe specifically leveraging the PLC in order to do that?

**Darla Sampley (25:09):**

Well, I was looking at, so solution tree has like a global PD. And so, I was watching some of those and one of the speakers, she was talking about the ladder of inference and how we tend to make observations. And we make, you know, assumptions based on those observations. And she said, the only good thing is that it's a ladder. So, you can go back down the ladder. And that would be my big thing for educators is that we need to stop making assumptions about kids because they have the letters IEP after their name. It just means they learn differently. That's what that means. That's where you have to get with whether it's the resource teacher, whether it's the self-contained teacher. And you've got to take collective responsibility for those students, because it doesn't matter if they're a fourth grader and you teach sixth grade or vice versa, they're still your kids and you have to stop making these assumptions. You have to figure out what is the best way for them to learn. Do I need to record me reading and have that available on Google, Google classroom for them to listen to and pause and listen to as much as they want to will that help. You just have to find new ways to get the information to them. But I think we need, as educators need to stop when you get that list. And you're like, oh, has IEP has an IEP? When's the soonest so-and-so can come pick them up because I don't, I don't want to handle them.

And like I said, I didn't know to do so. You do some research, you find some PD, you ask questions, they're your kids, you got to just own it. They're your kids. You would, if it, if it were your own child that you birthed, you'd hope that someone would say, they're my kid. I'm going to take care of them and make sure they learn. And that's what I do. They're my kids. So, I want to make sure that I speak to whoever it is. I need to speak to, to find out what I need to do to get them where they need to be.

**Matt Navo (27:16):**

Now, Darla, I know that if there are people listening to what you just stated in such an eloquent way, I think the most powerful statement you made there was we need to stop making assumptions about what the IEP means, and it means that they just learn differently. And I love that you, your staff there at Spradling has taken

ownership of and collective responsibility to really expanding learning opportunities for students with disabilities in such a way that your, your, your empowered it's, you sound passionate about improving outcomes. You need, you don't always hear that. So, I guess my last question here Darla for you is, as we think about improving outcomes for students with disabilities, what can educators at the national state and local levels due to really cultivate the improved opportunities and outcomes for students with disabilities in relationship to what you have been sharing with us on this podcast.

### **Darla Sampley (28:22):**

But I did get with my principal to ask about this one, because it's a more like school level, you know, and some of those suggestions that she even came up with, which I don't disagree with any of her suggestions was there needs to be more PD opportunities for the general education teacher on how to support SPED students. There, there just isn't enough. And there needs to be more, she even said at college level, there needs to be like a pre-service course about having SPED students in your room. Even if, even if you just have resource. I mean, I know what I went through college. I don't remember having a course that helped me for when I have resource kids in my room. They just, again, there was that assumption that everyone's just going to be a general education student in your room, and no one's going to need some extra attention or a different way to learn. She even went as far as just saying that the federal government needs to look at the disabilities act itself. It's, it's fairly dated. And we have a lot more technology now than we did when it first came out. And not that it just needs to be restructured and be refreshed with how our world is now. So, you know, that would be a great thing if they, if they would do that.

### **Matt Navo (29:51):**

I love that, Darla. It's hard to really anchor to what needs to be done nationally, but I, but I take away. If I'm a listener here, listening to you, talk about how your school is transforming. I take away the idea that it's not a quick fix. You've been on this journey for a while, but there's power in this guiding coalition that empowers teachers to think about how they want to improve outcomes for their students. And there's power in really looking at your mission and making sure that you are walking the talk, when you say at Spradley, all means all. What I get from you, Darla is all means all and everything you do. That's, that's fantastic. Darla, as we close, are there any final thoughts where you might want to offer suggestions to our listeners or where they might find out more about Spradling Elementary and the efforts you're making?

### **Darla Sampley (30:52):**

Well, from what my principal said, just said, what we're doing, right? Cause right now it's just our school. That's really pushing for this. And that's how things tend to happen here in Fort Smith, it takes a revolutionary school to start to try to make changes and everyone starts to go, huh? What are they doing? And so that's kind of where we feel. We're, we're trying to revolutionize how SPED is working by giving all of these kids an opportunity to learn at high levels, regardless of whether you got IEP after your name or not. And the school we're at, we are the highest poverty school in our area, like in Fort Smith. And so, we have every card stacked against

us, against our kids and we're still making gains. And so, yes, it's a hard process. And you're going to have people who are going to try to roadblock you. You just need to keep doing what you're doing and know that it will work, but you can't give up on it. You wouldn't give up on your kids. Don't give up on the process. And then of course we can be reached the Fort Smith website at [fortsmithschools.org](http://fortsmithschools.org). And then Ms. Dawson said, anyone can email her if they wish she's our [rdawson@fortsmithschools.org](mailto:rdawson@fortsmithschools.org). And I'm the [dsampley@fortsmithschools.org](mailto:dsampley@fortsmithschools.org).

**Matt Navo (32:29):**

Oh, thank you. Darla and Annie, any final thoughts,

**Annie Sharp (32:33):**

Darla, thank you. I think that your students at your school are so lucky. You're definitely passionate about what you do. You're passionate about how you're doing it as well, which I really appreciate. I think that that's important. And again, I just, that all means all is came through very loud and clear today. So, thank you so much for doing what you do for your kids.

**Matt Navo (32:59):**

Well, thank you for Darla for coming on today. I really appreciate your leadership. I appreciate your, your you are being so courageous and sharing with us, your story and the school story at Spradling Elementary. So, thank you again for being with us today and sharing the improved outcomes for students with disabilities that your'e making in Arkansas.

**Darla Sampley:**

Thanks

**Matt Navo:** You bet. And thank you to our listeners for listening to schools on the move podcast, please be on the lookout for our next podcast, where we go to Texas for a unique conversation with a national expert on UDL. Thank you for listening to schools on the move. This production is brought to you by the national center for systemic improvement and funded by the office of special education programs in the U S department of education special thanks to all the production team. And we'll see you next time on Schools On The Move.

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