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Well, hello, and welcome to the Unpacked Podcast. Thanks for joining us today

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to hear a little bit about the realities in today's public schools.

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Today, I'm joined by Greg Melinda, the Technical Assistance Director at Ingham

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Intermediate School District. Say hello to everyone, Greg. Hello, everybody.

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We're going to talk a little bit today about IEPs and 504 plans and how they

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support students in our schools.

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So today, we'd like to start with talking a little bit about the foundational

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differences between what an IEP is and what a 504 plan is and how those work for our kids.

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Could you start just explaining what is an IEP and what is a 504?

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Sure. I'm going to start by going back in time just a little bit.

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Feel free to. We love that. So if we think about why these laws came about,

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it's because a lot of our students before these laws were in place didn't have access to education.

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So a lot of our students with disabilities were not allowed to be in public schools.

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So it's a civil rights piece of legislation that is trying to provide access

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for students with disabilities to get an education. Fantastic.

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Thanks for that background, because that's important. People don't realize that.

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They don't understand. It is. Both of these were enacted in the 70s.

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An IEP, that comes from a piece of

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legislation called the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, IDEA.

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It's had a couple different names over the years, but this is the one that people know it by.

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And then the 504 plan comes from the Rehabilitation Act, another piece of civil

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rights that was focused on adults with disabilities.

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When we take a look at both of these laws, they do different things.

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So IEPs and IDEA, that is definitely going to focus more on schools.

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In Michigan, we look at birth through age 26.

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That's our age group for special ed. Correct. For IDEA and IEPs.

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For 504 plan, that's actually lifetime.

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That's a very big difference, right? Yes. Yeah. Yes. So an IEP,

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for example, is not going to follow you to a university.

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That is just K-12 education, where a 504 plan might.

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If you've got a disability and you need some accommodations in a university

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setting, a 504 plan might be appropriate.

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But there is no mechanism where you could get an IEP at a university.

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There's no mechanism that you can get an IEP at a job site.

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But you can have a 504 plan at a job site.

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Because it's a piece of civil rights legislation, it's about providing access

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to somebody with a disability.

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Those are the laws that guide and define us. When we look at eligibility for

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this, you need to have a disability.

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How we define that is different between both of those pieces of law.

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Well, that's some good, really good background. So maybe you could start by

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breaking down IDEA a little bit, But really talk about how that works into the

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IEP plan for a student and, you know,

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how they work together, how the law supports their learning ability.

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Not ability, but their learning and their access.

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So IDEA is one of the most complex federal laws out there. If somebody tells

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you they know everything that's in IDEA.

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I don't know if I'd believe them. I look things up, and I'm considered an expert.

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But I think when you look things up, it's because you want to confirm your own knowledge.

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Taking a look at what's required in IDEA, how that works with schools,

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depends what age group you're looking at.

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Because there are different requirements for birth to three federally than there

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are for three years old to 21.

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It depends on the needs of the students, the age group, the disability.

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So IDEA is disability-based, meaning you've got to determine that a student

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has a disability and a need for supports and a need for specially designed instruction.

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So specially designed instruction is what we define special education as.

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And that means we're tailoring independent or individualized instruction to

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meet a student's needs to hopefully give them access to the general education.

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If not access to the general education, we're defining goals that a student's

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working on to help improve their life.

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That's fantastic. So now when you say access to the general education,

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do you mean general education curriculum or classrooms or both? Both. Both.

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Okay, great. Thank you for clarifying that.

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So what does it look like when a group comes together to create an IEP for a student?

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Can you talk a little bit about that, what the team looks like?

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Absolutely. Okay. Love that.

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So an IEP is defined, or the members are defined by law. Okay.

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Who needs to be there? Who is required to be there? So parents are required first to be involved.

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We can't compel a parent to attend a meeting, but we absolutely have to invite them. Okay.

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Parents need to have the ability to be there. So we can do things like we can

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do it via phone, we can do it via Zoom, Teams meeting, whatever.

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Just as long as they're involved, right? Yep. To get them engaged in that whole process. Absolutely.

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And parents are a vital part of this team. Parents are the historian.

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I might have a child for one year, two years, three years. They've got them for a lifetime.

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They're going to know things that have been tried in the past and whether they worked or didn't work.

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And we need that voice in this meeting. That's one voice.

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Students can be another voice, depending on their ability.

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You know, developmentally where they're at, it's going to be a great difference

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between a three-year-old and an 18-year-old. Yeah.

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So that's why the law is written flexibly to say, you know, here's what we do

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for a three-year-old, here's what we do for an 18-year-old.

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We need general education teacher if general education is being considered.

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Okay. So if we have a student in a center-based school like Hartwood or Beekman,

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and they're doing great there, and we don't need to consider switching schools

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or going somewhere else, we can say that general education teacher is not required.

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But if there is any consideration to going back to their home district,

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to going to a general education building, we must invite a general education teacher.

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Well, that makes sense, so that you're making sure you're connecting all the dots.

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We also need to invite a special education teacher, so that can be a provider

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like a speech and language pathologist.

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It can also be a classroom teacher. Okay, okay.

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We want that special education voice to say, here's how we're going to adapt

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instruction, here's how we're going to modify, and here's some goals we can work on.

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Okay. We need a, what's called a MET representative or an evaluation team representative. Okay.

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Because when you qualify for special education, that's through testing. Test in, test out.

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Which means you test in to qualify, you test out to move away from special education. Okay.

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With the evaluation team representative, that can also be the special education teacher.

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It could be somebody like a school psychologist, a speech and language pathologist.

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That person is there to interpret educational evaluations.

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Okay, so someone who is an expert in the needs of the child. Yes.

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We also need a district representative, public agency representative.

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That person is the person with the checkbook in their hands.

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They're also the person who's knowledgeable of the continuum of supports available to a student.

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And they're the person who essentially has the final say in the meeting of,

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here's what the district is prepared to offer to provide supports for this child.

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Absolutely required. And if we're working with transition age students,

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we have to consider inviting an outside agency, an organization like Michigan

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Rehabilitation Services,

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to create a plan for what do we do after school.

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Okay. So after they're aging out and after they have reached the level of the

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system that supports them, they're now going to be an independent adult of some sort. Yes.



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So that kind of gives an idea of who should be there or who's required to be there.

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But if you've been at an IEP meeting, you know, it can be a lot more people.

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So that's a pretty big team. Yes. That's a pretty big team.

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And that team supports the child through their learning different ages, right?

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The team may change up from year to year. But for the most part,

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the consistency in that is going to, of course, be the parents and the students

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and hopefully some type of education support that's there for the years.

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But think of yourself as a parent in that situation. How intimidating that can

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be for that first meeting.

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These are all people who are special education experts and have studied for this.

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And to support your child, you've never probably gone through special education training.

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That's a heavy burden on a parent. And I think we as special educators,

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the better we understand that, the better we can communicate with families and

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provide good supports for children.

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Yeah, it's really important that we have a welcoming environment for them so

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that they feel like we're working together. Yes. Okay, great.

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With a 504 plan, you know, the requirements are going to be different.

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You need to, typically it's going to be a counselor. Okay.

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Could be a social worker, could be a teacher. It's whoever the district designates

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as their coordinator. Okay.

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And they're looking at supports differently.

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So in an IEP, we're looking at that specially designed instruction,

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which is special education. We're looking at accommodations.

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We're looking at programming, all of those different supports.

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With a 504 plan, typically, we're only looking at accommodations.

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Okay. That's a very good differentiator there.

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So if a student needs specially designed instruction or to be presented information

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in a different way, that should be a key trigger to say, ooh,

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we should look at specially designed instruction. We should look at special education. Okay. Okay.

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So what are some misunderstandings about 504 plans versus IEPs?

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You just talked about the differences between them, but sometimes those lines get blurred.

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What are some common misunderstandings?

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I can tell you my least favorite one that I hear is calling a 504 plan an IEP junior.

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Oh my goodness, okay. Or treating it like a consolation prize.

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So let's say a family, a student is going through the evaluation process.

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And we determine that the student doesn't need specially designed instruction.

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So one of the phrases a person might hear is, well, at least you can still qualify for a 504 plan.

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But as we already said, this is a piece of civil rights. Right.

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Two separate laws. Right. It's not a consolation prize. Mm-hmm.

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This is determining, this is the level of supports that the student needs.

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The student only needs accommodations. They don't need instruction as well.

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That's okay. Right. It's okay to only need additional time or a quiet place to work.

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We all need those things. on different days, but some students need

them every day.

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So what would you say to a parent who is thinking about their child's needs?

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What would be their first step to find some support?

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You're going to reach out to one of the educators at your school.

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You know, whether or not that's a paraprofessional, a teacher,

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a principal, a counselor, a social worker, whoever you're comfortable talking

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with and expressing yourself and saying, I'm worried.

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Okay. As a special education director, you know, when I was in a local doing

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that, it was one of my favorite times to meet with families.

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Yeah. I would start by saying, I hear that you're concerned about your child.

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I hear that you're concerned about their academic performance or their behavioral

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performance. You're worried. Here's what I'm going to tell you.

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I'm not going to say, we're going to get your child an IEP. What I'm going to

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say is, we're going to find a plan of support.

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That could be something formal like an IEP, be something formal like a 504 plan,

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could also be something informal like let's get some extra support down the

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hallway or let's find a quiet spot to work after lunch.

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But what I hear you saying is you're worried about your child.

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We as a school district will help you come up with a plan. Yeah,

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test some things, right?

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Absolutely. Figure out what's really going to work for that child and that parent.

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Okay. Okay. That's great.

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That's great. Well, I think that's all we have time for today.

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We'd love to have you on the show again later.

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So somewhere down the road, we'll think of some other ways to bring you back.

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But thank you for joining us today and unpacking the realities in today's public

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schools. Thank you for the opportunity.