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Well, welcome to the Unpacked Podcast. I am Mickey O'Neill.

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I am your host today, and I am joined by our superintendent of Ingham ISD, Jason Malema. Hello.

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So glad to be back here unpacking educational topics with you today. Well, thanks.

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Thanks for joining us. Today we want to talk a little bit about special education.

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Many people don't truly understand what special education is and the broad scope

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of needs for our students.

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Can you share the 13 disabilities that are covered under special education and

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maybe how some of the services vary?

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Sure. So special education, a pretty large topic when we think about the depth

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and breadth of what's going on.

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But let me kind of hit on those 13 service areas that are recognized underneath

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the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, more commonly known as IDEA.

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And they are autism spectrum disorder, known as ASD, physical impairments,

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cognitive impairments, severe multiple impairments, deafblindness,

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specific learning disabilities,

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deaf or hard of hearing, speech and language impairments, early childhood developmental delays.

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Traumatic brain injuries, emotional impairments, visual impairments,

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or otherwise health impairments.

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So 13 different areas that are recognized at this point in time.

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When I mentioned IDEA, IDEA is the law that kind of governs and gives us an

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understanding of best practices when it comes to how do we provide supports

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for those students with disabilities.

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The origins of it actually date back to 1975 when the Education for All Handicapped

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Children Act was approved.

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And then in 1990, it was actually reauthorized as IDEA. And so that's the overall

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governing structure when we think about special education.

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There are other laws that have come in, for example, ADA and other factors that

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have come in since that point in time,

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but the origins of making sure that we had the right types of educational supports

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for students with disabilities come to us in the main process of IDEA. Okay.

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Can you share a little bit about the learning environment for students and what

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we hear this term least restrictive environment is and how that helps support our student learning?

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For sure. So before I jump into the least restrictive environment known as LRE,

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let me kind of hit on a topic known as FAPE, free and appropriate public education.

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So with inside IDEA is the concept of making sure that we provide FAPE,

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an appropriate public education for our students with disabilities.

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If we're providing FAPE, part of that then comes to us within the least restrictive

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environment. In other words, we're not putting students with disabilities into

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environments that are more restrictive than what they need.

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At its best, we're trying to make sure that students are being served with their neurotypical peers.

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So when we go back to those 13 disability areas that are recognized.

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Most of the students there with the right levels of supports can stay with inside

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their local school district and be provided services in tandem with educational

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classes that are provided with their neurotypical peers.

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There are students that might need some pull-out supports with a resource room.

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There are students that might need push-in supports with a parapro that's helping

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to keep them on point or providing supports with respect to reading or different concepts.

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Those are your typical, when we think about special education services,

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those are your typical special education services that we think about that happen inside our schools.

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The next step beyond that might be more of some regional programming.

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So we think about LRE, the least restrictive environment with their peers.

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The next restrictive environment, that whole spectrum we look at,

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again, those regional programs, that might be a student who's going to a program

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more regionally, as in that might be the district next door.

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And they are going to be in a classroom with other students who might

have some

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similar challenges, might have some similar identifications of their disabilities,

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some similar goals that are outlined in their IEPs.

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And they're going to be in the class with neurotypical peers part of the day,

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but they're going to spend more time with respect to inside those classrooms

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that are specially provided for students with those types of disabilities.

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Then the next level of restrictive environment is more of like a center-based

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school. And that is a school that doesn't have students with neurotypical behaviors and abilities.

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It is a school for those students who have otherwise challenges,

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disabilities, and need very specialized supports.

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So, for example, Beekman and Hartwood are examples here within Ingham ISD of

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schools in which students attend, but they are students that have pretty severe

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disabilities. It is the most restrictive environment from where schools are at.

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Beyond that is really not school-based services, but something that would be

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where if they need to be hospitalized into a clinical setting,

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which actually is beyond where schools have the ability. We don't run clinical settings.

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But that's why looking at the least restrictive environment,

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we are trying to assist local districts, look at rubrics, look at data,

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and figure out what is the best way we can provide services for students in

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the least restrictive environment.

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And that's a challenge. It's not an easy one-size-fits-all approach.

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You have to look at the data for each student individually, look at the services

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the schools have, and then try to make the best pairings.

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So pretty big topic, tough one to tackle.

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Yeah, yeah. So just to summarize a little bit, I'd say, and you can clarify

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this, but the local districts, students can go into the local classroom with their peers.

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They could have built-in supports, or they could be pulled out for supports

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like OT, occupational therapy, physical therapy, speech language supports.

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Then you've got where you've got some specialized programming in our local districts

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and students go to those specialized programs.

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It could be a kid from, you know, Williamston that goes to Dansville because

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they have a support there that's needed and it's a smaller classroom where they

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receive additional supports.

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Or you have the center-based type programs that ISDs operate where they have higher needs.

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And those are kind of the three things that schools function under.

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Absolutely. And so that's important to note, right? Like, how do we set the

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structures up to make sure that kids are getting the appropriate education,

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FAPE, but done so in an environment that is the least restrictive? That's the challenge.

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To make sure that they have everything they need and they can still grow socially

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with their peers as much as possible. Right, exactly. Fantastic.

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So maybe add a little bit about what is an IEP?

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We talk about that a lot. And then just kind of a little vocabulary

lessons

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for people who aren't in the education world.

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We can talk in a future episode in depth about what an IEP is versus a 504 plan

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and how those support kids.

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But maybe just for today's podcast to help people understand what an IEP is

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and how that drives their education?

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Sure. So an IEP is an individualized education plan that is specific to a student.

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As I mentioned earlier, there are 13 different disability areas.

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If a student qualifies underneath one of those 13 disability areas,

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then an IEP is drawn up, and that is in consultation with parents,

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that is in consultation with general education teachers, and that's in consultation

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with special education staff.

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So they get together, they sit down, and they talk about how do we craft the

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right types of supports for the needs of this specific student?

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Thinking about what's the appropriate public education that they need.

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And so that is as individualized as every student that we serve.

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So for some students, it could be minimal amounts, right? They might need 30

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minutes of additional speech and language support every two weeks.

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So that might be the appropriate spot for one student.

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For another student, it might be that they're going to need to be pulled out

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of classroom with their neurotypical peers, and they're going to be in a resource

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room two hours a day, which is pretty small numbers of students.

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So a student to staff ratio is set up to where staff can provide some very direct,

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more typically like you see five, seven kids type in a classroom.

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They're sitting down with them. They're working through things.

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They're modifying some of the curriculum to make sure the students can assist it. Right.

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So it all depends on the kid.

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That's the beauty of an IEP is it allows us to provide the right types of levels of support.

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A really focused individual attention that they need. Absolutely. Yeah.

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All right. Well, thank you for joining us today. I think that's all we

have

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time for, but we appreciate you helping us unpack the challenges and the realities

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in our public education system.

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And we look forward to catching you next time when we unpack it.