Episode 4: Innovation in Education – Why for Students with Disabilities and All Students? With 2020 National Teacher of the Year, Tabatha Rosproy

Matt Navo:
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 host for today's podcast are Ms. Jana Rosborough, Senior Program Associate with WestEd and Dr. Heather Gomez, Executive Leadership Coach with the Fresno County Superintendent Of Schools. Today we're in Kansas, in the town of Windfield with the 2020 national teacher of the year. Ms. Tabatha, Rosproy our topic today is innovation in education. Why for students with disabilities and all students.

Jana Rosborough (00:49):
All right. Hi, everybody. Welcome to Schools On The Move. So excited to be here today with Tabatha Rosproy and I am joined in today's session by Heather Gomez. Hi, Tabatha and hi Heather.

Tabatha Rosproy (01:03):
Good Morning.

Heather Gomez:
Hello.

Jana Rosborough (01:06):
Well, let's just dive in because we have a ton to talk about and at ton to dive into, because Tabatha is the 2020 national teacher of the year, which congratulations Tabatha on that. And she is a fellow Kansan, so I am excited across the board to get to have Tabatha with us for our time today. So, Tabatha, can you kick us off by sharing a little bit about your background, your yourself personally, and then how you got interested in education and leading us up to where you are today?

Tabatha Rosproy (01:40):
Yeah, absolutely. I just want to say thanks for having me here. I'm excited to, to share a piece of my story and that story really, you know, I was born in South
Carolina, but I grew up in Kansas educated by the public schools here and went to Southwestern college for my undergrad, which is in Winfield and for my Master's at Fort Hays state university. And so, in undergrad, I studied early childhood special education and general education, and that's what led me to preschool. You know, my first job right out of the gate was teaching preschool in Salina, Kansas. And I worked there for about four years before I actually moved back to Winfield where I went to college and started teaching for the public school and special services cooperative here. And I've been doing that for about seven years, but for the last three years, I've been serving a really unique population of people.

You know, my students are our four-year-olds and we're in a full day program and our classroom is housed inside of a nursing home, which I know we're going to get a little bit into later, but I knew I always wanted to, to teach right after high school. You know, when I was younger, I thought I want to be a horseback rider. Like that's going to be something productive riding around in a meadow. But I always knew after, you know, first grade that I wanted to be in a service profession and that really got ignited for me when I was taking a dual credit college Spanish class in high school. And part of our job was to walk down the block a couple of times a week and teach Spanish to preschoolers in our school district. And that was the first time I really got to witness a teacher doing their work rather than being on the delivery end of the instruction. I got to see this teacher, her name was Miss Pat. And the way that she interacted with her students was it was really beautiful. It was more of an art than I ever understood education to be. And that's what really, you know, lit my fire. And I knew that education was something I wanted to be a part of.

Heather Gomez (03:45):

So Tabatha, I absolutely love that you have shared your story and kind of talked about where this art of teaching and this passion kind of was ignited. Now you said one thing you said that your classroom was in a nursing home. So tell us, and talk to us a little bit about your intergenerational classroom, what that felt like, what that looked like, just so we can all kind of imagine this nuance.

Tabatha Rosproy (04:11):

Yes. I'm so excited to talk about it. You know, we, in our community in Winfield, Kansas, we already did something really unique that not a lot of states and counties towns do, which is fully fund pre-K for any four-year-old regardless of income or ability. But we recognize that we still had some work to do, and we needed to provide more full day opportunities for our preschoolers and to, you know, help the success of our families. And so, through this idea and through some work with an early childhood readiness coalition that we had formed this partnership with, with Cumbernauld village was born and we aren't the first people to ever do something like this. There's actually a kindergarten in Coffeyville, which we learned a lot from, but we are the first public preschool inside of a nursing home in the state of Kansas. And so, this partnership is, it's more beautiful than you could then you could honestly even imagine.

And if you ever want to check out a video about it, there is one on YouTube called “Cumbernauld little bikes” that you can just type into the search bar and you will find it. But our students get to be a part of something that teaches them, not only,
you know, better academic skills because of the number of volunteers that we have in the classroom at any given time, but it teaches them empathy and love and kindness towards others who have differing abilities, who, who are of a different generation. We always talk about how we serve students from four to 104. And that's the truth. There's really someone who is there that is 104 years old, which just blows my mind. And the residents who live there are this like untapped resource of love and connection and wisdom and what they have to offer my students is so much more than they were getting, you know, from me alone. And so it's this incredible place that's enriched, you know, with literature and opportunities for learning, but also opportunities for love.

**Heather Gomez (06:06):**
So can you kind of give us a kind of an idea of a day in the life of your preschool? Like what does that look like from morning to start? How does that relationship with, with our elders kind of transpire into the learning?

**Tabatha Rosproy (06:20):**
Sure. You know, I worried in the beginning that, you know, the grandmas and grandpas, which is what we call our resident volunteers there that we'd have trouble getting volunteers that they might be worried, you know, they live there. So would we be infringing upon them in some way, but the first day of school, you know, we moved in after Labor Day weekend in a hurry. Once construction was done at 6:30 AM that day, there were two volunteers who showed up. When I showed up to school, they were just so excited to have this young joy and, and life and vitality in their retirement village. But we always start our day after the kids eat breakfast with morning greetings. And that's something that really focuses on building conversation skills and building connections. We will do things like sing songs. High-fives hugs in every public space where the grandmas and grandpas are eating breakfast or just congregating.

And then we moved back into the classroom and then volunteers start to come in and they trickle in and out the whole day. And they do things like read one-on-one with my students, which I was never able to do to give all of my students that attention before they helped me during our play time so that I can work with individual groups of kids on their academic skills, you know, just by having warm bodies in there that will talk to the kids and play with them. They join us for recess. They help us set up for lunch. They might come in and pat backs at nap time. They also do things with us every afternoon. Each day of the week, we have some special activity like playing bingo or going to their library or having special visitors like music or the Sedgwick County Zoo, or some, someone in the community comes in to do something with us. And we also have special visits that are a special visit day, where we go to the rooms of people who are more bound to their rooms, whether that be, you know, for medical or physical conditions. And we visit them. And we talk about all the things in their room, we bring them gifts, they impart their wisdom on us, and we just, we are really together all the time. The grandmas and grandpas there have become really a part of the fabric of our classroom.

**Jana Rosborough (08:24):**
Tabatha, as you went to set up this classroom within, is it, would you describe it more as a nursing home or assisted living or is it kind of both?
Tabatha Rosproy (08:35):
It's both, it's actually, they've got apartments where some people are independent, they have assisted living healthcare. They even have like homes, garden homes on the property.

Jana Rosborough (08:45):
Ah, fantastic. So, as you went to sort of set up this, this classroom, and can you talk us through like wins and also hiccups that you encountered and trying this model out and, you know, any big lessons learned along the way, those sort of on that wind side and maybe even on the hiccup side?

Tabatha Rosproy (09:08):
Yeah. Well, there were definitely hiccups in the beginning, specifically construction was a challenge. You know, we were coming into a space that already existed for a different purpose. And so there were some delicate conversations that had to be had about what space they were losing, what, what space they were gaining and, you know, convincing the board and the residents and everyone there that this was going to be a great idea, which it was way easier than it sounds to do that because it has been incredible for their recruitment as well, and they're filling up their, their rooms and their apartments and their homes. But, you know, construction was the biggest headache in the beginning, but we also had, we had a few residents who really didn't care for, for kids to be there. You know, they say, and rightly so, they've raised their kids. They've been through that. They don't want to do it anymore. And so, we try to be really respectful of their space, remembering that this is their home. And, you know, we're guests here. This is our school. And in our classroom, we can sort of, you know, be as loud as we want and cause all the ruckus that preschoolers do. But when we are out in their space, we are so respectful. And so cognizant of that, and really, I think there may have been only one or two people who, who struggled with accepting the preschool being there, but really, you know, once all was said and done, they really kind of transferred over to the side of being excited. And so we just did that, you know, the way you do with anyone building relationships who might be nervous or scared, or, you know, just really not interested and not just by being kind and polite, but also making an effort to show them that you care about them. And that really taught our kids a lot too about not everybody, not everybody is thinking the same things that you are. You know, it's really getting these four-year-old kids to think about people outside of themselves.

And some of the incredible gains, you know, like I said, I never anticipated the, the amount of love and joy that it would bring to my students' lives and that it would bring to my life personally, you know, these are two populations that I've always loved so much, but just having them, helping my students with their, with their connectedness and their feelings of safety have also really increased my students' academic skills. The first year of our partnership at the end of the year, every single one of my students was on grade level or above in the area of phonemic awareness, which has never happened. And my decade of teaching, you know, we're always sort of shooting for 80%. That's always the goal, but in preschool, it almost never happens because this is their first time in any kind of like formal education setting. And so that right there just showed me the power of what can
happen when kids feel connected and they feel safe and they are given that attention that they need to those important skills to

**Jana Rosborough (11:53):**

Have a thing you talked a little bit about, maybe it's, you know, a couple holdouts maybe among the residents and trying to kind of figure out exactly what this would be and what this would look like, especially for like their life of you guys coming in. How did families react when you first proposed this idea and brought this forth? Was there excitement? Was there nervousness? Was it all of the above?

**Tabatha Rosproy (12:18):**

It was definitely all of the above. There were some reservations from people in the community. And so, one of the things that we had to do was host a forum, a public forum about where families who were interested could ask questions. And one of the biggest things people were interested in was safety, right? Not only safety of their students, but safety of the residents, you know, in a place where they, they may have several kinds of alarms going off during the week, will that interrupt their learning? Really, we were the ones doing most of the interruption there, you know, there were never any more fire drills or anymore, any other kind of drill or alarms than we ever had in our regular classroom setting. But also, you know, sanitary like medical issues were a concern for families. But what was so interesting about that is my kids have never been as healthy as they have been in that setting.

And I think it's because they are so proactive at Cumberland village about cleanliness, about hand-washing about sanitizing. And so where we, it was so much a part of our routine that we didn't have, you know, barely have any kids sick at all. And so really we just had to say, here's what we're going to do. Here's how we're going to address these things to the community and ask them to have a little bit of faith in us. And, you know, remember that we take care of their kids in public settings all the time. When we go on field trips, when we walk around town, we bring volunteers in, we did a background check on all of our, anybody who comes in the classroom has a background check through our district and has to go through the grandparent safety training that we put on at the beginning of the year and, you know, asking them to trust us with that.

And they did. And we had an overwhelming response. You know, we only have 16 slots open and it's just a lottery system. You know, 50% of those students need to meet some at-risk qualifiers. 50% are just, you know, random pool. And we had, let's see probably 40 applicants the first year, and then the second year, even more than that. And now that it's been shut down for a year because of the pandemic, which we had to move back into our early learning center temporarily, and now it's opening up again in the fall and people are just excited. There is buzz, you know, they, they heard about it. It got some attention that it deserved and now the interest is rejuvenated. So

**Heather Gomez (14:30):**

Tabatha, I love that. So, in hearing about your classroom and hearing about the safety and whether it be the physical safety, talk to us a little bit about some of the emotional safety. So social, emotional learning is a huge thing right now in
education. And it seems like you have kind of been able to narrow in on that, especially from a young age. So, what are some of the things you might give to other listeners and other teachers that might not have that same setting opportunity that you did, but how, how are you touching the social, emotional learning of your pre-K kids?

Tabatha Rosproy (15:06):

You know, I would say that social, emotional learning is something that a lot of pre-K teachers focus on, but I think we as educators and as a system kind of lose sight of our responsibility there because of all the academic pressure that starts happening around second and third grade and beyond. And I like to remind people that, you know, kids and adults alike, your brains are not really fully formed until you're in your mid-twenties. So, there is a lot of growth and development happening. And even though we might look older, it might look like we know what we're doing often we don't right. And especially kids. And so, we have to remember that what feels silly to us is something that's necessary in the same way that we teach kids how to read and write. We have to teach them how to self-regulate, how to interact with their peers and, and, you know, just how to be these productive, positive members of what community that they're in.

And so for me, that starts really young and it starts with relationships there. One of my favorite researchers, Dr. Becky Bailey, the founder of conscious discipline talks about there's really nothing else in life, except relationships, whatever everything else boils down to there's you and there's me. And we are in relationship with one another. And so the more that I can get my kids to connect with each other, the more I know that they're going to be willing to, to learn from each other, to learn from me and to be open to some of those educational experiences, you know, it's sort of like, you know, that hierarchy of needs, you know, that we all learn about in college. What do we need to take care of Maslow before bloom? Or is that, I hope I'm saying that correctly. And, and you just have to be able to reach kids emotionally before you can reach them academically.

And so for me, that looks like providing opportunities to be playful with each other, providing opportunities, to be playful with the adults in the room, giving opportunities, to make mistakes and to take risks in this setting that is safe. We never want to make kids feel ashamed for making mistakes. And I think that's an error that a lot of educators make just out of not knowing better. You know, I think a lot about like behavior charts and I think a lot about sending kids to the principal's office or announcing who's got 10 points and who's got five points, you know, things like that. And I think about what that does is it teaches other kids not to like those kids, right. That's sort of like public shaming. It teaches them that they're not doing what the teacher wants, but what we really need to be teaching kids is how to do what's right, because that's, what's safe and that's, what's kind.

And I just, I, again, you know, I feel like we lose sight of it because of all the other pressure and its admin at school boards as communities. I think we have a responsibility to support our teachers, not only in giving them the time that they need to focus on these skills, but also giving them the training that they need. I always say that, you know, life, maybe when education was started, years and years ago, public education, we weren't serving this purpose, but right now we are, this is our purpose. Now we see what our kids need, and our practices need to, to
reflect those needs. And for me, as, as a kid or as the younger kids, again, that really all starts with connections and relationships.

**Heather Gomez (18:15):**

So, Tabatha, through this, you have this really powerful story, and you have this powerful set of learnings through working with, with your kids. How now in this new role of teacher of the year, are you able to start shifting and shaping kind of that narrative around early childhood education?

**Tabatha Rosproy (18:39):**

Well, as national teacher of the year, I've been given like audience with people that I never had access to before, you know, and opportunities like this podcast, where I get to share what I'm passionate about and what, you know, I feel like is best practice. There is so much information out there and teachers are so they're incredible. They are experts and masters in their field. And I'm just, I'm so thrilled that I get to be a voice for that. And I'm specifically thrilled that I get to be a voice for early childhood education and for social, emotional education at all ages, forever early childhood educators have been, you know, of clawing their way, clawing their way up, trying to get the same respect, pay, you know, just to be seen as legitimate as their K through 12 counterparts. And I think that being chosen as the first ever preschool teacher, as national teacher of the year, that tells me that we're moving in the right direction. And I'm just so honored that I get to talk about and expose people to the incredible things that happen in early childhood education.

**Jana Rosborough (19:41):**

Tabatha, you mentioned a key word that really impacted everything the last year around the pandemic. Can you talk to us a little bit about what your year has been like teaching through the pandemic being national teacher of the year during our pandemic year and where again, have you seen places to lean into and things for us to consider moving forward

**Tabatha Rosproy (20:08):**

This year has been a struggle. You know, this week I'm going to deliver a keynote at the end of this school year to a group of special education teachers. And I think what can I say to encourage them after this really hard year? And I think back to, to what I've learned, and for me, it's not always choosing to be positive. That is the right thing to do, but it's choosing to see opportunities. And so, what I learned through this pandemic was that I wasn't going to be able to serve my students in the same way that I was before. And that made me feel grief because I knew it was working. It made me feel lost and my heart hurt for them, you know, in whatever situation they might be in because we didn't get to be together. And we all know that being together in person is, is just, it's the best for learning and proximity is so important.

But what I did realize is that I got to shift from this model of direct instruction to this model of family coaching. So I was so much more involved with families than I ever had been before, as someone who is super focused on family engagement, you know, it even, you know, leveled up from there because I had to be, you know,
because it wasn’t only me as responsible for the education of my students in the classroom anymore, but I got to see even more how important it was that we work together as a team. And so, you know, sometimes week to week, it would be checking in with my students and their families and it would be okay, this is like therapy for both of us at this time. Let’s talk through some of these routines and these boundaries as educators, we have this incredible knowledge of developmentally appropriate practice, and it’s almost a shame to keep it to ourselves because nobody, nobody tells you how to be a parent. You know, anybody can have a baby and nobody gives you any classes or gives you a degree or makes you get a license of any kind. You just have to figure it out. And so we really, we need each other and that has been even more apparent to me during this pandemic. So, I think for educators, I say lean into that. And for it, administrators, I say, remember, you got to take some things off of our plate so that we can lean into it. You know, we’ve seen what’s working, but we can’t just keep doing everything and piling it on top of each other. You know, we have to reevaluate and take away some of the less effective things. But as national teacher of the year specifically, it has been a really hard time. You know, I’m not getting any of the same experiences that the past national teachers of the year have everything that I’ve done so far, mostly has been virtual.

And that, you know, was sad for me in the beginning, but I definitely again, had to choose to see the opportunities. And I think that this was a time where teachers needed a voice more than ever. And so, I was so proud to get, to be able to be in constant communication with teachers across the country and to get to be an advocate for them. You know, I think I’m a good teacher. I don’t think I’m the best teacher in the country, but I think that I get to be a representative about what is amazing. And I also get to say, you know, I love public school, but sometimes I don’t like the things about it. So how can I help us make it better?

Heather Gomez (23:10):
So you said something Tabitha that I loved around that opportunity and how do we address some of that loss and making parents really become those partners, now in your classroom, I know your background, you said, or undergrad was centered and you have some specialization with special education and in your classroom, I am not sure on the makeup of your classroom, but I imagine you did serve students with special needs. How did you build the partnerships and be inclusive of students meeting them where all their needs were at, especially during the pandemic.

Tabatha Rosproy (23:46):
You know, within the classroom. I think that when you’re building that culture that you expect and that you want, you know, this idea of fairness comes in a lot with your students. People are always worried. Am I going to see this kid getting something? My kid doesn’t get, but we teach them really early. That fair doesn’t mean everyone gets the same thing. It means everyone gets what they need. And again, this kind of goes back to the way that you handle discipline and the way that you handle problems and the way that you see the best in your students. My kids in my class don’t have a problem with someone getting something extra because they know that that kid is worthy and valued. And that’s just something that they need. They’re right along there celebrating with you when you create that culture, they’re right along there wanting to be helpful.
Kids innately want to be helpful and they want to please people. So we need to capitalize on that. But within remote learning, this was really challenging. You know, especially when I have some kids who are, non-verbal reaching them through a screen was, you know, like pulling teeth. And so what I have always said is that teaching is 90% theater and 10% preparation, like as a joke, but this is even more true during the pandemic. You know, I had to be even sillier, even more vulnerable, even more willing to take risks. And from behind the screen, because my kids were not going to focus on me if I was not there. And what's so funny is I started feeling nervous about it because it wasn't only my students as my audience. It was their parents and their family, their daycare providers in the background, you know, once in a while my husband would walk in and just like, what is she doing?

But the thing is, I really did learn a little bit about myself and that power of vulnerability, you know, like Brittany Brown says, like there is something really magic in that. And I think when you're willing to do that from behind a screen, your kids are going to see you being authentic and they're going to be more likely to engage. But again, I really think that it had to do with that family support is what made it successful. And you'll hear lots of families who didn't have a good experience saying that they didn't really feel involved. They didn't feel communicated with. And I don't think that was because the teacher was doing a bad job. I just think they were overwhelmed with all the other things that were required to them.

Jana Rosborough (25:56):
So, Tabatha, I feel like we're just getting to scratch the surface on some of these pieces. So I'm hopeful. Like we'll get an opportunity at some point to revisit this and dive a little bit deeper, but we have a consistent last question that we like to ask our guests to kind of take forward. And so building off what you've shared and your experiences this past year, as national teacher of the year, what can educators at the national state and local levels do to rethink education and, you know, especially early childhood education for not only students with disabilities, but all students?

Tabatha Rosproy (26:35):
I think first and foremost, you have to give yourself permission to reflect on your practices. I think so often people see objecting as a form of being negative, but it's not, you know, talking about what's wrong means you want it to get better. You can love something so much and still want it to grow and change. You know, I love my husband, but sometimes he leaves his floss picks out on the counter. I'm not just going to pretend I don't see it. You know, I'm going to ask him to do something about it. And I think as educators, we have to feel empowered. You know, so often we are getting grief from the outside world, from people who don't understand what we're going through day to day. And we're used to that, but this has been amplified during the pandemic and it's worn us down.

And so, what I think people need to do is take some time to recuperate, but they need to come back ready to, ready to act and, and, you know, ready to remember that their voice has power, no matter, no matter how, how little they think that is. I learned this incredible lesson at the Kansas Leadership Center. And they say that
“leadership is not a position, it's an activity”. And I think that all educators have the power to affect change, whether that be locally, whether that be at the state or whether that be nationally. We just have to give ourselves permission to do that and to remind ourselves that it's okay to not always agree when we are all walking toward the same purpose.

Heather Gomez (28:00):
Well, Tabitha, we know that your time is very priceless right now, but we really want to thank you for joining us today. You have shared a lot with our listeners, from the importance of being vulnerable as a teacher, taking that time to reflect and more than anything, just building the relationships, not only with our students, but with our families and using them as ambassadors, but I, more than anything, I really appreciate that quote that you just said about leadership is not a position. It's an activity. And I will say you are taking that, taking that first and that launch forward and making sure that your leadership is an activity and you are truly making some deep impacts on early childhood education and just education in general. So, we thank you for your time today and we wish you all the luck in your future endeavors.

Tabatha Rosproxy (28:57):
Thank you so much for having me.

Jana Rosborough (28:59):
Yes. Thank you again. Have a thought and I have a almost three-year-old. So you may expect me to pull up outside Winfield, be battling for one of those spots and just a little bit, but yes. Thank you so much for being with us today and thank you all for listening to schools on the move. Please be on the lookout for our next podcast, where we will go to Florida for a unique conversation with the school, improving outcomes for students with disabilities. And again, thank you all for being with us today.

Matt Navo (29:32):
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.