Equity Today: The Region VIII EAC Podcast  
Episode 102 - Introducing The EAC Region VIII Staff

The Region VIII Equity Assistance Center at Metropolitan Statue University of Denver is guided by its vision to provide, upon request, technical assistance, training, and staff development for school boards, school districts, tribal education agencies, charter schools, and other responsible government agencies. We strive to promote equitable education opportunities and access for all students. We seek to improve equity, access, and participation and high quality, research-based opportunities for all students. We work to reduce disparities between and among groups where they may arise.

Kathy: I’m Kathy Rigsby, and I head the Region VIII Equity Assistance Center. We are based at the Metropolitan State University of Denver, and I would like to welcome you to our podcast! I thought we would take this opportunity, as we get into the podcasting world, to introduce ourselves and some of the work that we do here at the center. With me is Dr. Marilyn Chipman, Dr. Janelle Johnson, and one Amber Mozet, who is our administrative assistant, and the person who keeps us going in the directions we’re supposed to be going. And also with us is Tyler, who is our tech person, and who will be doing the editing and trying to keep us from doing too stupid things.

Tyler: Hello!

Kathy: And so, Janelle, you’re the new kid on the block, do you want to introduce yourself and some of the expectations that you have about joining us in Denver?

Janelle: Hi, my name is Janelle Johnson, as Kathy mentioned. I just recently started here at the Equity Assistance Center. I come to Denver from Arizona, I grew up in Arizona actually, and I graduated from the university of Arizona. And I did my graduate work in a department called Language, Reading, and Culture. And so, I am really excited to be here at the Equity Assistance Center in Region VIII. I can see even from my short time here what a great team we have, and we have a lot of projects ongoing and some new things developing, and I think we’re really going to do some great work. I’m glad for this chance to make connections with other people out there, and would love to find out how these podcasts can be the most helpful, that’s something that you guys can all let us know.

K: Janelle, you bring a lot of great talents and experience to us, are there particular areas you would like to continue working in, or start working in, uh, that you have done before?

J: Yeah, there are. My main areas of focus here at the Equity center are going to be the STEM fields. My teaching experience is primarily with math and science, and with ELL students as well as native students. I’ve worked in elementary, middle
school, and high school levels with math and science areas, as well as working with teachers who teach those subjects. So, any areas around that are the kinds of things that I’ll be working on here at the center.

K: Okay. Well, you know, that’s part of our grant.

J: That’s right.

K: And as you know, we have a very large and growing population of ELL students within the region and so helping particularly teachers be able to reach these English language learners in math and science in school will go a long way toward bringing these students into an ever-growing field.

J: That’s right.

K: Marilyn, how about introducing yourself?

Marilyn: Hello, I’m Marilyn Chipman, and I’m an Equity Specialist Coordinator here in Region VIII, happy to be working here with Kathy Rigsby and Janelle, Amber, our missing cohort, Marcela, and with Tyler. As you may or may not be aware, our Equity Assistance Center serves six states within this part of the United States, we are providing services within Colorado, Utah, Montana, Wyoming, North Dakota, and South Dakota, so you can see that we really have a wide region and a diverse population that we’re serving. The background that I bring to the Equity Assistance Center is that of having been a public school teacher, in both California and Colorado. My career in education has spanned almost 40 full years, and during that time my primary focus has been in Early Childhood Education, the impact of the educational experience on children and youth of color, from pre-K through 12th grade, cultural socialization, family school community connections, and the retention of students of color in academia. I am what is called an “Educational Sociologist,” meaning that I love the field of education, and the sociological component is how people interact in group settings. And, since school is a required group setting in which children are socialized, it has great, great interest for me. I have a Doctorate degree from the University of Denver in Educational Curriculum and Instruction, and I’m more than happy to be a part of this team, I would say a dynamic team because of the type of leadership that we’re in. So, that’s me.

K: Well, Marilyn, this summer you were introduced to a field that was relatively new to you, and that was to work with refugees. Will you talk a little bit about the types of challenges that you see? Because we’re seeing, at least in this metropolitan area and also in the Salt Lake Valley, and Eastern South Dakota, growing numbers of refugees and immigrants, many from Eastern Africa.

M: Mm hmm. And actually Kathy, you’re very right about the fact that the refugee population is growing very, very, rapidly within our six-state region, much more so than many people are aware. And they do bring a unique journey. It is a journey
that has been characterized by trauma, because even when we look at the definition of the refugee, usually they have come, they have been forced to leave their homeland, either by political turmoil, or by some type of natural disaster, hurricane, tornado, whatever. Something that has destroyed their homeland and therefore disrupted their way of life by way of trauma, not by way of choice, and I think that is the distinction that is made when we are looking at the refugee population. Here in Colorado and in the six-state region, we have a number of students, pre-K through grade 12, who are in a strange land. And frequently, the teachers do not really have all of the tools in place, number 1, to understand their journey fully, and number 2, to help them with the emotional side of the educational process. Many of the refugee students may have been in a camp for the last 4 or 5 years, and they may have just come from a country where they didn’t even have formal schooling as we know it. So they may not only not have the subject matter content, but they may not have any experience functioning in what we call the school setting, and there are problems inherent within that, as anyone would easily be able to understand. So what I am really so eager to do is to provide services to the teachers, to the administrators as well to help them understand that this journey is unlike any other. Also to help them realize that it’s not just the students that they are serving, but that the families of the refugee students also need to be serviced by the school.

K: That is a growing challenge, and thank you for letting us have more information about it. And I know that because we are here to serve schools at their request that we will look forward to receiving some of those requests because a concern not only for the language aspect of it, as English language learners, but the whole culturation piece that goes with moving outside of one’s country. And for those who have not had the experience of living outside of the United States, it can be hard to understand what that challenge is for somebody coming to the United States. Amber?

Amber: My name is Amber Mozet and I am the Administrative Assistant here at the Equity Assistance Center, and I am, I guess, the piece that kind of ties the EAC to the University. We are currently housed here at the Metropolitan State University of Denver. Because of my experience of working here at the university, that’s my expertise is all the fun paperwork that gets into play when the staff start travelling, and the budget, just knowing who to contact on campus, that’s my specialty.

J: Yeah, but I think you have a lot more integrated role than that, which I think is something really special about this team. You’re not just in the office, you participate in the activities of the center, the workshops, the professional development. So how do you see, what’s your perspective, your impression of that so far?

A: It’s been interesting to work with some of the groups that we have been working with, I like to use the example of Native Americans. We’re working with a group here in Denver on an event that’s going to happen in April 2013, and we’re also
working with another group down in the Durango/Cortez area. And it’s interesting because I haven’t really had exposure to Native Americans at all; I can’t think of any that were in my school when I was younger. So just getting to know about their culture and getting to know the people, it’s not what you see portrayed in the media, so it’s been really awesome.

K: Amber, this summer we were fortunate enough to be able to do some staff development in things like generating expectations of student achievement, which is a program to help teachers reach all students, as well as one on school climate that we all attended. Amber came with us, and because of her own degree background, I am looking forward to moving her to roles somewhere more outside her computer, and more in keeping with her own academic skills to work in schools, and I think particularly one group in schools that we don’t pay enough attention to, and that is our paraprofessionals, who often are far closer to students than the classroom teacher, because of the one-on-one work that they do. And this is a group that would be absolutely ideal for Amber to work with, not only for her academic experience, but also with the training that we are trying to make sure that she has, because when a Center is as small as we are, and serving as many states, we need as many interchangeable parts as we can have to serve our clients well as well as not to exhaust the staff. Sometimes when you see the coffee kiosk at the airport more frequently than you do your own house, sometimes you wonder why am I doing this? And the why is because it’s so necessary and it’s so incredibly rewarding for us which is why I’ve been doing it for more years than I care to admit. The other have talked about the areas that they concentrate in, mine is basically Title IX and Gender Equity; preventing Sexual Harassment, and preventing bullying. Those are areas that have kept me busy for a very long time. Bullying prevention, including cyber-bullying, is increasingly demanding, as schools learn not only how that impacts learning but also the safety aspects that go on in the schools. So that’s my field. The missing person here is Dr. Marcela Parra, who happens to be out – we’ll tell – she’s at the dentist – thank heavens for modern dentistry; she is our second-language person. Strongly so. Both in SIOP – Janelle, you’ll help me –


K: - again, another technique for all teachers to use working with students. Not only second language learners, but also a good technique when you have students for whom English may be their first language, but do not come to us with strong academic backgrounds in their own homes. So it’s very helpful in that. The other is that Marcela has done a tremendous amount of work over the years with American Indian Education. And as the one leading the effort Amber mentioned down in Cortez and Four Corners area, as well as increasing opportunities for American Indian children here in the Metropolitan area. So those are the two areas that she has been concentrating on in this last year that she’s been with us at the Center. Though, we are turning her into a trainer in the bullying prevention program. Because we need more than one on our staff. And there’s a limit to how many
directions I go. So I decided we needed somebody else to go in another direction, making sure we have adequate staff to cover all those requests.

J: Kathy, do you think it would be helpful for people to understand how we operate as a center? Because they might not be familiar with the logistics of who we are and how we operate.

K: Well, I think our operation is pretty easy. Ask us. We can only serve clients at their request. And on our website is a Request for Assistance. Fill that out and it comes to us.

T: I should say, our website is:

A: metrostate, m e t r o s t a t e dash eac dot org. (metrostate-eac.org) and you’ll find information about our center there, also bios of the staff, there’s educational resources as well, and one of the tabs on the menu is a request for assistance, just an easy form to fill out, your contact information, and just some basic information on the request that you’re looking for with the information that you’d like us to help you with, and then a member of the staff will be in touch with you to discuss more in depth about what your actual request is, what do you really need, how can we help you – all that logistics stuff.

K: We do not charge for our services; so if we have to get on an airplane, you’re going to get us for more than an hour. It’s going to be a day or two days work in a particular area. The other thing is, we will ask that when we come into an area to give workshops, that you provide the facilities and at least a cup of coffee and something for people to eat during the workshop, that is not something our budget can do. But everything else is provided without charge, because we are funded by the U.S. Department of Education specifically to do this.

M: You were mentioning a moment ago that we are interchangeable parts. And so we now have a new name, we are IPs (laughs), I like that. But really what you were saying is that there’s such an overlap among all of what we’re doing. Kathy mentioned her expertise in the area of bully prevention. And it’s easy to see how that could easily dovetail into the refugee population -

K: Absolutely.

M: - who would be bullied so severely because of even their dress, simply the way that they dress, the way that they look, could make them targets, and then language. Again, everything overlaps. Everything that we do has some kind of connection to each other in this whole matter of equity, because that’s what we are. We are the Equity Assistance Center. And as Kathy always explains, equity doesn’t mean being treated equally, but being treated fairly. And we want to be certain that students in all of the public schools, and maybe we should even say that we service the public schools, including charter schools, tribal education agencies, magnet schools,
vocational schools, k12, and so you can see that our- we're very wide in our breadth. It all kind of interconnects very well.

K: And that's a good point because when I have a request come in on a particular subject, when we meet with the requestor, then you find that there are so many areas that hinge on that, that to be effective you need to address also.

M: When you're peeling the onion, you find there's a lot there.

K: Yes.

J: We understand, I think, that principals and teachers in schools, it's not that they're not aware of these issues, but that they are so busy with the tasks at hand, and the needs that seem to be increasing for them all the time, and that's where we can offer services to help the work that's already being done at the school.

K: Absolutely. It's not a blame game or anything, it's how can we make it better for everyone in that school. And in these days of budget crunches, we also know that staff development funds can be very limited; and this is something that we can help provide, is the staff development, to a school or two a district. Because we work not only in large metropolitan areas like Denver, but we also work in very small rural areas, where often staff development funds are just not there, and getting somebody to come to the middle of what seems nowhere – pick a state – is difficult to do.

M: And Janelle, you have that expertise, don't you, in dealing with the needs of the rural population, the needs of teachers who are servicing rural students.

J: I worked primarily with rural indigenous populations, and so as you were mentioning there's a lot of multilayered issues going on; language and cultural issues to the logistics of getting to school every day can sometimes be problematic for families. The definitions of, we talked about parental involvement, but what does that mean? Whose definition of parental involvement is that? So I think those of us that are accustomed to working in schools, and that formal kind of setting, sometimes can't imagine the daily realities of people, especially in rural settings, because it can often be a very different kind of lifestyle than we may be accustomed to. So that's something I think is important for us to continue thinking about and we are available to work with schools also, as Kathy said, in rural areas, and we'll be happy to serve the schools that don't necessarily get much attention, even within their state.

K: And our region, Marilyn listed the states, Colorado, Utah, Wyoming, Montana, North Dakota, and South Dakota, is really a very rural area, except for along the Front Range in Colorado and in the Salt Lake Valley in Utah. Most of it is very rural. There is one particular area in South Dakota that happens to serve a lot of the American Indian reservations where the elementary school buses cover a million miles a year to pick up and bring kids to schools on this particular reservation.
M: And in harsh weather, too.

K: Yeah, they take weather very seriously in those particular states. In addition, there is a situation, school district, where the middle school and high school kids board during the week because of the transportation issues. It’s one of the few situations we have where it’s a public boarding school. And it’s the practicality and logistics of where they are. Another colleague of mine who happens to be our PI, and I have been in school districts where it’s 90 students, k-12, with all the challenges that go with 90 students k-12. We’re versatile.

M: We are, we are. Our region has the largest landmass.

K: Geographically, it is. The one that serves out of Portland Oregon is the one that I think covers the most travel, because they have Alaska, Hawaii, Guam, Samoa, Marshall Islands, Trust Territories – I mean, they’ve got the Pacific. A huge challenge. And this is one of the reasons we’ve started the podcast, and we’re glad to have Tyler aboard because with the increasing demands, we are going to have to look more and more to technology to deliver services in an effective manner.

M: I think what we’re doing is for the good of the children, but it also translates into empowering teachers. Because if a teacher dreads to go to school because of problems that he or she does not know how to solve, then that’s going to effect the atmosphere of the room. So what we’re really wanting to do within the Region VIII Equity Assistance Center is to strengthen, and to encourage, to motivate and empower those individuals, the adults, I call them the tall people in the room, who are working with the children on a day-to-day basis.

K: We just want to make things better.

M: Make things better for children and adults. And translates to their families.

K: Don’t hesitate to contact us through our website or through our phone numbers that are also on the website. Give us a call. We’d like to chat and see what we can do to assist your school or your district.

T: If you would like to contact the Region VIII Equity Assistance Center, you may do so at our website, metrostate-eac.org, phone 303-556-6065, or via email, at eac@msudenver.edu. Listeners are also invited to join the conversation by following us on twitter @EACRegion8, or by liking the Equity Assistance Center Region VIII facebook page. Special thanks to the band Northbound for the use of their song Forward in this podcast. Thank you.