



Dr. Federico Waitoller, MAP Center Equity Fellow - Illinois

TRANSCRIPTION

Center Announcer: Welcome to the Midwest and Plains Equity Assistance Center Equity Spotlight Podcast. This podcast series will feature the Center’s Equity Fellows, national scholars from North Dakota, South Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma, Minnesota, Iowa, Missouri, Wisconsin, Illinois, Michigan, Indiana, and Ohio who are working to advance equitable practices within school systems. Each episode will focus on a topic relevant to ensuring equitable access and participation, and quality education for historically marginalized students, specifically in the areas of race, sex, national origin, and religion, and at the intersection of socioeconomic status.

Federico: Hey there. This is Federico Waitoller. I’m an associate professor in the Department of Special Education at the University of Illinois at Chicago. In the last years, I have engaged in various research projects to understand how students of Color with disabilities are served through school choice programs, particularly in charter schools. I’ve been fascinated by this topic. What happened in Chicago at the end of 2018 and beginning of 2019 really caught me off guard.

Female Voice: —want?!

Crowd: Fair compensation!

Female Voice: When do we want it?!

Crowd: Now!

Female Voice: Whose schools?!

Crowd: Our schools!

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Female Voice: Whose schools?!

Crowd: Our schools!

Male Voice: Today, workers in Acero Charter Schools, the teachers, the educational support personnel, are on strike for a fair contract. We intend to stay on strike until we receive justice for the people who go to our schools and the people who work in our schools.

Female Voice: We showed up to our campuses around Chicago at 6:00 a.m. this morning to protest the misuse of funds that Acero has been imposing on our district. We are low on special education teachers. We have way too many kids in each class. We aren't receiving the support that we need.

Federico: With help of Chicago Teachers Union, charter school teachers in various charter campuses begins to unionize. In December 2018, Acero Charter hold a four-day strike that includes 550 teachers and assistants. In February 2019, various campuses of the Chicago International Charter School, including Ellison High School, Wrightwood Elementary School, and Northtown Academy High School, also strike for 14 days. In May 2019, Latino Youth High School Institute of Justice and Leadership Academy and Institute of Health Sciences Career Academy hold a three-day strike. What was interesting about these strikes was not that teachers were fighting for better salaries and better working conditions. They were, of course, but at the core of all these claims there were special education services and claims and demands to improve the services for students with disabilities in charter schools. This is very interesting for two reasons at least. One, charter school critics have criticized charter schools for being a

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conservative movement trying to weaken unions. Second, charter schools have been also critiqued for underserving students with disabilities and even sometimes counseling them out, so they don't have to serve them. Here you have both things coming together. Teachers are unionizing, and they're fighting for special education services.

What does a educational researcher like me does when these interesting events happen? I go and talk to more people. I sit down with two teachers that were involved in the teacher strikes. I asked them questions like why special education was the centerpiece? What did they want? What did they learn? What did they recommend for others advocating for special education services in charter schools and beyond? What you hear after this is my conversation with these two teachers. I hope you enjoy it.

Female Voice: - want?!

Crowd: Fair compensation!

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Federico: Hi. We're here with two of the teachers who were involved in some of the charter strikes that happened this year and at the end of last year in Chicago. Can you tell us your name?

Elizabeth: Yeah. My name is Elizabeth.

Federico: Elizabeth, tell us a little bit about you. How many years have you been in teaching? How did you end up in a charter school?

Elizabeth: Yeah. This is actually my first year as a teacher. I'm a special education teacher for high school students. How I ended up in a charter school was, because everything was so new to me, like my experience to teaching, I wanted to navigate different systems. The first thing that I gravitated towards was charter just 'cause there's always a lot of different speculations of what it's like to work at a charter school. So I kind of wanted to experience that for myself, figure out if they were true, if they weren't. When I started my process of becoming a teacher and figuring out my placement, I wanted to go to a charter system first to see what it was all about.

Federico: You were telling me that you started, you wanted to try this new title. What was it about charters that piqued your interest in it? Was it they say they're famous for flexibility and innovative ways? I mean, does any of that grab your attention, or was it something else?

Elizabeth: I think for me, it was—'cause I am a special education teacher—it was the way they ran their programs, right? Charters are supposed to take in students regardless of whether they have disabilities or not. Obviously, some of 'em have lottery systems. But when it comes to the special

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education system, they're notorious for being out of compliance most of the time, not providing the resources that the students require. So that's really where I gravitated towards, right?

Once I realized, okay, you're becoming a special education teacher, they're known for breaking those laws more than anyone. I was like, well, let's see. How bad is it really? How bad can it get? I've had teachers that taught at charter schools that would talk a lot about feeling defeated and not being heard to provide for their students. And so I wanted to go into it. What better way to disrupt the system than from inside?

Federico: You went with an attitude of, "let's change this?"

Elizabeth: Yes.

Federico: These people needs me.

Elizabeth: Something like that. I mean, I was a first-year teacher. It was still very much of I have a lot to learn. Coming in fresh and new, like let's get ready to fight.

Federico: Yeah. Tell me a bit about the school that you worked in. Tell me a bit about your students. I mean, you don't need to tell me the name of the school. Tell me about the students that you serve. Where are they coming from, the demographics?

Elizabeth: Yeah. I teach at a school...the demographics are predominantly Latinx. It's in a Latinx community. I teach at an alternative high school. I serve students from ages 16 to 21. They come into our school with different types

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of trauma, whether that's trauma from their household or trauma from their previous schools.

Then they also—what was I gonna say? Hold on. Yeah, so they have different types of trauma. My school is pretty small. On average, we have about—I think this school year, it was about 90 to 100 students. It's a really—

Federico: Total?

Elizabeth: Yes, total.

Federico: Oh, wow!

Elizabeth: It's a really small school. Just this school year, from the 90 students we serve, 25 of them received services whether that was through 504s or IEPs.

Federico: Hold on. You have only 100 students?

Elizabeth: Mm-hmm.

Federico: And 29 of them have IEPs?

Elizabeth: 25.

Federico: You have 24 percent students with disabilities?

Elizabeth: Yep.

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Federico: A fourth of the school has students with disabilities?

Elizabeth: Yeah.

Federico: Wow, okay.

Elizabeth: And one SPED teacher.

Federico: And one SPED teacher. Okay.

Elizabeth: Just one. At least we have one, right? Yeah, they have really different types of traumas that we have to navigate before we can even get to the academics. I mean, the one thing I do have to say that they're amazing, each and every one of them. One of the things that we are very proud of at our school is that the relationship that we built with our students. Even right now, it's just—I mean, I was in a group chat with them. We're constantly texting. We really see our school as like we're family 'cause we are so small. That's what gives me more of that fire to really fight for their rights, students that receive services and students that don't.

Federico: Is this charter—again, you don't need to say the name—but is it part of a network, or is this a standalone charter school?

Elizabeth: Standalone.

Federico: Standalone. Okay. It doesn't have a connection with any other charter schools?

Elizabeth: No.

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- Federico:* Okay. It seems it's very community-oriented for—would you say?
- Elizabeth:* Mm-hmm.
- Federico:* I mean that they're pretty involved in the community or—
- Elizabeth:* We have been in the past involved with the organizations around our community. Our students always would volunteer. The people in the neighborhood would come to the events for the students. This year we kind of fell off a little bit just 'cause there was a change in admin, and trying to figure out who was in charge really of the school. That deterred a lot of the community base. But we're hoping to get back to it.
- Federico:* The students that you serve there, I mean, you have 25 percent of students with IEPs. Can you give me an idea? Are we talking about are you serving severe disabilities or just students with learning disabilities, emotional behavioral disorders?
- Elizabeth:* Most of our students are learning disability. Then there's a couple with social-emotional disabilities. But none of them have severe.
- Federico:* We are also with another teacher that was part of the strike. Tell me a bit about you, how many years have you been in teaching, and how you ended up in a charter school.
- Sara:* I've been teaching almost about 10 years all in the Little Village Pilsen area with mostly Latino population, a high population of ELL students. Right now, my caseload is around 14 students at IHCSA, Instituto Health and Career Science Academy. I do a mixture of co-teaching and self-contained.

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- Federico:* You say all 25. Is that the entire IEP population at your school or—
- Sara:* Our school has a high population of students with disabilities. I think it's approximately 20 to 25 percent at least.
- Federico:* Okay, so similar.
- Sara:* Similar.
- Federico:* How many students total are in your school?
- Sara:* Of, oh, overall students? Approximately 750, I want to say.
- Federico:* Okay. Much larger. Okay.
- Sara:* Yes.
- Federico:* Tell me about the schools. I mean, what kind of students do they serve? Is this mostly a Latino, a mixed demographic school or—
- Sara:* It's over 90, 95 percent Latino, and a high population of students who come from impoverished backgrounds, a high ELL percentage as well.
- Federico:* Tell me a little bit about the disabilities that you serve to have an idea what's going on in your school.

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- Sara:** Most students have learning disabilities. There are some students with autism, with emotional disabilities, some ADHD, but mostly learning disabilities.
- Federico:** You say you are the only charter teacher?
- Sara:** At my school, we have a pretty decent sized special education department. I'm one of the only ones who speaks Spanish at my school, but we have a pretty big department.
- Federico:** Nice. I mean, I have a—we have an idea about your school by now. Can you tell us a little bit about how the strike started, I mean, how the conversations started, I mean, how things start brewing?
- Sara:** I mean, I think it had been brewing over, I mean, a year or two. Even last year, there were some large rallies. A lot of this was due to overall conditions. Teacher turnover was really insane at both of our schools, I would say.
- Federico:** I mean, what's the ballpark? What's the teacher turnover?
- Sara:** Within two years, over 40 percent teacher turnover.
- Federico:** Wow.
- Sara:** You would have teachers leaving every couple months, to be honest with you. Within special education, there's very high teacher turnover, lots of substitutes. On a given day, you might have 10 substitutes, which is problematic 'cause a lot of times the students aren't receiving the instruction

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they should be receiving. I think that was a big factor in it. Frankly, to be frank, a lot of teachers were leaving for Chicago Public Schools, and a lot of it for reasons of pay, workload, things of that nature.

Federico: Would you say your case was similar?

Elizabeth: Yeah. Well, this is my first year at this school. Just in the school year, we had five teachers leave throughout the school year. It was just, I've heard multiple times people just—teachers leave, come and go. Even the students ask me like, "Are you coming back?"

Sara: Yes.

Elizabeth: They would see someone like, "Well, there goes another one." Right?

Sara: Yeah.

Elizabeth: You really don't want that space to be like that. For you, you mentioned 10 substitutes a day. We are so small in staff that we actually have online classes. That's the way that our students received science or math for half of a year, really hardcore subjects that—

Sara: Wow.

Elizabeth: --they need instruction for, especially when you're teaching a student that receives services. It's like, well, how can I modify or accommodate when it's an online class? Their teacher's in a video. That was probably the biggest one for us, is just seeing their faces of like, "I don't get it," and then

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being—me being like, “Well, I don’t get it either,” ‘cause an online teacher to an actual teacher’s very different curriculum.

That was the biggest one and the pay, I think. For me speaking, I was getting paid almost \$10,000 to \$12,000 less. Being a first-year teacher, I wasn’t looking at pay. Seeing my colleagues who have families and struggling to make ends met, I was like, oh, that shouldn’t—it shouldn’t be like that.

Sara: I would say especially people look at other schools, the school down the block, like Finkl is literally within a block or two of us. Some of them are making 10 to 20 grand more and working 45 minutes to an hour less, right?

Elizabeth: Mm-hmm.

Sara: I think that’s also problematic when you have a family. So many of our teachers work second or third jobs. You shouldn’t be working extra jobs. You should be focusing on building your curriculum, and writing engaging lesson plans, and collaborating. We have so many teachers working extra jobs. I don’t think that’s okay.

Federico: Yeah. I mean, that was the, I assume, main reasons that people are leaving, right?

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Federico: How did it start? I mean, there were some conversations. I mean, how did the ball start rolling? When did the special ed conversation enter the strike?

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Sara: I mean, I think part of it was looking at and comparing what other schools have, right? I think part of it was comparing, even within special education, looking at, what is some of the language they have around special education in the Chicago Public School contract or within other contracts, and looking at the pay scales. I mean, it makes a big difference if you see someone working at the school down the street making 10 to 20 grand more than you. Then from there, we were having those conversations. I think those happened on a very frequent basis. I mean, maybe even a weekly basis, right? We started building from there into having rallies and thinking bigger on, how can we push back against this?

Federico: It was the same there for you?

Elizabeth: Yeah. I think for us, we would meet even weekly to just like, “This is what’s going on. We’ve been in negotiations.” Like Sara said—I can say your name, right? Yeah. Those conversations of the resources that we lacked as a school just were brought up naturally ‘cause it was like for us in our school, it was the second biggest thing, right?

It was like pay scale, but then also like, what are we missing being such a small school and then serving this particular population of students with trauma and having no type of resources. It naturally just happened, the conversation. Me looking at a traditional CPS school and realizing like, oh wow, we have nothing compared to what they have, especially when it came to serving our students with disabilities.

Federico: When did this—the special ed conversation started? Was this from the beginning? Was it afterwards that we’re gonna strike, we’re also gonna ask for this?

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Sara: I mean, I think from the second I started working there, there were always conversations on students not receiving their services just from the get go, right? ‘Cause there’s just such a need. You’d hear from the students saying, “I don’t have help in this class.” You’d hear from the teachers, “We’re—” I mean, there’s students who didn’t have help in majority of their classes or who were failing classes. For me that really stuck out.

You heard special education teachers speaking about it. You heard general education teachers ‘cause they knew they were supposed to have a co-teacher. They knew something was wrong, right? Especially in the Spanish classes, there might be over 50 percent students with disabilities. That was a huge problem.

Federico: You say 50 percent?

Sara: Yeah, over 50 percent with disabilities. At that point—

Federico: Hold on. Let me ask you about that. Why there is more on the Spanish classes?

Sara: Typically, in the classes like Spanish, or art, or classes like that, there often are for some reason more students with disabilities in one class. I don’t know if it’s based on how their other schedules are done. This happens frequently at other places. But I will say from what I’ve seen, charters break the law more on having a higher percentage than public schools. Public schools break the law as well. But I think charters is even worse. They get away with it.

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Federico: Was your experience similar, the conversation about special ed was from the beginning?

Elizabeth: It was definitely from the beginning, especially when I realized I was the only special education teacher. There's only so many ways that I could split myself to meet the requirements for my students' minutes. What we started doing was looking at student schedules and figuring out like, where can we rearrange their classes so I can be in there? That would mean that I would be in a class, for example an English class, and there was 20 students. Maybe 10 or 11 of those students received services just so I could meet the minutes. I would attempt not to break the law, when really it was harder to have such a large amount of students in that classroom because then in that room I was being split 11 different ways.

At the same time, when it came to my general education teacher, giving her the resources and the tools to engage with the students as well and being like, "Hey, we're gonna have to team ball it here 'cause there's two of us, but half of your class receives services. We need to make sure that we're meeting everyone's needs in there."

Federico: Yeah. When I hear that, I'm thinking where were parents for them? Were the parents complaining about this? Were parents reaching out to you to complain or say, "My kid's not receiving the services that he deserves"?

Sara: I mean, generally I would say at the beginning there weren't too many complaints. I think there are at first more complaints from students just not feeling like they weren't getting the help they need. They might know, "Hey, I'm supposed to have help in math. There's not a second teacher," right? Over time, I think there were more parent complaints.

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What we saw, especially in building up to the strike, is we started providing Know Your Rights informational sessions on them knowing, “Hey, if your child is supposed to have two teachers, they have to have two teachers. It’s federal law. Charters are not allowed to opt out of that.” As parents started learning more of their rights and their power, they started pushing back more. Some of our parents started calling the principal and CEO or case manager and demanding that their child’s rights be served.

Federico: Was there a response on that or things continue the same?

Sara: I mean, unfortunately a lot of times, they try to ignore them, right? We even had parents speaking in front of the board and the CEO saying, “Hey, don’t worry. We’re gonna fix this.” Some of those were ignored. Now, some of the pushback I will say did work. What we found even at our school is that they started cutting services and cutting minutes. They might go from having help five days a week in all their classes to going to having help one day a week.

Previously, a lot of parents didn’t know their rights and didn’t know, hey, they can speak up and say, “That’s not okay. My child needs these services.” Once they started pushing back and the teachers and students started pushing back, in many cases they stopped cutting the services. They stopped pressuring the IEP teams to cut services.

Federico: Do you have similar experiences or—

Elizabeth: My experience is a little different. I mean, for sure I would have conversations with the students. They would say like, “I’m struggling here.

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I don't understand it." Even something I noticed with my population of students is that they didn't understand their rights either. They didn't know how to read their IEP. Even some students didn't even know why they had one.

Then I had to go in and explain to 'em like, "This is why you're receiving services. This is what this legal document says." Then that's when they'd be like, "Wait. It's not happening." I'm like, "No, yeah. It's not happening, but there's one of me."

With parents, because of the population of students I work with, some of our students might have strained relationship with parents. The communication there isn't as open in another charter school or another school just because we respect the student not wanting. A lot of our students are 18. They have their rights. Their educational rights are to them. Empowering our students themselves to like, "This is—you need to speak up when we have IEP meetings. Go to our co-interim principals and talk about it, right? There's not much we can do until you start speaking up." We did have some parents who were like "Wait, what's happening?" Even they were surprised that there was only just one teacher. They spoke to the co-interim principals. I think the response was like, "There's not much we can do as of yet." A lot of them kept going back with like, "Well, next school year, we'll have more special education teachers." But I think it's more than just that. You can have three teachers, but if the requirements aren't being met, it doesn't matter how many teachers you have in there.

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Federico: Absolutely. You decided to strike. Were parents part of the strike or they supported the strike? I mean, what were your experiences with parents, or there weren't parents maybe?

Sara: I mean, I would say it just started just with the students. We had a lot of students joining us on the strike lines. I mean, I'd say we had at least 20 to 30 students joining us. It kept increasing throughout the strike as well. We had some parents joining us. But I would say it was majority students. During one day of the strike—I don't remember which day it was, maybe the second day—we did a Know Your Rights training around special education for both our schools, for the students, the teachers. Some parents came as well. A lot of people were very surprised 'cause they didn't know their rights around that.

Even when parents couldn't come, 'cause a lot of our parents work multiple jobs and things of that nature, every day I was getting messages from parents saying, "Hey, we support you." Actually, after the strike ended and the morning of, I got about 20 messages from parents saying, "Thank you so much for fighting for special—my child and fighting for special education." They knew what we were fighting for.

I think part of that piece came from we fliered parents before the strike at least five times, our staff did. It said about what we were fighting for, what were the issues, what we were fighting for, and included a lot around special education and ELL. There was a call-in number to the CEO. Tons of parents flooded the CEO with calls. Parents overall were very supportive of us.

Federico: Did you have a similar experience?

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Elizabeth:

For us it was mainly our students versus our parents. We would have these conversations. Sometimes they would just randomly close the door and be like, “So are you gonna update us?” ‘cause we were in the classroom. Having those conversations on why we were going on strike and for them to understand it was more than just the pay scale. Of course, that’s a big factor of it, but it was more than that. Being open about special education laws that were being broken for English learner students as well.

Similar to Sara, we had students reach out to myself and my other co-teachers just being like, “Thank you for supporting us and for advocating for us.” Then the day that we went back, they were like, “We wanted an extra day.” They were like, “No, we’re just kidding. We didn’t. We wanted to be in the classroom.” Seeing their cute little smiles and them hugging you and just really affirming that what you did was right was probably the best result out of everything.

Federico:

Just to clear up, can you tell us the claims or the things that you were asking for on—with the strike?

Sara:

Around special education, the article that we demanded and we won was that they will follow all special education law. The good part about that is it’s all special ed law, right, so that they can’t—

Federico:

Hold on. This is very strange that a strike—I mean, not that I’m saying it’s bad. It’s just strange. It’s good. That you’re pushing a school to follow the law through a strike, I never hear it before. I don’t know. Maybe you have more experience, but it sounds very strange. It’s like pushing someone to do what the law requires them to do through a teacher strike.

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Sara: Well, and that's the interesting thing is that even when we were bargaining it, they were saying like, "Well, this is already law. You don't need this." They knew why they were fighting against it is 'cause with it, with having this in our contract we could grieve it. It actually puts more pressure on them. It could force them to follow laws, such as they can't have more than 30 percent students with IEPs within a general education classroom, right, or within a co-taught classroom, or the class size language around self-contained classes and things of that nature.

That was a huge win. I mean, it really was a huge win for us. I think part of it wasn't just the contract language but that we did the Know Your Rights trainings with the contract language. They knew when they were breaking the law. I think that made a big impact.

'Cause even after the strike, when some of our teachers had IEP meetings, I was getting texts saying, "Hey, I think they're trying to pressure me to break the law in this way or trying to pressure me to cut minutes. I know, and I'm not gonna let them do that." It was also how teachers were empowered to say, "No, I'm gonna be here to fight for my kids. I know their rights." I think that makes a huge difference.

Federico: Around special ed, you have the—you asked to be able to grieve if you see as a teacher that they're breaking the law?

Sara: Mm-hmm.

Elizabeth: Mm-hmm.

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Federico: Right? You were the same thing?

Elizabeth: Yeah, same. We're under one contract.

Federico: Beyond that, yours asked for more teachers or services or—

Sara: Yeah. I mean, we won a ton. For example, wraparound services. We won based on a lot of their professional organizations, so for nurses, for psychologists. We had no nurse at our school. I don't know about your school.

Elizabeth: Yeah. We don't have a nurse.

Sara: Yeah. I mean, it was a social worker acting as a nurse. Right?

Elizabeth: Yep.

Sara: We had students with diabetes and other issues. Finally, we're getting a nurse. We're getting a psychologist, which we hadn't had. We're getting also class size language where if you have over a certain number of students, you actually get paid for every student per day, which deters them from having large class sizes. We reduced the school day.

We won CPS pay. That means stability. I mean, it means teachers won't be leaving. It's more beneficial to stay. We won more resources as well for our classroom, more books and things of that nature.

Federico: Was it a similar thing for you, too, or wins?

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Elizabeth:

Yeah, they were. They're similar 'cause we're under one contract. For us, in particular, it was having more teachers, right? Not having online classes for our students. That's why it was a big thing that we won CPS pay, just because that means, like Sara said, stability for our teachers. They won't be leaving.

Also, stability for our students, right? Having a new teacher every five months or every year, especially for students that receive services. One of the things we always talk about is that we need to be consistent. The consistency isn't happening inside the classrooms because they're constantly seeing a new face. Even just that and the resources.

We didn't have a nurse forever. There's staff doing different positions, being pulled into a hundred different ways. That can get very exhausting. And at some point, you're not even doing your own job efficiently because you're just so tired of trying to fill all of these different holes.

Federico:

Why do you think you ended up focused on the SPED? I know you were seeing all these mis-services, right? Students with disabilities have been mis-served throughout history, right? You can go to any school, and not all schools, but a lot of the schools mis-serve students with disabilities. The strategies or services that they do, they're not enough for them, right? Why do you think that happened here in the charter sector and not, for example, on a regular teacher strike from the district sector?

Sara:

I mean, I think part of it, since I've worked in both public and private sector, is that they break the law a lot more in the charter sector. Even before the strike, we sent out a survey to tons of charters. I think it was over 20 charters, and just asking 'em questions on basic laws and whether they're

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following 'em. A majority, I mean, over 50, often over 70 percent of the schools were blatantly breaking special education law. I saw that.

I mean, the most egregious cases I've ever seen of laws broken in special education. Having parents on their cover sheets saying they were there, and they were never there. I mean, the most egregious cases I've ever seen. I think that's part of it. We know that. I think the general education teachers and special education teachers know that this was really horrific, what was happening.

Our school has very high percentages of students with IEPs. I say you should judge a school by how they treat their students with IEPs, right? Just like how you should judge a country with how they treat their impoverished people, you should judge schools by how they treat their students with disabilities. If they are not treating them well, it has a ripple effect. If you have classes with over 50 percent students with IEPs, it affects the whole class, right? I think that's why it was really important for us.

Elizabeth:

Yeah. I think the reality, and the unfortunate reality because it is a school, and you're supposed to be providing for students, is there is no revenue, right? Providing all of these resources for our students does cost more money, right? We need more special education teachers. That's gonna cost more. We need something as simple as a manipulative. Those are expensive.

I think that charter schools tend to break the law with SPED more often. It's just because they're seeing how much money they're gonna have to waste, right? How do I save money? Well, by not doing it and hopefully not

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getting caught. I think that's the sickening part is that they look at our students as revenue whether they receive services or not. When you see a student walk in with an IEP in their hand, I'm assuming what they see is like, okay, how much money am I going to spend on this student, versus how much money is this student gonna make me?

Sara: Well, and even think about it. We had about 9 to 10 vacancies not filled. They didn't fill them. So, where did that money go, right? I mean, I overall still see charters as a privatization model. It is a moneymaking model to be honest with you. That is how it is different to public schools. I think a lot of the charters are not filling these positions. They're not providing the resources. They see all these students unfortunately as a dollar sign over their heads.

Federico: How many days did you strike for? Were they—

Interviewee: Elizabeth?

Federico: - the same?

Elizabeth: Three, right?

Sara: Three, yeah.

Federico: Three days? Okay.

Sara: Seems like a lot, but it was three.

Elizabeth: Longest three days of my life.

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Federico: Three intensive days.

Sara: Although I think we marched over 25 miles.

Elizabeth: Yeah. I met my goals.

Federico: I'll give you four. I'll give you four days for the 25 miles.

Elizabeth: I met my goal every single day for the tracker.

Federico: That's a pretty short strike. I mean, they were able to respond to that promptly. I mean, would you say so?

Sara: The biggest difference if you, I think, look at our strikes and other strikes that have happened around the country or even within the city is we had massive parent student community support. We built that, right? If you look at other strikes that have happened, it was just the workers, which is important. You clearly need a really strong worker solidarity base. Because we are—we're teachers, right? You work with students. You work in the communities. You have to have that support. We had so much support from the get go.

We had people calling them daily, the CEO, the principal. We had petitions going, emailing all the board of education members every day, right? We had actions at the president of the board's place of business. I mean, we put so much pressure on them from not only our standpoint but from the parent community standpoint. That's what caused us to win. I honestly think that's what caused us to win.

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Federico: Would you agree with that?

Elizabeth: Yeah. I think us—people just seeing teachers stand together like, “Well, what they want is just more money, right?” They automatically assume when you’re going on strike it’s because of the lack of money, which is part of it. But I think building these relationships with our students and with the community, they really understood there’s more than just that. The community definitely, they would be there at 6:00 in the morning with us. They would bring coffee.

They knew that we weren’t getting paid. I had parents and even some of my students, right, reach out and be like, “Do you need food? Do you need money?” Even just the thought, right, that crossed. We were big in numbers. They were definitely intimidated. They were like, “Okay, we can’t continue this.” I think it was also like our schools were closed. It was in middle of May, beginning of May, so really close to the end of the school year. Students were losing instruction. Towards the end of the school year, it wraps around super quickly. They were like, “Okay, we need to get our students back in our classrooms. Let’s negotiate.”

Federico: That’s great. What would you tell a parent of a student with a disability who’s considering to send their child to a charter school?

Sara: I mean, I would say, first of all, know your rights, right? I would say that’s within a charter or public school. Maybe even more so at a charter. Know your rights. Make sure you have copies of the IEP. Read over the IEP. Ask your child, “Hey, do you have—” use simple language, “do you have

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two teachers in this class?” Right? ‘Cause they should have if they should have the co-taught class. Or, “You have a small class, right?”

There’s simple ways you can talk to your child about and find out if they are getting the services. Check their grades frequently. If there’s a class they’re failing, ask them, “How many students are in your class? Are there two teachers? Are there one teacher?” Right?

To be blunt, even ask the special education teacher, ask the case manager, “Are all their services being met?” ‘Cause by law in Illinois now, they’re supposed to have sent a letter to the parents within 10 days of not providing services. Now clearly, frequently that is not happening. But, I would ask the case manager, the principal, or someone in writing, so you have proof. And ask for it back in writing. ‘Cause often they might break the law, but they’re not gonna do it in writing, right? So make sure you ask for everything in writing.

Elizabeth:

Yeah. I mean, I think know your rights. Also, the big one is don’t be afraid. I think a lot of our parents and even sometimes our students are afraid because they’re marginalized for having a child that receives services or being a student that receives services. Especially when it comes to the Latinx community, there’s such a negative connotation with what that means. Stop being afraid. There’s nothing wrong with a student using services or having a child. Know your rights.

Also, be very communicative. That’s with your child or with the teachers. Not being afraid of being like, “Okay, what’s going on?” To say like, “I know my student’s or my child’s needs are not being met. Why is that? What are the action steps?” I think that’s a big one is being like, “Okay, what’s the

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follow up?” and follow through. Regardless of what system your child is placed in, it’s just I would say don’t be afraid of asking [*crosstalk 37:20*].

Sara: Yeah. To piggyback off that, don’t be scared of the powers that be. ‘Cause sometimes the first question you ask, you might get pushback. They’re like, “Don’t worry. We’re gonna fix it.” It won’t be fixed. I mean, you might have to keep escalating. Go and speak to the principal, or speak at the board of education, or go to a rally, or start a petition. Don’t just stop when you don’t get your answer right away.

Federico: What kind of advice would you give to other teachers according to your experiences?

Elizabeth: I mean, I think that along as—know the SPED law. There’s so much of it. But I think it’s very important for a teacher to understand if something is being broken, and why, and how. Again, it goes back to, for me being a first-year teacher, I was always very nervous to speak up, right, in my—I know something’s wrong. Do I have the power or let alone the knowledge to speak about this?

I have to take my own advice of stop being afraid, and just realize that we are the advocates for our students. That means that we do it in various different ways whether that’s inside the classroom or talking to the principal, talking to the parents. Like what Sara said, if it doesn’t work, keep escalating. There’s more than just you who sees what’s wrong. There’s power in numbers. Go to your other teachers and be like, “Hey, you know this isn’t right, and this is why. So what are we gonna do about it?”

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Sara: Yeah, just like what you said, power in numbers. I mean, even we did a lot of surveys even to—it almost validates your own thoughts. Other people are in agreement with us. You have this data to show, hey, this percentage of teachers also says this is a problem or this law is being broken. And don't do things alone. Especially if you aren't tenure at your school, do things in groups. A lot of times you'll find people who think similarly to you.

Federico: What advice do you have for administrators?

Sara: I would just say trust in your teachers, trust in your parents. You're gonna have more problems if you break special education law, right? You know you should be doing what's best for the students. I mean, these students really need the help. The laws are there for a reason.

Talk to your teachers. Trust in them, right? Appoint them to leadership positions. Let your special education teams make a lot of decisions 'cause a lot of times they know what's best. They're working with the students on a daily basis.

Elizabeth: I mean, the first one is don't break the law, for sure, 'cause they know that they're breaking it. Also, communicate, right? Communicate with your teachers on what can—I think sometimes it's simple as asking the question of like, "What can we do to improve our school within special education or in general?" Having those hard conversations, 'cause sometimes they're not pretty. They might get ugly. As long as you have the end in mind, which is we want to provide for all of our students. Not being afraid to have that conversation of like, "Okay, we're breaking the law, but how are we going to fix it?"

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- Federico:* What about for parents? Any advice for parents?
- Sara:* I mean, I think it's just similar. Yeah, don't be afraid, power in numbers. Try to get a group of parents together. Don't go into the principal's office or case manager alone. Before IEPs, talk to your special education teacher. Talk to your child and the general education teachers, so you're all on board with the same goal before you go in that meeting. 'Cause unfortunately, sometimes there is coercion or scare tactics to try to reduce services. Even join some organizations that help with Know Your Rights training, like Raise Your Hand or other community organizations as well.
- Elizabeth:* Yeah. I think especially for parents that are Latinx's, something I would always get is parents are afraid to ask for things that are supposed to be translated and not—
- Sara:* Yeah, that's a good point.
- Elizabeth:* - saying like, "Hey, I need it in translation to understand." I think just get as much knowledge as you can, whether that's joining an organization that can help you understand what's happening in the law or even just talking to your teacher and saying like, "I don't understand it. Can you help me explain it?" That's power in itself is the knowledge to better for your student or your child.
- Sara:* Good.
- Federico:* What advice do you have for policymakers, people at the board, people doing education policy?

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Sara: Quit your jobs and get an elected school board! I mean, just do what's right for kids. If you're not in it for kids, if you're trying to privatize or make a dollar off the backs of kids, you should not be in the profession you're in. Talk to the experts. The experts are the parents, students, and teachers, right, the community. It's not the privatizers. It's not the charter operators or anything like that. You really should talk to the experts. They know what's going on in the schools.

Sara: Yeah, it would be the same, right? Know why you're in it. Then communicate with the teachers or parents. It's asking that question like, "How can we improve our schools?" Parents and even students have so much they would do. I would have students be like, "If I could change this, I would change X, Y, and Z." Just having that conversation. It might not look pretty, but it's what needs to be done.

Federico: What do you see—how do you see the future?

Sara: Of charters?

Federico: And students with disabilities. Do you think it's going to improve?

Sara: I mean, I think overall within our schools it will just 'cause people know their rights, and they do have the contract articles to back it up. It might take some push on that and maybe even filing of grievances and more Know Your Rights trainings. I think it will improve overall for our students with disabilities. I think administration knows that we know our rights more overall. I think even within the state, right, we had an investigation inquiry into special education and how the district was breaking the law. I hope and I think it will improve. But we also have to hold administrators' feet to

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the fire and even policymakers' feet to the fire to ensure all the state laws are followed.

Elizabeth: Yeah. I definitely think that our fight is not over. It's towards the correct direction. It's having those conversations and also holding each other accountable whether that's policymakers, administration, or schoolteachers, right, within ourselves. Within our schools, I think that there's an improvement that I'm looking forward to seeing next school year. If not, I mean, we can always file for grievance and be like, "Remember what we signed?" In general, I think that we're headed towards the right direction especially having these conversations within Latinx community. I know when I was in high school, no one would even want to speak about this at my family dinner table. Having those conversations within these communities is really important, and just getting as much knowledge as possible to be able to fight back.

Federico: Any final thoughts about your experiences, things I didn't ask you and you may want to say?

Sara: I would just say I think a year ago or more we didn't think this was possible almost. I don't think we ever thought we could have won this much. I would just say my advice is fight for the impossible. The only way you can win the impossible is through doing it as a coalition with the students, and parents, and community.

Elizabeth: Yeah. Last year I was about to graduate from college. There's no way one year I would've been thought I'd be like, yeah, you're gonna be on a strike and make changes. I—

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- Federico:* You didn't take a class about striking—
- Elizabeth:* Right!
- Federico:* - in college?
- Elizabeth:* They should offer that in college!
- Sara:* Yeah, right?
- Elizabeth:* How to properly strike for a charter.
- Federico:* What clothes to dress in, [crosstalk 45:51].
- Elizabeth:* Right.
- Federico:* Comfortable shoes.
- Elizabeth:* Running shoes and track your minutes and goals and stuff 'cause you will meet them. No, I think the biggest thing, especially for first-year or the teachers that aren't tenured, is don't be afraid to speak up for what's right. We're the advocates for our students. We always say that. If you're a teacher, I would hope that you're in it for the kids, right? What bigger way than to show that you love and care by getting them the resources and tools that they deserve?
- Federico:* Alright. Thank you very much. It's been an exciting conversation. Thank you for all your work.



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Sara: Thank you.

Elizabeth: Thank you.

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