Opportunity Thrives Episode 10.mp3

[00:00:00] Hello and welcome back to our tenth episode of Opportunity Thrives, where we are committed to better supporting the needs of today's secondary students.

[00:00:07] Through interviews with students, teachers, administrators, technologists and educational influencers, we want to understand what's working today in our schools, what's not, and how we can impact positive and lasting change. And we would love to hear your feedback and suggestions on our show. Please click on the podcast notes to leave us a review. You can provide input or send us questions. You can also reach us at info at Opportunity Thrives Dot.com. Covered 19 has transformed discussions about equity and supporting our nation's most vulnerable students. With that large scale shift to online learning, educators have had many questions. But the one question that has frequently risen to the top is about equity. This topic has also emerged front and center as one of the biggest challenges for districts when they're supporting remote learning programs. Today, we look forward to discussing replicable strategies, resources and lessons learned on how to ensure remote learning programs can support educational equity. And we're excited to introduce our first guest, Raymond Rose, who is the chair of Public Policy Committee at the Texas Distance Learning Association. And we also have Kelsey Ortiz, who is the founder and director of the Inclusive Digital Erra Collaborative at the Cayuse Center for Research on Learning. It's so great to have both of you with us today. Ray, you want to share a little bit more about your background and how equity has come to play such an important role in your career and in your life?

[00:01:35] Thank you, Jason. I'm an old guy. I've been doing stuff for a long time and many decades ago. I started off doing civil rights training and technical assistance for the Massachusetts Department of Education. And we're fairly focused on race, sex, color, religion, national origin. And I did lots of professional development and training at that point. And then after having gotten out of that and doing that for a while, I was part of the team that created the country's first virtual high school. And in that effort, we were providing some services and our first group to students that were that had special needs. And so I wrote a special ed policy for the virtual high schools.

[00:02:26] So I'm taking credit for writing the country's first online special education policy. But as I watched what was going on with virtual schooling, the equity concerns

from civil rights came back into awareness because I could see that there were problems with folks and just not applying civil rights concerns to what was going on with virtual ice, with virtual education in general. And I did a couple of publications about access and equity online. And then that gave me the opportunity to do a good deal of research, both with what was going on with schools and what was going on with compliance, civil rights compliance. And I have become very much. And I say I am an online evangelist for digital equity. That's where I am today.

[00:03:31] Well, that's great. It's the thing about the podcast is I can hear it in your voice. The commitment and the passion that you bring to that. Thank you for that. Kelsey, how about you? How about from your perspective? Tell us a little bit more about you and how equity has become foundational to your work, your career and your research.

[00:03:50] Well, sure. I'm experienced, not as old as Ray and so and so.

[00:03:59] But seriously, during my years of my undergraduate work, I worked for a large school district as a paraprofessional. And back then it was called a self-contained classroom of students with all types of disabilities. And that really was my introduction to special education. And that's really when I learned the potential of individualizing education plans and the power of specially designed instruction. And it was also when I fell in love with just the diversity that I had not been previously exposed to in my own primary and secondary education experiences. And I do come from a family of teachers and educators. I've always felt passionate about that. I really did find out early on that I really was passionate about serving all students and ensuring that they are able to access opportunities that are available to all the kids in the school. So I started out as a high school special education teacher. And then when I was having my babies, I moved to adult education. And that's when I really did see maybe firsthand some of the inequities that were existing across the lifespan in the local communities, especially when adults that maybe had undiagnosed disabilities were not successful in their secondary education and how that impacted them the rest of their lives. And from that, I moved to an area of research and policy that included online learning in states and have found out that that's an area that we can really provide opportunities across the lifespan to learners. But we have to make sure that those opportunities are fair and do not have any inequities built into them just because we didn't consider all of the needs of all students.

[00:06:00] Well, that's an amazing perspective. And just to see how your past informs how you're moving ahead with such diligence. We certainly appreciate that. I want to start by framing this conversation with a definition of how you would both describe equity. I hear different definitions every time I ask the question, and I'd be curious. But from each of you, Ray. How about you? How would you define and describe equity?

[00:06:28] I'm going to do a little bit of another history lesson here. Back when I was doing all the civil rights stuff, we're looking at how computers were being used in schools and so are a couple different things. Number one voice we're using, the computers and girls were standing around watching. And in some places where they got a number of computers, the gifted and talented kids were learning programming and everybody else was doing computer based instruction. So that's the beginning from my perspective of tech equity issues that come along. And then as we get further into it, people started talking about the digital divide. And when they were talking about the digital divide, they were talking about the fact that some schools had computers and some didn't. And then it changed from having computers to having Internet access. We're still looking at those issues as equity issues. But we're also and this term has come up more recently talking about the homework divide. And that is where especially school districts are making assumptions. Teachers are making assumptions about the fact about their students and saying, well, everybody in my class has an interest as a computer at home and has Internet. And they're assigning work that expects students to have high quality Internet connection and a high quality computer at home, not just a smartphone. And so we're seeing a homework divide, which is another aspect of equity. And the bigger thing for me is what we're talking about in terms of accessibility. And I'm going to read to you something that the U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights put out, and they put this out 10 years ago to local school district superintendents as. Their operational definition for accessibility and this is the issue that as we get into this conversation a little bit more, I'll be using as the definition and things I'm talking about. And that is that those with a disability are able to acquire the same information and engage in the same interactions and within the same timeframe as those without disabilities. That's my definition for equity. It's actually definition for accessibility.

[00:09:02] That's great. I've never heard that before. Thanks for sharing that. Kelsey, how about you? How would you describe equity?

[00:09:09] Yeah, again, I come from that perspective of a special educator and then folk read vocational rehabilitation counselor, but I think about during my early years of training, when I began to understand that in order to ensure that all people, including persons with disabilities, are afforded equal rights in our society, that we have to develop the sensitivity that I hadn't thought about before prior to my training regarding how our educational programs and employment opportunities may inadvertently block access and thus deny equal opportunities to to members of our society. And so I think when we talk about equity, we have to think about constantly being sensitive to the need to possibility of making systemic adjustments so that all individuals can participate as members of the community in a meaningful way, in a way of their choosing. So in K-12 primary and secondary, we think about training those kiddos to understand themselves as learners. As they do that they get more comfortable with understanding what they need in order to access what the task is. More and more, those learning tasks are including pieces of technology that they have to navigate. And again, if we don't have a system that is sensitive to making adjustments, lot of times those kiddos cannot access the learning task. And then we have an equitable learning scenario before us. And because of that, we refuse the ability for them to be able to choose. Oh, I really enjoyed that. I like that. That's something I want to pursue, which has implications later down the line. And then so in short, for me, when access is ensured for each individual, then equity follows.

[00:11:12] Excellent. Thank you. I think what we've seen is that in in our current situation is that these inequities may have been exacerbated. We also know what's true is right now it is an overwhelming time for districts and every administrator and teacher I know is doing the very best that they can, as we all are. Many districts are looking to improve their ex, their access to opportunities for students. Chuck Kelsey, do you want to pick up on that? Because I'd love to hear your perspective on what you think are some of the major considerations that districts need to be thinking about when it comes to equity and that accessibility for all students.

[00:11:53] Yeah. There's we could talk a lot about. For me, I'm really grounded in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act or I.D. A.. And what idea does is articulate the importance of parental participation in the development and implementation of disability service plans through early childhood education, all the way through primary and

secondary education and through idea Congress emphasize how critical parental input is to make sure special ed services are comprehensive, that they're appropriate and they support the student in accessing the general education curriculum. So we're back to that word of access in order to ensure equity and thus creating this equitable learning environment. Now we're meeting to see that communication with parents and that involved with parents from a different lens, because now all kids are learning at home. We cannot make assumptions about what that learning environment looks like, and therefore we must work even more collaboratively and even more hand-in-hand with parents to help them identify what resources the home environment has to offer, what the school, how they can support not only the child, but the parents. I think that's got to be a major, major piece that has to be revisited from a fresh point of view. The school needs to communicate to parents and caretakers regarding the child's progress towards learning goals. The way that that's communicated on a regular basis has to be revisited.

[00:13:34] Are we using technology needs to communicate? Are those parents able to access those technologies in order to get the information they need to do their part in supporting their children's education? So I think about what districts can do to support teachers and adopting a new mindset when it comes to effective communication. And I think districts are going to have to think about training teachers to partner with parents and the way that maybe was not previously required, because in the past, students came to their classroom every day. But now, especially with what we saw, superintendent of the state of Washington said that we have to not only plan for lessons in the classroom, but also have parallel lesson plans for remote learning. So now teachers must find a way to establish effective, consistent and safe communication with parents that may be experiencing extreme amounts of stress due to job loss. Six family members drop in income and other family issues. And we didn't train our teachers that way. We didn't have to think about that in the past. So I would say this new type of communication in a way that is inclusive of all parents from all different contexts and scenarios is going to be really critical of moving forward.

[00:14:58] That's such great advice. I think even in the absence of information or even knowledge of what to do. Communication is probably the strategy that's most effective. So I think that's fantastic. Ray, I know that you are incredibly passionate about what you believe districts need to be thinking about when it comes to equity. What do you. Can

you share just some of the things that you think are the most important or pertinent considerations that districts need to prioritize?

[00:15:27] I'm going to pick up on the topic communications. The school district, a lot of the reports that I have seen for school districts say that teachers are using the school Web site. The district website or the classroom Web site to communicate to parents. There was some research that was done almost just about a year ago that reviewed some 6000 school district Web sites across the country and found that 40 percent of those Web sites were not fully accessible to people with disabilities. There are parents who have a variety of disabilities. The assumption that putting something on a Web site means. That everybody is going to be able to read it is a mistake. So, as Kelsey said, there needs to be multiple vehicles for communications. It's not just putting something on the website. You need to make sure that the parents are getting the information. So that may be phone calls to the parents. School districts were put in and the teachers were put in a horrendous situation when they were suddenly asked to pivot. They were teaching in class and all of a sudden it's pivot. You're going to be teaching online in many school districts.

[00:16:46] The school district did not provide the teachers with what I would consider the adequate support. And so they need to be looking at that for the future. At this point in time, just everybody's prognosticating what's going to happen. So I'm going to be a prognosticator and say that I don't believe that the start of the 2020 2021 school year is going to be back to pre Colvard Normal. There's going to be something else going on and it's going to be some form of remote learning. It's going to be different, maybe hybrid, but it's going to be different. School districts need to be helping the teachers get ready today for what that's going to look like. When we talk about the pivot, there were a lot and I was on a few blogs where people were just throwing up lots of resources, technology, resources. When I look at some of those resources, I know that they are not fully accessible. I know that students just give you a simple example, because I happen to be looking at a another site today that had some graphs, graphical information, and the graphs were in different colors.

[00:18:04] And the assumption that everybody could see and understand those colors was problematic, when you have a set of directions that say push the red circle for doing X, push the green circle for Y, push the blue circle for X, Y, Z. Twenty five percent

of males are colorblind. If you're using tools that have a lack of thinking, lack of awareness about the population and the disabilities and, you know, we're not talking at this point, this simplistic level about the students with special needs. But there are students who have different abilities, have trouble hearing, have trouble seeing, need large print, need things to be slowed down. Teachers need to be thinking about the full range of accessibility and be selective in the tools that they are using so they can reach their students and students who were in a classroom who didn't have a problem in a classroom. May, when faced with a Zoome connection or getting materials that are printed and just delivered to them, be having some difficulty. So all of those issues play out in terms of what the accessibility issues are and the equity issues. I want to see more professional development for staff and I want to see the schools thinking about how to ensure that all students have full access to good Internet connectivity and high quality technology.

[00:19:47] I think that example of Zoom is such a great exemplar of students struggling to access or have equity in their education. And I want to pick up and continue that conversation. So what are some of the insights that have emerged from this rapid shift to remote learning? And and are there opportunities that this shift has created to increase equity in education? Kelsey, do you want to start with that?

[00:20:16] Well, just as as Ray is talking about, we know that there are deep divides when it comes to access to technology supports. And I'm going to expand that and say there's also deep divides in which parents get the information that they need in order to support their child while learning at home. And we also know that learning opportunities decrease when parents are not informed or trained on how educational software should be used to support student learning. We know that some parents are not able to help their children until after business hours and thus cannot access a highly qualified teaching professional, for an example, in order to have their questions asked just in time. So we've learned we've learned that those issues have come up and during the quarantine, we also know that sense knowledge is still very limited on the best way to implement remote learning and distance learning plans for students with disabilities that some students during this time received effective instruction and others did not.

[00:21:23] And part of that is because there's a lack of research in that area. But then also within states, just from district to districts, things were handled very differently. So

for an example, one high school kid maybe never heard from teachers or received an email, but was just told one time at the beginning of covered two that if you wanted to learn, you could go to a Google classroom. Other districts I heard required that their high school students attended a daily check in and check out the azem with the life teacher. And my anecdotal reports of that was those students tended to be much more engaged on a daily basis. Remote learning guidelines were very different from district of the District and then I think really did impact student access to learning opportunities. So those are some quick and dirty lessons that we've picked up right away.

[00:22:22] Right. We've been seeing differences in that unevenness that you describe, even within a school teacher, the teacher. It's very, very different on that rate. So what do you believe some of the opportunities that this new normal in education has revealed as it pertains to equity?

[00:22:39] Well, as a starting point, you've been hitting on some of the issues in terms of communications. The thing that one of the issues and I mentioned this before, is the lack of technology that some students have or inappropriate technology. One of the things and Kelsey was talking a little bit about the differences in teacher teacher information, but one of the things that I saw come out from some of the state departments of Education was some guidance about how much time students were supposed to spend in instruction. And teachers sometimes interpreted that as seat time. And this is an issue that we have been dealing with in online learning for a long time. Think about learning based on seat time. If you are not doing all your instruction in a Zoome classroom, if you're doing some, that's asynchronous. And again, teachers need to be given professional development in how to do this effectively.

[00:23:39] You can have assignments that are not online, that are not with the students sitting in front of the computer having to do things, having to do it online, having to do it and zoom. They're still getting doing research. They're thinking about things. They're reading. There's a variety of things that could be done that we don't have to measure learning by seat time.

[00:24:02] But we have to make sure that our communications out to the students is getting to all the students. And Kelsey was talking about parents. We cannot assume that the parent is going to become the teacher is going to know how to deal with the

technology and what happens in the house where you've got one computer, you've got two kids, and the parent needs to work online and the two kids are expected to be on zoom in different classes at the same time. That stuff needs to be all thought out. When we pivoted, we did not have the chance to think about it. We need to be thinking about it. Now, just in terms of a couple of other things that I have seen.

[00:24:44] A couple of school districts have had school buses that are equipped with Wi-Fi and they have packed them out in the community to help ensure that their students get access to the Internet. There are some schools that are trying to figure out how to make sure that their equipment gets repaired and they're having students servicing the equipment, learning to be techs for their equipment. So there are a number of things that are going on that are positive. We just need to see those be sort of more broadly and communicated more broadly. I guess that's part of what this podcast is all about. Yeah.

[00:25:20] I think you're you're right. And I'm going to continue on that. That trend. Those things that are working. So are there some strategies outside of, you know, a bad weather hotspot that are working and are in tandem with that? Are you seeing an increase in awareness of equity and how important it is for people to be thinking through these things?

[00:25:42] Yes. No, I think I think I think and Kelsey said this is spotty. We need to get more guidance out, starting off from state departments of Education to school districts and from school districts to their buildings. And then for buildings to the individual teachers, because there are teachers that are doing an amazing job. They got into the pivot. They came up with new ways to communicate. They are checking on their students. And Kelsey, get it made it a nice example there of checking on them every day. We know that there are schools that have said 30 percent of their students that haven't checked in with the school since the school went to stay at home situation. So we need support. We need people to be looking at best practices. And that could be a whole other podcast. But we don't have to.

[00:26:39] Well, the good news is you have plenty of work ahead of you. Right. Kelsey, from your side, are you seeing a heightened awareness of equity in districts today and a greater emphasis for that attention to access and equity?

[00:26:56] I think that districts have to make an intentional and mindful choice to focus on equity. And I have seen districts, for example, that are continuing to survey families. And I think one of the things that we're just going to have to resign ourselves to is that we're going to have to look at demographics and what we know about our families from different data points now.

[00:27:21] So, for an example, survey is asking about access to technology and Internet and you know, who's available in the home to support a learner. We just have to remember that when we disseminate those surveys to start kind of re mapping out our districts and rethinking. How to get services to students that are still remote? We we don't assume that if we disseminate a survey that all parents are going to access and take that survey through e-mail, that we also need to make multiple calls to parents that we haven't heard from. We need to use snail mail and paper pencil surveys in order to ensure that we are as inclusive as possible of hearing the voice of who's in our district and what those needs are. I'm also seeing districts work with community organizations in a way that they maybe never saw the need to before, even just in our district here in Lawrence, Kansas. A group of restaurants banded together to ensure that each and every day anybody that needed a lunch had a lunch waiting for them at several spots throughout the community. That was coordinated through the school district. I also know about teachers that are putting in extra time to ensure that kiddos that don't have Internet access are still receiving packets and that those packets are close by where there can be a handoff for a central location where those kiddos can pick those up, especially in rural areas.

[00:28:51] So we hear about these districts that are kind of trying to think outside of the box and going above and beyond. But at the heart of it all is ensuring all students have an opportunity to take advantage of a learning opportunity. Also, we have to remember that not all parents speak English. So we have to make sure that if we're savane or putting out one pagers or checklists or instructions or training, that we're sensitive to parents work schedules, but also the languages that they're that they are fluent and literate and also seen districts partnering with mental health and support services and communities to provide resources. And really, there's I think this is something that I'm really going to advocate for, is while parents are under this kind of new stress and this new norm with Knokke totally a clear end in sight, that we help parents identify support

systems within the community, that they that would be appropriate for them in order to help them continue to support their child's learning. And I see community districts partnering with different community organizations in that way. That's something that maybe we wouldn't have thought of prior to covered.

[00:30:08] And then also I'm seeing special education teachers that are really being creative in reaching their students. And maybe they can't get to that kiddo, but they can do a one on one zoom and maybe just for that week teach one learning strategy that is maybe could be applied across multiple subjects and then they just continue to reinforce that same strategy. So maybe it's not services to to the degree that they would have gotten in brick and mortar, but that those special ed teachers are still individualizing instruction. There's still encouraging that student to be independent as learners and they're still staying communicative with the family.

[00:30:48] What you're talking about are some real silver linings to this where we think about connecting with students or reaching students in a way that may actually be we haven't been able to before. So I think that there's some good things that that can can come from this road of innovative districts and thinking through what the future could look like. So, Ray, when you think of the future of education, what what will it need to look like? If we're going to be able to support you? Unique needs of the students that we serve?

[00:31:20] Well, I think part of what we need to be looking towards, which is universal design for learning, where you think about how you design learning activities for the broader reach. And this comes out of universal design from architecture and the simple example that everybody uses a curb cuts that we put curb cuts in there to help people who have a disability to move like you see mothers and fathers who are pushing strollers, using curb cuts to take advantage. You see other people taking advantage of curb cuts, universal design for learning. It's a piece that moves us forward to help reach and improve access for all students. The other thing is, as we've been talking about getting the communications, it's thinking about multiple ways we're doing the podcast. I'm hoping that I have been able to convince the producer that having a podcast needs to have a transcript as well, because the transcript helps people who are having some issues with hearing to be able to process the information. And there are some people who will prefer just to read a podcast rather than to listen to it. So those are just some of

the changes that I. We'll start. My biggest frustration, and I'm changing the question a little bit, is that teacher preparation and administrator preparation programs are not doing the job that I feel they need to be doing, addressing access of addressing equity.

[00:32:54] And so teachers are coming into the profession without necessarily that understanding, which means it falls to the districts to provide the professional development to help the teachers be better prepared. Because I can assure you that many, many teachers do not think about the accessibility issues that we have just touched on today. The special ed teachers have a sense of some of what that is all about, but they've been faced with shifting from teaching face to face to having the students remotely. And Zoom can work for some, but it doesn't work for everybody. And kids who I have who have trouble focusing may have trouble with Zoom. So they may need some. The teacher may need some help in understanding how to help a student focus in his home setting. And all of those things open up a whole lot of new options because Kelsey just did a paper talking about tell a service where you use it, where you are connecting with students at home, providing a variety of services that would normally be provided in classroom face to face service is something that could be being used long term, does not have to be dependent on the fact that students are no longer in class.

[00:34:22] So I think there are opportunities for improving the way we deal with all students, which was in fact something that you said, Jason. So you've got it.

[00:34:36] Just to add on to that real quick so that in that example of tell it serviced, I had I in one interview, I had a parent say that the child did not like being removed for therapies during the day when he was with his peer tell a service was that that could be added on the back end of the day or the front end of the day where they wouldn't have to leave the classroom to to meet with the appointment. And so that could be a new new practice that could be birthed out of something like this.

[00:35:05] Yeah. Are there other things that you think need to change to to provide equitable opportunities? And you can you can be like Ragins the question.

[00:35:15] So, Jason, the the work that I do now is primarily with State Departments of Education.

[00:35:21] And so when I think about change in order to provide equitable opportunities, I think about state departments and how we mobilize cross departmental and how we share information at the state level and how we plan strategically, how we anticipate what's coming, what we think may be coming in in the coming years, and how inclusive we are of voices that are intimately aware of dangers of planning new educational systems without understanding the gaps caused by inequities. And so I think truly to provide equitable opportunities, federal and state departments have to be much better at mobilizing teams to think about these things strategically, where access is the forefront of the conversation instead of an add on later brought on by a crisis like this. And that means that departments that maybe have been more siloed or maybe deal within one specific wheelhouse, but that those ideas are are kind of become hybrids and and shared across a team that's open to building something that's new and more inclusive. And then those inclusive voices may need to come from departments or organizations or even districts that we hadn't thought of, including in statewide state level discussions before. So that mobilizing piece and how we mobilize and what we make as a priority in our discussions, I think is really going to be critical in the next in the coming months for sure.

[00:37:08] And I think we need to be really open that there will there should be new roles and positions created out of what we have are learning from Kofod. We know that for an example of five 04 coordinator needs to exist in each district, a position needs to exist.

[00:37:29] And in that position basically ensures there's at least one person in the district that understands civil rights law when it comes. To technology and ensuring that students can have access afforded equal opportunity that are able to receive the same benefit that were originally intended by the adoption of a new technology. We need to rethink that position. Are we really training that position for what we're facing here in 2020? Is that position effective? Is it ensuring access?

[00:38:02] Are there other positions that we need to think about at the state and local levels? Also, we need to think about think moving forward and ensuring equity. We need to think about the role and expectations of the whole family and education of our children and how we, as an ex, as a society, can empower our families in all of its

different forms. To advocate for the needs of our children effectively and constructively during these complex times, we're just gonna have to remember, again, at the forefront that no one size fits all. And so we have to develop models that account for the individual needs in order to stay sensitive to and inclusive of all of our kiddos so that we don't leave certain kiddos and families behind.

[00:38:50] Just piggyback on what Kelsey was saying. She was talking about teams at the federal and state level and she suddenly moved down to the local level, but didn't say that those teams need to exist at the local level and cannot be in the silos either.

[00:39:08] I totally agree. I really appreciate that you both are carrying this flag forward. Ray, I want to thank you for being a very vocal, strong voice in this initiative. And Kelsey, I want to thank you for continuing to push this these ideas forward at that federal and state and to your point rate, that local level. So I just want to say thank you both for joining us today. It's been enlightening conversation and it's very important work. So you've given us a lot to think about. We certainly have a lot of ground we still need to cover. But I think that this pandemic has been a almost a catalyst and it has definitely uncovered opportunities on how we can work together and meet the needs of our students now and in the future. And I'm inspired.

[00:39:58] I'm hopeful, and I hope that the same is true for our listeners. Thanks to both of you. Thank you. Thank you for having me.