

Joe Latimer: We're here again with Pam Sudduth and Anne Ristow from the Students Support Academic Achievement Unit of Florida's Problem-Solving/Response to Intervention project. This is session number 5 of the Focus on the One, Desired Results series, which is a multi-session experience to support Florida educators in not only utilizing, but sustaining a multi-tiered system of support with fidelity in every school, district and classroom. And today we are joined by a very special guest, Dr. Monica Vera Terado who joins us with a long resume of roles as an educator, administrator, district and state leader. And her leading chief of equity and diversity in one of the biggest school districts in the state of Florida, Hillsborough County Public Schools. Thank you for joining us this morning, Monica.

Monica VT: Good morning, it's a pleasure to be able to be with this group and I'm excited about this work. Thank you.

Joe L: No problem, we're excited you're here. So before we start asking you some of the questions that talking a little about kind of the main topic today. We do want to give all of our listeners a reference point on the main topic of the podcast. Really we're going to focus on two areas, those are high probability and high intensity barriers. So you might be wondering what's the main difference? So a high probability barrier are a widespread or common barrier that's impacting many students engagement and learning. But then a high intensity barrier are significant, something that's a significant impact on an individual student's engagement and learning and often can be combatted with differentiated instruction, small group and individual instructions. So now I'm gonna transition over to Anne to get the conversation going.

Anne R. Thank you. Let's start out with those widespread or common barriers, Monica. What do you see, how do you see them impact many students' engagement in the learning areas of Florida schools?

Monica VT Well thank you for that question, and I think you know in my role working state-wide and then being able to now focus more deeply into one particular district, some of the major barriers have been and continue to be simply access to the same rigorous courses that all students, or our highest performing students are participating in. And I know in my current role, and I'm leading the work of our five-year strategic plan, and we're leading that through the lens of equity, diversity and inclusion and I'll just give one data point that's not just a Hillsborough county data point but something that we saw state-wide is Algebra I. Algebra I is a required course for graduation. So when we dig dip into our data in Hillsborough, 60% of our white students are participating and passing Algebra I in middle school compared to the 60% of our black and brown students who are taking Algebra I in high school and in fact not even passing until you know their junior or senior or high school and not passing at all and not making graduation requirement. These become these obviously the system has capacity for children to take and successfully participate in Algebra in middle school. So we can't say that it's a issue that we just don't have the capacity for Algebra. But yet, the barrier which is impacting thousands of students is that somehow they are not being identified to take Algebra when they enter middle school. So these are the kinds of systemic issues that we are working to address through our strategic planning, and also working state-wide to take a look at those data points because that impacts our students not only graduation rates, but their preparation for more rigorous courses when they enter high school and the gap widens. So even as we're seeing our gap getting closing for graduation, the next level is what about the post-secondary options that these students are entering into? Because a graduate graduating with a high school diploma, that's a big deal. That is. But what we don't want is some students graduating totally

ready for their post-secondary choice and that next step, and others thinking they're ready but they're not because they haven't taken the rigorous coursework to propel them to the next level.

Anne R        You made some really great connections and point in regard to the systems there, and I wanna go a little bit deeper because we know things don't work in isolation and I love that you brought into the conversation that relationship and responsibility between K-12 and post-secondary. So let's talk a little bit about things not working in isolation, and suggestions that you might have or that you've experienced for strengthening the systems and that can be anything from data-based problem solving, multi-tiered systems of support, leadership, ICCEL, the sky is the limit. But let's talk systems here a little bit.

Monica VR     Absolutely, so I'm thrilled to be able to do the work that we did over in the eight and a half years that I served in the Department of Education, because working at the systems level, working with school districts and superintendents and really understanding that we, it's very difficult to sustain an individual change at the school level or the classroom level if the district doesn't have an infrastructure to support. Okay, really you can't really see the big picture when you're working in that, and all divisions within the district organization need to be on the same page. And that goes from school board, our superintendent, our cabinet, to our principals, so that and obviously engaging our teachers and our families and everyone. And so a step toward this is the development of our strategic plan. We engaged over a hundred stakeholders. We had to start this with Zoom, but we have students who are part of this equity, diversity task force who are making recommendations for our five year strategic plan. Parents, advocacy groups, teachers, principals, board members, elected officials we have a state representative who serves on our group. I think I said families, but of course families. And then when you think about like for example, that one area. Just one area, you have many many, but Algebra. What do we need to do to identify that? Is it a middle school problem? Absolutely not. Decisions that are made for who gets what courses in middle school comes from elementary. Parents being empowered to promote and ask for these kinds of things. Schools and all the different staff in the schools, it's not just the school classroom teacher. It's leadership. It's our school counselors who are often at our articulation meetings from elementary to middle. Some recent examples as I've been engaging with our Hispanic community and our Black community and sharing some of these statistics, I've had so many parents say, I did not realize that so many other kids are taking Algebra in middle school. And I've literally had parents say, my child is gonna sign up for Algebra in middle school. I wouldn't have known that. I wouldn't have promoted that, had you not shared that data. We thought that was a high school class. And so you've gotta build awareness. You've gotta build the system so that we all know what equity means. And then of course, what is it gonna be to support? So we have increased now enrollment in courses in students who historically have not been participating in, and what will that look like? What will the support look like? And it doesn't mean more intensive supports are always gonna be needed. But when you're initially supporting underrepresented populations, you can expect that you've got to do something different to support and prepare the students and staff for that successful experience.

Anne R        Those are both common barriers and high intensity barriers, so thank you for giving us that application because I think we sometimes get so caught up in our threes of action, that we forget about all our players and the way that everything interrelates in order to help our students in Florida be successful, all our student be successful. I know Pam has some more to ask you about some of that.

Pam S Thank you so much, and I just wanna also add, having everybody at the table, bringing everyone from the top down, all the way down to the kiddos who are our stakeholders, to ensure that their voices are heard. That is just so refreshing. Like go to the source, ask what they need to be able to provide that support that we need. So if we take it a little deeper and look at those barriers that impact engagement and learning and focusing in on instruction within the classroom or even the school environment and thinking about what we refer to as ICEL, or instruction, curriculum, environment and the learner. How does that apply when you're thinking within that school classroom? So thinking about integrating strategies that support cognitive processing through academic instruction, how do you see that as an impactor or how can we support or address those barriers?

Monica VR So that's really critical that we then think about what is the instruction look like? What is the student learning environment? So one of the things we're doing in our district is, we've found we've got some foundational work that is driving our strategic planning. So TNTP opportunity myth, which is one amongst others, but just this idea that too often, students who are in classes are compliant and they're doing what they're asked to, but that compliant work is not the rigorous work that would engage them to own their learning, that would engage them in critical thinking, higher level thinking, learning to work with peers and all of these things are part of what we are expecting in a classroom environment is that the teacher is more of the facilitator and the students are the most engaged. It's their work. They're owning the work. They're learning to have more self-efficacy around their own work and then providing acceleration and interventions. So when we think about differentiated instruction and providing those additional supports, that's not just for students who might need extra closing of some gaps or specific skills being taught. We need to plan for that, but we also to ensure that those students who already know the information are having opportunities to accelerate and be enriched. So I think our biggest challenge, and I know this is not just in Hillsborough it's state-wide, nationally is in particular when you are integrating and raising expectations for students who often have not been in these rigorous classes or even in the general education environment if we're thinking about students with disabilities, is the go-to is toward compliant-like work. And the thought is that any kind of higher level thinking or engaging them in dialogue, those kinds of things, debate, those healthy kinds of things that happen in our advanced classes is just gonna be too much. But what we know to be true, is the research says that that's the exact opposite. All children benefit from that and we have to and will create those spaces for our students to be able to really become deep and thoughtful learners. And that's gonna serve them well as they navigate through our school system and then into successful post-secondary experiences. So we really have to move away from compliant behavior, because it does not get our kids where they need to be. And again, it's not just about your score grades or your school grade. These are the kinds of skills that every learner needs to be able to become a successful adult and integrate into society in a meaningful way.

Pam S I couldn't agree more and I can it's bringing to mind many experiences that I've had, just supporting schools with walk-throughs and looking in the classroom and you're right, it is that compliance. The kids are perfect, but at the same time if you look at the engagement that's happening and what's occurring and the learning that's occurring, you're like wait a minute. Are you sure that we're going to be able to meet the levels of those standards that you're asking those kids to be able to demonstrate? I love what you said also about preparing them for the next level, because it's what we would say is it's preparing them as an expert learner. They are going to be out into the real world. How do you know they're gonna succeed and be successful? Yes absolutely, that is just so refreshing. I know I

said that word before, but that's exactly what we're reaching for from the little bitties all the way up. It's our job to prepare them, absolutely. And we support that through universal design for learning, to bring in that access and integrating and demonstrating the learning. So thank you so much for that information. Anne, did you want to jump into the next?

Anne R Yes, before we jump into the lightning round I just wanted to give you an opportunity, Monica. You've given our Florida educators a lot to think about and their time is very precious. What stands out for you? What can they do today or how can they make sure that their voice is heard and a part of this systems approach to this change of getting our kids and equity inclusive environment?

Monica VR I'm gonna continue to say raising our expectations, but really holding ourselves accountable to those raised expectations and not just a buzz word. I'm gonna give an example. Some of the work that I'm most proud of being a part of was raising our expectations for students with disabilities statewide. And at the when I became bureau chief, our statewide the most likely way that a student with a disability was exiting, the most common was a special diploma. Then second was dropout, and the third was a standard diploma. So you were more likely to have a special diploma or drop out than earn a diploma the same way all other students were learning and the vast majority of those students were students who had mild disabilities. And so we had to really shake in a sense, the system, to say this is just not okay. Our kids can there's over thirty, forty years of research that show, our kids can absolutely participate and meet the expectations as all other students with the right support, including universal design for learning. And I'm gonna challenge, let me take a step back. I don't want to forget this point. So I think our last year, I left the department in the end of June, and our '18-'19, I think we were over 80 something percent graduation of the same standard diploma, so same diploma that all students receive, for students with disabilities. And we were at 30-40%, not too long ago really. And then the same time, we eliminated special diploma. And for folks who were around during that time, there was a lot of fear. The kids are gonna drop out, they're not gonna be successful, and oh my god, what's it going to do for all the other kids? The other kids are gonna drop out. If we include the kids and we, you know it's just this doomsday. But yet we focused on what does the research say? What are those best practices and let's continue to implement that. And our kids exceeded our expectations, as they always do when we hold them to high expectations, hold ourselves accountable for those expectations and then support the system as we're growing. So I would challenge folks to think about every single group. Think, just take that Algebra. Look at your school. Look at your district. Look at your community. To what degree are there gaps for students who take Algebra in high school versus those who take it in middle school, and how do we address those and how do we raise those expectations and support our students. But support he staff that teach them and support parents as well, cuz if you don't do all of those things at the same time things can get worse before they get better. But, and they usually do. That's part of the change process, right? When we're building a muscle, for example, there's a little bit of hurt when you build a new muscle. The muscle tears. But it's gonna get better, you're gonna get stronger. But if there's not support, then people might quit and give up and just say, we knew this wasn't gonna work. But when you support people through the process, we know we can get to the other side. So I know, I know that I know, if we could do that with students with disabilities, we certainly can do that statewide for other marginalized groups of students that continue to have huge gaps, that continue to have huge achievement gaps. And just say, if one group can do this, if one demographic group in our system, in our school system is successful at this particular thing, every

other group can too. And don't make any more excuses for that, but provide the support that's needed and just expectation that that's what's going to happen if we put the work in that's needed.

Pam S            Absolutely, that's what a wonderful wrap up with that. That's great information.

Anne R           I'm fired up, let's go.

Pam S            We can change the world!

Monica VR       I really believe that. What I hope to see is that in Hillsborough, that we become a model for the nation and every single group by our demographics, whatever our highest performing group is right now, that we will get to the point, and not take a century, but in relative time, that all groups are performing at that high level and even higher.

Pam S            Thank you so much for your responses.