

[00:00:06.350] - Lauren

Welcome to the LDA Podcast, a series by the Learning Disabilities Association of America. Our podcast is dedicated to exploring topics of interest to educators, individuals with learning disabilities, parents and professionals, professionals to work towards our goal of creating a more equitable world.

[00:00:23.350] - Lauren

Welcome to the LDA Podcast. I'm here today with Grace Kim and Michelle Norman of Partners and Promise. And they're here to talk to us today about special education and military families. So thank you guys both for being here.

[00:00:35.330] - Grace Kim

Oh, it's a pleasure.

[00:00:37.050] - Michelle Norman

Thanks for having us, Lauren.

[00:00:38.800] - Lauren

Of course. So start off. I was just going to ask if you guys could tell us a little bit about Partners and Promise. Why did you guys co-found this project?

[00:00:47.970] - Grace Kim

Wow. Well, Michelle, why don't you give a little bit of background as to how we ended up at the First Congressional Military Caucus?

[00:01:00.510] - Michelle Norman

Absolutely. So I guess it really back to knowing a little bit about us. So I am a Navy spouse for over 26 years. We have two children, an 18 year old daughter named Marissa. I also have a son, but it really is Marissa who was the inspiration behind Partners and Promise. Military families are highly mobile. We move a lot. And early on, based on all my daughter's disabilities, we knew that Marissa was going to have to access special education. And it was a struggle, to be honest. We probably PCs about four or five times as a family and with an IEP. And a lot of times we had fantastic luck. We had wonderful experiences in school districts, even when we're there only two to three years. But the last move that we made here to Virginia Beach was a little bit more difficult as far as the implementation of my daughter's IEP. And at the time, there really were no resources available to military families that were experiencing issues with special education. There is a DoD program called the Exceptional Family Member Program. We call it

EFMP that was designed to help military families that had specialized medical or educational needs, but it really was focused on the medical piece.

[00:02:27.110] - Michelle Norman

They really looked at like, well, what are the medical centers that are available in these particular bases or installation areas? And I think there's just an assumption that everything was going to go fine with special education because most of our families do go to public schools. But we found out that really wasn't the case, particularly for us. And when we were really struggling with our IEP being transferred to a new school district, noticing that parts of it were not being implemented and just a lot of pushback, we decided that we needed to take it to the next step. And so that's basically eventually how I found Grace. And we realized that we weren't alone in this as we kept talking to other families that were experiencing these problems, and we decided we need to take it to the next level. Started advocating locally within the state or Commonwealth of Virginia, and then also bringing our concerns and challenges to those in Congress. And fortunately, we met a few fantastic representatives that understood our challenges because they themselves had children with special needs. And they gave us a really great platform, a venue called the Congressional Military Family Caucus back in 2019 to kind of talk a little bit about what this military special education crisis was all about.

[00:03:44.730] - Michelle Norman

Grace joined me while we had two other military spouses who also had a lot of struggles accessing special ed. And it really just started from there talking about what our challenges are, but also talking solutions. How can we make this an easier process for our military families?

[00:04:04.830] - Grace Kim

And a little about my background. I'm a parent of a child with autism. He is now an adult. Believe it or not, he's an adult. I also have a daughter who's doing quite well, and we're very thankful for both of them. My husband has served in the United States Navy and the United States Air Force as active duty, and he's currently serving on active duty orders for the United States Air Force Reserve, supporting the yellow ribbon program. Now, when Josiah was quite young, we went through the whole process of having him identified as child disabilities under the IDEA through Child Find. It was fairly quickly established that he would be requiring some services almost from birth. Right. So we thought we had everything squared away. But then we found that when we were on a specific base that they had taken away his services and had placed him instead in the ESL classroom. Because Josiah is of Korean descent, as you can probably tell by my English, we speak English pretty well. He's not an immigrant. He was born in New York, but they still placed him in the ESL class rather than in the special education services that he was supposed to be receiving.

[00:05:30.120] - Grace Kim

And to take it even further, they kind of use my role on the base chapel to guilt me into signing away his special education, some of his physical therapy, occupational therapy, and speech language services by bringing up how there are children of other, you know, enlisted and other families who needed these services more than Josiah. And because of that, I felt bad. What am I supposed to say, here's the chaplain's wife saying no. So of course I said sure. And I signed away my son's rights.

[00:06:08.250] - Grace Kim

And since then, it really has been a struggle to get him to the point where he was able to graduate with a standard diploma. But he has. And we're very thankful. But I discovered that in order to get the change that we were seeking, they weren't listening to me. They weren't listening to dad. So what we had to do was consider how do we advocate successfully? Well, you need an attorney. So I went to law school and became one so now I'm a special education attorney practicing in the Commonwealth of Virginia. I have quite a few military clients too, including the Normans. Lovely Marissa. We adore her. She's so sweet, so much fun. But there are also others from different branches. And the struggles that they face are very similar, are very similar. Marginalization of the needs, like minimizing the impact of the child's disabilities, waiting them out, hoping that they can use IDA timelines to delay the provision of services. I've had quite a few clients have difficulty when they arrived because they weren't able to find housing. There was a housing shortage and so they were put in temporary housing, but the school district wasn't willing to let them enroll anywhere if they were in temporary housing.

[00:07:25.350] - Grace Kim

So then what do they do? They couldn't enroll their kids. They are coming to me two, three weeks into the school year saying, what are we supposed to do? And so that's one of the reasons why we came together on this. Michelle mentioned the I'm sorry, the Congressional Family Military Caucus. Did I get that right, Michelle?

[00:07:46.720] - Michelle Norman

Yes. You've almost got it right.

[00:07:49.090] - Grace Kim

Yay! Almost.

[00:07:50.490] - Michelle Norman

Congressional Military Family Caucus Summit. How about that?

[00:07:53.580] - Grace Kim

Congressional Military Family Caucus Summit. We just discovered, hey, we've got some momentum here. We can really do something with our platform. And that's the start of what we have now, which is a full fledged nonprofit led by military spouses, volunteers. We give up our time, our energies, our talents, in order to try to leverage that positive change, not just from a case by case, one by one, each individual child, but on a larger level so that we can advocate for all military special education students, not just these individual ones, to make positive changes so that we can kind of move that ball forward towards progress, towards making sure, I mean, if you have a child who's on the autism spectrum, let's say, can you imagine every two to three years moving to a new school, to a new state, to a new country?

[00:08:54.330] - Grace Kim

What's happening to your services? What about that gap between what's going to happen to that child without the continuity of educational services, speech language, et cetera? And there are quite a few of those families that we represent.

[00:09:08.340] - Grace Kim

So that's us in a nutshell. Anything to add to that, Michelle?

[00:09:13.060] - Michelle Norman

You did such a great job with that, Grace. The mission for Partners in Promise, really like Grace said, is elevating all of the exceptional military families stories and voices, but then also being able to educate and advise those who can make change, such as DoD leadership, Department of Defense leadership, public officials, those in Congress, even our fellow military service and veteran organizations. We all know that special education is complex. A lot of folks kind of shy away from it because they don't understand the law. And so that's really where we come in. And we use again, those stories, but we also use data. We notice that we were underrepresented, under surveyed. No one really knew about our population within the military community. And so we saw that there's a gap, and that's where we kind of build it in. We have an annual military special education survey that we launched, and it has grown by leaps and bounds from our very first survey that we did a few years ago, which was just a standardized grassroots Google Form survey with, of course, leading questions and bias and all that great stuff. But it gave us good qualitative data that, yes, there are problems.

[00:10:33.030] - Michelle Norman

And then our most recent survey that we launched last October with the Ohio State University went through the IRB process. It has given us amazing statistically significant data. And we're just noticing that there are true barriers for our families in accessing a free and appropriate public education. There are real

barriers or perceived barriers and unknown barriers. And so that really was what our survey focused on. And we'll take that data and it will help us inform the change that we need. That is what we can take to our leadership in Congress and say, hey, here's where the gaps are. This is where we need to fill it in.

[00:11:14.970] - Lauren

Absolutely. Well, and obviously it's very important work that you're working on. And I was just wondering, Michelle, if you could maybe go into the story with your daughter, what struggle she was facing as you were trying to navigate the special education system.

[00:11:29.710] - Michelle Norman

Marissa, she is a fighter. She is 18 years old. She was born very early. She weighed 2 pounds 3 ounces at 27 weeks. And so that in itself has been our journey as far as overcoming a lot of the medical challenges that she has faced. Within her first week of life, she suffered a grade four brain bleed on the left side of her brain, which resulted in cerebral palsy, more specifically, right hemiplegia and 20 other medical diagnosis to include ADHD, anxiety, auditory processing, hearing loss, many, many diagnoses, many disabilities. Yes. And to be honest, the first few years of her life, it really was just a life or death scenario. She had a tracheostomy. And so the first year was basically trying to navigate getting her out of a hospital and how to reconstruct her airway so that she could breathe on her own. And then after we were able to successfully do that at one years old, and it was more of like she has real palsy now. We need to start all the therapies because we need for her to eventually eat, talk, walk on her own. There was very little effort, I think, initially on the education piece as far as schooling.

[00:12:51.470] - Michelle Norman

We were very excited once we did get her into the developmental PreK class here in Virginia Beach. And I think I was very naïve at the very beginning because I was just happy. I was thrilled she was in school. I'm like, wow, she's getting any service this is amazing. And I think because you go through so many emotions and not knowing whether your child is going to live, and then to get to the point where they're actually, like, with their peers, I did not challenge. I did not guess. I was just very naïve on this is just the way it's going to be. And it really wasn't until she was a little bit older that I started to see more. And I think it's because maybe she was compensating for some things early on in her educational career. But when we started to see the gaps, I mean, I could tell when she would come home after we first moved here, Virginia Beach, and she was complaining about one of her teachers. I know you heard this one, Grace. Her teacher was talking too fast. And I'm thinking to myself, okay, well, maybe she's from the south.

[00:13:56.390] - Michelle Norman

Perhaps she has an accent. She's like, I'm not understanding anything, mom. And I'm like, okay, well, I can ask them maybe to slow down. And so we would have multiple IEP meetings where I would talk. I'm

like, Marissa is not understanding what's happening in this inclusive class. And she's telling me that she'll wait 20-25 minutes in the class while the lecture is going on. And then when everything is over and all the students can start working on their homework, she raises her hand and the special education assistant would come over and she's like, 'yeah, I didn't get any of that. What did I lose? What did I miss? And how do I go and start on this homework?' And that hurt me so much to hear that because she is not accessing an education. She can't understand a word the teacher was speaking. And again, I was bringing this up in IEP meetings. I was trying to ask these experts, what is going on. I'm an engineer. I'm not a teacher. And it wasn't until we got an advocate and then we finally had Grace. She said, we need some better evaluations. We need full evaluation for Marissa.

[00:15:05.440] - Michelle Norman

And lo and behold, we find out that she has auditory processing disorder, which makes so much more sense now. Like, no wonder it wasn't an accent, it's just that she wasn't processing what this teacher was saying. And that kills me that these experts, 16-17 people around a table are listening to me talking about this, and no one thought twice to say, well, why don't we just evaluate her for speech language issues? Nothing.

[00:15:35.130] - Grace Kim

To quickly interject, one of the most shocking things that I found was on a recording. An individual who is quite high up in the administrative special education department for the school district stated, and I'll never forget it, 'why are we trying to get Marissa to do something she clearly is unable to do?' So what she was saying was, it wasn't that Marissa had additional disabilities, learning disabilities. She was assuming that Marissa had some type of cognitive deficit, intellectual disability, something of that nature. And so what mom and dad were asking for was basically not something that Marissa could ever grasp. So why are you forcing her to do it? You know she'll never do it. I think just hearing that from someone who was in leadership was quite shocking. And with the new updated testing, what we found was Marissa has no cognitive impairment. She's not intellectually disabled. Sure, the right hemiplegia did have an impact, but it did not impact her intelligence or capacity to the degree where she could be considered intellectually disabled. And what they were seeing, instead of seeing it as a floor from which she could rise, they were looking at it as a ceiling that she would never be able to go beyond.

[00:17:06.240] - Grace Kim

So if you can imagine, these parents are advocating and they're very well spoken and they're very polite, professional, and kind. That's not the case with every parent that I help, but they are very articulate. They're writing all the right letters, they're saying all the right things, and they're still being told it's just your kids disabled. What do you want from us? Just constantly telling them no. Sorry to interrupt, I just wanted to bring that up.

[00:17:34.580] - Michelle Norman

No, that's okay. But I think that kind of leads into the next part of this, Grace, is that in these meetings, there are references and questions to my spouse. Tell us about your job. How long are you going to be here?

[00:17:50.650] - Grace Kim

(laughing) How long are you going to be here?

[00:17:53.070] - Michelle Norman

Well, that sounds like a fantastic position!

[00:17:58.230] - Grace Kim

Promote soon and leave, right?

[00:18:00.260] - Michelle Norman

Right. It was data mining, I guess, to see what our next steps would be and maybe how long we would be a pain for them instead of...

[00:18:13.430] - Grace Kim

Some districts are very forward, they'll just ask you basically, how long are you going to be our problem? They don't say it like that, but basically they'll be like, how long are you guys going to move in? Two, three years. Okay.

[00:18:24.990] - Michelle Norman

Right.

[00:18:25.540] - Grace Kim

All right.

[00:18:25.870] - Michelle Norman

It is a gamble. I think they do, there sometimes there are competing agendas, and so maybe we were just caught in that. But it definitely was an eye opening experience for us, particularly for a military family. We have a tendency to respect authority, to accept what authority tells you. So it is very difficult to speak up

because this is not something that we're used to doing. It's just the way that system typically works. And so we find that a lot of our families are afraid to speak up. They do not want their command to hear. They don't want to worry about retaliation, particularly those that may live on a base where there's a school associated with it. And I'm sure you see that a lot, Grace.

[00:19:10.210] - Grace Kim

Yeah, I do. And we also have to consider I want to touch on the... You mentioned the exceptional family member program (EFMP) earlier. A lot of military personnel are loathe to stand out in any negative way and you want to move forward, promoting your career. And then if you have anything being EFMP, it does limit the areas where you can serve because you need to be around a certain base. Right. Where they have a concentration of specializations. Even I had a family who was prevented from going to Japan because they didn't have the medication that the child needed. In the 100 milligram, they only had the 50 milligram. It was such a strange thing. So it's true that it can have an impact on their career. I also wanted to point out, like, oh, gosh, when we're talking about all of the issues we're facing, it really boils down to time, right. And time really is one of the most valuable resources that our children have. I'm thinking about the clients of mine who they don't even qualify for EFMP because they're dyslexic. And dyslexia is not something that would qualify them for any sort of medical service.

[00:20:32.500] - Grace Kim

Right? It's a learning disability. It's a neurobiological difference. And so what are these families supposed to do in terms of getting any sort of support from the military? It's difficult. There's no medical treatment that they can receive. There's nothing wrong with the child. They just have to be taught in a much more structured way. They definitely can be taught. But again, time is the greatest resource. And anything that delays or eats away or takes or robs these children of that time to learn. We need to stand up and change that. I find that a lot of military that I know personally, a lot of military spouses, they're overwhelmed. They're already going through so much. They don't want to quote unquote, 'rock the boat.' But yet if you step in and let them know, hey, we're making a difference, come join us. They're willing, they will fight. You talk about mama bears, they will do anything for their kids, right?

[00:21:34.950] - Michelle Norman

Absolutely mama bears.

[00:21:38.160] - Grace Kim

You should see Michelle when she's on fire. My word, out of the way!

[00:21:42.430] - Michelle Norman

Definitely been there and done that. But you made a great point. Again, Grace, with the delays our survey that Jennifer Barnhill, our COO and lead researcher, spearheaded this past October, we found that the average delay is 5.75 months after a PCs, which is a change of duty station. And so 5.75 months going without services. And if you put that in terms of a two year set of orders, a two year tour, that's over 25% of their time without any services whatsoever, that's a problem, because what's happening during five months, chances are some regression going on there as well, right?

[00:22:29.950] - Grace Kim

Absolutely.

[00:22:30.770] - Michelle Norman

And how do you ever make that up? When you're leaving again two years later, the same thing happens. It just compounds and compounds. And so those are the things we're trying to identify is how do we shorten those delays? Because looking at it, these are IDEA violations that could have major impacts with accessing of FAPE, I know that Grace can expound a little bit more on that, but what can we do to make this easier on our families?

[00:23:02.130] - Grace Kim

There's no question that time and delays have a substantive impact on a child's education. The standard that we have to keep an eye on is whether or not the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act is being followed both procedurally and substantively. Now if it's just a matter of a procedural violation, you're not going to win. Right? But if you have a procedural violation, such as delay, a time delay that has a substantive impact, well, then the child has been denied a free and appropriate public education or a FAPE. The learning disability community, they know this well, you have a certain period of time based on all the studies that have been done on neuroplasticity and just the window of time that these kiddos have to be able to learn life skills like reading, calculating, doing math, writing...Not influence impediment. You're putting a huge barrier or impediment in front of these military families when you don't allow them to advance enroll their child or you refuse to even let them enroll when they're physically there, but not in permanent military housing, but permanent housing. What else? I mean, the practice of demanding when the family comes in saying, we reject your IEP from this other school district, we don't do that.

[00:24:32.080] - Grace Kim

This is not how we do things here. Well, how do you do things? And all of a sudden you're going through a cycle of evaluations and after the testing, they have 65 days and they milk that time. The school districts tend to really-and it might be because the school district is under staffed, they're going through whatever. The problem is, none of this is an excuse for not providing the child a free and appropriate public education. So some of the changes that we are seeking, and Michelle can talk about this a little bit more

in detail, are directly related to timeline violations. Not just timeline violations, but treating military special education children as almost they're their own category. You look at Every Student Succeeds that military children and homeless children are lumped together, but they're not the same. They don't have the same struggles or needs. And I think there needs to be an identification separately of the military special needs child and that accordingly, certain things have to take place. For instance, the IEP that student transfers in with has to be honored. Has to be honored. No saying this is not how we do this.

[00:25:50.140] - Grace Kim

No taking away services, saying we just don't have those here. You have to honor the IEP for at least let's set a time period. You have to have it in place for at least 60 days, which some school districts will do. The problem is not all school districts are doing this, and a lot of school districts these days are waiting for parents to file due process cases to do anything. And that's another issue.

[00:26:18.010] - Michelle Norman

Just like you were touching upon Grace as far as ESSA and IDEA, we chatted with Congressmen and women about possibly amending, adding reauthorization any of those type of changes that would help our military kiddos that have exceptional needs. And no one really wants to touch the laws right now. And so that really kind of limits us on what we can do and what we have any, I guess say particularly only through DoD Department of Defense because no one really is wanting to look at the big global change at this point. So that's kind of what we've been doing right now is focusing on the local level, the state level, but then within Department of Defense. And how can we have some reporting or any type of provisions within the National Defense Authorization Act which is signed on an annual basis? It's our defense budget and that's really what we've been trying to maneuver within these past few years. One of the things we've done is obviously the first way it started is having a study on military children with special needs and looking at special education. And that was back in 2020. And then in the 2021 NDAA, we were able to get some provisions in there that would allow for special education attorneys to be available on installations.

[00:27:45.530] - Michelle Norman

The wording is such where it could be a JAG who's trained for a few days in special education or some service branches. Look at it as a civilian special education attorney. It hasn't been standardized across the service branches, but at least it's a resource that I didn't have when we were having problems. And so we feel like that's a big win for us. Although Grace will tell you that folks are coming to her asking questions about that's true.

[00:28:13.490] - Grace Kim

That's true. I have like friends who are JAGs texting, what are they asking me to do? Is this what you do? And they're like, well, you're welcome. You're welcome. They are also hiring the civilians. And Michelle

mentioned one of them did seek out did a consult with me to get advice about her case. She just wanted to it was kind of a sanity check. I would have just done it. It was very interesting. It was set up as if it was a regular initial consultation with my office. That's what I thought it was. But it turned out to be the lawyer. Just wanted to make sure she wasn't messing up, which was amazing. I was like, okay, you're the one who was hired for this. Okay. So I mean, great start. Let's get them trained. It really is just a matter of reading the law, right?

[00:29:04.210] - Michelle Norman

You got to read it and have that experience too, I think is huge. Actually going through an eligibility process with a family, going through a due process, hearing. Those are things that you can read about, but you need to actually experience it as well. Have that practice underneath your belt. Some other things that we're looking at, Lauren, there are some protections out there through the Military Interstate Children's Compact Commission. I know we call it MIC Three, but it is an agreement that states have signed onto that will help military families as you move from one state to another. And within this agreement, there have been some protections through state legislators that help with advanced enrollment. Advanced enrollment is when you can be living in a different state and you can take your IEP and written orders and fax it, scan and email whatever to the next school district saying, hey, I'm coming in four months. Here's my child's plan, and we're going to start school on September 1. So let's make sure all these services are available, all these supports on day one, we can hit the ground running. And so we're hoping to see families use that more often and make sure that all the states can offer that because right now we're noticing that only 16% of our families have ever used it.

[00:30:29.260] - Michelle Norman

And then many of them who could have used it were told it wasn't an option. So there's a lot of messaging and awareness problems with that. And the other thing that we are kind of looking at is just making information accessible to our families. There's a lot of things they don't know. They don't know about their rights. They don't know about the compact. They don't know about these special ed attorneys that are available to them. How do we educate our families proactively? How do we get the state laws to them? Because as you're moving, it is different from state to state, it would be nice if there's a way through a central dashboard in a military one source or some type of very central website that families can access so they can see how things look state to state, district to district. What are the performance indicators for math, English, science? What are the rates of graduation for a standard diploma, both the kids in general ed and those in special ed? So there's things that we're hoping to help our families with because we know that when you are an informed family and you're knowledgeable that you have better, positive educational outcomes.

[00:31:38.970] - Michelle Norman

And that's what we want for our kiddos. We don't want our kiddos to not be able to graduate. We want them to be able to be successful, independent contributors to society. That's really the point of all of this. There's no reason why they shouldn't have the same opportunities as their civilian peers.

[00:31:55.670] - Lauren

Absolutely. Well, to sort of build off of that. How would you both recommend that military parents who might not necessarily know the laws in and out like Grace does, how would you recommend that they advocate for their child?

[00:32:09.170] - Grace Kim

Well, that's a great question. And what I was just thinking about, as Michelle is speaking, is how different the implementation of the IDEA is even within states but when you're moving from one state to another, the consent laws can be different. So the IDEA is the floor, right? And the states can add and give parents additional rights. On top of that, the Commonwealth of Virginia requires a parental consent before any changes are implemented. Not all states do that. You cross the border into Maryland, and a lot of parents don't know that. They don't have to agree. Their only recourse is to file due process. So then, of course, your stance and your strategy kind of has to change. This type of information needs to be available somehow to these families. And I feel like currently it's not all together in one place. There are these individuals on military bases. What are they called, Michelle?

[00:33:11.870] - Michelle Norman

Again, so it's many different ones. We have school liaison officers. Yeah.

[00:33:19.130] - Grace Kim

We have school liaison officers. And I feel like, don't you think it would make a lot of sense for the school liaison officer to know the ins and outs of that state special education law as it compares to others? Again, they have to know what the federal law says and then know what on top of that might be different in their state. For instance, in the Commonwealth of Virginia, it's a state where you can show up to a meeting, say, I'm recording, and you press record. Other States require 24 to 48 hours notice before you can record. And if you don't tell them, they will reschedule the meeting. And that's well within their rights to do little things like that make a big difference in how parents, military, special education families, and school districts would approach an IEP meeting. I would say the more individuals approach and ask the special education, I'm sorry, the school liaison officer. I think that if we all make a concerted effort to always go to that person, they would probably think maybe we need to add this to the list of things that the flows are required to know. So that would be a very useful change.

[00:34:31.470] - Grace Kim

We would love to be able to put all of this out there. But again, it's so different from state to state to state. I can give you a general overview, and we could stick that on the Internet. Frankly, Wrights Law is a great resource for families, military or not. What's another great resource? The Organization for Autism Research has really focused on those military families of children who are on children and adults, frankly, on the autism spectrum. They offer quite a bit of resources on their website. And I'm sure the Learning Disabilities Association of America, just by having us speaking with you now, you guys are shining a light on the situation. It's really difficult as a military mom, dad, a military parent. There's so many little things we got to take care of and so many balls we have to juggle. Right. We would love it if the individuals that we are directed to school liaison offices would be familiar, and some are I'm not saying that none of them are. It's just not the same across bases and not the same across military branches.

[00:35:42.180] - Michelle Norman

It's not standardized. And that is one of our recommendations is to not just educate our families, which of course we would point them to our website as well. We have great resources available there, podcast, webinars. We also have some fantastic IEP binders, videos and other resources. But we really need to have training of those school liaison officers. They're often the first person that our families go to when they move. But we also point them to the ESMP offices that are on those bases. It depends on what service branch sometimes are called navigators, system navigators. Sometimes they're called case liaisons, sometimes they're just called ESMP coordinators. Point families to those offices if they're in the EFMP program because they are the ones who are probably know a little bit more than the SLOs about special ed. In fact, some of them, like the Navy, they will actually attend an IEP meeting with that family, which that goes a long way when you have someone there as an ally who can just maybe not even say a word, but just be able to be there as support for that family. And so we definitely need educating key DoD officials.

[00:36:56.450] - Michelle Norman

The more that our leadership understands this military life, this highly mobile life for those who have special needs and have IEPs, I think that they will, in turn encourage more legislation, encourage change, encourage the trainings that are necessary for not just those folks we mentioned, but even the special education attorneys. Really, implementing that with fidelity is so important. We need to get everybody out there and partner with us. The other thing is sometimes DoD wants to do everything, but it's impossible. They can't do it all. So how do you leverage those public private partnerships, more memorandums of understanding with nonprofits to help fill in some of those gaps? Maybe them sharing our survey, which they are reluctant to do with any nonprofit, but that would be helpful so that we can reach more people and come to better solutions to help our families. So there's a multiple ways to help our families. And that's a great thing about the surveys. It really just informed the solutions that we give.

[00:38:09.630] - Grace Kim

Right. Because what we found is that there really wasn't any data that had been collected on these issues. They would talk about the kind of the more medical side, but not the special education side. Without a focus on the special education side and without data, we can't really move anything forward. People won't listen to you if you don't have any data. Otherwise you're just complaining instead of getting facts.

[00:38:37.230] - Lauren

Well, and I think you can both answer this one as well. Is there a point where you recommend that a parent or an individual would seek legal assistance?

[00:38:44.790] - Michelle Norman

I'm going to let Grace do this one? I think she knows the best.

[00:38:51.100] - Grace Kim

Sure. It depends on what state you're in and what legal help is. In some states, legal help can simply be special education advocacy. Where, for instance, I attend a lot of the eligibility, IEP, other disciplinary, even manifestation determination, review, FBA, VIP meetings. I attend those with my clients. In other states, it's just litigation. So depending on where you are in the state of special education, if you find that your child has not made progress towards their IEP goals or has regressed, that's proof that the IEP is not appropriate or that the IEP is not being implemented, it can also be that the IEP is inappropriate. So if you have a dispute between the school, it's almost like you're talking about two different kids, right? The school is reporting no, your kid is fine. I have the one case where the school is confident that the child is not autistic, and then you have the mom who's a psychologist and who's had her child tested at UVA. She's autistic. Like they're fairly certain. I mean, she's not going to get it wrong. Right? And UVA also is very sure she's autistic. So the school district and the parents are looking at the child same kid, but they're seeing two different children.

[00:40:17.490] - Grace Kim

In situations like that, you may need legal assistance, because if you don't acknowledge an area of need, then you're not going to address that area of need through the Individualized Education Program, IEP Goals, Accommodation Services and Placement. If you don't acknowledge that the child has dyslexia, dysgraphia, dyscalculia, you're not going to address it. You're just going to say it's behavioral. And we hear that a lot, right? That's very typical, actually, for a lot of our kiddos in the learning disability category of the IDEA. So if it feels as if you're looking at a different kid, you might need to consider at least an advocate or an attorney. If it is clear that your son or daughter has not made any progress and has even

regressed in their areas of need. Absolutely. You need to consider...The problem is time. Like I said, time is the most precious thing that we have and it's very important we don't waste time for our kids. I've dealt with families who have been fighting with the school district for years, and we're able to help them within a few months. It really still takes months get some real change. Of course, who's to say that that whole year's long journey wouldn't have happened?

[00:41:42.110] - Grace Kim

But it is clear that once the parents got an attorney, the school sat up and paid a lot more attention to that child. In that case, it's unfortunate. But a lot of times school districts, and I'm not saying that school districts are out there to get our kids, no, but just the way that the system is set up, unless they have to deal with a situation, oftentimes they're already dealing with so many other more pressing issues that they do wait until it becomes okay, it's clear we have either violated the law or that the parent is about to sue us. So let's see if we can reach a resolution. Unfortunately, in that case, I mean clearly about resources and not about what's actually right.

[00:42:35.070] - Michelle Norman

I absolutely agree with everything you mention, Grace. And I will add that one of the main things we tell our families is document, document, document. Because the more information you have about your child, their evaluations, how they performed on state benchmark testing, all those things are so important. And it takes the emotion out of what you're trying to advocate for because you can always point back to the data and say, my child is here. Now they're here. How are the progress reports looking? What is the measurable goals that they're working on? Are they making any progress? Keeping all the information well organized is so important. Where that really came in handy was during Covid, and there were multiple months there where people were not receiving any special education service and support. And it's not saying that, hey, you missed X amount of hours three times a week of speech. Then we know that it's not necessarily a one for one and getting compensatory services, but it's a start when you keep good data to show that this is where my child was here. And now at this date, they're here, they didn't receive services. I'm seeing regression on XYZ.

[00:43:52.060] - Michelle Norman

So again, being organized and I know that's difficult because we move a lot, having a good IEP binder, scanning everything that you can and reaching out to those in the ESMP offices to assist. We don't want people to have to go to that next level. But if anyone watched our webinar last Friday that we did with Easter Seals, Katie Neas was on. She's the deputy assistant at the Department of Special Education. She said, hey, we're not going to know if there's any problems until people file complaints. That's what they check. They want to see those state complaints. And so I'm not saying everyone needs to go out and file a state complaint because that in itself is difficult and costs money, even though there are ways to do it for

free. We just need to make sure that these are valid complaints as well. And they have the data supported.

[00:44:52.110] - Grace Kim

Think about the military family. They've been fighting with the school for a whole year. They're going to leave soon. Are they going to file a complaint right? Probably not. And that's why collecting the data and the survey that we do is so valuable and necessary.

[00:45:10.050] - Lauren

Well, then I just have one more question for you guys, and that's based on your personal experiences, what advice would you have for military parents who have a student who's entitled to special education services?

[00:45:21.870] - Michelle Norman

I'll start. You have to be what we talked about earlier be that mama bear, because no one else is going to be advocating for your child like you, as a parent and to speak up and not be afraid. Because I think now we're at the point where you do have that tribe of other moms, other special education parents that are in the military community that are understanding your predicament. And we now have the data that supports it both qualitative and quantitative. So speak up, stay organized, document everything, and then utilize those resources that we continually to improve on. Tell the local installation, ESMP offices, and the local SLO. If they don't know that there's problems, they're going to think everything is just wonderful in their community and nothing will ever change. And so we need partners, we need allies to work with us on these solutions and make it easier for our families to move.

[00:46:16.200] - Grace Kim

There's so many things they're just like going through my head right now. Like what can I tell them? There's so many things. Well, first of all, here's this. You don't have to sign anything when you're there. You can wait. You can ask for a day or two or even a week to process the documents, the IEP, the IEP, whatever it might be, eligibility that you can wait. Let them know, hey, this is a lot. I'm in a room with a bunch of people telling me who my child is and what they're not good at, right? It's tough. It's a very difficult position for parents to be in. I cried at meetings myself when they were telling me things like, your son was never going to be able to write. Your son is never going to be able to jump. He still can't really jump, but he can write. Not great, but he's able to do it. He has dysgraphia. It's overwhelming. Don't make a decision. It's almost like peer pressure. Don't sign anything. You don't have to, okay? Take your time. Review it. Review it with someone you trust. Review it with anyone you know who might be in education.

[00:47:23.200] - Grace Kim

If you have a friend or family member who is a special education teacher or a general education teacher, whoever they might be, if there is a pediatrician who knows your child psychologist who has tested them, send the evaluations out to them and have them take a look and let you know whether or not they agree with the results of the school district testing or whether they agree with the IEP. So don't feel pressure. Just take your time. You are the number one member of the IEP team. You are the first person the law mentions as a required member of that team. Don't let them tell you what to do. You take your time. I also would recommend that to the greatest extent possible, always try to be firm. Be kind, but make sure you're right. Meaning don't let your emotions take over. If you feel like you need support and need help, in these IEP meetings. I mean, having lived on a military base, all my neighbors would have come with me to an IEP meeting. And the law does say you can bring whomever you wish. I could have brought all ten of my Hercules Drive neighbors.

[00:48:37.510] - Grace Kim

They would have come with me. They were all very invested in each other's children and families. Because we're in the same boat. We understand the challenges of military life and what our kids, what we're trying to protect them from and what we're trying to give them. Right. Oh, gosh, so many things. Record IEP meetings. If you need to give advanced notice, check to see if the state requires 24 48 hours notice. Get a personal recording device. Not a phone, not an iPhone, not a Galaxy Note. Whatever. Make sure you bring a recording device, okay? Because the moment a phone call comes in, your phone will stop recording because of the laws.

[00:49:22.930] - Michelle Norman

I love that, Grace.

[00:49:24.000] - Grace Kim

Can you think of anything else?

[00:49:25.350] - Michelle Norman

I love everything that you're chatting about. But I think the overwhelming one for me is don't sign anything. It takes, there's so much information that's thrown at you, especially when you first move and you have that first IEP meeting. And that's where a lot of people don't realize that the changes are happening. So I think what you said as far as go home, wait for that prior written notice to come so we know exactly what happened and what's being proposed.

[00:49:56.630] - Grace Kim

Because sometimes what you just reminded me of, Michelle, is how going from Fairfax County to Virginia Beach, they took Marissa's occupational therapy and physical therapy service hours, direct services, and changed them all to consult. Only telling you that this is just how we do it. No. So, parents, please recognize that there is a difference between a direct and an indirect service. There's a difference between consult and direct. There's a difference between one on one and group. Just understand what's happening when you're transitioning into that new school district and they tell you this is just how we do it. No, what the IEP is meant to do is address your child's needs and not bow to what that school wants to do out of administrative convenience. The other thing, we're not here to make friends with all of our kids, teachers and principals. I've heard so many parents say, Well, I don't want to rock the boat. I don't want to be that parent. We have to be that parent. We have to go in the meeting, be kind, be courteous, be clear that you may not be signing anything right now because you need to take it home and review it before so that you understand everything that's going to be discussed.

[00:51:16.110] - Grace Kim

But you're not there to be their friend. We are there to make sure, bottom line, that all of our child identified needs, according to their disabilities, are being adequately addressed through IEP goals, accommodations and services and placement. Bottom line. Okay. And don't forget those secondary transitions. That's important because that is how our kids get from where they are with all the deficits that they're struggling with to where we know they can be standard diploma on their way to a career or four year college, whatever it is that our kids want to do.

[00:51:50.490] - Michelle Norman

Absolutely. It's a business meeting. That's what it has to be treated like. And I love everything you just said.

[00:52:02.070] - Grace Kim

It's so difficult for me as a Korean American, because part of the Korean culture is always to like, we are so thankful and grateful for our teachers in Korea. We love them and we buy them gifts, we lavish them. So I get that urge. At the same time, if we're leaving in two years, I may never see you again. I'm here for my kid. And if we delay this any longer, cumulatively, he's going to miss out on years of education. So really put into context any sort of relationship that you are worried about, whether it's with the principal or the child's teacher, et cetera. They're also avenues. If you feel like your child is being retaliated against, the Office of Civil Rights, you can go on their website and file a complaint. So don't feel like you have to bow to whatever it is that the IEP team is demanding that you sign for what your child needs. You're not there to be anybody's friend. You're there for your child, period.

[00:53:07.810] - Michelle Norman

We do have the top tips on our website, and folks can go over there and see what we recommend for folks before an IEP meeting. So www.thepromiseact.org.

[00:53:20.470] - Lauren

That's great. We'll include a link to that in our show notes. And just before we wrap up, I know you mentioned your website. Is there anywhere else that people can find updates about things that you're doing through social media?

[00:53:32.480] - Michelle Norman

Absolutely. So we have Facebook page Partners and Promise, LinkedIn as well. That seems to be a great place for us to get some traction. But we also have a podcast. Our CEO, Jennifer Barnhill does a podcast called Disruptive Storytelling by Military Changemakers. And last season was based on stigma. Because when we did our first or actually our second survey, we noticed a lot of folks were concerned about identifying as a family that had an exceptional need. And so we did a whole series on stigma. And then this new season is based on data and how data is being used within our military community and the changes that we're seeing. So that's another great place that can be found on podcasts and anywhere that you can listen to the podcast. There they're there. It's Disruptive Storytelling by Military Changemakers. We do also have a newsletter. So if you go to our website and get in touch, there's a way to subscribe to a newsletter that comes out on a weekly basis. And you can kind of stay informed of all the news, all of the places we've been that previous week and it's a great way to feel connected within our community.

[00:54:45.910] - Lauren

Well, thank you again, Grace and Michelle, for talking with us. We had a great conversation today.

[00:54:51.170] - Michelle Norman

Thank you so much, Lauren.

[00:54:52.320] - Grace Kim

You are most welcome, thanks for having us.

[00:55:01.850] - Lauren

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