

**SIMON BUEHRER:** Welcome to *Inspiring Change* from OCALI, our forum of stories and connections from our ongoing work of inspiring change and promoting access for people with disabilities. I'm Simon Buehrer. There are almost 7 million students who receive special education services in the US. Those services can range from highly customized and personalized offerings delivered in a one-on-one setting to supports provided within a general education environment --and everything in between.

Over the last month or so, most if not all of the students who receive special education services and their families and just like most of the students in this country, have been learning what it means to *learn from home*. Most schools across the country have been closed during the COVID-19 pandemic. And that has resulted in an abrupt and immediate impact to the educational landscape and has forced schools, teachers and support staff, parents and families to practically invent in real time new ways of educating and supporting millions of students across the country.

As part of our ongoing series, "Voices, Visions and Victories," we wanted to know more about some of the changes and challenges that resulted from this sudden transition, particularly when it comes to providing special education services. That transition happened all at once without a lot of warning and with limited preparation time for the educators, support staff, students, and families that are involved. But as it unfolds, this moment and these circumstances also illustrate the creativity, resiliency, and ingenuity that follows when people are forced into an unexpected situation and instead of giving in or giving up, channel their collective energies and experiences and work together to improvise, invent, and figure things out along the way.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

The Ohio Department of Education recently released a document entitled "Considerations for Students with Disabilities During Ohio's Ordered School Building Closure." In bold red letters on the first page it says, "It is important for school personnel and parents to work together collaboratively during this time to find ways to continue to serve and educate students with disabilities." So we talked to an educator.

**DAVID BROOKS:** Yeah, I'm David Brooks. I am a multiple disabilities teacher. I currently work with elementary

kids from grades kindergarten through fifth.

**SIMON BUEHRER:** And we talked to a parent.

**PATTY LEITZ:** He is the most social child with autism I've ever seen. He's very socially aware and very aware of his surroundings. I don't know if you could hear him. He is jumping...

**SIMON BUEHRER:** To hear one example of how special education services continue to be delivered during a global pandemic.

**PATTY LEITZ:** Yeah, he's definitely has a high proprioceptive need... jumping. I want to put him in the Special Olympics as soon as it turns eight.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

**SIMON BUEHRER:** Patty Leitz is a nurse and mother of four. Her youngest son Michael is in first grade. They've lived in Ohio for two years now, though their home is actually in Virginia.

**PATTY LEITZ:** Michael's 7-years-old. He's in first grade. And he was diagnosed with autism at 18 months and then started ABA 20 months.

And they call him nonverbal. He uses LAMP for communication on the iPad, a communication device due to having the limited ability to communicate. Yeah, it does definitely affect his life greatly, but he's very good at-- he's a strong personality, very good at communicating non-verbally also.

Yeah. So the thing is, because he's nonverbal, you don't know what's going on in the head. And everybody's telling me there is a lot going on in there. I live in Ohio. And I work in Virginia.

My home is in Virginia. We have a home in Virginia. My husband's in Virginia. And my job, I work at the hospital there.

It's been a struggle since I came here. I've been here two years. But I've been trying to balance the working from home and taking care of the kids and everything. And it's been-- I haven't succeeded yet 100%.

**SIMON BUEHRER:** David Brooks is Michael's teacher. He teaches kindergarten through fifth grade at Barrington Elementary School in Upper Arlington, Ohio.

**DAVID BROOKS:** I have eight on my caseload now. And they cover the whole range of ages. I've got a couple kindergartners. I've got a fifth grader and some sprinkled in there between them.

And they have all sorts of needs -- academic needs, social needs, behavior needs. There's a little bit of everything in there. And most of the education is very individualized to that student's needs.

And their day is also very individualized. Some of them are in the general education setting a lot. Some of them hardly go out at all. And there's some that's about 50/50, things like that.

**SIMON BUEHRER:** David and Patty learned that schools would be shut down for a few weeks just before they went on spring break, which in some ways was good, since it gave them a little time to think about and try to adjust to this new reality, but which was also not so good, since it gave them a little time to think about and try to adjust to this new reality.

**DAVID BROOKS:** It did, unfortunately, put a damper on spring break. My wife, who's also a teacher, we had all these fun plans that all got canceled. And we had to reschedule.

And then pretty much the entirety of spring break, I'm in my head, like, "how am I going to make this work? What do I need to do? What's the district expecting us to do? How are the families going to deal with this"? So there was a lot of questions going through my head, but unfortunately really no answers at that point.

**PATTY LEITZ:** My biggest thought with the whole thing, of course, is the kids health and they're safe and healthy. And my other kids could understand a virus and understand pandemic. The older kids are 16 and 14, but Michael can't understand that. So there is a difficulty in him understanding that he's not going to school. Even just for the spring break, he kept asking for school.

**SIMON BUEHRER:** For lots of kids on the spectrum, the transition from school to vacation and then vacation back to school can be really challenging. It's a disruption to the daily structure and routine to that predictable way of understanding where one is going, what one is going to do, and the corresponding rules, guidelines, and expectations. And the loss or suspension of these things can be confusing, difficult, even traumatic. And now you have a new situation, where it's not just an extended spring break, as we were calling the COVID-19 school closures in the early days, but an abrupt shift to *schooling from home*, occurring simultaneously with parents, those lucky ones who still have jobs, who are now *working from home*. And this is a new disruption for everyone.

**DAVID BROOKS:** Yeah, this is brand new. Much of what I do on a daily basis is hands-on. There's a lot of corrective feedback in real time.

I try to be as proactive and prepared for a situation as possible, but a lot of it is feeding off the students and how they're feeling and how they're reacting to things. So any plan that I make could change on a drop of a hat. So it makes distance learning pretty difficult.

**PATTY LEITZ:** My biggest feeling about the whole thing was fear of my kids. I'm making sure they're safe and healthy. The other thing was fear of failure. I thought, oh, no, I depend a lot on Mr. Brooks and the team there. It's all so much hands-on. And there has always been a big gap between what you can do at home and what he can do at school.

**SIMON BUEHRER:** Patty learned firsthand that she was going to have to be the one to somehow fill that gap between what Michael could do at home and what he could do at school, especially now that home and school were the same place.

**DAVID BROOKS:** Unfortunately, I have to lean on the parents quite a bit. With a lot of the instruction being very individualized and discrete trials, there is really nothing I can do from my home and then the students at their home. So I have to rely on the parents. And now those parents who don't have an education background are being asked to be a special education teacher.

**SIMON BUEHRER:** Patty was going to have to play a very active role in Michael's continuing education. This wasn't going to be one of those situations where David would try and teach Michael through Zoom or Skype or some other video conferencing tool. That just wasn't going to work.

Instead, he was going to coach Patty to fill in for him, like an at-home substitute teacher. Patty is not trained to be a teacher. She you didn't go to school for it.

**PATTY LEITZ:** I'm a nurse.

**SIMON BUEHRER:** She's a nurse and a mom, a mom whose husband is back home in Virginia, a mom who is now like so many other parents going to play this new role of surrogate teacher.

**DAVID BROOKS:** And in order to do that, the parents need to know what to do, what's expected, materials, I use, and lingo that I use.

**SIMON BUEHRER:** "And lingo that I used." We'll get back to this in a minute, but it's worth noting that having the right words, *the right language* would prove to be really significant and important.

**DAVID BROOKS:** So I have been sending a daily lesson plan, if you will, each morning with one math activity that focuses on one of the student's IEP objectives and one reading activity that focuses on one of the student's IEP objectives. And with each of those activity, there is a video recording of myself explaining the procedures, explaining what is expected.

I'm telling them the words that I typically use that the students have responded successfully with. I'm demonstrating it. I'm also demonstrating if a student does something incorrectly how to do a correction procedure for that. It also has written instructions on what to do and links to any materials that they may need, whether it be a worksheet or flashcards or something. I'm just trying to give them the bare minimum of what they need to do to continue to have the students be exposed to their educational materials.

**PATTY LEITZ:** So he put on here before any at the top of the assignment of what the lesson plan of what Michael was supposed to do, he put in the expectation-- he put it was very clear, very clear explanation in writing of what I need to do, but then he did this video up on top that before every assignment of explaining to me how to teach Michael, that use these words. He'd just say, "this is what I do." So I took notes. And I wrote down word for word what he was saying with what he said to Michael.

And so then when I-- and I had that with me when I went in to teach Michael. And had my visuals of school-- *first school, then iPad*, I had that all out. But when I sat down with him and used the words that Mr. Brooks gave me, he looked at me like, *what*, basically like, how did *you* find *that out*? And then he responded right away.

I used Mr. Brooks's words. And I imitated Mr. Brooks, what he showed me in the video. And Michael did the work just right then readily.

**SIMON BUEHRER:** So the combination of clear instructions on what to do, expectations based on Michael's IEP objectives and a video of David explaining and demonstrating how he would teach the day's lessons, these are the tools and strategies that are given to Patty, plus, as we mentioned earlier, the specific words and language suggested by David.

**DAVID BROOKS:** Lingo that I use.

**SIMON BUEHRER:** These words, which for Patty, at least, proved to be the real key, almost a literal key to unlocking the experience of teaching Michael.

**PATTY LEITZ:** When I sat down with him and used the words that Mr. Brooks gave me, he looked at me like, *what?* Basically, like how did *you* find *that out?*

**SIMON BUEHRER:** So what exactly did Patty do with these words?

**PATTY LEITZ:** Consistency, make visuals. Get him on a schedule. These are the rules, just set it up from day one. This is the expectation.

And I used-- Mr. Brooks always talked about using the first-and-then first, do school. Then you can have your iPad. That was key.

So he learned that after the first day that he's not going to get his iPad, unless he sits down and does his school work. So it took like four days trial and error. One time he made me wait an hour. I sat there at the table, everything all laid out.

And he just played around, not even with any toys. He was just selectively ignoring me. He came over to me and said, "iPad." And I point to the visual and say "First school, then iPad." But he after an hour, he finally came over and did it.

**SIMON BUEHRER:** Of course, this isn't just like pushing a button. *Voila*, home education! It's a lot of trial and error, stops and starts. Some days are better than others.

**PATTY LEITZ:** Because of working, it has to be flexible. I can't say that every single day at 10:00 AM, we're going to get on, set the table, and do work. What I thought I was going to be able to do that, like in my mind, in my dream world, but it is not a reality.

When I'm working, I can not. Who knows, my job, something comes up. And my job is how we eat. So I have to be able to do well at my job.

**DAVID BROOKS:** I feel at this point-- I've told the parents, literally, just do the best you can. If something doesn't get done on one day, it's fine. Find some other time to make it up if you can. If it doesn't get done exactly the way I do it, it's fine.

Kids are pretty resilient. When school resumes, we'll match-- we'll will come to the students' level and then push them from there. But the most important thing that I tell the parents is their health, physical and mental health at this point is the most important thing.

**SIMON BUEHRER:** Patty and Michael are really fortunate to have such a strong support team in her school district. It's not just David Brooks.

**PATTY LEITZ:** What I found is the OT did the same thing. She called me up, and she gave me very clear instruction of this is what to do. And she gave me a timeline. This is how long he can sit and do this task. And then I have to give him his reinforcer.

And then how long she gives the reinforcer very clear direction, so wonderful. And then even the adaptive PE teacher he sent me an email and gave me instruction of what to do, but he also gave me the words that he uses in his direction to Michael. So that I might just say, "Come on, Michael, you could do it." I might say a lot, but he says just very direct, "Kick the ball." Keep your words limited to help.

Give me direction that way. So all of them gave me the words to use that what they say to Michael. And that was life-changing for me, because then all of a sudden he was doing the task, because I was using the correct words. And it just short and sweet, but what he had heard before.

**SIMON BUEHRER:** So with the occupational therapist and phys-ed teacher providing similar clear instructions and language, Patty, the nurse, and mother continues to receive additional help and support as Michael's primary educational provider. And she's seeing what Michael is capable of and learning more about what he knows and what he can do.

**PATTY LEITZ:** I found out a lot more of what Michael can do. Yeah, I didn't know Michael could count money, that he could count coins, that he knew what the value of a coin was, but he was able to match it. I didn't know he could tell time. And he could tell time very easily.

It is a big problem when the child cannot communicate, when they're nonverbal, that you don't know what's going on in the head, to have low expectations. And my sister always tells me, always have high expectations. And I thought I had high expectations, but I'm really learning a lot about Michael.

And then he's responding to that though too. What I found in the last two weeks as he's talking to me more, he's using more words that I haven't heard him say previously, he's talking about the playground, talking about a book that he read, talking about a slide. I'd never heard him talk about a slide before, coming up and speaking, saying words to me that I haven't heard him say and then using his device, his whole sentence, ...flipping out... out, like I didn't even know.

I'm like, what did you just say? I want to make sure I stopped everything and to reinforce what

he had done. It's very empowering.

**SIMON BUEHRER:** So it seems like things are more or less working out so far. Patti is settling into her role as mother, nurse, and teacher. And Michael continues to learn what it means to learn from home. How long this situation and arrangement will continue is still unknown. At least, for now, there aren't any foreseeable plans to try and introduce remote academic instruction by a video distance learning.

**DAVID BROOKS:** From what I have seen is when we've done these video conferences, the kids are very easily distracted. They tend to be more concerned about looking at themselves and having fun, -- which is completely understandable. And then I think any sort of true academic instruction taking place like that would be pretty difficult. So it would be more of a social get together to keep the relationship going. I'm hoping to get multiple students on a Zoom or a conference call so they can continue to see each other and have those relationships.

**SIMON BUEHRER:** Relationships are at the heart of this. The relationship between a teacher and a student, a parent and a child, a teacher and a parent. And like all relationships, they require considerable time and effort to build, nurture, and strengthen them. It's still early. Things are still evolving and changing, but there are some early wins some early victories.

**DAVID BROOKS:** I would like to say that, I would say Patty's, Patty's case is a victory. Her and I have communicated quite a bit throughout the school year. And I know that she has been stressed over some things and still learning how or what makes Michael tick.

So the fact that she is able to see firsthand all of the cool and fun and successful things that we see at school that she may not be seeing at all, now she is seeing at home. And she is helping to shape that. And hearing how surprised and excited and happy she is that she now her son is capable of doing all these really cool things that she didn't know before, I think is a success.

**PATTY LEITZ:** I don't know. I'm just saying I am seeing a whole other part of him through this experience that ... one problem I have had in the past is getting overwhelmed by autism and that you have to have hope that my child is-- I want him to be a productive member of society and to reach his full potential, whatever that may be, never knowing really what is his potential, what is that going to look like, but always just staying the course and keeping positive. And but I wax and wane.



Sometimes autism is just too overwhelming. And I wonder, how am I going to succeed? How am I going to help my child? But the amount of hope that this has put-- this has given me so much hope, because I'm seeing a whole other side of him than I've seen before and seeing how much more he can do. And I just can't wait to find out more of what he can do, that he can share with me.

**SIMON BUEHRER:** You're listening to *Inspiring Change* from OCALI, our forum of stories and connections from our ongoing work of inspiring change and promoting access for people with disabilities. Special thanks to Patty and David for sharing their thoughts and experiences with us. We look forward to talking to more parents, educators, and other professionals as part of our ongoing series, "Voices, Visions, and Victories."

You can find those episodes at [OCALI.org/podcasts](http://OCALI.org/podcasts). You'll also find transcripts of all of our episodes for those who need an accessible version of this podcast. And, of course, you can find *Inspiring Change* at popular podcast sites, like Apple, Google, or Stitcher. Choose your favorite one and be sure to subscribe.

Thanks again for listening to *Inspiring Change*, because the need for change is everywhere. And inspiration can happen anywhere. I'm Simon Buehrer. See you soon.