Jennifer Russel: Hey everybody, welcome to LifeSkills Radio. I'm your host, Jennifer Russell, and today I am delighted to have our very own Elizabeth Danner. So we're gonna talk about transition. Yay.

E. Danner: Hi Jen, thanks for having me.

Jennifer Russel: Hey, Elizabeth. Thank you for being here. Tell us a little bit about your experience as a life skills teacher and how you got into transition.

E. Danner: I came to the classroom after years of doing social work and supported employment, supported living for adults with disabilities. And then, I ended up getting a job as a peer professional in a classroom and that's kind of what brought back my love for teaching. So that's how I landed as a high school life skills teacher, supporting students with intellectual disabilities in inclusion, in to the general classes as well as access to the community. So as part of that experience, I just had that feeling that we were doing so much work and as student's left, graduated and left the protections of IDEA, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, as students were leaving public schools it just felt like, without really effective on going transition planning, they were just kind of falling off a cliff.

E. Danner: And even students who had families with a lot of resources, really the key to sustainable adult lives was transition planning. So that's where I became sort of obsessed with that.

Jennifer Russel: Tell us what it looks like. You know, when things don't work out well, and the bus stops coming, what do we typically see for a child who has significant disabilities and exits out of the system?

E. Danner: Right, so, indicator 14, talk about dry when you say state performance plan indicator 14. It sounds very dry. But really what that data tells us, it's a federal accountability system. And what it tells us is what happens a year after students exit public schools. Students with disabilities. What are they doing? Are they enrolled in some kind of continued learning, either college or community college or some kind of continued learning - technical school, anything like that. Are they in a job? What's their career looking like? Or do they have some type of other employment? Or, are they graduating to the couch with none of the above activities? And so, right now, the latest data that came out of the fall 2018 reports is, state wide, it is close, I think it's above 35 percent of students with disabilities are graduating to the couch. And within region 13, it's about 24 percent. So even while I celebrate that region 13 districts are performing better, that's still one quarter of our students are graduating to the couch.

E. Danner: That data is very complex. I could talk about that all day, we don't have time for that in this podcast, but it does tell us that that's the kind of worst case scenario. That they haven't found their way to a career. Now the data reflects not just students with intellectual disabilities, but with all disabilities. So we haven't disaggregated all of that. But still, I think we all know, anyone who has been in the classroom for a few years, when you hear back from families and when you run into a family at Randall's or HEB and, "Hey, how are things going?", and so often, too often, you hear, "Ugh, we're struggling to find something that works". Now, it's also wonderful to hear the success stories. But really, that key to special education is that we can be that link. We can put things in place and make connections that will support the student, lifelong.

Jennifer Russel: And so let's talk a little bit more about those links and those connections and think about what teachers need to keep in mind. I know that when I was in the classroom, and I worked primarily with younger students, so before I really understood the continuum or the alignment, I really didn't think it had that much to do with what I was doing with my little four year olds.

E. Danner: It felt so far off.

Jennifer Russel: It felt very far removed. But now I know that independence, that's what we're working on, whether the child is four or fourteen or twenty-one.

E. Danner: Absolutely.

Jennifer Russel: So, thinking about the skills that will, you know, what is working on independence look like for a four year old?

E. Danner: Asking yourself everyday, "What am I doing for the student that they should be doing for themselves?".

Jennifer Russel: Exactly. Am I hanging up their backpack when they are physically able to? I just need to be working with them.

E. Danner: We need to teach that skill.

Jennifer Russel: Yeah. Break that down, you know, walking through the cafeteria line and getting their food or greeting the people that work in the cafeteria, all of the things.

E. Danner: All of those moments, and that's a great example of, the school day is just a collection of moments that are really opportunities to learn that independence or even if it's going from a physical prompt to a verbal prompt, or to a picture or symbol. Or, you know, that you can also think in terms of how can I decrease my ownership of this action and increase their ownership, the student's ownership of that action.

Jennifer Russel: Right. And you can say that across the grades?

E. Danner: Across the grades, absolutely. And I do encourage teachers of any age to really pause and develop a clear picture of what they want their students to know and be able to do when they graduate. All of their students. And that, you know, if they can kind of think, starting in those terms, so even if you're teaching the four and five year olds the first priority is obviously, "What do I want them to be able to do when they get to elementary school?", such as hanging up their backpack, or tell a teacher good morning or something like that. Certainly that is a transition plan, in and of itself.

E. Danner: But I also encourage them to think way down the line. So a four year old, you can fairly easily physically support, right? That if their behavior requires support, you can physically support them by yourself. But when you're thinking about, "What about when they're 20 years old?", what can we start to do to fade this now and to transfer that. And just having in mind, how are they gonna communicate and the more significant the disability the more complex the communication, the more important it is that we really take time - and this is where our village makes a big difference - having their peer professionals, the related service providers, the bus drivers, the family. Everybody in that students life helped to fill in the blanks of, who is this person? What do they like? What do they not like? How do we know? And start to create that vision for down the road.

Jennifer Russel: And creating that vision, let's just talk a little bit about that. So, yes, really getting to know your students and knowing what their dreams are and what they love and coming up with a plan. So can you just talk a little bit about that and how teachers can sort of wrap their head around that process?

E. Danner: Well the first thing that I wish I had come to sooner in my career is deleting the word realistic and unrealistic. I think that's one of our biggest struggles as special educators, is, we put so much pressure on ourselves to help a student articulate a, quote, "realistic goal". And, that term realistic comes from a good place, I think. At least for me it did. What I meant by that was, I want to help the student set their goals on something achievable. So I had a lot of, sort of, protective impulse of I wanted to steer my students in a direction that I could feel like they could achieve.

Jennifer Russel: Right, like we do with academic goals.

E. Danner: Absolutely, and so I thought of it that way. And I also felt like I put pressure on myself that as the professional I have to get them to do this because otherwise my professionalism is on the line, or something, right? I think we put a lot of pressure on ourselves with that. But what I discovered when I left that word out of the equation, not only was it not needed, but it actually got in the way and it made by work harder. And I think that's the thing that I want to give freedom to all special educators. Even the teachers who support students with the most complex needs and have the most support needed in order to be included in the community, get rid of that word, because you don't need it. Because, if a student with, and I'll give you an example, a student that I taught had visual impairment, had cerebral palsy which included some fine and gross motor difficulties, had speech impairment that required him to use an augmentative communication device; back then it was one of the big clunky ones that now I think students are using iPads and its gotten much sleeker. But for him, he had a lot of involvement.

E. Danner: He wanted to be a pilot and several of us who were working with him really wanted to be sure that he knew that the federal aviation administration, rules and requirements are such that you have to have 20/20 uncorrected vision. You have to have this and this and this. And we were so concerned about making sure that he knew the FAA rules that what we didn't focus on, what we came around to, was why? Why do you want to be a pilot? Because I love planes. I love airplanes. They're big, they're loud, they're interesting, they're metal, whatever reason that an adolescent man would be intrigued by airplanes, those were his reasons, right? That he liked to be around them. And so, as we stumbled our way toward getting rid of the word realistic, what we found by using that word was it just crushed his dreams and it also, it limited his trust in us.I think that was what ultimately it did.

E. Danner: And since that time, and since getting rid of that word realistic, I have found that in my own life, as I have said what ultimately I would come to recognize as entirely unachievable goals, such as running a half marathon in under two hours. Absolutely unachievable for my forty something self. But, when asked in a running class, what's your running goal? I said, "Ah, run a sub 2 half marathon", because that's what every other runner was talking about. So what did I know? I didn't, I was like, "That sounds cool, I guess that's what we're supposed to want? I don't know".

E. Danner: So I just kind of threw it out there, and I had running coach say, "Okay, well let's do some work on that and we'll help you find a more realistic goal". And I remember leaving that running class thinking, "I don't like that coach". And I remember thinking, and he didn't know me, and he didn't..And it was much later that I thought, "Ah! He said realistic. He did the thing that I caution against in transition planning", and I really don't care about my speed in running, it's not something that I'm really hugely invested in.

E. Danner: But I realized that even when the stakes were that low, I didn't like that coach. I ended up switching to another class. And the other coach, I decided to test her. And I said, "I want a sub two", because I thought, "Let me see what she does with this". And she said, "Okay, sure". And she never once, she could have easily told me at that moment "That's never going to happen, friend". But she said, "Okay", and she just gave me a list of, okay, these are the minutes per mile you're gonna need to achieve, this is the pace you're gonna need to keep. Why don't you run two miles right now at that pace, and tell me how that goes? And I came back huffing and puffing and said, "Yeah, I think maybe I'm gonna switch my goal".

E. Danner: But in that moment, I could see illustrated how important it is that my...I worked much harder for that second coach. I did a lot more and I had a lot more faith in her when she told me what to do or how to reach my goal and then, as I revised my goal, when I had revised goals I trusted her much more when she told me what work I needed to do to achieve them. And I think we see that same process in the classroom. If I tell a young person with down syndrome who wants to be a professional singer, you know a rock singer, and part of their, they have speech impairment and their voice, like they sing at the same skill level that I do, which is not a skill level. I don't have a good voice. And so, I sing along in my car. I sing along at home. I have places where I can sing. And yet, there's no reason for me to say, "Well, that's not realistic".

Jennifer Russel: Right.

E. Danner: That word would only get in the way. I could just say, "Okay, on the way to that goal, because there are a lot of people trying to be professional singers out there and they also have day jobs", so I can frame it in a different way and I can also stop and ask, "What do you like about singing?".

Jennifer Russel: Right, what's appealing to you about that as a job?

E. Danner: Yeah.

Jennifer Russel: I think we're trying to protect, with the whole realistic unrealistic, I think you mentioned this that, it seems like the idea is that we want to protect kids, we want to spare them pain of not achieving that goal. But then in the process, we erode trust and

E. Danner: We do damage.

Jennifer Russel: And do damage.

E. Danner: We do, and I think about some of, just when I think about my adult life out in the world, some of the most interesting things I've done in my life have been on the way to an unachievable goal. So I don't worry about if it's achievable or not, and I can also say that there are stories like Temple Grandin and a million different stories of people who set out goals that, if I were their case manager, I might be thinking, "That doesn't sound realistic". And yet they did them, and I think that's the other thing is that we don't have a crystal ball. We do have transition assessments, we do have evaluation, we do have information about their disability and its impact. So we do certainly have those things, but we also don't have a crystal ball. When I think about how much technology has changed, just in the time that I've been alive on the planet, let alone in the time that I've been in my career in special education, so many things are possible now for people with disabilities and for people without disabilities that were not before. So we don't have crystal ball, and what's nice about it is, when you delete that part of it, setting a realistic goal, air quotes, that when I leave that out it makes my job easier as well.

E. Danner: So it's not a sacrifice I'm making. I'm actually giving myself a gift by taking that out of the equation, and then it leaves me room to just be curious to get to know that student more and to also have conversations about, "Okay, on the way to that goal", so on the way to a [crosstalk]

Jennifer Russel: To being a pilot.

E. Danner: To being a pilot, what are some things you could do? And of course the happy ending to that story is that the student went on to get a certificate to clean planes at a technical school and so he was able to

Jennifer Russel: To be with planes all day!

E. Danner: To be with planes all day, which was his whole goal. And because of his squeaky clean record in a post 9/11 world, to get access to planes, even to clean them, requires background checks. I mean, this kid had never said so much as a swear word. He was just absolutely the dream for the airline industry in terms of his contribution. So things like that, when you think about on the way to that goal, how can you learn more about that industry? How can you learn more about that? Where can you go to do those things or to be around those things?

Jennifer Russel: I like that phrasing, on the way to that goal. Like, the student with a significant physical disability who wants to be a football player.

E. Danner: Yes.

Jennifer Russel: On the way to that goal. Or the child with intellectual disability who wants to be a doctor. On the way to that goal there's just so many...It's expansive, rather than limiting.

E. Danner: Yeah, what is it about that goal that you like? Let's find ways that you can do that thing. If it's you like wearing a uniform. If it's like, you like being around sports. Whatever that thing is, so finding more about it and then looking at on the way to that goal. And, sharing, here's something you do really well. I noticed that in your job at the doctor's office, you get all of this great feedback. You really contribute very much to that setting. Different things of, you know, sharing about, "Well, you do this really well".

Jennifer Russel: And I also think that's something that can be, those conversations can be started early on as well. I think the sooner, sort of looking at those barriers to inclusion and really talking with parents about, you know, what their specific fear, cos', you know, for some parents they want their child, regardless, to be fully included.

E. Danner: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jennifer Russel: Other parents do not want their kids to be included, because of fears. Which may be the exact same fears, it just looks different. So being able to have those conversations with parents about, and maybe just taking baby steps, you know starting at four like, guess what, we're gonna all eat lunch together, or we're gonna go into the pre-k classroom and so that hopefully, along the way, they can see that this child is a part of, you know, they're a part of the community.

E. Danner: Absolutely. Yeah, and that kind of learning along with parents and staying curious, I think that's the other piece. Sometimes, early in my career, I felt so much pressure to make everything fit and to have a neatly polished transition plan, and giving myself permission to be curious and to really find the meaning behind transition planning. There is a lot of, you know, depending on your IEP software system, it can be more or less difficult to capture what's important about transition planning in your actual IEP. So that part can be particularly challenging for a new teacher or a novice teacher who's just trying to figure out, "How do I get this IEP software to do what I want it to do?". And in those moments, you know, find the mentors who can help you navigate the software system, but always remembering the spirit of transition planning. The whole point is that we kind of stop and check in with, what is all of this work that we're doing? Where is it gonna lead to? And what can we be working on now? And certainly, in those early years before transition planning is required in the IEP, we can, like you said, we can still be, teachers can still be thinking about that. What am I doing for the student now that they could be doing for themselves?

Jennifer Russel: Yeah, thinking about independence, thinking about barriers to inclusion.

E. Danner: Helping loop families in to signing up for medicate waivers and getting connected with the family liaison who can kind of walk families through.

Jennifer Russel: Working on communication, I mean that's a big piece, I think. Social emotional skills, I mean you can [crosstalk]

E. Danner: Self-determination.

Jennifer Russel: Yep. You can get a job if you're not the best reader, but if you don't have certain skills, social emotional or self regulation skills [crosstalk]

E. Danner: Self advocacy.

Jennifer Russel: It'll be a lot more difficult to get a job and keep a job.

E. Danner: Absolutely. Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jennifer Russel: So, for the new teacher who is say a new secondary teacher, can you walk me through sort of a timeline? Are there certain things, things that have to be done by when, that you can sort of nutshell?

E. Danner: Well, the easiest nutshell would be to go to the Texas transition and employment guide. There are checklists in terms of by age 14, by age 16, by age 18 if you think long range. In terms of what do I, as a teacher, need to be doing for transition today; there we have the SPP 13 checklist, and you can cue the whomp whoa sound. That sounds so terrible. But, I think what is helpful about that is there's the annual requirements for transitions. So you asked, you know, what should teachers be doing. So there is the Texas transition and employment guide, helps kind of formulate what's our long range planning and what are some mileposts to be thinking about for my 14 year olds, my 15 year olds.

E. Danner: But, in terms of what do I need to do this year to not get fired, that I need to be thinking about in terms of what are my requirements as a teacher, and sometimes that does become the bigger priority when you're just trying to get through the next ARD. That's where I would definitely recommend asking your campus support and your district support folks, every district has a TED, transition and employment services designee, find your TED and ask them, "What are the requirements for transition and what does that look like?". Maybe it's spelled out in your operating guidelines. Maybe there's a whole transition toolkit. Some districts put together a whole toolkit. Some just use that indicator 13 checklist, and so ultimately that's gonna be the accountability guide of what must be included in the IEP each year.

Jennifer Russel: Great, that's very helpful information. And, in terms of region 13 offerings, whether it's courses or websites or products, can you talk a little bit about sort of your work here? And I think you have a pretty robust, at this point now, you have a pretty robust collection of resources for teachers.

E. Danner: Absolutely, so ESC13.net/transition is my website. And that will lead you to a whole bunch of other live binders and resources.

Jennifer Russel: It's very pretty.

E. Danner: There are so many, sometimes it can be a little overwhelming. We do have a transition planning at a glance series in the products store that is really designed for the new or novice teacher, but is also, has been used by others to kind of, it's really with the educator audience in mind.

Jennifer Russel: Great.

E. Danner: And then, there are really if you start from ESC13.net/transition, that will take you many many many places. And, most of all, to me. So, if you have questions, the shorthand version is to email me and then I can kind of curate the resources that you need in response to the question.

Jennifer Russel: And, yeah, if you could just share your email with the listeners?

E. Danner: Elizabeth.danner, and that's D, as in David, A-N-N-E-R, like dinner with an A. Elizabeth.danner@esc13.txed.net is one way. Or possibly at the podcast site where you found the podcast, you can find links to contact information. But I also highly recommend touching base with the TED for your district. That can be a great resource, and again that's the transition and employment services designee.

Jennifer Russel: And you also do a great workshop, do you do leaving a clear trail in the fall and the spring, or?

E. Danner: So, leaving a clear trail is all things graduation. And that is a workshop that we recommend that special educators, so either an ARD facilitator or the special ed administrator attend that. And counselors, who are the keepers of the curriculum requirements, and then a PEEMS person. So we recommend that each district send that team of three. I do once a year, in the fall, I do Texas transition, which is kind of the intro to all things transition. But the transition Texas website, which you can get to from my website, but transitionintexas.org, that's the state website, and they have some online courses that are available 24/7. Free.

Jennifer Russel: Oh, great. Elizabeth, thank you so much for joining us. We're so happy that we got to snag you, because we know you're busy, and got to talk to transition.

E. Danner: Well thanks so much for having me.