

CPI *Unrestrained* Transcription

Episode 38: Candace Burckhardt

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Host: Terry Vittone

Terry: Welcome to *Unrestrained*, the CPI podcast series. My guest today is special education coordinator Candace Burckhardt of Indigo Education. Hello and welcome, Candace.

Candace: Hi!

Terry: Hi. Let me tell you a little bit about our guest. Candace Burckhardt is the special education coordinator and CPI Instructor with Indigo Education, an organization that assists more than 80 charter schools, serving over 3,500 students in Minnesota by helping to develop their special education programs.

Candace provides regular professional development to schools on special education topics such as building trauma-informed classrooms, English learners, brain-based teaching strategies, mindfulness and meditation, and behavior management. She has worked with schools in the United States, Central America, South America, Europe, and Asia.

In addition to her work with Indigo Education, Candace is a doctoral candidate at Johns Hopkins University. Her research focuses on using mindfulness in the classroom as a way to increase self-regulation and social-emotional skills in adolescents with disabilities. All right then, Candace, let's begin.

I was going to start with Indigo Education's mission statement, and I understand that you've just changed it. So, could you fill us in on that?

Candace: Yes, absolutely. Yeah, so we have a new mission and vision that actually came out this week. Our new mission is that we are “determined to provide integrity driven leadership and exceptional education services,” and our new vision is effective and accessible education for all.

Terry: All right. That sounds great. I mean, with that thought in mind, could you give our listeners an overview of the history and services available through Indigo? I mean, in other words, if I'm the administrator for a charter school, why would I seek you out?

Candace: Yeah, absolutely. So, Indigo Education as you mentioned, we're a nonprofit organization that works with over 70 charter schools in Minnesota. The organization was actually born out of a grant from the Minnesota Department of Education over 20 years ago. Minnesota was actually the first state to have charter schools, and that started in 1991, and we were really one of the first partners on the scene to help with that.

Terry: Wasn't it . . . I think that was, I remembered the City Academy in St. Paul, I think, was one of the first charter schools. That was back I think when I was still living in the Twin Cities.

Candace: Yeah, it's kind of amazing how long the history has been here in Minnesota. We moved to nonprofit status about 10 years ago. And then, we accomplish our mission by providing special education administrative staff to client schools. The rule in Minnesota is that each school has a director of special education, and it doesn't make fiscal sense to have a full-time director for each school. So just like a special education teacher would have a caseload of students, each of our staff has a caseload of charter schools in the state that we work with.

We're a pretty small organization. We have about 16 staff members and a board of directors that have really just three primary roles, either as a director of special education, special education coordinator, or school psychologist. And then, in addition to some of those services that we provide, we also provide a lot of special development to education professionals, as you mentioned. So, we do CPI training for our client schools, due process laws, trauma-informed classrooms, early childhood special education programming, and all those sorts of things that would fall under that umbrella. And then, we work with charter schools all over the state, in urban, suburban, and rural places.

Terry: All right. So, if I'm an administrator and say I'm seeing restraint being used too often, that's something then that they might call you for and say, "Do you have any verbal de-escalation training?" or a request like that; would that be a typical call that you might get?

Candace: Yeah, absolutely. Right now, we're able to provide CPI training to any of our schools that contract with us. It's kind of similar to thinking about a district model, much like a district would provide CPI training to schools within their district. We sort of serve as a district in that way. So, certainly it would be common for an administrator to call and say, "I'm really looking for this sort of training," or, "I'd like to have all of my staff trained in the CPI basic verbal de-escalation. Could you come out and do that?"

Terry: How do charter schools become aware of you guys?

Candace: Yeah. So, it's sort of through the approaches I mentioned. Legally, every school needs to have a director of special education on staff. So when a charter school opens or, you know, is changing or is looking for new contractors, then they would likely start to research or hear maybe from their charter school authorizer about Indigo Education. Since

we've been around for 20 years and really worked with over half of the charter schools in the state, we're a pretty well-known name in that area.

Terry: I see. So, if I'm a special education director, and I've got a particular issue, and I need an outside resource, then Indigo is like a very well-known resource for meeting the demands that they might have.

Candace: Yeah, absolutely. So right now, we predominantly work with charter schools in the state. But we're actually hopeful to expand our training and expertise to traditional public schools, private schools, and, actually, workplaces that wanna have a better understanding of disabilities and accommodation. We're actually looking to partner with several summer camp organizations as well.

Terry: Cool. Could you tell me, Candace, why was it necessary to change your mission statement? I know this, we even talked about this, but this is kind of a new thing for the interview as we had it planned. I mean, the older one, the first mission statement that I read on your website a couple weeks back was an enduring commitment to provide exceptional special education services and leadership with integrity. What's the critical difference would you say with the stuff that's been added in?

Candace: Yes, I think one of the main differences is that we're starting as a staff to think about expanding our offerings. So not just talking about special education, we're also talking about trauma-informed care for all students, talking about mindfulness and meditation, and we're also going to expand into offering some English language learner services for next year as well. We really wanted to focus more holistically on effective, accessible education not just for students with disabilities but also for all sorts of students.

Terry: So it speaks to the more broad-based range of services that Indigo offers.

Candace: Absolutely.

Terry: I see. So, say I'm a parent, why is a charter school a good option for me if I have a child that requires special education?

Candace: Yeah, that's a great question. A charter school is a public school just like a traditional district school. And what I love about charter schools is that they give parents and families another choice about where to send their child to school. And that choice is not limited by the neighborhood they live in, how much money they make, or even the disability that their child has. So one common misconception is that charter schools can actually deny admission to students in special education. But this is not true in all [states]. All charter schools in Minnesota are required to accept all students regardless of the type of disabilities that they have or level of need. And many charter schools have unique missions or types of curriculum, which could benefit certain types of special education students. For example, we work with several charter schools that are project-learning based or spend a

significant amount of time learning in special environments like the outdoors. I could see that being a really great fit for a student with ADHD perhaps, rather than a traditional classroom setting.

Terry: I see.

Candace: We also work with . . . yeah.

Terry: Go ahead, I'm sorry.

Candace: Definitely. Oh, I was just going to add, you know, we also work with schools that have more of an arts or performance focus, which I've seen to be incredibly healing for children with emotional or behavioral needs or who have experienced trauma. There's also schools that specialize in welcoming specific cultures, such as Spanish immersion, bilingual schools, Hmong, Malay schools. I really just think it's another great option that parents have when considering the unique needs of their child.

Terry: Well, you certainly make a good case for it. And with the law there stating that a student cannot be declined, parents can be sure that the investment in time they make in qualifying a school for their child is that acceptance is guaranteed. It's nice to have that sense of confidence going in if you're seeking out the proper resource, or the optimal resource rather, for your child.

Candace: Absolutely, yeah. I'm really glad that there's such strong language and protection so that students with disabilities can attend whatever school that they want to.

Terry: That's great. How did you guys find out about CPI training, and how long have you been using it?

Candace: Yeah, great question. I have been using CPI personally in a variety of different settings. I've worked in traditional public school districts, charter schools, in wilderness therapy, and used CPI on all of those different settings. And we have been formally training with CPI for our client schools for the past two years.

Terry: I see. What do you find most rewarding about facilitating CPI training? I mean, what do you think makes the most impact?

Candace: What I see as most rewarding about facilitating CPI is that moment in training when participants start to understand that concept of an Integrated Experience. As adults, you know, we have so many tools through CPI that we can use to really help you exploit a crisis through our nonverbal gestures, our verbal language. And when participants just begin to realize that student behavior is an alternate result of those Precipitating Factors such as their trauma history, then they can begin to really treat the student in interventions and in

a more open, exploratory, and loving way, other than viewing CPI as a punishment or a punitive sort of a training.

So, that moment when it just sort of all clicks and I see participants really start to understand just how much they can do to facilitate relationships and healing for their students through CPI while they de-escalate is just one of the things that I love most about training with CPI. And I think it also really just fits nicely with the other works that Indigo Education does, such as our partnership with Child Trauma Academy. And every time I lead a CPI training, I just feel really positive about the experience.

Terry: I see. Have you heard a lot of feedback from schools that CPI de-escalation techniques have helped them avoid restraints, seclusion, or lower their rates of that?

Candace: Absolutely. We're still collecting data since we've only been implementing CPI for the past two years with our client schools. So at the end of this year, we're going to do a big data collection to really look at the use of restraint in our schools. Anecdotally, we're definitely hearing from our schools that the use of restraint has decreased in the past two years since we started training.

And I actually think that about 99% of the situations that our charter schools face with students can be de-escalated without the use of restraint. So, I'm definitely hearing stories from all of the schools that we're going to [where Indigo Education has been retained] about ways now that they've been able to use verbal de-escalation to help with that.

Terry: That would be great if you could tell our listeners about a situation or one of those stories that one of the teachers told you where CPI de-escalation techniques helped to resolve a situation that otherwise might have required restraint.

Candace: Yeah, absolutely. One of the most frequent changes that we've heard repeated over and over by staff is that they used to go straight to a restraint when a student was in the Release stage. So, if you've had CPI training before, then you know that it's incredibly damaging and dangerous to do a restraint during this time because it will likely further escalate the situation and will likely become more violent.

Instead, we really want them to be able to have that emotional or physical release and to remove the audience from that situation, so that students have that time to go through that release without potentially pulling others into the conflict. Prior to CPI, some of our school staff were prematurely inappropriately intervening with a restraint rather than allowing the child to have some time for that release. And that's one of the things that's most often discussed by staff when they're coming in, and we definitely changed our approach to this now. We see the merits of allowing that release to happen.

Terry: I see. So that *Verbal Escalation Continuum*SM, when they know that model and now they can see that Release stage coming on, they know to understand how to intervene in a

more safe and verbal way rather than with restraints, or as you said, maybe a hasty sort of physical reaction.

Candace: Yeah, correct. I think it can be challenging as an educator to see someone go through release and not to take maybe a more active approach during that stage. But allowing our client schools, our charter schools to be able to see and identify what you said, that continuum, "Okay, now I have the student in this stage. Here's my appropriate response as a staff member at this time to help de-escalate that."

Terry: Oh that's great. That's a great benefit and well described. Thank you. I understand you guys also use CPI's blended learning option known as Flex. Why did you choose Flex and what are some of the benefits that you've seen from using the Flex training option?

Candace: Yeah, you might have to interrupt me as I go too long on this because I just absolutely love Flex, and as an organization, we have just been really blown away by it as a program.

So when Flex first came out, I remember meeting with our executive director, Erin Wanat, to discuss it as an option for our client schools, and we were kind of like, "Oh, I don't know. What we've been doing has been working really well." But we decided to purchase 10 seats, and within two days, all of the 10 seats were filled up by our charter schools. Everyone really wanted this as an option. And the first time I ran the in-person parts of Flex, I was a little bit nervous about what the attitudes of the participants would be and really what their CPI content knowledge would be like.

Again, as an educator, I have a little power and control about the experience that I craft to the participants, but I was blown away just by how much the participants had internalized the online curriculum and really found that they were able to ask so much deeper questions about how to apply CPI to individual students that they work with.

And you know, every time we'll do a Flex training, we ask the participant's feedback, and all of our reviews have just been so powerful. People have really liked it. And in fact, in this spring, we switched entirely to offering the Flex program for our initial CPI training. We will continue to offer a mix of the traditional 12-hour program, but we're also planning to offer a lot of the Flex training to really cater to different learning styles since we've just seen how powerful it is for our participants.

Terry: Oh, that's excellent. So, it really seems to have opened up a lot of flexibility for participants that come to Indigo.

Candace: Absolutely, yeah. As a facilitator, the Flex program really allows me to be able to train more people in less time. And this is great for our client schools because I can go up to a school in rural Minnesota and provide both the Flex training and the refresher training on the same day for their staff. This minimizes disruptions to students because staff are out of

the building for less time and this greatly reduces the cost for substitutes for those schools.

Terry: Yes, you mentioned that when I asked you earlier outside of this interview about Flex. You said participating schools are able to save a substantial amount of money on hiring substitutes with the Flex training. Could you explain that in a little more detail?

Candace: Absolutely. When we run the traditional 12-hour programs, schools need to get substitutes for either an entire day or a two-day time frame, and then they'll also need to get substitutes for any people that go through an additional refresher training. Sometimes we're looking at two to three days of substitutes. And it's extremely hard to find great substitutes. We have teacher shortages as it is, and especially substitute shortages, especially for our staff that work in special education. By doing the Flex program, we're really able to eliminate some of the burden that comes with just the messy transition of having staff out of the building, disruptions to student schedules and needs, where this is the cost for substitutes.

Terry: That's a really pretty salient benefit of the training. Thank you for articulating it for us. I appreciate it.

Candace: No, I mean, I would just love—yeah. I actually ran a Flex training yesterday. I just have kind of a fun little story. One of the participants came up to me before the class just to tell me how meaningful the program was to her. She had her own trauma history and was really worried that the course might be all about, you know, power, domination over students, and she was worried that that can be triggering to her and really, you know, against her mindset.

But she was just so excited by how much the Flex course focused on relationship building, how it really took into account so many factors like cultural background, gender, mental health. And she actually came to our class yesterday with a whole list of really these advanced detailed questions that we were able to talk about as a group. And I just felt that that was—I find that, to me, the case every time I lead a Flex training, the in-class portion, that our participants are just really so much more . . . have deeper understanding of the content. And I was just really excited to see that yesterday.

Terry: That is a great story. Thank you for sharing it. Well, let's close today with a giveback program going on at Indigo. Could you tell our listeners about the giving back sock donation program and how listeners might participate in that?

Candace: Yeah, absolutely. The giving back sock donation program is just one of the many things that I love about working with Indigo Education. I'm not sure if you knew this, but socks are the most requested item at homeless shelters. I cannot imagine living through a Minnesota winter without a quality pair of socks. So, our team decided to begin collecting socks at our trainings to donate to homeless shelters. Yeah, we plan to switch our

charitable focus every three months. But right now, we've been collecting socks, which I just think is a really great way that we can give back to the community.

Terry: And people interested in learning more about Indigo, could you tell me the web address quickly?

Candace: Absolutely. Our web address for Indigo Education is indigoed.org.

Terry: Yes, thank you very much, Candace, for joining us today. We were pleased to have you as a guest on *Unrestrained*. Thank you.

Candace: Thank you. It's great to be here, Terry.

Terry: All right, and thank you. And thanks to all the listeners as well.