

CPI *Unrestrained* Transcription

Episode 39: Becky Eckhardt and Michele Brand

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Host: Terry Vittone

Terry: Hello and welcome to *Unrestrained*, the CPI podcast series. This is your host, Terry Vittone, and today I'm joined by two staff members of Nebraska South Sioux City Community Schools, Becky Eckhardt, the student services director, and Michele Brand, the 6-12 at-risk coordinator. Hello and welcome, Becky and Michele.

Becky: Hello.

Michele: Hello.

Terry: Hello. Let me tell you a little bit about our guests. Becky Eckhardt earned a master's degree in speech language pathology from the University of Minnesota Duluth and began her work with the South Sioux City Schools as a preschool speech language pathologist. And from there, she progressed to the at-risk education lead teacher, then an elementary principal, and is now the student services director for South Sioux City Community Schools.

Michele Brand earned a graduate degree in behavior disorders and instructional strategy from Morningside College, and since 2004, she has acted as South Sioux City Schools 6-12 at-risk coordinator. In 2015, she was awarded the local ABC network affiliate KCAU's "My Favorite Teacher" Award.

And today, we're going to talk about the features of the South Sioux City Community Schools, how they came to include CPI's *Nonviolent Crisis Intervention*[®] training in their program, some experiences and successes they've had using CPI strategies and techniques, and finally, proposed State Bill 595, sponsored by Senator Michael Groene, and relating to the Student Discipline Act and how it provides for the use of physical force or physical restraint or removal from class in response to student behavior. It also states that a teacher shall not be subject to legal action or administrative discipline for removing a student from a class.

So we'll be very interested to get your thoughts on this legislation. But let's start with some information about South Sioux City Community Schools, the number of

schools, students, your roles, and just some demographics of the community that you serve.

Becky: Thank you, Terry. This is Becky. We have right at about 3,900 students in South Sioux City Community Schools. About 19% of them are ELL or second language learners. Over 70% are minority and about 13% are special education students. So we have quite a diverse student population.

Terry: I see. And how long have you used CPI training in South Sioux City Community Schools and how was it chosen?

Becky: That was before my time as student services director, Terry, but we've been using it since 2003 and it originally—my understanding is it came about by—we did not have a process in place to respond to students when they became physical. And so the team at that time identified CPI as a model that fit our beliefs in South Sioux City Schools. At that time, we really restricted our training to our special education staff. But since that, we've grown it dramatically.

We not only train all our student services staff, but we've trained all our school counselors. Every administrator in South Sioux City is trained as well as many, many general education staff and support staff. Our long-term goal is to have 100% of our staff trained. We believe it has changed our climate and how adults respond to students in crisis.

Terry: That's great. How often do you guys refresh?

Michele: This is Michele. We do that one time per year at the beginning of the school year.

Terry: I see. And how close are you to that 100% mark right now, would you say? That's pretty aggressive.

Michele: At this point, I would say in overall, probably a little less than 50%.

Terry: I see. Okay. Well, that's still a pretty fair number of people trained in CPI. And so let me get a little more feel for your South Sioux City. Now, how many high schools, for instance, would be included in that?

Becky: We have one high school with right at about a little under 1,300 students, one middle school with about 900 kids. And then we have an early childhood center that serves preschool and kindergarten and five K-5 elementary schools.

Terry: I see, okay. That gives me just a little clearer picture of how your students are distributed among the different schools that you have. Regarding CPI training, what are some of the most memorable—you spoke, Becky, to the culture change that

CPI training has brought, and I'm wondering if both you and Michele might speak to some of the successes or challenges you've had using verbal de-escalation skills in managing challenging behavior in your schools.

Michele: This is Michele. Some of the successes that we've had is, you know, sometimes we'll have students move into the district that are in crisis. And they'll go to a building that has not had restraints or not even had the need to use them. And what CPI has allowed us to do is utilize that common language. We can establish a plan, expectations, and then get to know our students to be able to de-escalate those behaviors. So you know, those kids that are in crisis, that's why our numbers drop off is because we figure out a plan to meet them so we can avoid using restraints.

Terry: And I think those numbers you're referring to are in a chart you sent me of records that you guys keep regarding, among other things, numbers of restraints used. I see in between 2012 and 2013—you break it down by schools between child and team restraints—in those two years, you had a total of 87 restraints, and then between 2014 and 2015, you had a total of 20 restraints. You decreased 77% in that time period in restraints. And you say that's a result of kind of getting to know sort of new and more acting-out students who come into the school?

Michele: And it's knowing how to de-escalate those behaviors, recognizing when they're leading to a crisis and how can we stop it from escalating. And then the staff working together, you know, CPI gives that common language for staff so they can handle conversations and they can problem solve. It's really helped those teams because typically, our children that are restrained are special population kids. And really, it helped those teams be able to have a common language and problem solve.

Terry: Could you speak a little more to the special populations and be a little more, I guess, explicit about who we're talking about?

Becky: Typically, the reoccurring cases we have had, what I would say is our most unique student population, those that might be categorized as severe-to-profound with possibly autism combined in there, students that have a really difficult time communicating with us what their needs are, what their wants are. And so this common language allows us to gather all the pieces of data we have and figure out what those triggers are where maybe sometimes, we weren't recognizing them before because they weren't overt to their teachers or the individuals working with them.

Now, we're able to take a really close look at what they might be trying to tell us before they escalate and then try to figure out what is the best response to avoid a

child-hold position and offer the child choices or whatever is in their support plan so that we at least can reduce, if not completely avoid, a restraint.

Terry: And that's an excellent answer. Do you feel that the *Crisis Development Model*SM then has been internalized pretty much by the people that deal with these challenging students?

Michele: I do. I do. I think the trainers that we have across our district in CPI are our most knowledgeable, and we do have buildings that really have years without any use of the hold, which is wonderful, at the time when they maybe get a new student and they have to really look at it. It simply takes a refresher from our trainers to remember the annual training they've had and then they're ready to go again.

But we do have some buildings that have some of our special populations where they may have to use this on a more consistent basis, not all the time, but because of their student population, they may be exposed to this a little bit more frequently. And they understand this so well, and it really is pretty amazing to watch them respond with care when a child is in crisis. They just know how to react so it doesn't become escalated. And I think prior to having the CPI training, we didn't know how to respond to that and unintentionally, I think we often escalated students. We didn't know at the time we were doing that, but now with this training, we're able to recognize things that before, we didn't.

Terry: Excellent. And I think I heard you use the plural "years" for certain schools that have had no restraints or hold to use. And that's really a remarkable result indeed. So that's got to be saving you guys some money and some stress. And it must be— what's your turnover rate like there, would you say? We read constantly in the news about new teachers coming into schools and not being prepared adequately for the sort of de-escalation skills that they're going to need. Do you guys find that you retain your teachers pretty well?

Becky: Yes. We retain our teachers quite well. Every year, of course, we have teachers that retire, relocate, for whatever reason, take a different position in another school district. We do conduct exit interviews, and I think they give us really good information. We ask why they're leaving our district, what we could do differently for the staff that continue to be here, were there problems or additional support that we could've provided. And to my knowledge, never has someone left our district because they felt unsafe or they didn't believe they had the appropriate support in place.

It's typically, you know, they're leaving because their family is relocating. They're moving on to some career advancement. But we're pretty proud that the staff are not leaving because they don't feel supported and they don't feel safe. I think we do a really nice job responding to teachers that feel like maybe they have someone

in their classroom that they don't feel equipped to support. Our administrators and our teams really wrap the services around the students and the teachers so that we can ensure everybody is safe and everybody has the support they need.

Terry: Excellent. Excellent. Let me get a sense for—I know this is kind of unscripted. I know we did some pre-interview questions so that this would go as it's going today. I'm just trying to get a feel for the South Sioux City kind of economy. What drives the economy? Are you guys largely agrarian there? I mean, is it farming business? What drives the tax base there in South Sioux City?

Michele: We have Tyson Foods, a large meat-packing plant that employs a large number of our parents. There are also a couple other meat-packing plants in our area. So I'd say that that is probably the number-one employer by far. In our area, we do have very high free and reduced lunch in our district. I don't have the percentage right in front of me, but I believe it's in the 70% of free and reduced lunch. So we are dealing with some families that have challenges. And as a school system, we really try to provide a variety of supports and services—not just academics—to support our family.

Terry: So you may have a number of students that come to your school who are challenged at the beginning of the day in ways that are not immediately visible or maybe to the experienced teachers that they are because of the nature of the area that they live in and the economic culture that they come from.

Michele: Yeah, absolutely. The beginning of the day, some of our kids really struggle coming off of long weekends and breaks. And so, that, I think, is especially important that our staff are mindful of the subtle behaviors that our kids are presenting and how can we use those de-escalation strategies to help support the student and avoid the escalation that comes with stress or adjusting from home life to school life.

Terry: I see. Let's move on to the proposed State Bill 595 introduced by Senator Michael Groene that would allow teachers to use force to deal with students exhibiting challenging behavior. Could you tell us the fundamental purpose of this bill and sort of, politically, how it began and both of your reactions to it, and then the reaction of the educational community as you know it to Bill 595? Is this celebrated? Is it vilified? Is it a little of both? It's hard to know where to begin on this because it's an unusual piece of legislation in relation to what we've seen.

Becky: This is Becky. My understanding is it partially came out of a school legislation case where possibly a teacher felt that a student wasn't ready to return to class and for whatever reason, the student was returned to class before that teacher felt that it was safe to do so. And so I think this is an attempt to make school safer and provide additional support for teachers. I'm not confident that how it's written does what it's intended to do.

Terry: I see. For our listeners, it begins, "A bill for an act relating to the Student Discipline Act . . . to provide for use of physical force or physical restraint or removal from a class in response to student behavior; to harmonize revisions; and to repeal the original section." And then it enacts Section Two which says, "If a student becomes physically violent toward himself or herself, a teacher, an administrator, or another student, a teacher or administrator may use necessary physical force or physical restraint to subdue such student until such student no longer presents a danger to himself or herself, the teacher, the administrator, or the other student."

And I'm wondering personally how you feel about that being written into law. I mean, well, do you think that will dilute the culture of verbal de-escalation in a certain sense? I mean I'm all for the protective aspect of this both for the student and the teacher and for the ongoing ability of the classroom to teach and in other words fulfill its function. But it seems to actually write this into law—we're curious about it.

Michele: This is Michele. I happen to have in front of me [a publication] our teacher union, The Voice, of the Nebraska State Education Association, and they did a poll that said 61% of the 7,000-teacher poll said their biggest problem in the classroom is unruly and disruptive students. And my concern with this bill the way it's stated because this article proceeds to go on to say kids are coming to school with mental and physical trauma. The solution isn't to throw them out. It's how to get them the help they need to deal with their issues. Extensive training in de-escalation and student restraint is important for educators.

So to me, I agree with that but I don't think that bill says there's a need for training if you can physically remove a child. I think they're missing that education component because my curiosity is the schools where staff don't feel safe, are they trained in CPI? Do they have some kind of de-escalation system in place, or how do you deal with high-stress kids or high-need kids?

And so that's what I feel is missing from that [Bill 595]. I think we can agree that, yes, some teachers don't feel safe. But to say we're gonna be able to do this to children without providing that training, I think you're missing that opportunity to do those things. And if you have students with mental and physical trauma and then school puts their hands on them, those children are gonna be traumatized again.

Terry: So it's sort of a double whammy. So this bill could be—even though I can understand why a majority might support the latitude that it gives them to not be fearful of needing to remove a disruptive student, and it also includes language that says, "Any teacher or administrator defending himself or herself shall not be

subject to legal action or administrative discipline." So there's kind of, you know, a hold-harmless section of this.

But like you said, the biggest omission is a prescription to include a training requirement that would round out this act, this proposed legislation, to be more meaningful on a sort of restorative basis, with the inclusion of that necessary training component. And that the teacher has the expertise to de-escalate a situation before they come to physical force and a physical restraint is not considered. How far along is Bill 595? What do you think the—do you guys have any feel for the chances of passage on this?

Becky: There are a lot of bills in our legislature, more than a typical year. I think there's approximately 40 related to education which is an—don't quote me on that number but I think that's the number I heard, which is a high number in the State of Nebraska. And so I'm not sure what the likelihood is that this one will get passed. But I do think we need to speak out because I do think the information that's being communicated right now to our teachers and the teacher association really is that this will give them the protection to use the necessary force or remove a child who is disruptive and causing safety concerns in their classroom, which I don't necessarily disagree with.

I think we should have classrooms that are safe, and if a student is unsafe, I do think we should be able to remove them, determine what appropriate supports are needed for that student, and put those in place to avoid the safety risk. But like you said, without the provisions of some staff training and to spell out, they go straight in this bill to physical restraint and physical removal. There is no de-escalation prior to that.

There's no defining of, it says in the bill, that they can use physical force when the student is at risk of destroying school property. Well, what kind of school property are we talking about here? There's quite a range there that I think we just need to put some definitions with some of the words that are used in this bill because without that, I just worry that staff without training, and without definitions to this bill, I worry about what could happen in some of our classrooms and to what could happen to some of our students.

Terry: I can see how it's the sort of the ambiguity of what you just pointed out that there could be a culture change, and not a positive culture change in the sense that, you know, that at a discretionary judgment of the teacher that they can use this force but they don't have the balance of the training to go with it. And so, I mean, when you think about the building or sustaining of a culture like you achieved there in South Sioux City, you would hate to see a piece of legislation come in and omit what you guys have embraced in committing so much to verbal de-escalation training and refreshing your teachers on things like the *Crisis Development Model*SM

and how to really, before a student gets to that Release stage, to support them and to de-escalate them. So I think you both have made some excellent points about the plusses and then the omissions from Bill 595. So thank you very much for that.

I want to conclude today, first of all, by thanking you both very much for your time. I know you're very busy, and to take time out to do a podcast with CPI is something that we're very appreciative of. I wanted to ask Michele about the award that you won, the "My Favorite Teacher" award. How did it come about that you were chosen for that?

Michele: My students nominated me, and to my surprise, I look up and I have a local news anchor in my doorway. So I had really no idea. It was my kids! Every year, KCAU, our local news channel, picks a teacher and I was fortunate enough that my students nominated me and I received it and I really had no clue. You know, their letters were very touching as far as what I had done to make a difference for them. So it was really humbling and it came from those guys which you sometimes don't realize how much kids appreciate what we do. And that was their way of saying thank you.

Terry: What a tremendous recommendation and a thank-you indeed. Well, my guests today have been Becky Eckhardt (she is the student services director) and Michele Brand, the 6-12 at-risk coordinator for Nebraska South Sioux City Community Schools. Becky and Michele, thank you so much.

Becky: Thank you.

Michele: Thank you, Terry.

Terry: And thank you all for listening.