CPI *Unrestrained* Transcription

Episode 44: Cyndi Pitonyak

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Host: Terry Vittone

Terry: Hello and welcome to *Unrestrained*. This is your host, Terry Vittone, and today I'm joined by Cyndi Pitonyak of Virginia Commonwealth University's Autism Center for Excellence. Hello and welcome, Cyndi.

Cyndi: Hi.

Terry: Let me tell you a little bit about our guest. Cyndi Pitonyak has over 30 years of experience as a special educator. She has teaching experience in inclusive and self-contained settings in both elementary and secondary schools as well as administration experience at the school and district level. She has provided technical assistance and training to school divisions nationally and internationally, and she has taught undergraduate and graduate-level special-education teacher preparation programs. Cyndi is particularly interested in inclusive education and is a subject matter expert in PBIS, or Positive Behavioral and Interventions Supports. Cyndi was the special education coordinator for Montgomery County Schools in Virginia when the system adopted the PBIS approach. She is now a technical assistance associate with the Virginia Commonwealth University's Autism Center for Excellence.

Today, we're going to talk about how PBIS can help schools reform the use of restraint and seclusion through prevention and culture change. We're also going to talk about her work at Virginia Commonwealth University's Autism Center for Excellence and the great resources available online that teachers can use for free right away. We also have some good free resources on PBIS. We'll get to that a little bit later. But let's start with some basics about PBIS. Cyndi, can you begin by giving us a brief definition of PBIS, Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports, and talk about the design of the process?

Cyndi: Okay. PBIS is a proactive process for supporting kids to learn and use positive behaviors every day as they negotiate the ups and downs of their lives at school. It's based on the idea that behaviors occur for a reason, and students use them because they need them and because they work for them. Through PBIS, we can systematically look at the circumstances that give rise to problem behaviors, and we can alter those circumstances to promote more positive interactions, and to reduce the probability of getting negative

ones. We can teach kids to meet their needs with positive behaviors rather than problem behaviors if we understand what those needs are.

Kids behave in all kinds of ways for all kinds of reasons, and effective behavior intervention has to be individualized to meet their circumstances and their needs. PBIS is structured in a three-tiered approach, and a lot of teachers are very familiar with multiple tiers of support through their work with the Response to Intervention process and academics over the last few years.

PBIS is the same. At tier one, we look at school-wide supports to promote positive behaviors for all kids in the school. At tier two, we kind of zero in on some more targeted support. They're just for those smaller groups of students who are at risk of developing some more significant problems. Those are kids who need a little something more than the school-wide structure at tier one. And then at tier three, we look at supports and interventions for students that are tailored very specifically to that particular kid's circumstance and needs.

So PBIS is an ongoing process. It's tailored to meet specific circumstances and needs of kids, and it's designed to meet the natural real-world settings, like a regular public school.

Terry: Okay. Well, let's say, Cyndi, that we have a student who is continually disrupting class, or talking over the teacher, or they're aggressive with other students, destroying school property or equipment. What are the beginning steps a teacher would take in a PBIS approach to modify that kind of behavior?

Cyndi: Okay. Well, first, I'm assuming here that our hypothetical student has ongoing chronic problems with this kind of behavior, that it's not a rare occurrence, and that the level of disruption is really significant. This would be a student who would require that highly individualized tier three level of individual interventions and supports. It would be kids at tier three who would be most likely to be experiencing restraint and seclusion in the school program. At that tier three level, we're going to start by immediately establishing a little support team around the kid, and that support team is going to be composed of the people who work with her or with him every day. And if the student is older, we want the student to participate on the team as well.

So that team is going to start off by looking at the context within which these behaviors you just described are occurring. Where do they happen? When do they happen? With whom are they most likely to happen? And maybe even more significantly, when do they not happen? What's going on with this kid in terms of their basic priorities in school? That's what we have to sort of start with, some of the fundamental needs. Is there something going on outside the school that's very problematic for this kid? Is the student unwell? Are there health issues? Are there some learning issues that we are not

addressing? Does this kid have relationships? Does he have friends at school? Are there adults at school that he trusts or relates positively to?

We look at those areas of very basic need right off the bat. And if there are things we find up front that are unaddressed, the team is going to act to address those right away. If these behaviors persist, if the behavior is presenting a kind of safety risk, we're going to immediately develop a crisis plan to make sure that we're handling things safely and doing everything we can to reduce the intensity of the behaviors that are creating that safety risk. And I think we're going to have some information available on the steps in that crisis planning process that people can download from this podcast.

Terry: Right.

Cyndi: So we've got the team. We've started off by looking at the context a little bit with those basic needs. We've made sure that if there's a safety issue going on, we've got a crisis plan. And from there, we're going to start making modifications to the student's routine based on information that we collected out there, circumstances under which behavior occurs and doesn't occur. The idea is that rather than trying to focus on changing the kid up front, we're going to try to focus on changing the circumstances. We're going to try to remove the triggers for this problem behavior as much as possible. And we're going to teach the student up front a more positive alternative that works just as well.

For example, if we discover through our data collection that our student is being removed from class consistently after these behaviors occur, we might infer from that, that maybe these behaviors are serving the purpose of allowing him to escape the classroom. And if that's the case, we might teach the student to request a break by using a break card that can be placed on her desk anytime, giving her a legal place to go when she needs to get away. The idea is that this new behavior, using that break card and going to the legal spot, works better for the student than the old behavior did, as a way to ultimately escape and regroup.

It's quicker and easier than talking over the teacher, and flipping over desks, and creating a big scene. And then we're going to zero in on those specific triggers that we find that drive the student to want to escape the classroom. Why did this kid want out of the classroom so badly that she's willing to go to all of this extreme? We're going to work on addressing those. So over time, we can eliminate the need for the student to ask for the special breaks, and we can withdraw the special modification.

Terry: I see. Now, I know sometimes, in the information you sent, that PBIS assembles a support team for the student. Could you talk about that support team and what they might begin to do for a student who's presenting these kinds of behavioral issues?

Cyndi: Right. PBIS is by definition a team approach. One person cannot be all things to all people. Nobody can do everything, but everybody can do something, it's the idea, kind

of, "It takes a village." PBIS is a process. It's not an event; it's not a form that you fill out. It takes place over time. So as team members, we're going to have to gather information about the student and these circumstances that I was talking about. We're going to plan our interventions based on that information. We're going to try them out, and then we're going to gather information about how they're working, or we're going to keep making adjustments, first until we've calmed the situation down, and then over time, to gradually teach the kid to use the new behaviors rather than depending on these special supports we've built in, like being able to take a break whenever you want to.

Terry: So you gradually withdraw that support, huh?

Cyndi: Exactly, over time, but just to calm it down first. And you teach the new behavior and show the kid that it works until the student develops some confidence with it. So this little support team is going to meet regularly for a set period of time, usually weekly for 30 to 45 minutes at first. And their purpose is to plan, problem solve, look at their progress data, make adjustments on what they're doing, celebrate their successes. And especially, for older kids, it's really important to include the student on the team if she's willing to participate, and we found that most kids are. If the focus is on really trying to understand the situation and help that student to succeed, those kids are willing to be part of that.

Terry: Mm-hmm. I know, in looking at the material again that you've shared, that PBIS identifies disruptive behavior that sometimes masks other real aims that the student has. Can you give an example of common disruptive or acting-out behavior, and how it might really represent what is going on with the student?

Cyndi: Yeah, well, every student is different and, of course, people are complicated. And we can't just assume that a particular behavior means the same thing when we see it with different kids. In fact, students are often using behavior patterns that they've developed for years, over time to meet their needs. It's not like a conscious thing that they're sitting down and planning a strategy and coming into your classroom and executing it. It's like it's become a habit over time. We're always guessing. We have to always remember that we can't get inside somebody else's head and know exactly what they're experiencing. But that said, in general, a lot of problem behaviors that students demonstrate at school serve the purpose or the function of helping them get access to something or get away from something.

So we can often make a really good guess about what the purpose of the behavior is by watching really carefully to see what typically happens with the student right before the behavior occurs, and then what happens consistently after the problem behavior occurs. So let's say, for example, let's say a student, when given a written assignment, this student typically yells at me, something like, "You're crazy if you think I'm going to do this," balls up the paper, throws it down, leaves his desk, and goes over to the computer, and starts booting up a game instead of doing the assignment.

This one little behavior sequence could mean one of several things. And if it consistently happens after I give him written assignments, and I know that's what happens before, I can start making notes about what usually happens after it occurs. And if I watch that, I can often make a guess about what it means. So, for example, if after that behavior sequence, the teacher usually goes over, helps the student get a new paper, helps him get going and get started on the assignment, and the student generally cooperates with that, it might make sense that the purpose of that behavior sequence was for the student to gain access to help, because that's what it did for him, get the teacher over there to help.

Let's say the same sequence is usually followed, but the teacher sends the kid out of the room down to the office or puts him in time-out, and that consistently happens. We might make the assumption that the purpose could be to get out of the assignment or escape the classroom because that's what happens when the behavior occurs. Let's say that the teacher usually allows the student to stay on the computer for a little while because she just can't deal with it right then, and she needs the time to help other students who are really trying to do the assignment. If that happens, if she wants to just avoid the disruption, this little behavior sequence might be serving the purpose of actually giving the student access to time on the computer.

He gets confronted with something he doesn't like to do, and this behavior helps him get access to something that he would rather do. Let's say the sequence is followed by the student's friends laughing at what he's doing; we could guess that a purpose of the behavior might be to get access to peer attention or appreciation from peers.

Now, of course, real people are complicated. Behaviors don't always fit into these really neat little boxes like I'm describing. Depending on the circumstances, the same behavior could or might serve the purpose of allowing the student to escape the classroom in one instance, and get peer attention in another instance, or there could be other factors in play, like autism or PTSD or ADHD. These conditions can all present sensory issues that could be part of the picture.

So, I guess to wrap it up, in order to make a good guess, I need to carefully watch specific incidents of this behavior that I'm targeting over time. And I need to look for patterns that repeat. That is the heart of the functional behavior assessment or FBA process.

Terry: I see. So the FBA process kind of susses out a hidden agenda, if you will. So then what are some PBIS strategies that could teach a student a better way to channel this acting-out behavior that you described?

Cyndi: Well, if we're going to teach a student a better way to behave, it's pretty easy to see that it's critical to understand the purpose that the behavior serves. So if the behavior

usually results in the student gaining help with a teacher, then I'm going to teach the student a better way to get help. If the behavior usually results in the student leaving the classroom, I'm going to teach the student a legal way to leave, and how to regroup and return. If the behavior serves the purpose of allowing the student to gain access to a preferred activity, something you would rather do, I'm going to teach the student to negotiate for something you would rather do or ask for an alternative assignment. If the behavior is a primary way for the student to gain status or attention from his peers, I'm going to teach another more positive way to do that.

In the beginning, I've got a structured thing set up where using the new behavior serves the same purpose as the problem behavior did, but it's quicker and easier to use. If my student yells at me and tears up his paper and I send him instantly out of class, but when he shows me the break card and asks me for a break, I'd tell him he can't go until he's finished his work, he's going to go back to yelling at me and tearing up his paper. So in the beginning, that break card had to result in an instant break or there is no reason for him to use it. Does that make sense?

Terry: Yes, it does.

Cyndi: And as time goes on, my student is going to gain skill and confidence with that new strategy. He's going to trust that this break card means "I get out of here," and it's not a problem. At the same time, the support team is continuing to proactively look at the circumstances in that class that's causing him to want to escape. Why does he want out of here so badly? And we're adjusting those. And over time, I can teach my students, first, to take breaks and come back. Then I can teach him to delay breaks until he gets permission from me. Then maybe I can teach him to take breaks just at certain intervals, and then eventually, maybe not to need breaks at all, except on very rare occasions.

But in the beginning, that replacement behavior I teach has to serve the same function as the problem behavior if it's going to be effective. And just as a reminder, you know, we're talking about tier three interventions here. These are highly individualized for specific students with significant chronic problem behaviors. There are lots of great strategies at tier one that a teacher can use with a whole class—or at tier two that can be used for smaller groups of kids who are at risk. These are easy to access on the web. We're going to include some resources with this podcast on those as well. And they require a lot less planning, and they're a lot simpler than kind of what I'm describing.

Terry: I see. And we'll talk about those resources a little bit later, but one of them, now, is called a crisis or safety plan worksheet. This is one of the free resources teachers can download on the podcast page. And what is the goal of a crisis or safety plan worksheet?

Cyndi: Well, classrooms and students and teachers have to be safe; it's non-negotiable. There is no learning in an unsafe environment. So the crisis planning worksheet is a tool that a

student support team can use to guide them through the process of establishing, first, exactly what is crisis level behavior. What does it look like for the student? They all identify what they know about the circumstances under which it's likely to occur, and especially the early warning signs could determine crisis behavior. The team is going to decide together how they can intervene when they see those early warning signs because what they want to do is prevent escalation to crisis level.

And they also decide together. They think out the worst-case scenario, and they kind of decide together exactly what they're going to do if things do escalate to a crisis level in order to maintain safety, help the student calm down. And they keep thinking it through in the plan until the end is eventually returning to the regular routine, whether it's later that day or another day, but they continue to planning all the way through that where the student is back in the circle again. A crisis is usually not a teachable moment. We don't give swimming lessons when somebody is drowning.

So in a crisis, the agenda has to shift instantly to maintaining safety and helping the student calm down, period. Dealing with consequences, discussing what happened, all of that comes later after safety and calm have been restored. Teachers need confidence that if a student has a really hard time, they know what to do. And the student needs confidence that if he loses control, the teachers know how to keep him safe and they're going to help him regain his composure. I've seen so many times that often just a process of using the worksheet to create a plan can be a huge confidence booster for teachers. I've seen it again and again.

Once the crisis plan is in place, we don't have that many crises, and I think it's because teachers are intervening early when they see those early warning signs, and they don't get as anxious themselves. They don't escalate to crisis level themselves because they know what they're going to do.

Just like everything else, I have to say one last time that at tier three, crisis plans are not generic. Every student is different. This particular crisis plan is about what a crisis looks like for this particular student, and the step we follow is what helps this particular student calm down. At tier three, it's different for every kid.

Terry: I see. Well, it raises the question, how could a teacher afford the time to provide that kind of specialized attention? I mean, is that a realistic use of resources?

Cyndi: One thing that is really important, I think, is that it helps to be working with a natural population of kids for an inclusive regular school. If you're looking at a typical kid who lives in the attendance area of a school, and there aren't people being bused in from outside based on certain characteristics that they have, the number of students who would require this level of individualized planning in a natural population is actually very small. We're talking about 1% to 2% of the school population or less. And when a school fully implements PBIS, that means they have behavior interventions and supports

already in place for all the kids at tier one, and they have interventions already going on for kids who are at risk at tier two. And so the stronger the tier one and tier two supports are in the school, the fewer kids there are going to be who are going to need that intensive tier-three type intervention.

Terry: So you build a culture with tier supports one and two that then make it easier to focus on tier three for the especially problematic students?

Cyndi: Exactly. It really helps to not have an overwhelming number of kids who require those supports. And working with that natural population and also implementing good supports like tier one and two really make that possible. A good thing for teachers to remember is that kids who have chronic difficulties with their behavior, chronic problems with social interaction, are really a normal part of any natural school population. There are going to be some of those kids, just as adults who have those issues are just a normal part of the community. It's part of our job in schools to teach those kids and to address those issues. And one way to look at it is that these kids, kids who have chronic issues with behavior, are going to take up your time anyway.

So it's a matter of whether you want to put the time in up front and work systematically to understand and try to proactively address and prevent their problems, which means you're going to see them reduce over time, or whether you want to put your time in reacting after problems have occurred. And you wind up reacting with greater and greater intensity, and this approach typically escalates the problems over time, and kids often wind up getting kicked out of school completely or sent somewhere different, to a different kind of program.

So the issue is do you want to spend your time creating support and helping kids connect and teaching them new skills, or do you want to spend your time reacting and isolating and punishing? My experience has overwhelmingly been that PBIS is a much less stressful, much safer, more effective approach over time, and therefore, it's ultimately less time consuming.

Terry: I see. And I understand that PBIS is an evidence-based approach. Could you talk about some of the evidence, like statistics that bear out the benefits of a proactive approach like PBIS?

Cyndi: Yeah. It's easy to find. There are over 40 years of solid evidence that support PBIS as a highly effective approach to disruptive, violent, or antisocial behavior of students in schools. Studies across time have clearly demonstrated that we can get an average 80% reduction in targeted problem behaviors for two-thirds of the kids that we try this with at that intensive level. We also know through research that behavior intervention plan success rates double when we base those plans on functional behavior assessment or discovering the purpose that the problem behavior serves for the student that we've already discussed.

When I worked with the local school division in my community, we saw that 86% of our kids with individual PBIS plans achieved very significant behavior improvement. And for those kids, the average decrease in the problem behaviors that were targeted was 81%. And the average decrease in crisis behavior was 78%. So those national statistics were definitely verified by what we saw at the local level.

Terry: Well, that's really persuasive. Could you talk about some situations in schools that might require the ongoing use of restraint and seclusion, and can we consider restraint and seclusion teaching tools from a PBIS perspective? Can they function as a preventive strategy to diminish crises from risk behavior?

Cyndi: Well, restraint and seclusion are emergency procedures. They might be necessary in the moment when the immediate alternative is that somebody is going to be seriously hurt, the student or someone else. But by far, most of the problem behaviors we see in school are not emergencies. Most of the problem behaviors that teachers are dealing with in schools, at least at their beginning, are not behaviors where someone is at risk of serious injury.

In fact, students have been seriously injured and even killed by the use of restraint and seclusion procedures in their school. So to answer your question, restraint and seclusion are not teaching tools. They do not prevent crisis situations. They don't teach a student any positive alternative.

Terry: That's a CPI perspective as well, and we're glad that PBIS and what you have found shores up that thinking about restraint and seclusion. So what, then, is the most effective way to establish safety in a school from a PBIS perspective?

Cyndi: Terry, you already referred a while back to establishing a culture, a school culture that is supportive of students. The most effective way to create safety in school is to prevent problems from occurring in the first place. Establishing PBIS with all three tiers of support is a proven evidence-based approach, and it helps create a school community that's based on welcome and support for all students. And I believe also that another key element is inclusive schools that serve the natural population of kids who live in the neighborhood. We've already discussed that this keeps the number of children who require these intensive individual supports small, and so the planning that's required to serve them successfully is not overwhelming for teachers.

And also in this type of setting, kids with problem behaviors are surrounded by typical peers who are modelling appropriate social behaviors. This kind of help setting can be a really strong positive influence on these kids who need these intensive behavior supports. And typical peers can benefit from learning firsthand how to resolve conflicts and address social problems in the real world. And highly restrictive procedures like

restraint and seclusion are kept to emergency situations because they're out of place or even shocking in a regular school and classroom.

The culture that develops when kids with problem behaviors are all clustered together in one school or put together in one class is a culture where sometimes these procedures become commonplace, everyday strategy. And after a while, they're not used only in immediate emergencies, when somebody is going to get hurt, but they start being used as a means to get students to comply. And it becomes negative and dangerous, and students are a lot more likely to be hurt than to be educated in such a culture.

Terry: Indeed. So with restraint and seclusion, they learn to treat it as a first response. And we can see the damage in that because it's not a teaching moment, and it's traumatic for the student and other students observing, I would think. So then why do schools spend so many resources on punitive measures, and how do we change that mindset?

Cyndi: Gosh, Terry, I honestly don't know why schools continue to spend so many resources on punitive measures. There's such a wealth of information that's available on highly effective positive approaches. Special ed law even requires them. I guess making a paradigm shift begins with taking an honest look at the outcomes that you're actually getting for your students. If you're using punitive measures, are they resulting in your kids learning to positively participate in the school community? Are your kids positively participating? Do they have friends? Relationships with adults are positive? They're learning and succeeding? A lot of times, we're using punitive measures because we believe that they're necessary for a positive result. But what about when we are not getting a positive result, and we keep using them anyway? And PBIS is an alternative to that.

Terry: And so PBIS maybe changes school culture away from reactionary measures like restraint and seclusion.

Cyndi: Yeah. It's by definition a proactive approach. PBIS is about antecedent-based intervention and teaching functional replacement behaviors. It's about a data-driven instructional approach to problems. It's the very opposite of a reaction measure.

Terry: How refreshing. Our listeners can download free resources that you put together to accompany this podcast. There is a PowerPoint presentation, an excellent one called Class 1 Fundamentals. There is also a How to Make a PBIS Plan instruction sheet, a Crisis Plan Worksheet, a Crisis Incident Record Form, and a form on how to complete a functional behavior assessment. Could you talk a little bit about that first one, Cyndi, the Class 1 Fundamentals PowerPoint presentation?

Cyndi: Yeah. That PowerPoint presentation was from the first class in a little PBIS course that I taught in a school division in our community a few years ago. It has some very basic

information about PBIS, and it contrasts PBIS behavior management approaches. We often use that information with—we were putting together school teams around a student who was going to require intensive support, especially if the teachers on the team had not been involved in teaching and supporting a student with those issues before.

So it might be helpful, if your listeners look at the PowerPoint, to also read the presenter notes that go along with the slides. They're in there, and that might be useful. At the end of the PowerPoint presentation, there is also a link to the resources from that little course that I taught. There is also a link to pbis.org, which is the national clearinghouse, a great source for PBIS information at all three tiers.

Terry: Oh, excellent, Cyndi. Thank you so much for providing those resources that our listeners can download. Let's transition now to the work you're doing at Virginia Commonwealth University in the Autism Center for Excellence.

The center describes itself as a university-based technical assistance, professional development, and educational research center for autism spectrum disorder in the Commonwealth of Virginia. So if you work with kids on the spectrum, you'll want to listen closely for the great resources available through the center, which you can access free of charge. Cyndi, how did you decide to transition from special education at Montgomery County Schools to work at the Autism Center for Excellence?

Cyndi: Well, I wasn't actually out looking for a change, but the opportunity at VCU came along at a natural transition time for me with the school division and personally. It was also an opportunity to learn from other school divisions in our state, and to work with Dr. Paul Wehman and Dr. Carol Schall, who have been professional heroes of mine for many years. I took the opportunity when it presented itself.

Terry: Excellent. Congratulations. The Autism Center for Excellence offers a three-year technical assistance program for school districts. Could you talk about the primary goals of that program?

Cyndi: Yeah. We at VCU-ACE are funded by the Virginia Department of Education. And we provide free training and information to anyone and everyone through our website, which is vcuautismcenter.org. We also work with school divisions who are selected through a competitive grant application process. Every three years or so, we select a new group of school divisions from across the state to work with. And we provide intensive technical assistance to those school districts. We help them achieve their goals to improve their services for kids on the autism spectrum and to all their kids.

In each of our divisions, they focus on expanding their teachers' use of evidence-based practices in their classrooms. They work on building curriculum content in some areas that are specific to autism like social skills or communication or creating learning that's

based on students' strengths and interests. We help the school divisions create staff development, and we really help them with systems change to improve their services to kids. We work intensively on-site with our school divisions for three to five years. And in addition to the training and technical assistance efforts, we're working to develop and support a community of leaders in every school division in our state around services for kids on the spectrum. We call our network "COLA," which stands for Community of Leaders in Autism.

Terry: All right. Another resource we have is from the Autism Center for Excellence. It is a practice brief called The Foundational Five. Could you talk about why these five practices form the cornerstone of your instructional process?

Cyndi: Yeah. There are currently 27 practices that are recognized as evidence-based for students on the autism spectrum. The Foundational Five are what we call five of these practices that we at ACE have found to be a particularly great starting point for schools when they're trying to build their services and get their teachers more involved in using evidence-based practices, because these five have lots of bang for the buck when it comes to student learning. The Foundational Five practices are visual supports, reinforcement, systematic instruction, antecedent-based interventions, and social communication interventions. And as you mentioned, a fact sheet on these practices is on our website, and I think can be downloaded here from the podcast as well.

Terry: Excellent. Well, let's talk about resources available to teachers right now on the Autism Center for Excellence website. I know there is the Training & Education, and Resources menus, and they're all packed with valuable free resources. Can you describe some of those resources there?

Cyndi: Yeah. We have amazing resources on the ACE website. They are open to everyone, and as you've already mentioned, all of them are free. So I strongly encourage everyone to check out the website and take advantage of them. With our Training & Education tab, it will take you to online courses for teachers, parents, paraprofessionals, administrators, anybody interested in learning more about ASD. We have webcasts on a wide variety of topics. We have short, little five-minute how-to videos that provide a great visual tool for learning about some basic teaching strategies. If you click on the Resources link, you get to fact sheets on a variety of topics.

There are some short, little Ask the Experts videos that provide a very quick, simple description and introduction to some fundamentals. There are Classroom Snapshot videos that highlight some good things happening in classrooms across Virginia as well as a ton of information on behavior, communication, transition, evidence-based practices, lots of specific resources often for families and paraprofessionals. And things are added to the website all the time. It just gets better and better. It's a great resource.

Terry: You know, when I was on the site, I looked at something that you'd recommended called the ACE Dashboard. Can you talk about the training sections, selections such as prompting, reinforcements, overview of autism spectrum disorder, and how teachers can earn badges and certificates there?

Cyndi: Yeah. The ACE website is organized to allow each person to easily find the relevant information for them by clicking on the button that kind of describes your area of interest. So if you're a parent, if you're a paraprofessional, if you're an educator, an administrator, you can click the button, and it takes you right to links that have information and training that might especially be of interest to you.

And if you set up an account by clicking on our little MyACE Dashboard and setting up an account, it literally takes about one minute and, of course, it is free. You can easily see all the training options that are available on the site, and you can keep track of those you complete.

So teachers can earn badges in these key instructional areas that you were talking about like prompting and reinforcement and basic information on ASD and other things. And the badges come with recertification point recommendations and completion certificates that teachers can use in their divisions to work towards maintaining their certification. And I can't say enough, even though it says, "Set up an account," that everything is free.

Terry: Well, what a tremendous resource for teachers, and we urge them to take a look at that, especially if they're working with kids on the spectrum or even just difficult students. It sounds like it would be good, practical knowledge for any teacher to have. Are there any final thoughts you want to pass on today, Cyndi, about the Autism Center for Excellence?

Cyndi: Well, just to underline what you just said, that practices that are good for students on the autism spectrum are good for all students. And the resources on our site are really diverse: those little videos, the longer webcasts, online courses, the fact sheets, the materials that you can print out. Our resources can be used for individual learning, they can be shared with others, they can be built in to staff development, and they can be shared at faculty meetings. There's so many ways to use them. At ACE, we learn so much from the school divisions that we support through our technical assistance plans.

And everything that we learned or developed with those folks is built into our training and resources on the website. We are working on building in more resources that have been developed by people on the autism spectrum. And we're also currently working on some new resources on inclusion. The site changes all the time, and I encourage your listeners to check it out.

Terry: All right. Well, to close with a quick question today, could you tell me why Dr. Paul Wehman and Dr. Carol Schall are your professional heroes?

Cyndi: Oh, gosh. Yes. Dr. Wehman, early, early, early in my teaching career, I went to a workshop that he did in Charlottesville where he was just talking about teaching kids functional skills that they could actually use in their lives to participate more actively in their communities, and it literally changed everything for me. Listening to him, I had a huge paradigm shift. I went back to my little self-contained classroom that I was teaching at the time, and I don't think I ever taught the same way since. My career took a completely different trajectory.

And Dr. Schall is someone who we used to call frequently to come and give us help, especially with our kids on the autism spectrum when I was working at the school division. And I took copious notes every time, and I would refer to those notes again and again and again with other kids over time. So those two have just been heroes of mine. And the chance to work with them at ACE was just too good to pass up.

Terry: Excellent. It must be very gratifying. Well, my guest today has been Cyndi Pitonyak. She is a technical assistance associate with the Virginia Commonwealth University Autism Center for Excellence as well as a subject matter expert in PBIS. Cyndi, thank you so much for talking with us today.

Cyndi: You are most welcome, Terry. Thanks for asking me.