



White Paper

Capturing Voices from the Field: Experts Discuss Special Education in the COVID-19 Era

*by Dr. Kurt Hulett, Author
and Special Education Advocate*



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Panel Discussion Deep Dive

On April 15, 2020, Rethink Ed brought together several of the nation's leading experts in special education to discuss the state of the field during the COVID-19 crisis. The panel, entitled "Voices from the Field: Educating Children with Disabilities During the COVID-19 Era," consisted of Phyllis Wolfram, Executive Director of the Council for Administrators of Special Education (hereafter CASE); David Adams, Director of Social-Emotional Learning at the Urban Assembly; Adam Leckie, Ed.D., Assistant Superintendent at Florence Unified USD and CASE executive board member; Gary Myrah, Executive Director of Wisconsin CASE; Kindel Mason, Director of Special Services at Jerome SD and president-elect of CASE; and panel moderator, Kurt Hulett, Ed.D., advocate and author in special education.


"We need to worry less about compliance and checking boxes and more about meeting the needs of children during this turbulent time."

- Phyllis Wolfram

The panel provided a lively discussion and immediately delved into the myriad of issues facing special educators during this unprecedented time. Phyllis Wolfram kicked off the panel by providing an overview of the four guiding principles from CASE created specifically for the COVID-19 era. The four principles are: 1. Focus on the safety, health, and welfare of students and staff members in your community; 2. Provide FAPE -- deliver services to as many students as you reasonably can in the best way you know how; 3. Document your efforts; and 4. IDEA wasn't built for this (COVID-19). She reviewed input from the US DOE

and guidance from OSEP. In addition, she provided practical advice and reminded listeners that the most important thing during this time is focusing on the current academic and functional needs of each child and doing your absolute best to meet those needs. She noted, "IDEA was not built for COVID-19. We must do the best we can with the resources we have for each child. At the end of the day, if we focus on the academic and functional needs of each child, partner with their parents, and work diligently to meet the child's goals, then that is what matters. We need to worry less about compliance and checking boxes and more about meeting the needs of children during this turbulent time."

Dovetailing on Phyllis's thoughts, David Adams, SEL Director of the Urban Assembly, purported that we must work even harder in a remote learning environment to meet the social-emotional needs of each child. He noted, "Of course, in a remote learning environment, the cues change for teachers. No longer can the teacher easily pick-up on frustration or disengagement on the part of the child when teaching remotely. The teacher can no longer tell if the child's head is down and they appear sad. Educators must be vigilant in reaching out to their students and constantly assessing their emotional well-being." David continued by indicating, "One of the best things we can do is to establish consistent and predictable learning environments and schedules for our students. Children are without predictable and structured schedules at this time. Regardless of the schedule, it needs to be consistent, predictable, and easily navigated by each child. Children need routines and schedules upon which to rely."



"We must meet families and children where they are, not where we want them to be."

- Kindel Mason

As a current special education director in Idaho and president-elect of CASE, Kindel Mason offered several practical recommendations and thoughts to consider. He noted, “Now that we’ve adjusted and everything is moving in the right direction, the next step seems to be looking at and addressing ESY. We have to figure out who we will address and who is eligible and how we will meet their needs. Do we continue with distance learning or do we use a different approach? One of the challenges is there are so many unknown variables at this point.” In reference to unknown variables, when asked about educating children in the fall, Kindel noted, “That’s one of the biggest questions and greatest unknowns. Will we be in the schools in the fall? Will we be on a rotating Monday-Wednesday-Friday schedule one week and Tuesday- Thursday the next week? Will we do some combination of distance learning and ‘at school’ learning? It is exceedingly hard to plan for an educational landscape that keeps shifting under our feet.”

When asked about top priorities, Kindel made it clear that parent and family communication is paramount. Kindel commented, “Without a doubt, communication with parents and families is among the most effective and important things we can do right now. We cannot make assumptions. What is appropriate for one child and one family, might overwhelm another child and family. Now that parents are teachers in the home environment, we must take into account their workload, in addition to their regular jobs during the day. We must meet families and children where they are -- not where we want them to be.” Kindel was also asked about silver linings, to which he responded, “I’ve seen several silver linings. One, this time has helped me to realize just how hard our teachers work, regardless of the challenges placed in front of them. I have teachers who are worried sick about their students and are working around the clock to make sure they get everything they need. Also, I have seen a lot of generosity and altruism.

For example, Rethink Ed and others have given away tremendous amounts of time, expertise, and service in the past two months -- all in the name of helping out. At the end of the day, sometimes the worst situations bring out the best in our communities.”

Dr. Adam Leckie, CASE board member and assistant superintendent in Arizona, reiterated the importance of communication with parents and families. He noted, “One of the first things we did was reach out to our parents and families and we began the process of partnering with them. Our top priority was to check on the entire family’s social and emotional wellbeing. COVID-19 has caused tremendous stress and strain for our families and we need to do everything in our power to help and support them.” He noted, “Parents are tremendous assets during this time. They are the primary caregivers and teachers. By partnering with them, they become a part of the process and the solution.” Dr. Leckie also commented on the importance of taking care of staff members: “We must take care of our teachers during this time. They are working tirelessly, and every teacher needs our support. At the end of the day, one of the best things we can do is to provide clarity and direction. Teachers always want to do the right thing. Given the extraordinary number of unknowns, teachers have a thousand questions. We must do everything we can to answer questions, provide clarity and direction, problem-solve, and help them navigate these murky waters.” From a leadership perspective, Dr. Leckie noted that this has been a tremendously

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- Adam Leckie

challenging time for school district leadership teams. He continued to state that he has met with his leadership team more in the past two months than he did the prior two years. Dr. Leckie mentioned, “This is a time for strategic and analytical thinking and planning. We are re-writing nearly every policy in the book. We must bring people together, gain buy-in and build consensus fast, and then execute the new policies. Strong and compassionate leadership is one of the greatest things we can provide right now.”

Gary Myrah, executive director of Wisconsin CASE, spoke at length about the fatigue teachers, parents, and students are experiencing with distance learning and the effects of the quarantine. He noted, “We must be sensitive to the fact that everyone -- parents, teachers, and students -- are reaching a point of fatigue and burn-out with distance learning.

What was initially novel, different, and potentially fun, has given way to parents feeling overwhelmed and students disengaged. In addition, teachers and administrators are tired. They have been putting in extremely long days since the beginning of this crisis.” Gary continued, “We need to ensure we protect special educators and their positions during this time. With a projected shortfall in funding anticipated, we need to make sure special education positions do not go unfilled. Not filling special education positions could significantly jeopardize our ability to provide mandated services.” Gary also spoke to the importance of professionals sharing information during this time. He stated, “We need to professionally share what we have collectively learned over the past couple of months and what is working. By collaborating and sharing best practices, we will be in a much better position to move forward this fall. The fall of 2020 has many unknowns and we must pull together as we navigate these challenging times.”

Panel Take-Aways

Several common threads emerged during the panel discussion. Some of the most consistent and compelling messages are as follows:

- First things first, make sure each child is safe and secure during this time. Academic needs should take a backseat to the health and well-being of each child -- both physically and emotionally.
- Children need predictable and structured schedules and learning environments during this time. Consistency of schedule and routine helps children to feel safe and secure.
- Educators must be vigilant in reaching out to students to check on their social and emotional well-being. Without having children physically present in class, the traditional cues are gone and thus harder to track each student's emotional health.
- Communication with parents is of paramount importance. We must rely on input and guidance from parents to help us understand their needs and their level of comfort with home instruction. By reaching out often, we can collaborate with parents as true partners. By opening the channels of communication, we will hopefully avoid overwhelming parents as well as missing any new and pressing needs. As well, we will also be far more in tune with the needs and progress of the child as we communicate regularly with parents.
- Worry less about compliance and focus on the needs of each child. IDEA did not anticipate nor plan for COVID-19 and a few timelines and checkpoints may be missed along the way. Instead of worrying about checked boxes, ensure that each child is progressing on his or her goals and that they are healthy and safe during this time.

- Problem-solving is critical during this time. IDEA was not built for COVID-19 and it is taking significant amounts of critical-thinking and problemsolving skills to meet the needs (remotely) of each child.
 - Take care of your teachers and staff. Our primary goal and job as educators are to take care of children; however, we need to also look out for the health and well-being of our staff members. It is extremely easy during a time like this for teachers to become overwhelmed and stressed. We need to check in with teachers and staff often and make sure we are all taking care of one another. Dr. Kurt Hulett, Author, and Special Education
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Author's Biography

Dr. Kurt Hulett, Author, and Special Education Advocate

Dr. Hulett is a leading special education advocate and educational consultant based in Central Texas. He works extensively on behalf of children and families engaged in the IEP and Section 504 process. He is well-known for his ability to navigate difficult situations and secure the educational services, goals and desired outcomes for the parents and students he serves. In addition, he trains principals and administrators in the utilization of both best practices and legal approaches to special education management. Dr. Hulett is the author of the best-selling text "Legal Aspects of Special Education." He is committed to helping all stakeholders meet the needs of students with disabilities.

He has extensive experience in many aspects of school administration including over ten years as a school principal, work in assessment as vice president for Triumph Learning in New York, head of research and development for Pearson Assessment in San Antonio, legal issues and compliance specialist for Henrico County Public Schools in Virginia, and grants and budget analyst for the Office of the Secretary of Education in Virginia.

Dr. Hulett has a bachelor's degree in public administration from James Madison University, a master's in special education from the University of Virginia, and a doctorate in education administration and supervision also from the University of Virginia. Dr. Hulett is the proud of father of two children currently attending South Bosque Elementary School and the spouse of a Baylor University professor.



Panelists Biography

Dr. Adam Leckie, CASE Board Member, and Assistant Superintendent

Adam has worked with individuals with disabilities for over 18 years and in public education for the past 13 years. He has worked as a Special Education Teacher, Special Education Department Chair, Special Education Instructional Specialist, Special Education Director, and currently is an Assistant Superintendent for Student Services. In that time Adam has improved the outcomes for students with disabilities in his local school district through a focus on inclusive practices, high-quality instruction, and effective behavioral supports. In addition to his work in the public school system, Adam taught college courses on applied behavioral analysis (ABA) and autism to master's students.

He is Past-President of AzCASE and currently serves as the Publications Chair for the Council of Administrators of Special Education (CASE). He was named the 2015 Early Career Special Education Director of the Year, 2019 Arizona Distinguished Administrator of the Year, 2019 Arizona Outstanding Dissertation Award winner, and 2019 PBISAz Director's Award winner. Adam's publications include contributions to the Journal of Special Education Leadership (2016), the Journal of Access, Equity, and Compliance (2019) and the book Lucky 21: The General Education Teacher's Guide to Special Education (2018).



**Phyllis Wolfram, CASE Executive Director,
and former SPED Director**

Phyllis Wolfram is the current Executive Director for the National Council of Administrators of Special Education. Just prior to this role, Phyllis served as the Executive Director for MO-CASE and resides in Springfield, Missouri. She has worked in the field of education for 36 years. Phyllis' administrative experience spans 29 years in the field of special education administration at the local level. She has been a local special education director in three different districts ranging in size from a small rural district to the largest urban district in the state of Missouri. In addition, she has experience in the area of gifted education, Section 504, ELL and early childhood.

Phyllis is currently the President of CASE. Prior to this position she served as the chair of the CASE Policy and Legislation Committee for three years. She has also chaired the CASE Ad Hoc Committee on IDEA Reauthorization in 2010, and served as a member of the CASE Task Force, Design for the Future, 2005. In her home state of Missouri, Phyllis has served on the Governor's Commission on Autism Spectrum Disorders and has served on various state-level committees including Early Childhood Special Education, Electronic IEP Development, Missouri's RTI initiative, Transition from School to Work and the Elementary English Language Arts Advisory Committee. Phyllis has also served on the Board of Directors for the Council for Exceptional Children and the CEC IDEA Reauthorization Workgroup. She is currently the Chairman of the Board for Burrell Behavioral Health, the second-largest mental health provider in Missouri.



David Adams, SEL Director Urban Assembly

Adam has worked with individuals with disabilities for over 18 years and in public education for the past 13 years. He has worked as a Special Education Teacher, Special Education Department Chair, Special Education Instructional Specialist, Special Education Director, and currently is an Assistant Superintendent for Student Services. In that time Adam has improved the outcomes for students with disabilities in his local school district through a focus on inclusive practices, high-quality instruction, and effective behavioral supports. In addition to his work in the public school system, Adam taught college courses on applied behavioral analysis (ABA) and autism to master's students. He is Past-President of AzCASE and currently serves as the Publications Chair for the Council of Administrators of Special Education (CASE). He was named the 2015 Early Career Special Education Director of the Year, 2019 Arizona Distinguished Administrator of the Year, 2019 Arizona Outstanding Dissertation Award winner, and 2019 PBISAz Director's Award winner. Adam's publications include contributions to the *Journal of Special Education Leadership* (2016), the *Journal of Access, Equity, and Compliance* (2019) and the book *Lucky 21: The General Education Teacher's Guide to Special Education* (2018).

David is the Director of Social-Emotional Learning at The Urban Assembly. He previously served as the Social-Emotional Learning Coordinator for District 75 where he shaped the District's approach to social-emotional learning for students with severe cognitive and behavioral challenges. He has worked internationally in schools in England, standing up and evaluating programs of positive behavioral supports and Social-Emotional Learning as a research intern at Yale University's Health, Emotion and Behavior Lab, and published multiple academic papers around the relationship of social-emotional competence, and student academic and behavioral outcomes. He is married with two children, serves on the Board of Directors of CASEL and is an Engineering Officer in the Army Reserve. David holds an M.Ed in Educational Psychology from Fordham University.



Kindel Mason, Special Services Director, Jerome School District (ID), CASE President-Elect

Kindel has 29 years of experience in special education, and has served as the Special Services Director in Jerome, Idaho since 2005. Prior to becoming a director, Kindel worked with the Idaho State Department of Education as a consultant and taught special education at the elementary and middle school levels. He holds a B.A. in Elementary/Special Education, M.A. in Special Education from Idaho State University, and earned an Ed.S. in School Administration from the University of Idaho. He was selected as the 2013 Idaho Outstanding Special Education Administrator, and the 2015 Idaho State University Outstanding Educator.

Kindel has been an active member of CASE for 14 years and a CEC member for 25 years. Currently, he serves on the CASE Executive Committee as the CASE President-Elect. His past leadership experiences include: CASE Professional Development chair, CASE Membership Committee member, Idaho CASE President, Idaho CEC President, President of the Idaho Association of Special Education Administrators, and President of the Marsh Valley Education Association. He served on the Idaho Medicaid Advisory Committee and the Governor's Interagency Student Services Support Committee. His spare time is spent enjoying Idaho's outdoor recreation opportunities with his family.



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About Us

Rethink Ed was founded on a simple, yet powerful idea: To re-think education. To make it better and easier. To unburden school districts and empower educators. To improve outcomes and elevate accountability. To promote collaboration and inspire learning. And most importantly, to make a difference in the school day for everyone – administrators, educators, and students.

The Rethink Ed solution is part of Rethink First, a global company that is transforming behavioral healthcare. Similar to Rethink First's other solutions that are innovating and improving outcomes for clinicians and employers globally, Rethink Ed is pioneering EdTech with our relentless pursuit of innovative methods that put evidenced-based, data-informed, digitally delivered instruction and assessments into the hands of educators, clinicians, and parents who share our singularly minded focus: To power the potential of all children and to work together to help them succeed.

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**Gary Myrah, President Wisconsin CASE and
former SPED Director**

Gary was hired as the Executive Director of WCASS in 2011. He retired from the Port Washington-Saukville School District after 27 years of service and prior to that he served as the director for the Adams-Friendship Area Schools for 7 years. He has been active in WCASS since the merger of WCAPS and WCASE in 1994 and has served as the chair of the conference committee as well as the president of the association. He received the Dan O'Sullivan award twice and the John Melcher Award (now referred to as the Administrator of the Year Award) once in his career. He was formerly the Professional Development Chair, and is currently President-Elect, for CASE International (Council of Administrators of Special Education).