



Episode 21 –
We're Back - A New Chapter for I Will Be Your Voice Podcast
Transcript

Matt Butensky:

Well, it's been a minute, but welcome back to the I Will Be Your Voice podcast. We took a pause, we took a break, but we're really excited to be back. My name is Matt Butensky. I'm a youth development program manager at the Center for Schools and Communities and really we just realized that we have more stories to tell, right guys?

Meghan Dale:

Absolutely.

Matt Butensky:

We have more stories to tell and we have more information to share. So today we're talking about what we've been up to over the last year and just giving a preview of what is to come, what we've been excited about. And so I think for everyone here, we took a pause. Is this a remake, a reboot or a sequel?

Ben Simmons:

I think it's just chapter two.

Matt Butensky:

Chapter two.

Ben Simmons:

We're going to take on more stories like you said.

Matt Butensky:

Chapter two in our podcast. I like that. Okay. So I'm joined by some of my favorite colleagues today, Taylor, Ben and Meghan. And just to start off, how is everyone doing today?

Ben Simmons:

It's a beautiful single digit day here in Pennsylvania.

Matt Butensky:

Yes, it's still icy, but we're thawing out a little bit. And how do we feel about returning to the podcast in chapter two? Taylor, what do you think?

Taylor Teichman:

I'm very excited. I think expanding and like you said, having more stories to share. I'm excited to see who we might bring on the podcast and what we talk about this year.

Meghan Dale:

And I'm excited as well. I'm new to the podcast. I'm new to this podcast so I'll be just happy to be in the room with you.

Matt Butensky:

But you're not new to the team.

Meghan Dale:

Not new to the team, just new to the mic.

Matt Butensky:

Fantastic. And Ben, anything else?

Ben Simmons:

I forgot the question.

Matt Butensky:

How do you feel about the return to the podcast?

Ben Simmons:

I think that we have a lot of stories to tell and I think that 2025 was a big year. We did a lot and 2026 is going to be the same.

Matt Butensky:

Exactly. The work continues. Okay. So Taylor, let's start with you. Can you just share what your role is at the Center for Schools and Communities?

Taylor Teichman:

Sure. So I am Taylor Teichman. I am a youth development coordinator for our Pennsylvania ECYEH program. So I provide statewide training and technical assistance and regional training and technical assistance on really the guidance from the McKinney-Vento Federal Act.

Matt Butensky:

Yes. And just to start with the basics, what does ECYEH or E-C-Y-E-H actually stand for?

Taylor Teichman:

Yes. So ECYEH stands for the Education for Children and Youth Experiencing Homelessness Program. And so as Ben was saying, 2025, I was like, "Wow, 2025 went really, really fast." And some of, just to highlight the ECYEH program and why this work matters and we'll be sharing many more stories throughout 2026 is that actually our statewide program in 2023 to 2024, we identified 50,000 students experiencing homelessness in Pennsylvania. That was a 32% increase since the 2019 to 2020 school year. So, huge.

Matt Butensky:

Yeah. And we've been seeing that increase as you just said year to year. It seems to go up every single year impacting a lot of students and families. So one of the ways Pennsylvania responds to this work through ECYEH is our regional model. Can you just share a little bit about what our regional model looks like?

Taylor Teichman:

Sure. So our regional model is actually, I think, one of my favorite things about the program. We're one of the very few states, I think we might be one of three states throughout the United States that has a regional model for our ECYEH program and for supporting students experiencing homelessness through McKinney-Vento. So our regional model, we have eight regions that are located across the state. They're based in other intermediate units and our regional offices, each region has a regional coordinator and then our regional coordinators also have additional incredible support teams and staff on their team. And so they're really providing kind of that more boots on the ground training, TA support to our homeless liaisons in every school district and to really any school personnel and educator and community partners that are coming in contact with and working alongside students who may be experiencing homelessness.

So we really, because of that regional model, I think we are able to... I think that's how and why our numbers continue to increase because we have an incredible group of folks doing this work across the state.

Matt Butensky:

Yeah. Our regional offices do incredible work. We've seen them really chip in as some other funding has dispersed or left over the last year. They have supply closets, they have a new mentoring model for homeless liaisons in one of our regions. So a lot of exciting and important work happens in our regional offices and we definitely want to invite some of our regions in future episodes of the podcast to share what they've been up to over the last year too.

Taylor Teichman:

Yeah. Our regions are very creative and really truly the experts behind this program. So I'm excited to bring them in and hear more about what they're doing in each of their regions.

Matt Butensky:

Yes. We will talk more with them, but you've also been busy this past year-

Taylor Teichman:

I have been.

Matt Butensky:

... working on some new projects. And so what are some of the projects that you've been working on over the last year?

Taylor Teichman:

Yeah. So I feel like in the past year we were able to create some really incredible resources and as part of that, collaborating again with our regional offices and some other statewide programs throughout the state. So one of those that I'm really proud of is our youth human trafficking toolkit for educators. It's a response and screening toolkit and it was developed for school-based mental health professionals, nurses, McKinney-Vento, our homeless liaisons, social workers, counselors, and it's really to help them recognize and respond to youth who may be at risk for human trafficking. And so we know that there's kind of an intersection there or a parallel there of students who are experiencing homelessness may be at a higher risk and can be at a higher risk of also experiencing trafficking. So we kind of realized over the years of doing this and then with our partners at the Pennsylvania Department of Education as well, our state coordinator kind of elevating and uplifting that we're seeing a lot of intersect here.

So we were able to pull a team together here at the center. We included some of our regional coordinators and then we also collaborated with the Pennsylvania Coalition to Advance Respect, also known as PCAR. And so I think it was this really beautiful webbing of expertise because here at the center through our ECYEH program, we have that internal expertise around McKinney-Vento, students experiencing homelessness, navigating school, working with educators, working with liaisons and so really kind of understanding those different nuances for students experiencing homelessness. And then PCAR has over 50 plus years of statewide

advocacy, policy work, intervention and prevention when it comes to supporting survivors of sexual violence and also supports rape crisis centers across the commonwealth. So it was kind of really a no-brainer that that's who we were going to tap into to kind of bring both of our skill sets and expertise together.

So that's kind of how that came to be. And then I think some of the parts of the toolkit that are really kind of unique and helpful for liaisons and for those other school-based personnel that might be utilizing it is that we, as part of the toolkit, there's a school-based response protocol in there that prioritizes student safety and support. And so with that, there's a trauma informed screening questionnaire that the homeless liaison can be using and so that's really just a helpful in the moment kind of tool that they can use to really identify some additional support and additional safety for those students. So that was a big one.

Matt Butensky:

Yeah, it is. And a lot of our work is schools identify students who are experiencing homelessness and then we have to think about what other services or things that they're going through. And so that is just an added tool for them in their school buildings. Where can we find the toolkit?

Taylor Teichman:

Oh, the toolkit is on our ECYEH PA website.

Matt Butensky:

Which we'll share the link as part of the podcast.

Taylor Teichman:

Yes.

Matt Butensky:

Yep.

Taylor Teichman:

It's a digital toolkit. So folks are able to download that and print that and use it as they need.

Matt Butensky:

Perfect. Thank you for sharing about that. You've also been working on our learning series, which we offer monthly sessions. Can you tell us a little bit more about the learning series, maybe a session that was really impactful for our attendees or that resonated with you?

Taylor Teichman:

Yeah, sure. So our learning series, as you said, we have that, that happens monthly and that's a statewide reach. So homeless liaisons are welcome to join that. It's their free webinars. I think what I've enjoyed most about our learning series is how we try to pull in a variety of different topics or discussion points for folks. So some that are coming to mind. We had one in early fall, Communicating with Communicators, that was with Karen Black. She was the former communications director for NACE, which is like our national organization for our work. And so that was a nice lead up.

We have Awareness Week that occurs every month in November. I really enjoyed having Karen join us and provide some tips and tools for homeless liaisons to be able to prepare for Awareness Week and kind of have little nuggets that they can be working with and sharing with like their communication folks in their school district so that it's not just one time a year, but it's every month in some capacity they're able to uplift and highlight students in their schools and kind of there was a nice focus on success stories as part of that and I think that's huge.

We've also had Dr. Rajni Shankar-Brown with us. She was with us previously through our restorative series practice webinar sessions and we've been able to bring her into the fold with our ECYEH webinar learning series and her sessions are always very highly attended and we always hear a lot of feedback. She has provided a lot of training for us around compassion fatigue, trauma-informed practices, taking care of ourselves in order to take care of others and the work that we do. And so it's always a treat when we can have Dr. Rajni because I know folks really resonate with what she brings and offers for us and then kind of just a little bit of maybe a shameless plug for our spring sessions coming. I'm excited. We have one of our former keynotes from our Paving the Way conference joining us, Rocky Callen. She's an author. She was with us at our conference in 2025 and so she'll be offering a session for us on destigmatizing mental health experiences for students experiencing homelessness.

Matt Butensky:

Wow. Okay. That's a lot. Actually, the Restorative Practice Series is one of our most well attended series at the center. I was just looking at some numbers yesterday. We've had over a thousand participants-

Taylor Teichman:

Wow.

Matt Butensky:

... for the Restorative Practice Series. So thank you for organizing that and working with Dr. Shankar-Brown and also sharing about the toolkit for human trafficking. And we also have a unaccompanied homeless youth guide that's come out over the last year-

Taylor Teichman:

We did, yes.

Matt Butensky:

... which we can talk more about in another episode of the podcast, so we'll share more about that. So thank you, Taylor-

Taylor Teichman:

Thank you.

Matt Butensky:

... for giving us all that information. So another project that we've been especially excited about is the implementation of Act 1 of 2022 and Ben and Meghan have been deeply involved in supporting this work. So Ben, just to get started, what do you do at the center?

Ben Simmons:

So my name is Ben Simmons. I am the youth development specialist here at the Center for Schools and Communities, and in my work I work across all of our youth development initiatives and that can sometimes feel like a lot, but it's also informed my work in Act 1 of 2022 and really pushed us through a lot of different projects.

Matt Butensky:

Yeah. And Meghan, you're also going to be talking about Act 1. What do you do at the center?

Meghan Dale:

Hi, I am the special projects managing coordinator here at the Center for Schools and Communities and in addition to my support on the Act 1 projects, I also coordinate the refugee education program here at the center, which we'll talk a little bit more about later.

Matt Butensky:

Yes. And you've been working on bullying prevention as well.

Meghan Dale:

Yes. That's a new project kind of on my to do list. Yeah. It's been exciting to jump in to all these different projects and kind of get to know what else is going on here at the center.

Matt Butensky:

Ben, for our listeners who might be newer to Act 1 of 2022, what is Act 1?

Ben Simmons:

I love that question. Every year there is an Act 1. Act 1 of 2022 was the first piece of legislation passed in 2022, and I really broadly think that it's something that is worth celebrating. It's something that makes me proud to be a Pennsylvanian. It underscores the rights of kids and the abilities that they have even when they've experienced education instability.

So the full title of the law is Act 1 of 2022, Assisting Students Experiencing Education Instability and it defines education instability as one or more school change in a single school year due to homelessness, according to McKinney-Vento, foster care placement, adjudication of delinquency or juvenile justice involvement. So it's really highlighting those abilities of highly mobile students.

Matt Butensky:

Yeah, that is true that I know you've done a scanning of other state legislation and I don't know exactly where we meet up, but not every state has a similar law. So it is pretty cool that we have this. It's a big breakthrough for Pennsylvania.

Ben Simmons:

Definitely. I mean in the Mid-Atlantic we lead on that and there are often rights that are outlined specifically for students experiencing homelessness, but nothing that encompasses all of these populations of students. The closest is my home state of Kentucky and they don't even fully have the robust protections that we have.

Matt Butensky:

Yeah. And the act really fills in gaps that the federal laws might not provide for or they might encourage, but Act 1 really goes further to kind of cement credit transfers and more things we're going to be talking about. So one of the pieces we're most proud of and I know you're most proud of with Act 1 is our new graduation plan toolkit, which released I believe in November. So can you talk a little bit more about the graduation plan toolkit?

Ben Simmons:

Yes. It actually debuted at our statewide conference paving the way in October.

Matt Butensky:

Oh, right. That's correct.

Ben Simmons:

Meghan and I spent a lot of time on that presentation, on that document and it is hopefully a great tool for anyone who works with any students who need graduation planning assistance and it can be tailored to meet specific needs, but we designed this really in the interest of LEAs, of local education agencies. They had told us that this was something they needed support on and this is a tool that really catalyzed us taking this work on in partnership with the Department

of Ed. So we started this process. It's a lengthy document. It's a full toolkit that we hope makes the implementation of Act 1, the development of policies and actual graduation planning really effective. But because of the student-centered nature, you'll follow the story in that toolkit of a student named Alex Olmasi. I couldn't really come up with a word for sample that wasn't just sample with a different accent on it. So we went with Celtic and Olmasi does mean sample in Celtic. I don't know if I'm pronouncing it correctly though. So if anyone's a Celt, let me know. Reach out.

Matt Butensky:

[inaudible 00:19:34] Irish language experts out there. Exactly. Reach out. Well, that's exciting and it does follow... It's a sample so that schools using it can see exactly what's intended in those different areas of the toolkit. And important to note, the toolkit is so important because students that are Act 1 eligible in high school must have a graduation plan for them because the graduation rates for those student groups is significantly lower than their peers that are less mobile and that don't experience education instability. So we feel like we really met the policy and put it into practice with the toolkit. And you did a huge amount of work with our graduation plan toolkit. Can you talk a little about the templates in the toolkit?

Ben Simmons:

Yeah, thank you. So we have unique templates for each secondary grade level, nine, 10, 11, and 12. And because as you mentioned, Matt, any student in grades nine to 12 who is identified for Act 1 must be provided with a graduation plan, we've designed kind of around that understanding and of course every school is unique. But we wanted to really capture that process and have it in one document because as you know, students experiencing any kind of education instability are likely to experience it again. So this is a document that should and will move with them and keep them on track to graduate on time.

Matt Butensky:

And we also felt it was really important for the student to be involved in their graduation plan templates. So a student expression of goals form was created to allow them to participate in their graduation plan. A lot of times these students are not always very involved and so we felt it was important. Did you want to say anything else about the student template?

Ben Simmons:

Yeah. It's also designed to capture some information for students who may be in different kinds of placements. So capturing what they can share that maybe doesn't come up in transcripts or even in a conversation with the student. So we've designed that with some probing questions, some ways for them to express what they want to do and give them a lot of ownership. I think that's been a theme for a lot of our work is student voice, student expression, and giving them ownership and empowerment.

Matt Butensky:

Yeah. A lot of the students that are eligible might have their education so piecemealed that it is really important to just ask them questions, right? About their education history, about their academic experience and what their strengths are, because in that way we can help identify other ways that they can demonstrate competency, which is required as a part of the law and find alternative assessments for them so that there could be just more flexibility for their graduation planning. So thank you for sharing about the graduation plan toolkit. We will have another episode that dives more into Act 1 and specifically the graduation plan toolkit, but we have other projects for Act 1 and most recently we've been working on a frequently asked questions guide and Meghan, why don't you tell us a little bit about how that FAQ guide came together?

Meghan Dale:

Absolutely. Yeah. We're really excited to launch the Act 1 of 2022 Frequently Asked Questions Resource on our Act 1 webpage and actually by the time you're hearing this podcast episode, it will be live on our webpage so you can check it out and answer some of the questions you might have about Act 1. So the FAQ is a collection of questions that we've received from various practitioners or that practitioners sent to PDE as they continue to understand, learn about and apply Act 1 in their school practice, and we hope to continue to update the document with newly submitted questions as they kind of arise with practitioners. So please feel free to share your thoughts with us on our webpage as well. There's a space where you can submit questions and we'd be happy to take a look at them. And we've also developed a two part Act 1 FAQ webinar series that discusses and answers each question listed in the FAQ. So if you want to hear Matt, Ben and me read those questions and answers to you, we encourage you to give it a watch, learn from us and share with your colleagues.

Matt Butensky:

Yeah, they are posted at our Act 1 website.

Ben Simmons:

And that URL is act1edinstability.org.

Matt Butensky:

Yes. And just when we think we've answered or been asked all the questions, we get new questions that need more review and it really just demonstrates the importance of continuing this work around Act 1 because we do receive new questions whenever we have an activity or an event and it is interesting to see how things play out in schools.

Ben Simmons:

And I think we've really spent a lot of time distilling what the actual policy question is and separating each FAQ from, "Well, this is my student's experience," versus how do we implement Act 1 overall. So while you're looking at that FAQ, you're going to find these questions that are really based in real life interpretations and policy decisions and that's helpful. But as you have

those questions and you reach out to us for assistance, we often do take those questions thinking, "Oh, we've heard this before." So know that we take that really seriously. So whether that's an email, a meeting or just a question in passing, it's always informing this and our future support.

Matt Butensky:

Yeah. And in the two part series that Meghan mentioned, we do have some scenarios built in. So if you take a listen to those, you'll see some of those practical scenarios that you might have experienced as well. What do you think is the most frequently asked question for Act 1?

Meghan Dale:

So we get a lot of very specific questions about identifying students and student eligibility for act one supports. We have a lot of questions that are very specific to like a singular case or one student and we get a lot of details about what's going on with that student, how they're experiencing education instability, if they're experiencing education instability and they oftentimes practitioners reach out to us to see is the student eligible? Can this student receive Act 1 supports? And what that shows me is that practitioners really care about ensuring that their students are receiving these supports and taking the time to backtrack and understand where the student has been, the previous placements that they may have been in, the previous school districts they may have been in. And so to me, that just shows how much practitioners and teachers and educators are really paying attention to students and are really hoping to get them connected with the services that they're owed.

Matt Butensky:

Yeah. And probably our second most frequently asked question was, do you have a graduation plan template?

Ben Simmons:

And now we can happily respond yes.

Matt Butensky:

We do.

Meghan Dale:

A resounding yes.

Matt Butensky:

There's printable and fillable versions actually. So we're covering both methods, whatever is easiest for you to use. And we have some additional work coming for Act 1. I know that we

recently formed a work group of local education agencies on Act 1. We have about 10 in that work group or is there more than 10?

Ben Simmons:

About 40.

Matt Butensky:

Oh, okay. Or 10, 40.

Meghan Dale:

10, 40.

Matt Butensky:

10 to 40 is the range in the work group. Okay. And so we're going to be meeting with them throughout the next year to really see how they're implementing Act 1, developing policies. Anything else?

Ben Simmons:

Yeah. We're really, this is an advertisement too. So if you're listening and interested, let us know, but we are using this as sort of a community of practice. So we've got people sharing their best practices, their common issues, and we're organizing each meeting just around a theme. So our upcoming work item, I guess to say, is around developing school policy or administrative procedures to really codify Act 1 allowable identifications and processes. So that's really something that we're grateful for our statewide network to inform that so we're not just throwing out something that we hope will stick.

Matt Butensky:

Yeah. We have a huge network of school districts in Pennsylvania and so we have varied levels of implementation of it. And so we really want to get the best practices that we can. And that's one of our roles here is that we really try to identify best practices and strategies of others that are working directly with students and then distill that down to other school districts or other organizations that need those models and that help. Yeah? Yes.

Meghan Dale:

Yes.

Matt Butensky:

So Meghan, you also mentioned you support our refugee education projects. I just wanted to ask you what is one resource or piece of work you've been especially excited about over the past year around our refugee education work?

Meghan Dale:

Yeah. So we have a lot to be proud of in the Pennsylvania refugee education program. So I'm going I'm going to share two things that I'm proud of.

Matt Butensky:

Okay.

Meghan Dale:

Yeah. So in 2025 last year, we kicked off our quarterly learning series titled Together We're Better with the intention of bringing practitioners and experts who serve refugee youth and families together to learn best practices and ways to create spaces of welcome for refugee students and their families. And just this past Friday actually on January 30th, Christina Moon from the Education Law Center led us in her session, The Legal Rights of Immigrant Students in Pennsylvania Schools. This session was very highly attended and I think it's very relevant and it was very informative about ways that we can advocate at all levels for and protect our refugee and immigrant students by knowing our rights and the rights of our students and their families. So that was great. That was awesome and that will be up on our refugee education program webpage that you can watch that recording if you're interested and reach out if you'd like more resources on that.

We're also very proud of our 10 Ways to Welcome flyer, which details ways that practitioners can engage and support their newcomer students and families. And some of those ways are just to check in with those students. How are they getting along in school, maybe setting up a buddy system with their peers, doing some work on implicit biases in the school or with practitioners, creating a parent night, reaching out to parents and trying to engage parents, work with language, making sure that there are interpreters or that materials that go home are in parents' preferred language. So those are just some small ways that are listed on this flyer because what's important is that when students feel like they belong in schools and in their classrooms, they're more likely to have better academic and behavioral outcomes.

And so that's always top of our mind when we welcome newcomer students and families to schools. And we want to encourage practitioners to think about ways that they themselves and their colleagues are working to create spaces of welcome in your own schools, in your own classrooms and with the communities that you serve.

Matt Butensky:

Thank you for sharing that. Really important and timely resources.

Meghan Dale:

Of course.

Matt Butensky:

So thanks for giving us an update on those projects that you also work on at the Center for Schools and Communities.

Meghan Dale:

Of course.

Matt Butensky:

So that is just a preview of what we have been up to over the last year and so we want to have more episodes. We also welcome anyone listening that has their own projects or stories about how they do similar work, we'd love to have you as a guest on our podcast so you can certainly reach out. But before we close, is there anything else that anybody wanted to say, something we forgot to mention? Any other words to close out?

Ben Simmons:

2025 was a crazy year. So we appreciate everything that we get to see from this level and I think it continues to inspire me to see such a huge network that supports students and families.

Meghan Dale:

Yeah. I'm excited for chapter two of the podcast and to meet some new experts and yeah, just stay tuned for what all four of us have to offer in 2026 in our learning series and our projects and in all of our programs.

Taylor Teichman:

I think that's what I'm most grateful for as I was listening as Ben and Meghan were also sharing. What I love so much about this work is that we're working with so many different folks across the state and we're also very mindful of what's the current events that are taking place and trying to tap into how we can support whatever those current events are that folks are needing more resources or needing just more support and more community around. So I guess to say that's kind of, I guess my mantra for 2026 in the work is just keeping that and making sure that the communities that we serve and the students that we serve are always at the forefront.

Meghan Dale:

Love that.

Matt Butensky:

Well said. I would say just grateful to be continuing this work. It has been an interesting year, but we have been able to continue to provide the same level of information and services and so that is what I am grateful for. Also, we will be heading into conference planning season very, very soon as well for our annual conferences, so we're excited about that. And that is where we're going to leave off today for today's episode of the I Will Be Your Voice podcast. Thank you Taylor and Ben and Meghan for joining the conversation today.

Ben Simmons:

We will be your voice.

Matt Butensky:

Yes.

Taylor Teichman:

Thank you, Matt, for facilitating us.

Meghan Dale:

Yes, happy to be here.

Taylor Teichman:

Hosting us.

Meghan Dale:

Happy to be here.

Matt Butensky:

I'm glad you could be a part of this episode and you will be a part of future episodes. That's exciting too.

Meghan Dale:

Yay.

Matt Butensky:

So if you'd like to learn more about students experiencing homelessness in Pennsylvania, visit ECYEHPennsylvania.center-school.org. We appreciate you listening and we'll see you again soon.

Meghan Dale:

Bye.

Taylor Teichman:

Bye.

Ben Simmons:

Bye.