Erin Okuno – Half the Curriculum Walks in the Door

Carrie Basas: [00:00:00] Welcome to the Rooted in Washington podcast, a podcast about family engagement. I'm Carrie Basas, the host, and today my guest is Erin Okuno. Erin, welcome. Now I've met your family, but I would like you to tell me a little bit more about them.

Erin Okuno: My family lives with me in Washington, and so there's a spouse who's very wonderful, two kids, one in middle school and one in high school.

I have a really big dog who looks like a miniature horse and a couple chickens.

Carrie Basas: So that's your side hustle these days. The chickens--

Erin Okuno: yeah, eggs are expensive, so it's a, not a moneymaker, but it's not a money loser. Yeah. Do the chickens have names? Uh, no. They just have nicknames like, oh, there's, there's that one and there's the other one.

Carrie Basas: We won't include them in our family engagement strategy, I guess.

Erin Okuno: No, they're not very family oriented.

Carrie Basas: Sounds like it, I mean, they're [00:01:00] just producing for your family. So we do have to honor their existence. So besides being a chicken herder, you work as the director of the Office of the Education Ombuds, and I wonder what drives your passion for family engagement?

Erin Okuno: There's a lot of things that drive the passion for family engagement, but before I get into that, I'll give you the like really short, what we do at the Office of Education Ombuds. So we deal with complaints and conflicts that happen within the public school systems. So when something happens and there's a problem that often can't be resolved quickly at the school level, families call us and we want to support them in in solving that problem.

Family engagement is really important to this work because every student is attached to a family. So oftentimes we can't resolve the student problem without also working with the family in some way, and that's a really important

component to. To what we [00:02:00] do at OEO. So communicating with the family, communicating with the school.

Sometimes we also work directly with the student, but students don't exist in absence of a family.

Carrie Basas: That makes sense. I know that the office was formed to really focus on family engagement, especially for communities that had been most marginalized, and legislators came together and wanted to make sure that those supports were there for families and students because they saw that families were often navigating conflicts alone and that students were having to advocate for themselves too, in ways that were more than other students in their classes.

And I know that your work has focused on racial equity and education, so how do you think race shapes, family and school relationships and you know, following up on that, what do schools, what should they be doing differently?

Erin Okuno: I inherited a really great legacy at the office around racial equity. So that's been a really, [00:03:00] um, satisfying part of the job.

Students bring their whole selves to school so they don't bring just a part of them and turn off other parts. They show up as a full human being and schools hopefully will recognize their racial identities and their race and their cultural backgrounds and the families and the traditions that come with them as well.

And when schools do that, we see better results. So, um, a teacher friend often reminds me that half the curriculum walks in the door, meaning the students are bringing the curriculum, including their racial identity. And when students in schools can honor that and be a part of it, it's a much more enriching experience for the families and the students.

And I think the teaching and learning is definitely stronger on a systemic level. We know that there's opportunity gaps. Are happening. We can, if we look at race data in education, we can see the disparities, we can see who's succeeding. We can see who's graduating, who's and who's not [00:04:00] graduating. Um, Washington State has really collects really great data on students at the race and ethnicity level, but the data is only good if we use it.

So we have the data now. We need to work with schools and the education system to use the data down to the ethnic group level and look for where there's gaps.

Carrie Basas: I really love the idea about half of the curriculum coming in with the student. It also makes me think that that can be a source of conflict because the curriculum's going to look different.

What an adult is being asked to do is different because students have individualized needs and experiences. Did your friend ever share how they came to that conclusion? Can't imagine it was taught in a program maybe.

Erin Okuno: Yeah, my friend, um, she's a very experienced teacher and I think that she's evolved that practice over years and there's a lot of ways that, and when I've watched her teach, she [00:05:00] also is a professional friend, but she also taught both of my kids.

She really works to understand who's in the classroom and to. Do things to change the curriculum to honor that. So if she knows that she has a student interested in graphic novels, she might find a graphic novel that she knows will resonate with the student, especially around different parts of their identity.

So I'll give a quick story. Um, another teacher at the same school, but I think they have very similar philosophies. At the beginning of the school year, she sent a message out to, I'm assuming every parent in the class, just introducing herself. And then she said, please message back with something that I should know about your, your child.

What's something they love or something that they're working on, or, you know, what are you excited about? So I wrote back and said, Hey, my, I'm looking forward to meeting you. My daughter really loves graphic novels. She's a prolific reader. I hope that she'll work on her literacy skills This year, the first day of [00:06:00] school, or the second day, or within the first week, the teacher had taken that message and left a box of graphic novels at my student's desk on my kids' desk.

And that just started their teaching, their relationship as teacher student off to a really great start. I think that's still one of her favorite teachers.

Carrie Basas: It's so amazing and we think about teachers often feeling the scarcity of school resources. And I have to ask, you know, you and I have a birthday book drive every year, so is that one of the schools that we distribute to?

Yes. Excellent. We're doing our work, then we just need to make this national

Erin Okuno: Wait, we gotta explain the birthday book drive though, now that you brought up.

Carrie Basas: It's true. I know. It's a little bit of a cliffhanger. Okay. You start because you're the one who came up with the idea.

Erin Okuno: Okay. So sometime a couple years ago when I was having a, not milestone birthday, but I was like, you know what?

I'm getting old. I don't need more stuff. In my house. For me, I have more than enough. I was like, I really like schools and [00:07:00] I really like books and I also wanna make sure that students get, see, have books that reflect who they are. So I put out a Facebook message and said like, Hey, I'm thinking of doing this where we collect books by authors of color, and then you said, I'm born just my birthday's around the same time.

I really love that idea. So then we expanded it to include books about disabilities

Carrie Basas: and we have loaded up your Honda so many times now.

Erin Okuno: My honda Fit.

Carrie Basas: Yeah. Which is no longer made, which seems like a real shame because it was designed specifically for this purpose.

Erin Okuno: Yes. It's a miniature bookmobile now.

Carrie Basas: Yeah. We're not sponsored by Honda really or anything,

Erin Okuno: but if Honda wants to bring back the Honda fit to North America, I will be thrilled

Carrie Basas: for the next, uh, endeavor. The, the nonprofit focused on book distribution partnering with Dolly Parton.

Erin Okuno: There we go. So anyway, back to the book Drive really fast because we gotta hype that up.

It's, I think on its fifth year every school that we've given books to [00:08:00] and teachers have absolutely loved it because the books are specifically about

disabilities or by authors of color. They all said like it's filling gaps in their school library or the classroom library. And sometimes if we're really lucky, students are present when we deliver and the students will like gravitate to the books 'cause they're new, they're interesting.

It's not a book from the 1970s. So it's fun.

Carrie Basas: Yeah, it's been really exciting to see and then have teachers get excited. I know that when we started to deliver books to my daughter's high school, which was a new school for us, that there were a few teachers trying to figure out the timing of the delivery because they were going to fight over the book box.

And I dared not ask what happened to the books in that process. It is really amazing to have, well, you know, to do something like what you're describing, schools need those resources and [00:09:00] communities can have a role in that, but it doesn't have to be a full box of books either. I know we just had a parent teacher conference at my daughter's school, and they call them personalized learning plans, A PLP, which I then say is a plop, uh, because it makes it more interesting for a teen.

But at our PLP meeting, my daughter has a mentor teacher who has really shared, he is a young man of color, high school teacher. He is really shared a lot of himself in our PLPs, our parent student teacher conferences about his own shyness. I see him relating to my daughter in that aspect, and we were chatting yesterday about how it came up in his transition to college.

And then we had this sweet moment where I thought, who is this 29, 30-year-old: he said, I didn't wanna mention it, but over break I saw the girls, the group of friends out and about in downtown Seattle I was [00:10:00] driving past .And he said it made him so excited to see them outside of the school environment because he likes them all so much and is so excited about their future.

And of course my teen's response was like, uh, okay, thanks. Can we go now? Uh, but I appreciated it and gave him a meaningful look of solidarity.

With that you've mentioned that data is really important, uh, for schools and districts to make family engagement more equitable. And in fact, that's how I first met you when you were running a nonprofit focused on educational equity in Southeast Seattle and really coming together with other partners to talk about data.

And bring the community together to review data, determine what data should be collected. So I hope we'll talk about that. But just as a starting point, how can schools and districts use data to make family engagement more effective and [00:11:00] equitable?

Erin Okuno: Yeah, that's a big question. So every school collects a lot of data.

It's just inherent to how public schools work. Now the question is, what is a school using that data for and how are they using it and what are they looking at? And family engagement can be a part of that data search. So what data are you looking at? Who's collecting the data and who's contributing to the data are three questions.

Um, family engagement also needs to be a whole school practice, not just relegated to like one or two. Staff people that have that as part of their title, and I hope that everybody in the school is using the data and practicing some, or thinking about family engagement and the two in tandem.

Carrie Basas: So what do you think are some mistakes that schools make? Or community groups, anyone else, in how data's collected or how it's used in engaging families?

Erin Okuno: I think some of the mistakes that people make are thinking [00:12:00] that it's a one-time thing. Like you collect the data and then that's, and that's it. Like you collect it, you maybe use it a little bit, and then you're like, okay, we're done.

It should be a cyclical process where you're collecting the data, evaluating the data, using the data in some way, and then reporting back. Dr. Annie Shiru at UW College of Ed has a really nice format for that, forgot what it's called, but has a really colorful wheel and when I was at SESEC my last org, we used that wheel to drive data inquiry and data collection.

Carrie Basas: There's a lot of admiring of problems that happen, and I know you've mentioned before data gazing. I'm leading a student co-design project right now, and the interesting thing is that it is about inclusive practices. And I'm not sure that students as a targeted group or group unto themselves just for the purpose of feedback and design, have been [00:13:00] asked to give input about their own experiences.

But then when I asked the students why they're interested in participating, they said, because we'd be doing something with our, they wanna share their stories

because they feel isolated. And when I've met their parents, their parents also feel isolated. But what they're excited about is the doing something with the data.

And so their follow up questions are often about. What are we gonna make and how are people going to interact with it? And what feedback will we get, which is something adults should be able to model and lead with. But the students are pointing out all of the pieces that are necessary for people to not feel like data and painful stories were extracted from them.

Erin Okuno: Yeah, that's a huge one. So I, I think the first question is like, what parts do they wanna own?

Carrie Basas: Yeah.

Erin Okuno: And how do they wanna shape the data? So when Csac, my last org did a really big data, I. Collection [00:14:00] project, a family engagement project using survey data. The design group that put together the survey included communities of color and people of color.

And we specifically said, what are some of the core values that this project has to have? And one of the, one of the key values was it had to be trust. So anything we did had to build trust within the team, had to build trust with the community. And if that value was missing, then that's often where we paused and said like, the course of action has to be dictated by this value.

So for your students, it's like, what will be, what's that value? What's the key component that they really want? And they own their own stories and they own their own data. So what are they comfortable sharing? What's something that they maybe don't want to do or share or like have it used in a way that they don't feel is appropriate?

Carrie Basas: Yeah, a lot of those questions are coming up because they've signed up to be part of a group, but to the extent that they wanna be named in the final [00:15:00] product, I also don't wanna deprive them of ownership of the final product because they've been creators. This has been their idea. My name doesn't need to be attached to it, but if they are comfortable sharing that this is the part that they made, or this is part of their story, I think it has more impact, but thinking through that with young people about what the fallout can be too. It's just one of those considerations because they haven't yet been asked about their stories often. What I've loved though about that is that teachers have often led them to me and they're noticing the same thing.

So I feel like there's an ally between the work that I'm doing and the way, like I've had some teachers join the calls and ask how they can support their student, even though this is after hours, because they think it's so important and they wish there were more resources [00:16:00] to engage students and families.

And for my thing, it is a paid opportunity, which people are like, well, students wanna make money, which, and I'm paying pretty well at the same time. That's an honorarium that doesn't cover the fact that. They're at least 15 years old. Some of them are 22, that this is the first time that for many of them, that they, and.

Where their families have been asked what they think would change their rate and experience of inclusion. So there's probably not enough money to really address that piece, but people are willing to give their time, even if there isn't money on the table. Or, I remember your review of the data that you were collecting as part of SESEC and how that environment was structured, which felt like a gift of community.

And there was food and there were markers and there was like warm feeling in which people [00:17:00] shared their special interests like whales and bunnies and, and you know, we had fun facilitation, which we'll get to, but I know that you got really exciting survey results out of that. And is there one that you would highlight in particular?

Erin Okuno: Yeah, so we were talking about like, how can data be. Used and not just warehoused or gazed at , like, oh, that's either a really great result and let's congratulate ourselves or data gaze and be like, wow, we don't know what to do with it. So one of the results that, one of the questions that we asked and the results that we got was how do people, how do families like to receive information from the school?

And that one was really interesting and telling. 'cause when it's really tangible and people can be like, okay, I can do something with that. So the results were things like, um, or the question was like, how do you wanna get your data? Do you wanna get via text, via newsletter, email? And we saw, [00:18:00] we saw really big differences by race group, white English speaking family said email's great.

We can access that. It, you know, it's comes to us. It's timely. All of that, families of color, immigrant families, or limited English families said we, that they preferred phone calls or in-person communication. And so we're like, Hmm, what's driving this result? What's, what's going on there? So when we

took it back to our design group and showed them that result, several of our partners said they believe that it had to do with the communication and being able to build a relationship with the, with the school or somebody from the school in one way.

So email is a one-way push out of information. So it's like there's not a lot of back and forth communication or checking for meaning. Um, for a lot of our families of color, especially, especially immigrant families, even if they had the email [00:19:00] translated into their home language, it's still. An American school system with American school system terminology, um, beliefs and practices.

So having, they could read it, but it didn't mean that they understood it. So a phone call or, and very specifically a phone call from a human, not a robocall or a in person, allowed the parents to check in for meaning to ask questions and find out what's going on and build a relationship with somebody at the school.

Carrie Basas: I remember those discussions vaguely in the debrief. And also it's probably combined with other research in the field or working in family engagement over the years. But one thing that I always took away, and I attributed to that space, so maybe it was wrong or not, but I, uh, that the kind of communication that immigrant families and families of color receive is often different from the communication that white [00:20:00] families who are English speaking receive.

And so there's some trauma too, if the communication you get from school is always negative or accusatory or you don't understand it because there hasn't been appropriate interpretation or translation. And so that relationship piece you're talking about is so important. We aren't talking about something vacuous like a compliment sandwich.

But if you only hear from school when school is upset or telling you. That your student has already failed at something or broken some sort of expectation that there's, and I know teachers feel a lot of stress and they really may adore a student and see them, but they feel like there's not a lot of time built into their day to proactively share the good things that they're mostly focused on.

Well, here's what I'm required to share with you by law or attend this meeting, or, I really only have the capacity to communicate [00:21:00] when there's something formal that we need to resolve. And that that is just a terrible ratio of communication that Disproportionately affects some families.

Erin Okuno: Yeah. One of the other survey results that we collected was how often do different groups receive positive communication and not positive communication?

And what we saw was, again, a racial disparity. Families in the global majority, so white families, English speaking families, received about one extra touch, positive touch than families of color. That may not sound like a lot, but when you're thinking about when something happens that posi, that extra positive touch is gonna make the resolution of a problem much quicker and easier.

So, time is a resource that is scarce in schools if we believe, and let's just go with that belief. However, if [00:22:00] we can also value it as a preventative prophylactic, doing the upfront work to build a relationship with a family can have positive results in resolving a problem later. Because you're not starting from scratch.

You're not starting from a place of like, something bad happened, there's at least a relationship there of and a little bit of trust building.

Carrie Basas: Yeah, that's absolutely true. I know that you have to see that in your work. And I think about an example where my daughter's school wanted to exit her from special education services and she's doing pretty well, but the communication came from someone I had never interacted with and that person was so dismissive of my questions and there was a lot going on.

Like contact is everything. The person was gonna have a baby, they were like contracted to perform the services. They really tried , but there wasn't a relationship there. And I have a lot of trust with her school team and I was [00:23:00] trying to tell them, this is not how you do this. Which I know is can feel kind of aggressive, but for me to be able to vocalize that and say I need time to process this. You don't give me a report that you read aloud to me at a meeting and then say, we're gonna stop services. Okay, we're done. It's an hour. Like those things don't work for people. And I'd seen people before, they could have talked to me about something, and I know it's hard because people would like to get the data or wait to document a meeting in case there's resistance.

But just that light touch of, we still have a relationship by the way someone else is coming into our relationship who's a school psychologist. I just wanted to know their feedback about her impressions, but because it was through such a formal approach from a stranger, it really cut against the trust that we already had and we built it back up.

But it [00:24:00] was tense and I knew, I mean, it's still like the mama bear in it, but I knew stepping back from professional experiences, this is all the stuff that I'm reacting to and here's my secret code for calming me down right now. And they didn't necessarily take the code, so I'm like, I'm gonna rev up.

But just it is making an investment in a relationship in a genuine way so that you can repair. You were saying maybe you won't get to a point where you have to repair something. Maybe you won't have the student for very long, but the just having another ally in the school building, someone trust it, even if it's not your teacher, when something comes up can also make a difference for a family and a student.

Erin Okuno: Yeah, especially for the student. You know, it's like at OEO, the ombuds office, we often hear of students who need somebody, need a team approach to support them. So it's [00:25:00] if they're feeling something in a classroom. Maybe the classroom environment is overstimulating. Is there another ally in the school that they can just go and take a quiet moment?

Is it the library? Is it maybe running in the, going to the gym and ha, knowing that the PE teacher will let them run a lap before they go back to school? All of those things are important to keeping kids in school safe and learning. So it's again, like who knows? Where's the relationships? How many relationships can we add to a student that's affirming and supportive?

Carrie Basas: I think it makes a difference for educators too, to feel connected because we know the rate of churn and burnout is really high, and having positive relationships, or at least ones in which there's been growth, and out of sturdiness and solidness to it over the years is important. Well, [00:26:00] you know, one of the people that helped facilitate your data reviews, he always asks the best questions.

So I had to ask you. He's got those sensory questions. And sometimes I have to say that I've used, Jondou's work when I've had to shake up a group. So what does good data taste like?

Erin Okuno: Oh, um, good data tastes like a good bowl of ramen or udan. So when you have a really good bowl of noodles, you can taste all of the separate pieces of it, but it comes together nicely.

Like the noodles are just chewy and not all wilted or soggy, like you can, like have a nice bite and that's always fun when you get good data, it's clean, it's chewy. You can like see the different parts, but you can see how they all melt

together. And conversely, a bad bowl of ramen is [00:27:00] everything is soggy and slurpee and mushy.

And sometimes we have to deal with a that data too. But you know, it doesn't mean that it's data that you should just not pay attention to and throw out. It just means you're gonna have a different experience and maybe you can make something fun out of it.

Carrie Basas: I recently had a bad bowl of data. I am not even sure that I shared that with you.

I'm doing a survey on transition from high school to college or vocational programs for students with disabilities and there's a gift card associated with it. I used a survey platform that my client wanted me to use that I hadn't before. I learned that it doesn't really track the IP addresses. Then suddenly overnight we had 276 responses and I said, we have to turn this off because you only budget it for 200 gift cards.

So we turned off the data and I started to make [00:28:00] the email list for the client about for the gift cards, here are the emails, please send young people their gift cards so they don't write to me and say that I have scammed them. And then I just started to look at the email addresses, which were kind of funny, odd.

They didn't necessarily match names when people provided them. Also, I wasn't sure what school system people were describing. I started to look at the survey results. I realized I got spammed. I was eating a big bowl of ramen bots and it was hard to really tell the humans in the mix. And then that sent me off on a research trail of is this common Now?

The funny thing is the bots had answers to promoting inclusion and independence and supports that I did not find offensive in any way. They were kind of on track and on task, but I had a hard time trying to clean up [00:29:00] that data from personal stories to bot bio. And maybe they aren't all bots, but a decent amount of them were.

So I'm going to have to exclude them and thank them for their service in promoting inclusion. I thought, okay, here's another piece. Because we use the internet so much for surveys, we also, there's more recognition that we should compensate people for completing surveys, especially if they're folks we haven't heard from, and that we wanna offer confidentiality and anonymity.

So I wasn't making people give me a lot of identifying details, but if you wanted a gift card, I needed an email address, and this is the next wave of research,

Erin Okuno: which you have to put two factor identification.

Carrie Basas: I'm gonna have to do video calls with all the bots and to figure out if they're really humans.

But I just thought, okay, [00:30:00] you know, this is a way that we would engage families too on a survey. And what does that look like? I imagine humans creating additional accounts, but not AI, well, maybe humans with a program going that they complete multiple survey answers the same time. So that data was kind of gross.

It's like sludge at the bottom of my ramen. You know, just shifting gears a little bit beyond the taste of our data, what do you think are the biggest barriers that families face in advocating for their children's education?

Erin Okuno: Oh, that's a good question. I think some of the things are how to navigate a system that wasn't designed for families.

So public education system was designed for, and by educators, not saying that's a bad thing, but was designed for their comfort, for their efficiency. It wasn't designed to say a student is attached to a [00:31:00] family and when there's a problem, the family needs to intervene on behalf of the student. So there's times where it's overly complicated, overly procedural, and the reality is we're not gonna overthrow that system right away 'cause that would create a ton of chaos. But I think there's ways that we can add more humanity to it, more relationships, and also rework parts of the systems to prevent problems. There's places where we can probably look and go, like there's structural things that we can do to eliminate some of these problems upfront and just prevent them.

But that means that we have to slow down a little bit and figure out what those are and make the policy fixes. Make the practice fixes. And also identify what's working and what's not working.

Carrie Basas: It's hard for people to often feel empowered in that system. And like you were saying, schools were designed for educators.

It's really stepping back even a little bit more, [00:32:00] 'cause educators would say, well, it certainly doesn't feel like a workplace that was designed for me and we're sympathetic to that. I just remember classes at UW College of Education

about the history of education with Joy and others talking about how schools were places of moral training and hygienics.

Seattle Public Schools probably still has this amazing archive of the history of the schools as well as the sorting that happened. You know, immigrant students were labeled as disabled. There were notes in the files about people's appearance, the cleanliness of their clothes. PTA-- roots of it were associated with the eugenics movement, which is not something where they are today.

But all of these things really didn't build a whole lot of trust and schools were oriented towards raising young citizens to be productive in certain ways, to [00:33:00] comply in different ways. And it was, it's fascinating how, where we've gotten and what things are taught in schools now, and there's still a struggle with who really controls that because educators would certainly think policy makers.

Erin Okuno: I agree with all of that.

Carrie Basas: So racism, something we're struggling with talking about right now. People are worried about being banned, and cultural biases. How are they affecting family engagement efforts?

Erin Okuno: That's a great question. I don't know if I have a really good answer, but families know when they feel a sense of belonging to a school community and systemic racism and cultural bias, biases show up in big in little ways.

So it shows up as like, who's welcome into a school? Who gets, you know, if you're walking up to school, are you, is there somebody there to say like, Hey, how's it going to, to greet you? And maybe a really affirming and [00:34:00] welcoming way. And when you don't feel that people know it and feel it. So I hope that's something that schools and all of us can work on.

One of the analogies I was thinking about when we were thinking about this question is it kind of feels like we've all been an outsider at some point in our life. It's just part of a human experience if you're living with other people. So maybe it's like you go to a party and you get invited to a party and you know, like one person, but you can't find that one person that you know.

So you're like lingering around and trying to figure out like how to fit in. And when you don't fit in, you're on the side of the party, like playing on your phone

or maybe watching, like getting food because you're trying to look like you belong, but you know that you're like, Ooh, this doesn't feel right.

And students and families that are not part of the mainstream of a school can feel that. So can we do things to break that down? Can we do things to [00:35:00] create a sense of. Wellbeing and a sense of belonging in schools in different ways, and that's gonna look different for everyone. So for some school communities, maybe it's having a big event and inviting people to that event and say, and create all, but also creating ways for people to feel welcome and force people to connect to somebody else that will make them feel great about being there. For others, it's maybe having a teacher reach out and, and introducing themselves and saying like, Hey, I am your student's math teacher. Is it okay if I check in with you every couple, you know, every couple weeks just to see how it's going. Doesn't have to be a big thing, but you know, just want you to know I'm here for you so that when something comes up, when a question comes up, the parent knows who to turn to.

Um, it also includes people like the bus driver. So is the bus driver like saying, good morning, I'm really glad to have you on my bus today, waving to the parent at the bus stop. All of these things are really important to [00:36:00] feeling connected to schools.

Carrie Basas: Yeah, the importance of a warm welcome, which it's interesting because you know, the adults are in that mix too, and they might be nervous about their new class for the year or might be picking up that somebody doesn't necessarily trust them or there would be barriers to building relationship. But recently for this student design project, I had to verify that I had humans and not bots. And also just see how the young people were in communicating to get a sense of what some of their access needs would be in a group and how we'd work together as a group.

And I was very nervous about it and my family made fun of me, but they said, well, you're the adult. I said, well, that doesn't keep me from being nervous about it. I don't know these people. And I don't know, you can get canceled by teens really quickly. I have a teen of my own. I understand that painfully.

But [00:37:00] I just thought, I also don't want people to be fake in their welcome. And if I could just communicate with them why I was excited about talking to them out of 274 people that reached out to join this effort. And I could certainly do that because I had been thinking about them and there was something concrete and it made all the difference, and then some of them texted

me and told me how nervous they were and I just told them that I was too, and it made it easier, and I think that having that vulnerability is so important.

One of my daughter's teachers, well actually many of my daughter's teachers have had this experience where they really like her and they realize that she's judging them. I dunno where she gets that from at all. But, uh, they realize she's judging them kind of harshly. And they really want, and teachers probably shouldn't put this on students to really be liked by their students, but they feel like maybe there's a next level to unlock in their relationship with her. And so they're like really trying. [00:38:00] And so some of them over the years asked me, what do I do? What do I do? How do I, 'cause I know it's in there. I see how she interacts with other people and what do I do? And sometimes I have to tell them, you need to back off because she sees your eagerness to connect as a lack of sincerity to play it cool. And some, you know, and then others-- I said, she's fully aware and she really likes you, and that's as much as you're gonna get. So don't really put it on her that she has to lift you up emotionally. That's not her job as a student. I'm not your therapist, but I appreciate all the effort you're making.

But it, it, it's been sweet to see them kind of struggle with, I really like her. And I don't know where I stand with her. And so we all kind of feel that at different times.

Erin Okuno: Yeah. And along with that, it's also, you know, I would hope that the teachers are making that same effort to connect with other students who are, [00:39:00] maybe English is not their first language.

Or there's a disability that manifests in different ways that makes it harder to connect or other intersectional identities that might not match the teacher because those are the kids that also need that same affirmation. That same connection to adults in the building.

Carrie Basas: Yeah. That's also how you build a teacher workforce.

I think so many teachers have that experience. Some of them had great experiences in school. I think there's a pretty big group of teachers where I've worked with, in doing clock hour trainings or visiting friends, college of Ed classes where they shared that their experience in school was pretty awful.

And yet there was someone in the building. Sometimes it wasn't a teacher, wasn't a para, wasn't a principal. It may have been the bus driver that you were describing. It may have been a senior who volunteered there a lot. An elder in

the community that they had some connection with and they thought, [00:40:00] I need to make school better.

So I didn't have that experience of school that it was great and, but I could as an educator or in another capacity in a school environment, change it for someone 'cause I've seen what it is to not be included and seen, which are totally the people you wanna hire.

Let's talk about policy. So what policy shifts do you think would strengthen family engagement across Washington? We've talked a lot about relationships and policy. Seems like jumping up a few levels.

Erin Okuno: Yeah, you need both. I think one of the policy shifts is to start using the data that we already have. So we've talked about data. We also in Washington, are collecting really great data at the race and ethnic group level.

But good data is only as good as the people that are using it. So if it's just being collected, [00:41:00] not using it, then it's gonna be harder to make policy shifts that are embedded in, um, undoing systemic racism.

Carrie Basas: How do you think people get good at using data?

Erin Okuno: The first part is actually using it. So practicing with it, using it, asking people from the communities that are, the data's being collected on, like what do you notice?

What stands out to you? Also in Washington, and there's some really great data analyst or people who can help to make sense of that data. So leaning on them to say like, Hey, I got this gigantic dataset. I don't know what to do with it. How can we use it? And that might take time and money, but it's gonna be time and money well spent.

Carrie Basas: Yeah, it seems like people can freak out at spreadsheets and other things or glaze over, but really part of working with the data is just. Starting [00:42:00] from square one and asking questions about it that other people might not perceive as the most informed questions, but sometimes those questions really aren't answered the by the data or there's something missing, or people don't even know what they collected or what are the limits?

Oh, we have this general question. Well, we have no idea. We haven't really asked. Okay. If there's a general question like school climate survey, do you feel connected to your school? And there's a scale of one to five. Okay. Then we

never ask a follow a question about how, who makes you feel connected to the school?

Why? Is it just because it's across the street from your house and you're popular and you have a lot of friends? Or is there something that we could be doing here?

Erin Okuno: And also like who feels connected and who doesn't feel connected. Are there disparities in the, in those groups as well versus going like, yeah, that's a really great result.

But when you dig deeper, you're like, oh wait, I have [00:43:00] this one group of students that scored really low on that.

Carrie Basas: Yeah. It makes a lot of sense to bring in the people that are most affected by the data and talk about that and get some context.

Erin Okuno: Mm-hmm. I have this funny story. So there was an elementary school that did a student engagement survey, and it was not an anonymous survey.

So they knew which students scored what. And so for the stu, some of the students that scored like a sense of belonging, really low, the teachers went and sought out those students. 'cause they wanted to ask the question. So they invited them to a special lunch and all the students are like, uh, why am I here?

Am I in trouble? But it was like, no, it was supposed to be like, we, no, we wanna hear from you. We wanna make you feel special. Because we and have lunch, with the principal and the adult, but the students were totally free. The older students that knew to freak out were freaked out for a moment.

Carrie Basas: That is [00:44:00] definitely not the, you made the principal's honor roll experience of, I think maybe it was both elementary school and middle school for me. Uh, the principal took you out to Friendly's the ice cream place and you could get like a Mr. Sundae or whatever that had the little eyes or Mr. Conehead? And you could have ice cream for breakfast with your principal.

Maybe they should have really offered more incentives or context there.

Erin Okuno: They did. Once they got the students into the room, they're like, you're not in trouble. But there was definitely this like look of like, why am I getting, why am I having lunch with the principal?

Carrie Basas: Well, one thing we did when I used to work at the education ombuds office, talk about an idea where you needed context, we thought-- and I think maybe a legislator asked us this, we got this idea somewhere. I'm like, well, we've gone down a lot of rabbit holes. One of them was years ago when I first came in, we thought, who are frequent flyers? What schools do we hear from a lot? So we had the data, the office is very good about [00:45:00] collecting data, having a strong database, and we ran the reports and then the team decided that I would go talk to the people that were the frequent flyers.

And that was so awkward. But here's the context. They were also the, among the largest schools. So more students to call. Also, when I would ask the schools, they would say, oh, you know, there were referrals within the system because people call the ombuds on their own with a question. And it can be a family, student, teacher, community professional who's concerned, but they were doing referrals.

So it wasn't necessarily that a school was a hotbed of problems. It was, it was a large, usually large high school that had thousands of students. And the theme was that someone got good support from the ombuds office, [00:46:00] referred to someone else because there were so many other people at the school who had a similar problem.

And there was our pattern. It was helpful in building relationship with people who took my meetings and mostly everyone took my meetings. Although some wondered why is this woman showing up? I decided to do it in person and you know, there wasn't like a SWAT car, a little siren, no light, nothing.

I just show ed up. Not very intimidating. Somebody asked me to be on their career panel. Someone else asked me to lunch. Someone else talked to me about all the consulting they were paying for to improve student mental health. They were telling me all the things they were doing. I was thinking, these are amazing resources for other schools to have that don't have them, but it just wasn't just the numbers.

Erin Okuno: Yeah. And I tell people like, you have to put, like you said, the numbers in context. So at OEO we also look at, like, I think about, I tell people when you look at our data, you also have to remember it's referral based. So just because the school has no referrals doesn't mean that there's no [00:47:00] problems at the school.

It's just. Those families don't know, probably have problems and are either resolving it in a different way or don't know how to resolve the, don't know that we're a resource to help solve the problem.

Carrie Basas: Yeah, and we often got calls from educators too that proactively felt like there was a problem, or despite multiple efforts they felt to communicate with the family, things were really going downhill and they wanted some sort of reset or intermediary, which seems like a very healthy way to approach breakdown and communication.

So I never wanna penalize anyone for being a frequent user of dispute resolution services, but just looking at data and going, oh wow, there are a lot of calls from there-- it's not a complete story, but it was interesting to have the context and then have follow up conversations with people about what their experience was [00:48:00] like.

So school leaders and policymakers: if any of them are listening and they often hear about all the bad things that are happening and they often feel like they're trapped at this level of maybe compliance legalistic approach or just trying to keep the train on the track. What is one concrete step you think that they could take to foster more inclusive family relationships?

Erin Okuno: Um, that's a really interesting question, a good one too, because there's things I think we can all do and sometimes it takes pausing to figure out what that is. So earlier we were talking about the survey data that SESEC did. So one of the things that one of our principals did who was on the design team is when he got his school level data back and looked at like communication patterns and all of the, and.

What did that mean for a school? One of the results, like we were talking about is families of color were saying like they [00:49:00] value in-person communication and phone calls more than written communication. So he paused and he's like, why am I having my bilingual I A spend an hour every week translating a newsletter in writing versus I can ask him to take that same hour, the same amount of resources, but shift that to how the families value communication.

So he ask those, um, his bilingual IAs to not do the written translation, but take that hour and take a set of 10 families and make phone calls.

Carrie Basas: Well, making regular phone calls to families with someone that they have a connection with in their language is a really good strategy. And I think it's so surprising to get a phone call.

Sometimes that you don't know what to do with it. When we were having our conflict over our daughter's IEP, [00:50:00] her principal called me and I didn't answer it. I wasn't feeling well then, but I was a little overwhelmed by it. But I thought, wow, that's, that's so healthy because people just war by email and in fact, I was getting revved up and he wasn't calling to push me down or to gaslight me or explain something else.

He just thought he needed to hear my insights before we had the formal meeting. And so it was an invitation to talk about that and for him to get context besides the email.

And then there was another time I brought up with school my daughter really didn't like a substitute teacher. of course, we then ran into her at a pharmacy in our neighborhood and I just thought the world is very small, so you all have to work through your problems proactively because people pop up anywhere in our lives.

In fact, the woman slowed the roll of her car [00:51:00] to yell out my child's name and say hi. And I was like, wait, it's that the person I just told your principal that you didn't like . But my daughter had concrete things that were concerning her about the substitute teacher. You know, just like she doesn't wanna be touched by people; it wasn't an inappropriate touch. She also didn't want to call a teacher auntie. There were cultural things there as well to unpack. And I shared-- almost like this would be the opposite of a hype team, that with the principal, that my daughter was going to reach out. And then he reached out to me and I said, Nope, I want you to talk to her.

And he was very good at it. But he talked to her and then he came back to me and he said, here are the things I'm gonna do, and here are things I'm not gonna do. And I said, that makes sense. And really all I want is for my daughter to know that one, she can talk to you to problem solve, and she should talk to [00:52:00] the substitute teacher who is an ongoing presence in the school.

It's a small community to make things work. But I wasn't there. I've never met the person. This was before we randomly ran into her in the neighborhood, but I hadn't met her. So I said, this is not my story to tell, but I just want to say it's gonna happen so that it does for the student. And then I think he handled it

beautifully in communicating back and he wanted to know if there was anything she felt like was unresolved from the conversation.

So then I talked to her about it and she's like, no, I'm good. I'm clear about what's gonna happen and what I'm just going to live with and now I understand some things.

Erin Okuno: Yeah. And that's a great example of how, of student advocacy for themselves and clear resolution. So I think since I run the OEO and we're the state's largest complaint line for education, I would hope that every student that has a complaint would feel safe and heard and [00:53:00] get a resolution along those in some way like that.

I think we know that that's not true. Otherwise, yeah, we wouldn't have an office. But can we create systems and ways for more students to be able to say, Hey, I'm not happy about something. Is there a solution? Is it a quick problem or is it a bigger systemic problem?

Carrie Basas: Yeah, it's a question of, you know, who has the experience and the perspective to share what's going on, and you get so many people involved sometimes that it does become about the adults, and I thought for this one kind of low stakes, there's some feedback, some input. I don't know if it's fair or not, but it's something that's weighing on her and having the access to the principal to have the conversation. He was very clear about what the boundaries of that were was good.

I mean, I think it was solidarity with his staffing, but also taking feedback and then wanting to check to see did I resolve it? Because [00:54:00] usually you're like, Hey, let's take it off the calendar. That's done. I did it and I kind of don't wanna know if you liked it or not. I just did the thing. Right, I mean, maybe I'm just channeling myself.

Anyway, before we wrap up today, I know that you love books and you love going to the library and doing all your holds. And getting your peak picks and strategizing. So what is one book from your library haul that you're really excited about?

Erin Okuno: One of the books that I finished a couple months ago, it is not currently in my holds, is Trevor Noah's latest book Into the Uncut Grass.

He calls it a Children's book, but I think it's more than a children's book. So the intro had a really interesting passage that I loved, and he was taught it. He says

the book is about conflict resolution, which resonates since that's what our office does on a day to day. And so he wrote in the opening that you need imagination [00:55:00] to be able to resolve conflict.

And I've never really thought about putting those two ideas together, but really does help because sometimes we do need to use our imagination. We need to collectively imagine what's a new path forward, what a solution could be. Different people have different ideas, know different parts of the problem. So when we can imagine together how to fix this collective thing that is not working for many people, then maybe we can come up with a new solution.

Carrie Basas: I think the people get really stuck. They get stuck on a position or a point of view. Sometimes people can't even identify what would resolve the issue.

I've seen people just latch onto something that someone else tells 'em they should want. You should want 20 minutes of speech for your child. You should want that grade raised. You should want the bus to stop closer to your [00:56:00] house. You should want, and those sound like smaller or trivial things, but there're just a lot where someone out of a sense of fairness, they, they wanna be treated fairly.

They want justice and they're told or they think someone else getting something that they are not. But then sometimes they get that thing and they say, that's not actually the thing that I wanted for my family or relationship. Doesn't really make me feel any better. And getting past problems and conflict is often about letting go of that rigid position or, and or being able to say, I really don't care so much about that thing, but my underlying fear is that you don't see my child or you don't respect me, or that their lives after they're here is going to be worse. [00:57:00] Um, that you aren't making the same investment that you look down on me. And those are harder conversations. And then that feels a little more and amorphous as to what is the resolution.

But that's the thing to get to that like the creativity about, well, wow, that's not even, that's really not even what this legal process does or this administrative process. This is about maybe how we're not even showing up for each other as people, or it's really helpful if people say, I'm not using an excuse, we're stuck in a system that really kind of sucks. Here are the things that we do that are cookie cutter. We know that kids are not cookie cutters. What is the solution? In this moment where we can come together within these constraints and we can work for better policy.

Erin Okuno: Yeah. That's where creativity and imagination can really support problem solving in a [00:58:00] much more human way.

Carrie Basas: And it's hard. It's harder because it is much wider set of possibilities and there's not a preset list and people tend to hide behind a preset list and say it's this or nothing.

Erin Okuno: And that's all. But that's also where the Office of Education outputs is a really great resource because we're before a legal system where before formal processes that are very prescriptive and dictatorial come into place so we can work with everyone to say, is there, can we peel this back? Can we talk? What are the possibilities? What are things that are not said that need to be said?

Carrie Basas: And hopefully people get the skills from that process. And confidence to keep that going with hard conversations.

Unrelated to hard conversations. But last question, as we think about lunch for ourselves too. Again, we have no sponsorships except Roots of Inclusion, a lovely nonprofit that has [00:59:00] really wanted to bring life to stories about family engagement in order to improve things at the school level and policy-wise.

But in your bio, your official bio, you say that you're always looking for the perfect takeout meal under $25. And so have you found it yet? Is it in the cards for us?

Erin Okuno: I hope it's in the cards for us 'cause I wanna have a good meal for $25. Um, and the answer is yes. So one of my favorite times of the year is spring because Plate of Nations happens in South Seattle and it is like restaurant week, but in South Seattle with a lot of family owned, ethnic owned restaurants.

And there's a punch card. So it's kind of like bingo. You get to go around and collect stamps and you get to eat really great meals for 20, I think it, this year it's $25 and that's a $25 to, for two people. Like you can share a plate. So I have, [01:00:00] I've looked at the list and plotting out my gluttonous eating and my cholesterol will go up that week and then the week after, I think it's longer than a week.

Then after that I'll have to do a lot of like stuff to make up for all of that eating,

Carrie Basas: please no green smoothie fast again and solidarity with friends. Yeah, no, I was concerned about you.

Erin Okuno: Yeah.

Carrie Basas: I think that that's an extreme response to Plate of Nations and its deliciousness.

Erin Okuno: Yeah. That green smoothie fast was before PLA of Nations.

Carrie Basas: Oh, it's like a preparation, for the eating.

Erin Okuno: I didn't last long on that one. No, really did not.

Carrie Basas: No, I was trying to avoid you during that time and you didn't seem, I really like you would be a fun time to , definitely get to together.

Erin Okuno: I think it lasted about three days and then I gave up.

Carrie Basas: That's the reality here.

Erin Okuno: Yeah.

Carrie Basas: I'm not sure what the takeaway is for family engagement with that.

Erin Okuno: Avoid people that who are on a green smoothie fast. If you wanna preserve your family engagement.

Carrie Basas: Yeah. They might be super cranky. Their meetings should not be scheduled during that time. Also, honoring other holidays like [01:01:00] Ramadan.

Erin Okuno: Yeah, that's, there's a cultural significant to that. There was no cultural significant to green smoothie three days.

Carrie Basas: No, no. I did not see that on my calendar. Well, thank you so much.

Erin Okuno: Yeah, thanks for having me.