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Susan Jobe:

Welcome to the Guide for Life podcast, exploring topics related to the personal competency skills that empower Arkansas students and teachers to thrive at home, school, on the job, and in the community. Welcome to the Guide for Life podcast. I'm Susan Jobe. I'm very happy to have my special friend and guest on today, Andrea Fortner, who is the Director of Guidance and School Counseling here at DESE. Welcome Andrea.

Andrea Fortner:

Hi Susan. It's really good to be with you and work with you on this project again. I love Guide for life and student success plans. So this is a perfect set up for me. And thank you for asking me to be with you today.

Susan Jobe:

Absolutely. You and I have worked together a lot on student success plans this past year. And I know that when we first started to get together and trying to create some professional development for counselors and for teachers and how they could better and more efficiently implement student success plans, where they really were a useful tool for their students. Tell me some of your thoughts about that. Where we were and where we're trying to go with this.

Andrea Fortner:

Student success plans. That's been around for a little bit now, and I think we are to the point now where we are understanding the value and the importance, and we're even talking to higher ed now and just pushing that up. So it began years ago and it started with eighth grade. And now those kids that we started with, we're seeing on up there in years and we need to continue pushing this because students need to plan and create pathways for graduation and farther.

Andrea Fortner:

And if we can get them on the correct path, then we can ensure that they have a plan for their future and are going to be able to support their families and pursue their interest in their careers and even their passions. So it all goes hand in hand with just creating an opportunity for all of our students to have really success in not only just their education, but in life in general. And that's just better for our whole society. When we have people that are happy with their careers and are able to provide for their families. So student success plans, although it sounds like it's a piece of paper in a small part, it's really not. It's really conversations and leading and guiding and helping our future.

Susan Jobe:

I love that. So let's go back to the law, act 930, what does the law say about student success plans?

Andrea Fortner:

So like I said earlier, it says that a plan has to be developed starting in eighth grade. And that was for this, the students that in 2018 and 19 were in the eighth grade. It has to be developed by school personnel, along with the student and the parent, and it needs to be updated and reviewed every year. And so it's a collaboration effort. So that's one thing that the law does stipulate. This is not created by just an advisor. It's really a team approach that's reviewed every year.

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Andrea Fortner:

It also needs to be accessible to the student. So that can be in any format, that can be paper, digital, whatever format, but it just needs to be where they have access to it and can look at it. It needs to guide students along pathways to graduation. It must address accelerated learning opportunities. It also needs to address academic deficits and interventions and include college and career planning components. It also may include community engagement components. So those are the components that are required in the plan. And then the law also stipulates how often and who is a part of the plan.

Susan Jobe:

Right. So I know that when we were talking, like I said earlier, about developing some PD sessions, we really wanted a mindset shift for teachers, for counselors, anyone that's involved in this process to go from just... I think sometimes when there's a law, we want to make sure we're meeting the requirements of the law, checking a box, and we've done this, making sure we've done all that we need to do, but we really I think wanted to make this shift from this really being an engaging tool and something that is useful for students and teachers in determining those pathways for our students.

Susan Jobe:

And so making this a lot about building relationships and getting to know our students, having those conversations about what their passions are, what their interests are and it can be everything from where they might be struggling academically to where they really excel in their academics. And I know we also get the question a lot about IEPs and can IEPS be used as a student success plan because a lot of the same requirements are there. So can we use IEPS as student success plans?

Andrea Fortner:

So that's a good question. You're right. It does get asked a lot. So the answer is both, but what we can't do is we can't do for some students and not the other. So yes, that transition plan that addresses college and career planning components and all of those in the IEP can be used as part, or it really needs to be at the same time, I guess you would say. They really need both.

Andrea Fortner:

And those transition plans are part of the IEPS are not really required until age 14. And so when we say eighth graders is when we start developing them, the times don't really match up or normally they don't really match up. So the student success plan needs to be developed in the eighth grade. And then what typically happens is when we're doing those transition plans with the IEP later, then we look at what's already being developed and those can kind of go hand in hand, but we don't replace one necessarily with the other. We just have to do what's best for the student and make sure we're all on the same page when it comes to student success plans in IEPS.

Susan Jobe:

You've shared a story with me about a student that you had in your school and how their student success plan really gave them a track to run on. Can you share that story with our listeners today?

Andrea Fortner:

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It's a great story. And previously I was a high school counselor. We had a student that came to school in the middle of the school year, all alone. And so you have those come in from time to time. A parent just drops them off. A lot of times those are your highly mobile students. And this one just happened to be a highly mobile student. And it was a girl. I believe she's in the 10th grade. And so she shows up and of course gets taken to my office so we can help work on her schedule. And just imagine how you would feel coming to a new school, that's hard enough, but all of those transitions and being alone, no one with you. And just all of the emotions that are accompanying that situation, just the vulnerability and anxiety. Just meeting new students alone can just be terrifying for kids in this position.

Andrea Fortner:

So she comes into my office and I'm welcoming her and all of that. And she pulls the sheet of paper out of her backpack and she says, here's my plan. And what she handed me was a four year plan. It wasn't anything glamorous. It wasn't anything... Just this outstanding piece of work, but she had something to hold onto. She had something that made her feel comfortable. She knew where she was going in her education and she had ownership of it. She wanted to make sure she was on the right path. And I'm sure this was not the first time that she was moving even after she created that in eighth grade or and revisited that. So I could tell instantly that that gave her confidence, that gave her power to speak, advocacy over what her schedule was going to be.

Andrea Fortner:

[inaudible 00:09:25] going to be able to say, this is what I want. This is where I'm heading. And it really was empowering for her. And I'm sure reduced some of that anxiety when she knew she had a plan for her education. So that's just one story of how having that student success plan and having that accessibility to students can help them with all of their transitions that happen because we do have a lot of highly mobile students, and that is really something that can help them emotionally on the transition, but also educationally as they're moving forward.

Susan Jobe:

And I love that story because when we think about the students having access to their plan, for me, before I heard that story, that's not where my mind was going with that. You know what I mean? I can think of a million reasons why we would want the kids to have access to the plan, but then to hear about this student and how that was really probably a security blanket of sorts for her coming into a new building, in a new district all by herself. And helping them to take ownership of their learning and that pathway and where they're going is just so powerful. So I know that you and I had a lot of conversations about how student success plan implementation looked in different schools and in different districts and the answer to that was different in every school and every district, correct?

Andrea Fortner:

That's correct.

Susan Jobe:

And so, while there's nothing wrong with that, I think that a lot of that was coming from and correct me if I'm wrong, but I think a lot of that was coming from schools or the people trying to work with students on this. It was just like, we don't really know how to do this. We want to. It's not a lack of want to, it's a

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we don't know the best way to do this. And so everyone was developing their own systems, which is awesome, because taking ownership, but it also is very easy for that to get lost in the shuffle and not having systems in place. And so we talked about developing a design tool just to help schools. And so talk about this design tool that we have. We're going to link it in the show notes so that you can have access to it, but let's talk the design tool a little bit.

Andrea Fortner:

[inaudible 00:11:56] So we took the components from the law, things that we know have to be in the student success plan, but we also took other things that we just knew were best practices and other things that are important for kids, because a lot of those go hand in hand. So one thing I love about this, and I'm sure, Susan, you'll talk more about this, is how we embedded just some social, emotional learning. So we know that that's important. We know some of those self-assessment, goal setting, progress monitoring, careers, and even placement in entrance exams for college. All of those are important pieces. And they all go hand in hand when we're talking about student success plans. And so I think initially when this law came about, we were really focused on the plan itself. What was going to be in the plan?

Andrea Fortner:

And we didn't focus on the delivery of the information or the delivery of the activities at that time. We were really focused on making sure we were getting the student success plan done, but what we can kind of notice is our students move around and they move from building to building and that's different in every district. And how can we vertically align what we're doing? How can we kind of have a seamless approach and make sure everything is covered, make sure everyone is on the same page? And so that's kind of what this design tool does. It takes the components of the plan and it provides a vertical alignment with activities that could be really helpful for schools. If I were still a counselor in a school, I would definitely be using this tool to design this program because what we want is to create opportunities for those relationships and those conversations.

Andrea Fortner:

And that's what this tool does. It creates those opportunities for all of these discussions that need to be happening. And it does it in a way that can be organized and planned. And it can really take the burden off of the person in the school trying to coordinate all of these efforts, because it can just be tailored to the school and changed and moved around. There's nothing that we're giving in this design tool that can't be changed or added to, or just switch completely and use components that you want.

Andrea Fortner:

So it really just provides tons of opportunities to address all of these tasks and all of these situations. And hopefully we'll have some districts really latch onto it, and really start not only focusing on the student success plan itself, but the approach, the vertical alignment piece that helps everyone in the district that is helping with student success plans, which is probably just about everyone. So we know counselors have a big role in it, that a lot of schools have advisors, they have mentors, they have other people, the career development coaches, career coaches. We have all of these different roles and this really can help establish the plan.

Susan Jobe:

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What I love about the tool is that it is customizable. You can make it fit your needs. To me, in a perfect world, everyone would have advisory period. That's on my wishlist for our schools in Arkansas, but we know that that's not the case. And especially when we start getting in our upper grade levels, it just seems like there's not enough hours in the day. And so this tool can be used by grade level. We had it like a month by month or what were some other ways that we looked at the calendar that it could be... It's not a calendar, I'm sorry, the planning tool that schools could implement it?

Andrea Fortner:

Yeah. So if you do click on the link, it's going to force you to make a copy and then you could take and move things around. And I did that with the plan. I just move things around to see how you could reorganize that would best fit your school. So one way to do that is maybe you have a 10th grade guide or a 10th grade... Actually you could put it in a calendar. You could say August tasks and September tasks and October tasks for 10th grade. So let's say you have 10th grade advisors. So you can hand this plan to 10th grade advisors and say, here's what you're going to do each month and everything is there, everything is linked. This design tool has the I can statements. It has the Guide for Life, the competencies that are embedded into those things.

Andrea Fortner:

It has all of the resources there. So you could actually just turn this design tool into a grade calendar by month and hand it to those advisors. I love that component of it, that it's interchangeable. Another thing that you could do is let's say you have advisors and you're maybe you're a 7-12 building so you can design it like here's our August. Here's what everybody's going to do in August. And you can put seventh, eighth, ninth, 10th, 11th, and 12th on there. You can add a little section for notes and you say, hey, this month in August, we're going to just do relationship building activities. And you can just copy and paste all of those from all of those different grade spans and hand them an August calendar that shows everything they're going to do for August, for all the grades.

Andrea Fortner:

And I will point out, I know that seventh grade is on here. We did put seventh grade in the design tool. Not because it's required by law. We know it's not. We know that student success plans start in eighth grade, but we did that because a lot of our schools in our state are 7-12. And so this just gives you kind of a headstart on getting some of those things started with seventh grade. If they're not in your building, then you can certainly take all of those things and move them up or change them around. And like I said, you'll be making a copy of this. And so we it will become your own and then you can just take it and tailor it to fit your needs. So I love the versatility of it and how you can arrange it maybe by month or maybe by grade, or maybe a calendar for all year.

Andrea Fortner:

And then a lot of the way of planning those activities would be off of you. And I would also encourage you in districts that have different building levels, maybe you have a junior high or middle school and a high school, to really get together and do some district-wide planning so that you're making sure that you're not duplicating activities over and over or missing components. And because sometimes we're not aware of what people are doing in the other building and you don't want to reinvent either. So let's say the middle school teacher really sets in place a really good student success plan gets them really

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started. Well, you want to make sure that we have a soft transfer there to the next grade and understanding everybody's on the same page. So I would use this design tool as well for communication between building so that the process can be seamless, I guess, is what I want to say.

Susan Jobe:

Yeah. Yeah. And we really spent a lot of time digging trying to find [inaudible 00:20:06] tools and resources for just interest inventories and things like that. And that is the self-awareness piece that's in Guide for Life. And so a lot of times I have people ask me how do I implement Guide for Life and into our school? Well, this is just one example. The student success plan has Guide for Life literally stamped all over it. It's helping those kids make good decisions about their futures. It's interaction. It's building those relationships with the teacher and with each other. It's the understanding, the self-awareness, I know what my strengths and weaknesses are and where I can grow and where I excel and I love that part of it. And I think that it's a little bit of a mind shift because we tend to think of curriculum or social, emotional learning lessons when this is a very practical, tangible tool to do something that we're required to do by law.

Susan Jobe:

But it's a great opportunity to infuse all of the social, emotional learning and Guide for Life skills in the process. And another thing that I really loved is that during our trainings this summer, we actually brought in our college and career readiness tool vendors to meet with the schools that were utilizing their specific tool.

Susan Jobe:

And then they were really good to work with the schools one-on-one and show them what they had available within their tool to help with student success plans. And so I would also encourage you to get in touch with your college and career readiness tool vendors, and those representatives that are assigned to work with your school. And if you didn't have the opportunity to take part in some of those trainings, get with them. They were such a wealth of information. And I feel like that time was so awesome that they got to spend with the schools. So please reach out to them because they can be a great help to you and really utilizing those tools and helping you to know how you can work with student success plans with their tools. Do you have any other thoughts on that, Andrea?

Andrea Fortner:

Yeah. I agree with you. I think that was a very valuable time and they have access to this design tool. They looked at it, some of them even incorporated what they have in their tool to this tool. So they are very knowledgeable about what Arkansas requires and making sure that you're getting what you need. And so they were very, very helpful. So I agree with you, Susan, on just getting in touch with them and letting them help you figure out the plan for implementation at your district level.

Susan Jobe:

As we're wrapping it up, let's talk about maybe next steps. If you're getting ready to start your school year, we're starting a new school year. We've actually already started it, but how would you go about maybe taking this tool to your student success plan team in your building and saying, hey, let's give this a go. What would your recommendations be?

Andrea Fortner:

Right. I'm not sure who all is listening to this, but you probably are aware of who is leading this charge at your school. And if you're not, I mentioned them earlier, but here are some people that would need to be a part of these decisions. The administration, the school counselors. If you have career coaches, a lot of times your career tech teachers can play a big part in helping with some of these things. And let's see, who am I missing? The career development teacher for that grade. It's usually in eighth grade there. So I would just get that team together. And like I said earlier, try to get it across the building levels. If you have maybe a junior high or middle that has the eighth grade in it, I would get those teams together so you can plan vertically.

Andrea Fortner:

So that might take some coordination there of efforts getting everybody on the same page, but maybe even a Zoom, just making sure that you've got the alignment, you've got the pieces in place that not only meet the law, but that also build those relationships and incorporate some of these other things that are so valuable and helpful for student success. And what's going to happen is once you get these things in place, you're going to see the results of this flow over into other areas that are very impactful for your school. So when you have meaningful relationships with the person at your school, we know that attendance is better and grades are better and your dropout rate is going to decrease and the students are going to be more successful with post-secondary or with their career plans.

Andrea Fortner:

So this really can be kind of the rocket that launches a lot of your efforts. It can really be what helps students be successful in other areas. It addresses those accelerated opportunities and the intervention. So this really can be the hub for a lot of things that will make your school data show that later on. So we know that it's a required by law, but I guarantee you, if you do a really good job with student success plans, it will flow over and you will see results in your data at your district level. So it's definitely worth the time. So administrators are who I would go to first, and it might be an administrator listening to this. So administrators and just understanding all that's involved in it and how it can benefit the students in their school as a whole.

Susan Jobe:

All right. Awesome. Well, again, we're going to link the design tool in the show notes. If you have any trouble accessing that, you can reach out to our offices and we're happy to provide you with a link to that information. Andrea, I know that you are also providing through your office a lot of resources and support for school counselors. Do you want to share any of the things that you have going on this school year, as far as meetings and trainings so that counselors that may not know about them can maybe get plugged in there?

Andrea Fortner:

Sure, sure. Actually next week we start our fall conferences. So I'll be traveling in September and October to our co-ops. We're either meeting virtually or some in person. So I can't wait to see all the counselors over the next few months. I'm pretty new so I can't wait to actually see faces and meet people and connect with counselors. And we have some good training that's going to be happening. Some real

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practical things that you can use in your school counseling program. So that's the most, I guess on my mind trainings that are happening right now [inaudible 00:27:28] coming up so I can't wait to see everybody.

Susan Jobe:

Right. And tell us also about the little monthly counselors meetings that you have online.

Andrea Fortner:

Oh, right, Right, right. We just had our first one, August 17th. And so those are called counselor connections. Every other month, we do a one hour Zoom. It's topic specific. Susan was our guests last month, talked about Guide for Life. And then the last 30 minutes are really beneficial because it's a time for counselors to connect with one another, ask questions, get clarification on things and just support one another. And then in addition to that on the alternate month is novice counselor meeting. And so if you're a new counselor that is a meeting just for you with us, again, that's a zoom and it is just a novice counselor support. So we just give you some information and some guidance, but we also just spend a lot of time talking and clarifying things and just meeting you right where you are on those novice counselor meetings. So I'm excited about both of those, and I don't know how to get you to the Zoom link, but [crosstalk 00:28:38]

Susan Jobe:

Is that calendar on the webpage?

Andrea Fortner:

Counselor's got a newsletter. We just sent out the newsletter yesterday, actually. And it has the link to all of those meetings. So if you're a counselor, you have that newsletter and you have the links, but we'll also send reminder emails and Zoom links out to the counselors. And if you're not getting our newsletter and you're a new counselor, please let us know, email us here, email me at andrea.fortner@ade.arkansas.gov. And let me get you on that list and get you connected to all of those workshops and meetings and support.

Susan Jobe:

Awesome. Well, Andrea, thank you so much for your time today. I hope that this little session has been helpful and informative, and I hope that it will help our school teams to be able to implement a student success plans even more successfully than they have been. So check out the link to the design tool in the show notes or on our website. And thank you for joining us today.