**Episode Title: From Advocating for Your Child to All Children**

***Episode Description****: In this episode, we talk to two family leaders who overcame challenges with their schools to ensure that their children received the resources they needed to meet the high expectation that they held for them. Hear Sharon McCullom and Christian Davis discuss how by advocating for their children, became advocates for all children in their school and community. Jackie Arendt from the* [*Ohio PTA*](http://www.ohiopta.org/) *also joins in the conversation to provide information on how parents can take their first step towards partnering with their child’s school.*

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**Sharon McCullom:** I’ve always had support, but I searched out an advocate because of my son being male and I have found that the African American male, or just a male in general is attacked more because of your income guideline or your culture. So, I felt the need to bring somebody in because I’ve been fighting the fight for a long time and winning because sometimes you can be fighting but you're not winning.

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**Thomas Capretta:** Welcome to Family-to-Family. This is a podcast for families by families on topics and questions about the education system in Ohio. I am your host, Tom Capretta, coming to you from the Ohio Statewide Family Engagement Center in the Center on Education and Training for Employment at THE Ohio State University. Now let’s get to sharing Family-to-Family.

[Music]

**Thomas Capretta:** Hi, Fara!

**Fara Allen:** Hey, Tom!

**Thomas Capretta:** How are you today?

**Fara Allen:** I am doing great. I’m excited to hear from a few more families as they talk about their experiences advocating for their children in school.

**Thomas Capretta:** I’m excited to and what’s really cool about this episode is it’s not just about how families advocate for their own children, but about how stepping in to advocate for your child leads to benefits for many children.

**Fara Allen:** So true! Around the world, in every country there are parents and caregivers who are working hard with schools to improve the education opportunities for their own children – and for all of the children in their community.

**Thomas Capretta:** Today, we feature the stories of two Ohio parents whose efforts have led to better opportunities for their child, or for a whole community of children. We hope their stories inspire other parents and caregivers to do the same and lets them know that their leadership is important.

**Fara Allen:** We also hope that educators who are listening see how improving access to excellent educational opportunities for students of families of color, of different abilities, language, and income levels is best done when we welcome parents and caregivers as leaders.

**Thomas Capretta:** Ready to jump in?

**Fara Allen:** Sure am!

**Thomas Capretta:** Then, let’s get sharing, Family-to-Family.

**Christian Davis:** My name is Christian Davis.

**Thomas Capretta:** Christian Davis is a mother in Southwest, Ohio

**Christian Davis:** I originally started becoming involved as a parent when I realized that there was a lot of opportunities within my city, but most of the resource educational resources were divided by either what school your kids went to and or what area you resided in. And so, just for advocacy alone with my children. And then starting to see like the unbalances of resources made me become a strong advocate for educational access across the board.

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**Sharon McCullom:** My name is Sharon; I am a proud mother of two.

**Thomas Capretta:** Sharon McCullom is also a mother in Southwest, Ohio

**Sharon McCullom:** My son attends a public school, which is a career tech school K through 12. How I became an advocate is because I’ve been advocating for a long time, my daughter at the age of three had an IEP.

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**Thomas Capretta:** Parents and care givers are inspired and motivated to increase their involvement in their child’s education for many reasons, often personal. Sharon and Christian shared their personal stories with us here. While Sharon discusses working to improve educational opportunities for her son, Christian first shares her story about seeing a need in her school community and working to increase opportunities for all students. Both of these stories reflect the ways families around the globe are forces for good and for improvement in the education system.”

**Christian Davis:** At that time, I was able to see to the disparities across the district so, for instance I work with a lot of children that have special needs. And I would just be blown away by you know, there was some schools where teachers had to like buy two newspapers and laminate identical pictures in the newspapers, just to have a matching game, whereas at the schools that my kids went to I mean they had the resources to buy like very nice like you know plastic matching games. And that sounds so simple, but when you think about the fact that this is like within the same school district, it just was really disheartening. So, I think that's kind of like where I was first introduced. This isn't right, why is it that schools within the same school districts are not offering all children equal resources.

**Christian Davis:** As I started to sit at the right tables or invited be invited into relevant conversations I would then go back out and share that on a broader scale to our community.

[Music]

**Sharon McCullom:** I needed some assistance to help me fight so that my son would have the education, the equality of education. And also, to change the perspective of how children that have a label of IEP whether it’s a 504 or it’s behavioral you know what have not. To change the perspective. of their needs, because every child every person deserves an atmosphere to be able to win.

**Sharon McCullom:** When I start bringing in the law and their teachers are looking at me and have been told I don't know what I’m talking about, but until I brought in the physical paper in black and white, that says, it says here. What I have to say doesn't mean anything. Until I started talking the law.

**Sharon McCullom:** So that's what made me do what I have been doing and plus I have friends that are not just in advocacy but are working as teachers you know that are dealing with the same issue, so that helped me ultimately, to be understanding. But not lowering my standard because I’m here because I’m my son, how many times that I have said at the table, and I’m being talked around and not talk to. Well, that's another part of the mental you know issue because you make me feel like what I have to say doesn’t mean anything.

**Thomas Capretta:** Sharon discusses some of the results of her advocacy and partnership with her school in terms of access to new opportunities for her son.

**Sharon McCullom:** What I have tried to do because I have not always been received. But what I have done with my situation is that because of my son's disability of fine motor skills functioning. I had to go outside in order to bring something in, which was occupational therapy. They didn't even have occupational therapy at the school. But through the advocacy that I had, I brought occupational therapy into the picture for my son so from the second grade up until now.

 **Sharon McCullom:** Bringing that piece in… now is it fully where it could be? No. But at least there is a start until somebody grasps the ideal of how this can help students with disabilities. For their mind, just another outlet and tools that are given to help them when they are overwhelmed.

**Sharon McCullom:** My son now is functioning. I’m very proud that I’m that mother who's an encourager, but I believe it all starts at home first before it can reach out.

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**Thomas Capretta:** Here Christian shares how her efforts took shape and how priorities have been informed by the needs of other families in her community.

**Christian Davis:** And so, as we're pushing not only children's literacy, but family literacy, because we know that a lot of the families that we work with, they themselves want to improve their like the parents themselves want to improve their education, so we started to build out relationships with those two particular partners to make sure that our families had access to free brand-new books.

**Christian Davis:** Once the pandemic took place in schools were shut down, that’s when the educational piece really became our main focus because while schools were shut down, you know, parents were looking for alternative ways to ensure that their kids would still be educated during like a crazy moment right. That's kind of like how we started or why we do what we do now, and so we now have a strong following up over 16,000 families locally.

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**Thomas Capretta:** What advice do you all have for those listening?

**Christian Davis:** What I encourage our parents to do is to become like community or neighborhood ambassadors and it really is more of an empowerment thing. So, like if you live in the community right and you know you have a local church, or you have a local community recreation center literally just walk in and ask them, hey like you know, what do you guys offer or what do you guys, you know, what kind of current events do you guys have, what kind of community events are coming up. And then share that out with people that you know right. Like, I then always encourage our families to build their own network. So, like when you think of a network, a lot of people think of just like biological family but, like my strongest network doesn't even include family members, my network includes people that I met at my kid’s school, people that I met, you know, I got my kids involved in like just so many different programs that were like free or low cost. So, here we have like I mean Cincinnati is really arts driven so all of our museums, most of them are free to get in. They have a lot of like educational or art classes for kids that are absolutely free and I just started like informing everyone in my inner circle about opportunities that I would come across and literally that's how it starts it's like you know.

**Christian Davis:** The more you find out just share it. I mean, and of course, Facebook is absolutely free it doesn't cost, it doesn’t cost anything to start a small, you know Facebook group. And you know, and then you just invite people in your group I think so many times we are used to becoming excluded that we have to make sure that we are creating opportunities, so that not only are we included but other people can be included too right. So, and if you see a need like if you see a group that doesn't exist, just start the group. I guess that would be my advice I don’t know if I answered your question, but that would be my advice.

[Music]

**Sharon McCullom:** I’m one of those people that I’d rather be about it then just talk about it. Because sometimes you talk about it, and people are not going to pay attention to you, but if you are being what you say, then people start seeing what you have said.

**Sharon McCullom:** And that's really what is happening so again now he's you know I know he's on his way to being on the honor roll and all of that. Funny how he told me how he was tutoring some other kid in math, and I was like what? How are you going to be tutoring somebody in study hall, and you got an IEP, you got people looking at you going do you really need an IEP if you helping somebody else. They forget IEPs are just creating the environment for that child to grow, it is not because they still don't have problems. But because of the environment that that has been created for him to grow in helping somebody else is still helping himself. But we haven't gotten there yet, you know, to understand that kind of stuff it's kind of backwards, so to speak, but it really isn’t, you just got to be about it, not just talk about it.

[Music]

**Thomas Capretta**: Now we welcome Jackie Arendt to wrap up this awesome conversation on the power of family advocacy in education. Jackie has been a parent advocate and volunteer in education since the nineties and is now President of the Ohio PTA.

**Jackie Arendt:** Hello. Thank you for having me today. You can call me Jackie. I am the current Ohio Parent-Teacher Association president. I am a sociologist. I also am a school board member. I have been on my local school board, and I am currently on the Cuyahoga Valley Career Center School Board. So, I lend that to my background also. I would say my professional experience is as a PTA volunteer. I started back in the early nineties when my oldest daughter was in kindergarten. And I've held a variety of roles. You know, PTA is a volunteer organization, but again, it's an advocacy organization. And what I love about it is it's. People, parents training other parents to advocate. It is not about just my child or my singular voice. It's about all children. And when all children succeed, we have great results.

**Thomas Capretta:** What are your thoughts on the stories that Christian and Sharon shared with us today?

**Jackie Arendt:** Many of the programs that have been introduced over the century have been because of the strong advocacy work, you know, lunch programs, making sure kids have kindergarten readiness and stuff. So, lots of things can be attributed to the great work of parents as within the association, the advocacy work that they've done. When I listen to the families talk about their experience, you know, the first one where they basically were looking at the differences within their own city as to how resources were allocated was almost crippling to them. As far as how could this be? We're all in the same city and my kids aren't getting this or these kids are getting that or whatever it might be. So, that's great that their advocacy has led them to make sure that all children were receiving the same.

**Jackie Arendt:** And then the other parent that was talking about the IEP and the, you know, having to know the laws and the disparities that are found when you don't know the law and the law itself, how crippling it can be when you're trying to figure out, you know, when an administrator comes to you and says, oh, well, we can only do this or we can only do that, you know, how are you supposed to fight back or how are you supposed to advocate, right? How are you supposed to know? So, I think basically the bottom line with any of this is that when you're advocating and when you're in as a family member, whether it's for your child or it's for the school district or for the state or the nation, it's about making sure that we are looking at every child as all. And I guess the simplest way is every individual child needs whatever they need to be successful. And so, as a parent, yes, definitely fight for your child. Make sure you understand that you know what you can do. But I will also say that when you fight for your child, you know, think that maybe, too, that there's probably other children and that the work you're doing can lay the foundation for others to have these kinds of opportunities or the opportunities they need to be successful.

**Jackie Arendt:** I don't think people realize that there's a national family school partnership. You know, there’re standards around that. Right. And one of them is about sharing power. And sharing power is probably very important. that word power has can have negative connotations. But the idea is, is that we all need to be collective in our voices around how we get children from point A to point B, right. How do we get them ready? Basically, we need to make sure that there are people that are administratively in the classroom, support staff, whatever that can help with that. So, I think with parents and families, the bottom line is, you know, all of us schools, other community leaders, everybody needs to know that advocacy around children should be about what the child needs, not what the parent thinks the child needs or what the school administrator thinks the child needs. Well, what does the child need? Right?

**Jackie Arendt:** So, the advocacy work or the advice I give everybody is to always make sure you have that open dialogue. That communication is always ongoing and, you know, be part of a PTA, be part of an organization that's associated with others. Because the worst thing is, is that, yes, we want local control, we want local involvement, but we want to know that we there's a bigger purpose. I think that most of us want to believe there's a bigger purpose to it all.

[Music]

**Thomas Capretta:** Thank you Sharon, Christian, and Jackie for sharing your experience with us today. And thanks to you to all of you for advocating on behalf of your own children and others so that all students have access to the resources and opportunities that they deserve for success. It came up many times in this episode, so to close, remember, when we work hard with schools to improve the education opportunities for our own children – there can be big benefit for all children in our school community.

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