

CADRE and JAMS Foundation Present:
Voices from the Field
Interview Clip #3 Transcript – Patricia McGinnis

Marshall: Minnesota encourages the involvement of parent advocates in mediation. What are some of the benefits that accrue as a result of this involvement?

Patricia: Interesting and timely question. This month, we just had the advo- I invited some advocates to be on a panel for a mediator training, earlier in October, and they are a distinct and helpful group, a unique group because they see our mediators in action, several times, and have excellent feedback for us. And so during that session I asked a question like - What do you find the mediators doing that's helpful or harmful to the process? And they learn a lot from, from the input and the feedback at least from the advocate and parent perspective. How they can read body language and know a break is desperately needed without somebody having to ask for it. How they make sure people are fully understood before they move on and what techniques they use to do that. How they use caucus strategically. One of the harmful things, in fact, is if caucus is used too much. They can't really learn from the modeling of communication and collaboration that a mediator can do if they're in separate rooms the whole time. So that, that was one of the things that the advocates say not to do too much. So that's some of it, but more key, of course, is how that advocate helps in the session and there's big advantages for both the parents and the districts. What our mediators report is that they have a very balanced approach. Very well trained advocates in the state. They not only can tell the parent what they can and should expect from the district, but also what they can't and they also tell the district, or holds the district accountable to what they really need to be doing. And the districts often will accept that and, so they can lessen the adversarial nature of the dispute just by an honest conversation. Another thing is from their data we do find that parents believe they are effectively prepared for what's going to happen in mediation. How they should prioritize, first clarify and then prioritize their issues. So that's very helpful and Pacer's data also tells us that one hundred percent of the parents see the advocate modeling effective problem solving skills that can't help but assist them long-term in the relationship with the school.