

MICHAEL GRAHAM: My name is Michael B. Graham. I am from Columbia, South Carolina. My organization affiliation is the South Carolina Advisory Council on the Education of Students with Disabilities. I am also a parent of a special needs child with high-functioning Down syndrome, a 10-year-old girl with Down's syndrome. On the advisory council, I'm a member of the executive committee and I'm also a member of the chair of the recently formed Dispute Resolution Committee. I have been affiliated with the partnership for about four to five years, four years going into five years. I started in 2005. My first opportunity was given to me after completing a Partners in Policymaking Class; also known as the PIP Program. The project coordinator there gave me an opportunity to come to D.C. for a partnership meeting, and the catalyst for that was just my attempt to get involved on the state level in advocacy 2 the frustration there. There was a window open and an opportunity, so I came to D.C. to my first meeting there. What happened, as a result of coming to the meeting, that first partnership meeting, two days, I got very excited about what the potential and the possibilities were on a state level. After going back home, I actually did a presentation as a graduate of the program to some other PIP class. I said that there was a comparison of, you know, "what's hamburger on one level is steak on the other," you know, and I had been on the level where, you know, the issues we were dealing with on the state level, were really, you know, they considered it steak, and, in D.C., it's considered hamburger, you know, in terms of the potential of it. So, I was very, very excited and that was the catalyst for really advocacy in getting involved with the partnership.

If someone were to come up to me and ask me on the state level, "what's this IDEA Partnership?" I would say what I've learned and that is that the partnership is OSEP's investment and expertise, and they're providing a platform where you can get the information that you really, really need and it can be valuable in mining that information back down on the state level, because on the national level, you have the collaborations with people all across the country that have the information, so you don't have to reinvent the wheel, you can just access it and, primarily, through the relationships that you develop. What makes the partnership work to me is really what I said before and, that is, you have the expertise; you have the access to the other stakeholder's across the county and those that the partnerships bring together. The thing that really, really gels it all is the relationship that the people develop through the partnership, where I feel is genuine, meaningful, relationships to the point where, once again, if I need some information and, I can't access that information on a state level, I have a relationship with John, who does have the information in California and so I can pick up the phone and say, "hey John, this is my issue, this is my position and, you know, this is my challenge. How would you go about it and have you had that?" That is the uniqueness of it.

When I think about what keeps me coming back to the partnership, it's what I get from it, in terms of, I was just recently saying, you know, as short as at lunch, that when I come to the partnership, I get inflated with the potential of what can happen on a state level, and it is like I take all this energy and this inflation back to the state level, you know, to somebody to punch a hole in and spring a leak to where, you know, eventually, by the time that it does run out, you know, in whatever period of time, 3 or 4 months, it's time to come back to the partnership to get inflated again and encouraged again for the issues that are taking place on a state level, and the things that we see on a national level that hasn't gotten down to the state level, but it needs to continue in commitment of this process in order to be a change agent. Because of my engagement with the partnership on a national level of the changes that I have seen, or are beginning to see, is still in the show-me stage, and that show-me stage is from me bringing the information, you know, to coin a phrase, "the cutting edge stuff, hot of the press," back to state level and saying, "hey, look at what I've learned; look what's going on in the rest of the country." So, kind of like do a self assessment of what's taking place on a national level and creating an interest.

Everything right now is at a show-me stage, and I think that's good, even more so now, because of the

fact we have just recently formed a dispute resolution committee that I can bring this information back about dispute resolution, creating agreement, and, what have you, and using that as a conduit to get that information out there, but, at the same time, also using it as a springboard to kind of open it up to wider issues and wider things that are going on across the partnership where, you know, we can get that mind down to the level down to the level it needs to be to.

The information that I get from the partnership, I take it back to the state, and, you know, wherever that information can be passed out, disseminated, on whatever level that there's a willingness to look at the information. That may be the PTIs, it may be the Parent Resource Centers, or it may be whatever area of concern is on a community level, a grassroots level, you know. My desire is to get the information out, because I feel there is a focus of people not having enough knowledge and information about issues that they care deeply about and, especially, in the special needs community from the parent up to the school doors, beyond the school doors, the support for the teachers, and then, you know, going on up the chain until we get to the state superintendent; getting the information out there.

The changes and results, if you were to look at it to see where there has been some benefit from the investment, is, number one, I think the growth and the involvement of people getting the information about the partnership, on a national level, and wanting to become involved. I think that it's a slow process, it's an insidious process, but it's like once it catches on, and, really, the benefits of it are really, really seen across the board, in all respective areas, whether it's creating an agreement, dispute resolution, you know, dialogue guides, and finding out that people are understanding that they don't have to reinvent the wheel; they just have to find the kind of rubber that they need to put on the wheel for their particular state or their particular concern and then go forward from there, realizing that, hey, where I might get stuck or where I may have challenges, I've got access to people who can, you know, keep moving us along on that and continue towards something that's very, very beneficial at the end of the day for everybody concerned.

I think looking at the numbers of the people that are maybe calling and inquiring about the partnership, if it is no more than, you know, "I hear about this partnership; tell me a little bit more about it." A good example, my motivation was, try on the state level, was trying to get the new OAC director, who just came in position to come to this current partnership meeting. I was speaking with the ombudsman, you know, who is the right hand where that is the office where all of the complaints initially come through on the state level right before, you know, "the trigger is pulled," you know, to getting into something deeper, more legal. I spoke to her about taking a closer look. This is an opportune time, based on where we are in South Carolina; the things that we want to do to get a closer look and get some cutting edge stuff. Even though that was not able to happen, I gave her a power point of the partnership. The who, what, when, where and why; who we are, who the partnership is, some of the tenets that they're working by, their beliefs, and so on and so forth. I was able to get that information to them. So, the next, my point of contact would not be, "you don't know anything about it." It would be whether you want to pursue getting involved in it, and, if necessary, going to another level where you would bring me in again to maybe go deeper, tell me a little bit more. To me the best way to get the information is take them to the source. Everybody has their own time line of when they want to get involved, when they want to come in or "take a closer look." Maybe not this partnership meeting, but maybe one in the future, I can get them here, so they can see it and hear it in its pure perspective global perspective and take that information back themselves. Having done that, now I can feel, excuse me, I'm a viable conduit to the partnership for this information.

By not having a direct affiliation, I found that it has been a strength in that I don't have any, you know, connections; I don't have any dues I have to pay; I don't have any particular things I have to take along with me as a representative of that.

Coming as a parent, you know, that's, my child with a special need, and I would like to say all children with disabilities or persons with disabilities that's my constituency, you know, whether they be black or white. I would like to say whether they have polka dots or gotta a stripe down their back. I'm concerned about them being able to have the equitable life that they should be, you know, and have access to, you know, that's my primary concern. So, it does have its benefit and, at the same time, being able to put that in it's proper perspective, as their parent, by being able to go into the different environments with a pure agenda vs. a related agenda. I would like to, it is a phrase that I heard by, I think, his name is John Carlisle, about everyone being created to pursue all of their capabilities whatever they're capable of becoming. I think that also includes children with special needs.

My passion, that is helping to position me for the purpose, is helping the children with special needs, bringing their issues, bringing the parents' concern, and speaking for the ones who can't speak for themselves. Being able to go back to South Carolina and ask, "okay where's my partnership?" Considering, where we are, and I think that transition to South Carolina is in right now, I have often said it recently that I think we are in a unique position that sometimes when there's a lot of chaos on the horizon or chaos going on, that's the best time to attempt to implement a change because there's an opportunity, because everyone is open. So, I look at it as, while that chaos is going on, I'm getting the tools or access to the tools, people, you know, developments. So, when it comes time when that question is being asked, "well what can we do, you know, what's out there?" and so on in relation to a lot of different things. I can be like the little kid in the classroom and say, "have you ever thought about this?" You know? That's opening doors; that's their conduit. So, it is just a matter of timing, but right now, I'm educating myself to what's available.

I like to say that, and I've said this before, that I'd like to be one of the people that helps to facilitate duplicating an IDEA Partnership on a state level, because being a member of the state advisory council, which is mandated by IDEA, we have these components. We have a collaboration, or at least the stakeholder's across the board. In the school, we have administrators, we have policy makers, we have persons, such as myself and parents, we have advocacy groups, we have legal entities on the state council and it consists I think of about 55 people. So, we have a template for developing the exact same thing on a state level. What's the beauty of it is, you've got the people and entities in place and the roles and position; now it is time to give it a tune up with some information beyond the state, which is in turn going to help our engine run a lot better. So, that's the uniqueness of, I'm enjoying that ride of being in that position, to be able to want to say, you know, "hey, let's go get a tune up."

I think the thing that makes me unique, but really not unique, and, that is, I've gone beyond looking at it as "what's in it for me." I'm looking at it now, "what's in it for, number one, being a parent, that parent influence," looking at it, "what's in it for the children with special needs and disabilities." Then number two, "what's in it for everyone else, who really wants to get involved with a commitment." I say that, meaning, with a commitment to say, "I want to be a pure change agent; I know it's not going to be easy; I know it's not going to short, but at the same time, it's going to be worth it." I kind of summarized it to say, "I'm not looking at it, what I can get out of it, I'm looking at it in terms of what I can give to that process now." You know, that's what I'm interested in. My perception, and once again, I don't really put a lot of attention on their perceptions of me, because I feel that if I'm genuine and I'm attempting to do what's legitimate, without a quote agenda or, you know, amplified agenda that's going to come across and they are going to see, "hey, I want to be involved with what Mike's doing." How has some little semblances of that come, I get e-mails from people that I don't know, you know, telling me about certain things or, once I, every year at the end of the Partners in Policymaking class, all of the speakers have to have, the students have to give their response; write a letter of thank you or e-mail or whatever. The e-mails I get, I consistently hear people saying, "thank you for what you do," but more importantly

saying, "I see your passion; I see you're committed." You know, to me that's a setup for them wanting to get involved to the point when I, you know, want some support in something, I can get that, because they know it's a genuine commitment, and even that has also gone past just the parents. It has gone to the Department of Education developing those relationships inside, me being an outsider, and really me being that one that out of the camp that we've always had the confrontation in me and us. You know, "you and them" type attitude to where I want to try to set a stage and an environment to get past that, so we could do some things that really, really need to be done. So, it's relationship. It comes back again to the relationship building. You don't feel that I'm trying to cut your throat or I'm trying to stop you from doing something. I think, as you asked the question before, the ease of me being able to go "in and out those camps, is I don't have any affiliation; nobody's cuttin' me a check."

I think that the improvements are going to expose themselves, but as an honest opinion right now, you know I'm enjoying the ride of the partnership, what it has done for me, what it has helped me do, the vision it has given me, peripheral vision, and being able to see the big picture in the last four or five years. I trust the partnership in the sense that knowing that they are not looking at things just superficially. They're looking at things very deeply and broadly, you know, vertically and horizontally, you know, to the point when a move is being made it's a calculated move that's gonna have profound impact or hope to have profound impact, and, from that point, all you need is people to come into that and get that deal done. So, that in itself just helps me knowing I can be affiliated, you know, with that partnership and, once again, the people. I can pick up the phone at any time and call Joanne. I'm always on the phone giving updates to Patrice, "what's going on in South Carolina, do you think this will be a good strategy, this is what I'm thinking." I'm enjoying the ride, but it's like, you know, "hey, I'm ready to get another horse, give me a faster horse, because I'm ready to run, you know, but everything is staged, so, I'm really, really, really genuinely enjoying the ride, and, you know, as I put it out to Joanne and Patrice, I keep a bag packed, whenever you need me, wherever you need me, I'm ready to go. I've been on a CADRE, a 25-member CADRE, a couple of years ago to go to Jackson State as part of basically a two-day think tank with Duran Cooperation, 100 Black Men, but as I always tell people, "I'm coming as a parent first," that's my role, that's, as they called, a component; I want to be at the seat at the table so we can keep it, that prospective balanced and hopefully get some good things out of it period.