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**Mindy Wiseman:** Hello and welcome back to Working Well, a podcast series with a diverse group of educators from across the country discussing how to support the wellbeing of the workforce. I'm Mindy Wiseman with the National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments or NCSSE. In this episode, NCSSE training specialist Melanie Goodman speaks with Kathy Nimmer, an extraordinary educator who also happens to be blind. Kathy taught high school English for 29 years, was Indiana Teacher of the Year in 2015, and now directs a mentorship program for new educators. Kathy begins by talking about how her love of teaching and teachers started when she began losing her sight at seven years old.

**Kathy Nimmer:** When I was seven, I was diagnosed with a degenerative retinal disease, was an interesting time because I was a high-flying, hardworking student even at that age. And I started making mistakes and my very perceptive second grade teacher realized that a lot of the mistakes were mixing up letters or numbers. And she started watching the mistakes I was making and decided to talk to my parents about the need for testing my vision. And that began a long process that I actually still have these memories of where five doctors in a row told my parents there was nothing wrong with my vision and I was making it up to get attention.

**Mindy Wiseman:** Wow.

**Kathy Nimmer:** Yeah, I just remember it was a very shy kiddo and didn't have the urge to speak up, but just remember knowing my report, my issues, those things were true and sensing that frustration of not being believed. That's an early recollection that I still carry. My parents believed me though. And so we kept going and ultimately landed at the University of Chicago where I became a research patient by third grade. At that time, we knew my vision would go down, but we didn't know how far down or how quickly. So I stayed in public school with minor accommodations until sixth grade, when I shifted to the school for the Blind in Indianapolis. Certainly the right choice for me because I was with teachers who were outstanding, but also who were trained to help people with visual impairments and my vision would keep going down. So it was the right place, a hard choice for the family structure, but the right place as my vision kept deteriorating.

I learned living skills like cooking and cleaning, ironing those basic things that it would take into adulthood. Ultimately learned braille, and then that was at the very tip of the beginning of adaptive technology. So I started using screen readers for the computer, all of that I couldn't have gotten in public school. Plus, it grew my courage. I traced my ability to speak up for myself, to stand up for others, to really tap into my talents and not be overwhelmed by my disability. I trace a lot of that back to that formative time.

**Mindy Wiseman:** You're listening to Working Well with our guest, Kathy Nimmer. Next, Kathy talks about living with and embracing her blindness.

**Kathy Nimmer:** So by the time I was 23, my vision was down to almost complete blindness. I have a very small bit of light perception, so in the room where I'm sitting right now, I know that there's a window off to my right, not because I can see a window just because there's a bit of a glare from that direction, but I'm certainly not in a place where I use my vision for anything anymore. But I am grateful. I am very grateful for having had those years where I had vision, full vision and impartial vision because especially as a writer and as an English teacher, I understand color. I can picture a sunset. I know what a rainbow looks like or the concept, not just even... Not just the scientific concept of a horizon, but the visual dimensions of that. So I carry all of those visual memories with me, and that's been impactful and something I definitely value.

**Melanie Goodman:** So you obviously have, Kathy, amazing energy and drive, and where does that come from?

**Kathy Nimmer:** It's interesting because the origin is not all that honorable. It's not something that I would put forth as do it this way, but really back to that time when I was being diagnosed with the vision problem, my parents were very upset. I remember that I remember that room at the University of Chicago when we got that diagnosis and both of my parents were crying, and I just somehow decided in my little 7-year-old heart that I needed to be strong and I needed to take care of the things I could take care of so that they wouldn't cry. So I didn't show how much it upset me. I kind of tucked that in and really stepped into that world, probably already predisposed toward perfectionism, but really owned it from that age onward that I would do all that I could and be as okay as I could so that the other people around me would not worry and would not ache.

And it began there. So a hard and incorrect placement of responsibility and shoving any emotional debris inside. But ultimately as I worked through things over the years that paid off... The balancing out of that paid off and the desire if I was going to do something, I wanted to do it well. And that created a really good work ethic, a really good drive while retaining a compassion and an empathy for people in situations where the odds were stacked against them. So I wouldn't undo what it ultimately resulted in, which is again, a commitment to do well and change things for the good. And so I'll hold onto that and continually remind myself to let go of the other.

**Melanie Goodman:** So I'm curious about what initially drew you to teaching and you were just called to teaching full stop, it sounds like.

**Kathy Nimmer:** I was, and I'm not positive I would've recognized that without the disability because when I stayed in public school for those first few years after the diagnosis, I was forced into closer working relationships with my teachers who of course I admired and adored as most little kids do. They're elementary teachers and I had the opportunity during recess or during lunchtime working

with them, they read things to me or explained things with tangible tactile models such like that. And I sort of fell in love with them and with the idea of being the conveyor of knowledge when there was something kind of in the way of that learning. And then that was just multiplied at the blind school with tiny classes and a lot of one-on-one.

I mean, I had a high school science teacher who helped us dissect frogs. If you could imagine a room full of blind kids and dead frogs in front of us. And she adjusted that dissection activities so that we got everything that our sighted compatriots were getting in the public school, and a beautiful piano teacher who helped me find that I had a gift in that direction and I really became a great pianist because of her. How could I help but want to be a teacher, when I was surrounded just immersed in that education experience? I honestly can't remember wanting to be anything else because of the way that pathway unfolded.

**Melanie Goodman:** Wow. And your teaching has been in public school though, right?

**Kathy Nimmer:** It has. Yes, it has. I always entertained ideas of going back to the Indiana School for the Blind and Visually Impaired where I was educated through middle and high school, but my feet landed in Harrison High School, and that's where I stayed. I interviewed with a principal who loved to take chances, loved to be the first to try something, and I'm quite sure that door was opened because of his risk taking nature, but I just needed a door open. I didn't really care about why that door was opening and went through a turbulent beginning of the career, but I stuck with it.

**Melanie Goodman:** And stayed at that school. Am I right about that?

**Kathy Nimmer:** All the way, all the years that I was a classroom teacher, I was at that exact same school under different leadership, teaching a variety of different classes. The one class that I kept from my second year of teaching on through the end of my classroom experience was creative writing, which was the soulmate class of mine. Like that writing is a thing that's always been part of me from very early on. And when I had the opportunity to pick up that elective when someone retired my second year of teaching, I'm like, yeah, that's my heart right there. And that was one of the biggest things in my education was developing that class that ran once a year with 12 people. That was my first class at its peak. It ran three full classes of 30 students at its peak, and I grew it up from very small to one of the most popular electives in the building, and that was my daily bread. That was what fed me.

**Melanie Goodman:** That really fed your heart.

**Mindy Wiseman:** Next in our Working Well conversation with Kathy Nimmer, she talks about the disability label.

**Melanie Goodman:** So we skipped over, I'd asked you in the beginning about referring to your disability as a disability, and that's how the world kind of sees it. But I guess from your perspective, I wonder about that.

**Kathy Nimmer:** I am unquestionably blind, so I refer to myself as blind. Visually impaired is also a comfortable term for me that is a little more inclusive of those with partial vision on down. I'm actually less comfortable when people try to be so politically correct that they come up with really complex terminology that actually-

**Melanie Goodman:** Like what?

**Kathy Nimmer:** Sight afflicted. That might be my least favorite because that makes me feel as if I've got some sign embroidered upon my face that's rather menacing, might be contagious, something like that. And other extreme times when people try to change their wording to be okay with me not using the word see or watch or look at this or whatever, I see headlines. I don't see them with my eyes, but I am hearing them with my screen reader or whatever, but I'm not going to change to say, "Oh, my gosh, did you hear with Jaws?"

Which is the name of my screen reader. "Did you hear with Jaws that such and such war just started or escalated?" I'm like, no, I'm using the words that everyone uses that are in common use, and we don't always share meanings of the common words that we interchange with each other anyway. And that just happens to be that my seeing is a different process than yours. I would consider myself absolutely somebody with a disability that is a sensory disability that is commonly recognized, and I also do not consider it the primary thing about me.

It changes the way I do certain things. It is a factor in how I access the world and how I understand it. Those who meet me for the first time are unfailingly curious about it and certainly centered on it, and yet that's not my primary. And I can mark the evolution of a friendship or a professional connection by how much the blindness becomes less and less of a factor. I love it when a friend will forget that I can't see something or when a colleague comes to me not to talk about a child who has a sensory disability, but to talk about a child who's not a good writer or who has interest in a mystery genre and they know I love mysteries. So when it's not the number one, then I know we're getting somewhere.

**Melanie Goodman:** Did that just evolve for you what you described in terms of your relationship with students and your colleagues, I guess to some degree? Or did you feel like given that role as a teacher in front of this class, you had to address it head on?

**Kathy Nimmer:** So when a new class would begin, I of course took a little while to go over the syllabus anyway. And on my syllabus, I did not refer to a whole big extensive section about my disability, but I did have a small section in there that mentioned my guide dog who would be in the room, that mentioned that certain other process tasks would be done differently. For instance, they wouldn't raise their hands, they would speak their names, and I would call on

them that way. There were a few rules about non-interaction with the guide dog. So it was up there upfront, I mentioned it. We did not spend extensive time with it, and I'd say the first week of a class of new students, I sensed curiosity, maybe an unease, but as my time in that school went onward, I wouldn't say that my reputation squashed any of those sensations of unease or curiosity, but there were many, many times when students would come into my class, new to me as a student, but they knew about me.

They had heard other people talking about me or they'd seen me in the hallway. And so that certainly became something I appreciated that it wasn't addressing the elephant in the living room every single time to the same extent and just took a little bit of time and then practice. And they're so used to... They're so trained to raise their hands for a class that undoing that took a while. And I always used to joke with them that I knew that I had made a bond with them, when I would get an email from a math teacher and say, "Hey, you must have Jerry in class because he called out his name today in math class." And I love that as sort of a threshold of... So the norm began to be calling out names and yeah, not sure how my colleagues appreciated that or not, but that was a moniker for me that, Yeah, got it. They know Ms. Nimmer now.

**Melanie Goodman:** That's funny, Kathy.

**Mindy Wiseman:** Next, in our Working Well conversation with Kathy Nimmer, she talks about her early challenges in the classroom.

**Melanie Goodman:** So I know you said when you first started at the school, you had a risk-taker for a principal, and I don't know how long he stayed in that position while you were still there, but you've had a lot of other... You've had a lot of changes in administration. Are there other teachers with disabilities that are in your high school? I mean, did that create a pathway at all for others or were you kind of uniquely in that situation there?

**Kathy Nimmer:** I was uniquely in that situation. I knew no other teachers who were blind at that time. There were no other teachers with obvious disabilities at that time in this entire region. And it took a lot of work to find those teachers with visual impairments there at the beginning of my career, anywhere, it was a novelty and that put a lot of attention in my direction. And the beginning of my career was not great. I was so competent with English and writing, but I was very naive about what it needed to be like in the classroom to have a teacher with a disability and students who didn't have disabilities. I was so confident that minimizing my disability was the right way to go, that I was the opposite of my principal in the sense that I didn't want to take risks. So for instance, at the beginning, I didn't want to bump into a desk while I was walking around, so I stayed up front behind the podium.

I didn't want to mistakenly call somebody by the wrong name or knock over a stack of books or trip on a book bag that was on the floor. So I didn't interact with students very much. Even when they were in groups, for instance, they

would have them come up to me, I am a very free spirit. I'm funny, I'm expressive. And I was nervous about doing that without being able to read their body language, their facial expressions. And so I was pretty stern and very internal, and so I was not myself. And when I talk to new teachers now, I deliberately emphasized that the gifts that they are bringing to the classroom rise in large part from who they are. Of course, we come in with training, we come in with content, knowledge, strategies, ideas, and yet those are only robotic tools if they're not blended with who we are as people.

And we are at our best as teachers when our innate gifts are really in action. And so when I was trying to not be blind "in my classroom," I was not myself. It is part of who I am, and I was restraining my natural tendencies and the result was terrible. It was terrible. It was this poor classroom management. It was minimal connection. Very few relationships started. It was bad, and I would have switched to plan B and stepped away from education if I had a plan B, I didn't. And so I kept with it and I'm glad I did, but it took a while to figure out that I was not going to be a good teacher if I wasn't in the classroom, I'm not this version of myself that was very safe and very segmented. I needed to let my whole self come in that classroom. And once I figured that out, things started to change.

**Melanie Goodman:** So I know you've said that you feel like your disability contributes to your impact and success. It's not in spite of it. So that's partly what you're saying here is that you had to embrace all that about who you are.

**Kathy Nimmer:** Right. And what message was I sending to my students who all have, if not disabilities, their own proclivities, their own tendencies, their own personalities, if I was so stifling who I was, including my disability, that I was not truly there, not truly engaged, not trying to connect with them, and it was not good messaging. And then once I figured that out and once I had kind of a climactic turnaround and just became more real, more relaxed, more genuinely myself, I think they met me there and then we grew together. I wouldn't say I was anyone's favorite teacher because I was blind, but I was people's favorite teacher because I was Kathy Nimmer. I was real. And the blindness was one part of it.

**Mindy Wiseman:** You're listening to Working Well. Next, in our conversation with Kathy Nimmer, she talks about developing a mentoring program for new teachers.

**Kathy Nimmer:** So when I was named Indiana Teacher of the Year in 2015, I was off for a year of travel and speaking. And when I came back, my district and I, we talked about a hybrid role where I would still teach half of the day and then help new teachers in a very soft kind of mentoring, encouraging type of way the other half of the day. And there was no name of a program, there was no formal protocol. There was an awareness that education was approaching a climactic crisis time, and there was already the beginning of a teacher shortage there. Just issues were rising.

And so that was a really great solution for a few years for me to use what I had learned during my travels and my opportunities nationally in a way that would help our teachers here. And then the pandemic came, and that was kind of a tipping point where we all decided that we needed to take this, the next step and step back and develop a full scale program with goals and protocols and procedures, research all the things that would be a district-wide support system for new teachers joining this district.

And so I spent a year still helping in the soft sense, still helping the new teachers, but primarily focusing on the development of the program. And that's where SEEDS was born. So SEEDS stands for Supporting Educators Entering District Service. The purpose that we all have is to set the future up in a way that we trust that what we have done is going to pay off later for others. And so this program pours into the new people joining our district, whether that is brand new to education or simply brand new to our school corporation, to pour into them in a way that they can experience the year in a softer, better place, focusing on wellbeing, resilience, happiness, connecting them up with resources, affirmations, helping them find their courage and finding a way to sink in and start to make the difference that we'll have consequences for their kiddos in the future. And I am now running that full time. I'm running SEEDS full time. This is our third year.

**Melanie Goodman:** What gives you hope? Are you inspired by these newbies that are coming along? Are you finding that that's kind of fuel for you? Are there other things that really give you a lot of hope about what's down the road for us?

**Kathy Nimmer:** There's a lot of hope. I mean, I have the beauty. I always tell people that my job is to love them and what a beautiful job that is. And the benefit I get back is the privilege to walk beside them in the valleys and the mountaintops and some of the young newcomers have this ebullient joy that is so astounding and so refreshing. And to think of being 22 and choosing education in the current climate of all the strife and all the multiple issues that we could probably do a whole other podcast talking about, to choose that... Those who are at that age and choosing it, it's a tremendous choice and it speaks so much to the heart that they have because they could so easily choose something else.

And so it's on an odd sort of natural selection in a way because the people who are of that age graduating from college and entering this profession, they are fewer than before, far fewer than before, but they tend to be so full of that precious joy and that commitment, while that traditional four year plan is still the majority of the pathway for my folks on my caseload, it is shrinking in that there are alternative pathways that are getting more and more common. I have a lot of people who are in transition to teaching programs or people who chose teaching as a second career. One of my favorite is a fifth grade teacher who was an accountant for 22 years, and she... I mean fifth grade. And she shows that after being an accountant because she just felt called to that.

I was sitting with a teacher the other day who is in a current transition teaching program. So she is working while she is learning. So classwork, double doing here while she is actually teaching. And she was a paraprofessional for 11 years. So she was a classroom maid and did not aspire to teaching. So she didn't. But someone in the math department where she was a para, sat her down one day and said, "Have you thought about switching to this side of the desk?" And she's like, "Nope." And that seed was planted. Just that question made her start thinking about it. And then she took a little bit longer to think about it and then, there was a math opening in that building and she had thought about it enough that she was willing to talk to the principal, and the principal hired her on and she enrolled in the transition to teaching program, and that's where she is right now.

And so those alternate pathways are becoming more and more common and they don't come without their own challenges. So that teacher had not completed one complete education class before she started teaching. She was doing it simultaneous. So there's bumps and bruises that she has that my 22-year-old won't have, but vice versa, they need different things. Yeah, it is no day is the same. And every day I remember who I was at 22 and teaching poorly and holding back my natural self, primarily because of my disability, but broadly not knowing how to make this work for students who had their own needs. And I remember that Kathy Nimmer, and I believe that I served both my 22-year-old and my 40 some year old math teacher in a way that is better because of where I was.

**Mindy Wiseman:** Next in Working Well, Kathy talks about the challenges facing teachers today.

**Melanie Goodman:** So how would you characterize in our world right now, the major obstacles to being successful as a teacher? What do you think they face for us that we all need to pay attention to and work on?

**Kathy Nimmer:** It's just such a complicated landscape. It's easy to look back a few years and blame some of the issues with student behavior or with parental boldness or sometimes entitlement with motivation, stamina, resilience. It's easy to trace that back and point to the pandemic and the pandemic certainly influenced those things. And yet there's just such a wider landscape behind that in my mind. With the rise of technology, for instance, many things are easier, way better, and yet that also creates the problems, the well-documented problems when little children, for instance, are on devices too much and they're not running around and playing ghosts in the graveyard or swinging or lying on their backs, looking up at the clouds and making up stories about the shapes of the clouds. So we go back to a changed experience from the littlest among us on upward. We step into a future.

If the students are looking into a future, the jobs that they will be doing as well documented too, some of them don't even exist right now. It's exciting and it's intimidating. The things that their parents could count on for creating what we might have thought of before for a stable and predictable household. Those



things have changed. The family structures are different. What community looks like, that is different. There's just so much. So against all of that, I would say that when my teachers walk into a classroom, they're walking into a situation where every kiddo's story, which was always different, unique before, that you have to almost assume that there is extra debris or extra confusion or extra trauma. And so your assumption needs to be that there's probably a lot more you're going to be doing as a teacher that you can't fully anticipate a lot more that you'll have to be walking beside with courage and with openness, with an awareness of mental health of the student, and in a very deep protection of your own wellbeing so that you can be everything that is necessary for the child.

**Mindy Wiseman:** You've been listening to Working Well with Kathy Nimmer. Kathy closes out our conversation talking about her appreciation for guide dogs.

**Melanie Goodman:** So we have to talk about dogs.

**Kathy Nimmer:** Honestly, I probably always knew once my vision passed a certain threshold that I would have a guide dog, but I didn't do it right away. I wanted to work on establishing my professional self and my routines first. So when I started teaching, I did not have a guide dog. I used a white cane. When I was 26, my school was under construction, so there were ladders and there were wires and there were barricades and noise that distorted my physical awareness of where I was. And so things were uneasy for my physical environment. And then that same year as the construction, I went outside and a big wind gust made me stagger just a little bit. Ultimately was wandering around in a big parking lot with my cane and the wind and the rain. And I remember thinking if I had a guide dog, I could have just said find home and the dog would've done it. And so that was the construction and that morning trauma in the storm that made me apply for a dog. So I got my first guide dog in 1996, and I've had dogs ever since.

**Melanie Goodman:** And it's been an absolute fit for you. I mean, it's just no-brainer at this point, right?

**Kathy Nimmer:** No-brainer for me and not a no-brainer for all blind people. We all choose what we need. And so for me, I have more confidence in my travel. I am very comfortable with the dog being the way that people open conversations with me. As long as we don't stay with that, again, just like my principal opening the door because he was a risk-taker, giving me that chance to teach. I am fine with the conversation piece of the guide dog being the first step. And then we get beyond that and I'm good with that. I have the companionship. I have a community of guide dog handlers who are friends. I'm friends with trainers, puppy raisers. That whole aspect of my life has been beautiful. And I'll continue to have a dog by my side as long as I'm able.

**Melanie Goodman:** That's great.

**Kathy Nimmer:** So one of the really great things that has happened along the way with being a blind teacher is that I have had countless people who are entering college or

finishing college and looking for careers who are also blind or visually impaired, who have reached out to me. And it's been one of the greatest side effects of being a person who is blind and being successful and blessed in my career that I get looked up and I get reached out to and I get the chance to be part of their future. And it's everything from the person enrolled in college who's about to do their first internship in a school and the administration ask questions about how this would be addressed or how to do that the best way to somebody who is losing their vision as an adult and is finding teaching difficult, looking me up and reaching out. And I love that opportunity because it is the chance to give back and to be for them what I wish I had back then and so many-

**Melanie Goodman:** This is informal that they're finding you.

**Kathy Nimmer:** Informal. Informal. But I was in Boise, Idaho doing a week long intensive program for blind students last summer. And I was connected with a local teacher who was losing her vision. And so kind of came into her life informally, but then her HR department reached out to mine and then ultimately to me to figure out how they could best accommodate her so that she could keep doing her job. So yes, everything from... I know somebody who knew somebody who whatever, kind of chain of communication to a more formal opportunity to connect, I love those opportunities. And I hate so much that the unemployment rate for the blind is so sky-high. 70% or more of people who are blind or visually impaired are severely underemployed or fully unemployed. And when I look to, for instance, the young lady in Evansville, I don't want that for her. I want her future to include a principal who was like mine, but maybe not even one who was a risk-taker, just someone who knows that there's a way to do this. And I love being part of that formula.

**Melanie Goodman:** Oh, that's terrific. So are you doing that in any professional capacity as a consultant to other school districts at all? Their HR departments or anything like that or is... I mean, you're plenty busy with what you're already doing.

**Kathy Nimmer:** When I retire, which is not in the very distant future, I plan to develop that aspect of being available for consulting and numerous avenues, including supporting new teachers. But yes, including helping districts find ways to make a level playing field for teachers who have disabilities because the unique opportunities that arise from having that representation in a classroom showing not some super blind person, like, "I can do anything. Give me a scalpel and I'll perform brain surgery." It's not about that. And I actually hate that idea, that concept of being somehow superhuman. But just that opportunity to use gifts that we have been given just like everybody else has them, to have that opportunity, I definitely want to develop that as part of my future.

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