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Let's Keep the Main Thing the Main Thing

Center for Persons With Disabilities

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LET'S KEEP THE MAIN THING THE MAIN THING.

August 30, 2012 by JoLynne Lyon

In the next month, the CPD will wrap up its 40th Anniversary events. In the spirit of the celebration, we invited John Copenhaver, Director of the CPD’s Technical Assistance for Excellence in Special Education, to reflect on his career in the field.

Here’s his retrospective:

I was seventeen years old when my high school psychology class took a trip to what was then the state training school in American Fork, Utah. It was 1964 and “special” education was not very special. Parents of children with severe disabilities were counseled by doctors and clergy to take their child to the state hospital saying, “it will be better for them and your family.” Individuals with disabilities did not have the same civil rights as others.

I did volunteer work at the state hospital for the next three years and met a wonderful little girl by the name of Gail. She was five years old at the time. Gail had severe physical and cognitive disabilities and she was placed at the hospital by her parents when she was just a baby.

I know it might sound funny, but even though Gail never uttered a word, we seemed to communicate on a different level. She smiled when I came to feed her. It was quite simple with Gail, it was a communication through heart and spirit.

I was able to get to know her mother and father. They encouraged me. She passed away at ten years and I was able to be part of the service. We visit her gravesite whenever we are in the area.

In those days, the state hospitals were overcrowded, lacking educational programs. They followed a medical model of treatment. The facilities were outdated and depressing. Residents lined the perimeter of the buildings in diapers, rocking back and forth with very little stimulation.

Because of Gail and others like her, I went on to the University to pursue a career in special education. No one in my family had ever attended or graduated from higher education. I worked full time and went to school full time. I couldn’t have done it without the support of my wife, Kathy, who went on to become a wonderful second grade teacher. I was determined to make a difference in the lives of children with disabilities.

The same year I began my special education journey, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 passed and outlawed major forms of discrimination against racial, ethnic, and religious minorities and women. About the time I graduated from college, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act and Education of All Handicapped Act (EHA) passed and opened public school buildings to all children with disabilities.
My first job in special education was in Elmo, Montana on the shores of Flathead Lake. Elmo was on the Flathead and Salish Indian Reservation. Special education teachers in the state and throughout the country were provided training on the "Individualized Education Program" (IEP). We invented how the IEP should work. I taught in special education classrooms for the next eighteen years in various school districts in Montana and helped develop over one thousand IEPs. It was very gratifying to work with parents and children with disabilities. Each child was unique and valued. Between 1975-1990, it was all about physical access, procedural safeguards, and developing appropriate IEPs. During that time, I was blessed to serve as a special education teacher, school psychologist, and special education director.

In 1990, I took a leave of absence from my job in Montana for a position with Mountain Plains Regional Resource Center at Utah State University. Dr. Glenn Latham was the director when I arrived. Since that time, I have experienced the great fortune of working with and providing technical assistance—or advice on how to enhance special education and meet its legal requirements—to numerous state special education directors across the country, including the BIE. I have been at all 183 BIE schools in eighteen states.

From 1990-2012, special education started to change. State complaint investigations and due process hearings increased, and attorneys became part of the educational landscape. Accountability became a buzzword after the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act in 2004. Every State in the country was required to submit a State Performance Plan (SPP) focused on 20 performance and compliance indicators. Part C has 14 indicators. Every February, the State is required to submit an annual performance report (APR) that reports the progress of each indicator. IDEA has created an accountability system that involves the IEP for the student, the SPP for the State, and the APR for the school district. Data, accountability, disputes, and fiscal issues begin to overshadow the focus on the child and their IEP.

In the 1990s and before, the barriers were attitudes and discrimination. Today the barriers for special education are excessive regulations and bureaucracy. Data and accountability are important, but it has been carried to an extreme, at the expense of serving children.

Despite the challenges we currently face, there have been numerous accomplishments over the past thirty years in special education.

- We now have a zero reject policy for children with disabilities in public schools;
- Parents take an active role in their child’s special education program;
- Children with disabilities are viewed as general education first;
- The “inclusion” movement has provided increased involvement in general education for children with disabilities;
- We are using “people first” language out of respect;
- We have eliminated inappropriate language such as “retardation”;
- Infants and toddlers with disabilities now are entitled to services;
- There is more accountability at the State and school district levels;
- Response to Intervention (RTI) systems are getting to at-risk children earlier, before they are placed in special education.

I could go on with more accomplishments we should all be proud of, and continue our efforts to improve programs and services for children with disabilities. This effort should always include families and community.

As I move toward the end of my career, I hope the pendulum starts to swing back to a focus on each child and their IEP team, making sure to always keep the main thing the main thing—children with disabilities and their unique needs.