

SPECIAL EDUCATION – PACS AND DPACS CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE IN SPECIAL EDUCATION

by Cathy Abraham (Part 3 – Newsletter Series reprinted from IMPACT Newsletter, May 2005)

When I wrote this article, back in 2005, I had high hopes that parents could initiate improvements to special education services. Today, I see little change in how services are delivered. At the same time, there is a growing call for increased funding to meet the needs of students with learning differences. Dollars may be necessary, but we also need to review the ways in which money is spent.

Recently I took a look at the Special Education Review, initiated in March 1999. Dr. Linda Siegel and Mr. Steward Ladyman reviewed 454 submissions and made 47 recommendations on ways that services could be improved. Although some of those recommendations are no longer valid, many are still relevant. The recommendations for increased teacher training and quality early intervention have not been met, yet these are two of the most powerful ways to improve the quality of service. The Review is available at <http://www.featbc.org/downloads/review.pdf> and it is well worth reading. With it as a starting point, we can see a path for change that is still on the horizon.

PACs and SPCs have a right to look at Special Education services in their schools and examine whether they are meeting the needs of students. Parents are very capable of doing this task, using a common sense approach that cuts through rhetoric to the heart of helping children learn. We can be effective advocates for quality service quite simply because we care. Over the years, as I have learned to advocate for my daughter, Sheila, I have encountered exemplary professionals, as well as a few questionable practitioners.

As a parent, I have learned to take the best that was offered, and have tried to model those practices in other settings. You can do the same at your school. I learned about real professionalism when my daughter was having dental problems and we were referred to a specialist. On our first visit, we were asked to record her medical history and the nature of her disabilities. The dentist then examined her and explained his findings. The miracle happened when he asked me to tell him more about

Sheila. I outlined her long history of medical interventions, her fears and abilities. We worked together to develop a plan for her dental treatment that took all this information into account.

When I left his office, I was elated. Here was a professional who was willing to work with my daughter, was respectful of her, and sought to work with me. By bringing together his professional expertise with my expertise as a parent, we had a real opportunity for success. Using this example, we see that the model used for delivering services is central to the success of the program for the child. The key is in working together, supported by an exemplary framework. Success does not happen by accident.

Services begin and end in the classroom because that is where children “live” at school. Teachers need to be informed and involved in planning for children with special needs. Parents must be involved to ensure that the plan suits their child. Other specialists bring expertise to help incorporate best practice whenever needed. Too often we assume that if a child has special needs, we should automatically provide the child with an aide who becomes responsible for their education. This neither complies with Special Education policy nor exemplifies best practice. Aides have a role, but it is in providing support, not direction.

Following are basic questions that will help your PAC and SPC determine whether your school is using best practice:

- Can your principal describe the model for service? Is it centered in the classroom?
- Are teachers trained in learning differences to meet the needs of students in their classes?
- Are Individual Education Plans (IEPs) done yearly for every student with special needs? How often are they updated?
- Do parents participate in the development of the IEP in all cases?

The answers to these questions can be revealing, and will give your PAC and SPC a basis from which to plan for improvement. Don't be baffled by the “special” in Special Education. Use what you know about best practice and you will make a difference!