



AT A GLANCE

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Tale of Two Schools

June 2013 Newsletter

Why is it that some schools are committed to serving all of their students in general education classrooms with supports and services brought to them and yet there are still so many schools that insist on maintaining separate classrooms for students with disability labels?

As an advocate I have attended IEP meetings where general educators described the differentiated instructional strategies they have implemented, the high expectations they set for every student, and the success the student with an IEP has made in their class. I have heard administrators explain the school's philosophy that every student is seen as a competent learner and the staff's job is to ensure that everyone is making academic and social progress while sitting next to their peers in a general education classroom.

I recently spoke with a friend and fellow advocate. She shared a story of a young boy with the autism label who had been only allowed to be in the special education classroom in previous years. This year, after many meetings the staff agreed to try having the student receive his education in the general education classroom. But one thing that was different was the boy was only coming to school for the morning, then he left and went home for each afternoon. His general education teacher was thrilled with his progress, but did note when lunch was drawing near the student began more protesting behavior, which some days escalated to physical aggression to others. Instead of viewing this new behavior as a reason to have him return to the special education room, the team talked with his mother and determined the boy was actually communicating his frustration and sadness about having to leave school and go home. What did this thoughtful staff decide – that the boy needed to be at school for the entire day! Because of the staff's belief that the student is capable and deserves the same opportunities as others, he will lead an inclusive life in the community and at school.

Of course, I attend more IEP meetings with families where the special educators and administrators are the most vocal and share their sincere beliefs that students need to meet their subjective criteria in order to show they are ready to exercise their right to be in a general education classroom. I know another young boy in different school, he receives all of his academic classes in the special education classroom, he expresses frustration, which some days can escalate to physical aggression to others. Instead of understanding that he was communicating that he had no friends in his second grade class and had not been invited to a birthday party, he was told he won't be able to join the second grade class for lunch and Music or PE class until he shows he is ready to behave. As a result of the staff's reluctance to see the youngster as a competent learner, he is destined to continue to spend most of his day in a self contained special education classroom.

How can we ensure all students have the same rights regardless of their zip code? Unfortunately, many times parents of children with disability labels will band together and try to make changes. However, when inclusion of kids with disabilities is defined as the issue, it is relegated to only being a "fringe" issue that schools only have to occasionally deal with when "those parents" rise up. If we shift our viewpoint and frame the issue to how we educate all the kids that walk through a school door, it becomes a general education issue and our circle of families that are affected suddenly become every family at the school. Then, schools cannot dismiss the parents as members of a small subgroup, but instead will have to come to terms with how all students are treated in the school. Let's strive for one school system for all.

Identify your vision:

Focus on what every parent wants for their child.

Use your voice:

Have conversations with other parents and build on the similar educational concerns you share.

Work together:

Form alliances with parents of children with and without disability labels, speak as one parent group.



Resources

The power of a personal story can make such an impact on a variety of audiences. There is an app for that - a free app! Partners in Policymaking's *Telling Your Story* app helps you create and practice your personal story with step-by-step directions and examples on how to best present yourself and be heard by policy makers and the media. [Click here](#) to learn more about the app and begin using it.



Websites

There are many advocacy tools parents and educators can access to create positive change. [Click here](#) for the National PTA Advocacy Toolkit.

Transforming Schools Through Community Organizing from the Harvard Family Research Project explains the difference between parent involvement and community organizing and how parents can effect change. [Click here](#) to read more.

Please let me know if you're interested in one of my presentations and/or customized consulting and coaching.

Remember, what we anticipate, determines what we find!

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As a parent and an educator, I bring 35+ years of experience and enthusiasm to create positive change for students, families, and educators!

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