

**Key points:**

- **JoLeta Reynolds Award winner credited for being LRE leader**
- **Administrator changes beliefs about inclusion in wake of statewide settlement**
- **Colleague: Thompson able to 'look at big picture of very daunting task'**

**Thompson a witness to history, agent of change**

Anne Louise Thompson was always busy as the person charged with implementing a statewide settlement agreement in Connecticut.

The result of a lawsuit, the 2002 [agreement](#) required that children with intellectual disabilities be included as often as possible in general education settings. But Thompson, who became chief of the state [Bureau of Special Education](#) in February, said she did not try to persuade people about the merits of the settlement so much as show them what needed to be done.

It is Thompson's instrumental [role](#) in implementing and maintaining statewide LRE goals and objectives that earned her LRP's 3rd Annual JoLeta Reynolds Service to Special Education Award, which recognizes a professional who demonstrates dedication, excellence and integrity in serving children with disabilities and their families. Thompson was presented the award during a May 6 luncheon ceremony at LRP's National Institute in Charlotte.

"Some teachers and administrators, even some parents, feel that you can't do something unless you believe in it," Thompson said. "I have found that by changing some people's behavior, that may change their attitude."

For example, teachers and administrators may not think certain children can be educated in their home school, let alone in a general ed classroom, Thompson said. But if they are told they must include these children in their classrooms and curriculum, and then are shown how to do so, those assumptions can change.

"While you might not believe it, you need to put it into practice," Thompson said she told people about placing students with intellectual disabilities into general education classrooms.

Later, those same people would say, "I was told I would have to teach these children in my classroom, in our school, so I did, and now, I would never go back to the way it used to be," Thompson said. "I hear these stories all the time."

**A child of her times**

Growing up in Lancaster, Pa., Thompson had two role models for her eventual profession: Her mother was a special education teacher who worked with children with learning disabilities, and her father was board president of a regional intermediate unit that served children with disabilities.

At her high school and in church, Thompson began working with children with intellectual disabilities. But she was also influenced by the tenor of the early 70s, when the civil rights movement was expanding beyond issues of race to include those with disabilities.

"I grew up in a family that had always dealt with social justice issues," she said, "and I see disabilities as one of those."

After getting a bachelor's in special education from Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Thompson took a job as a special education teacher in Newport News, Va., and then as an elementary educational support specialist in Simsbury, Conn.

In Simsbury, she noticed that officials were starting to keep children with disabilities in the district, as opposed to sending them to a regional program.

Later, as a special education teacher for the EASTCONN Regional Education Service Center in North Windham, Conn., she worked with students at a public high school who lived at the Mansfield Training School, a large residential facility for children and adults with intellectual disabilities.

Historically, people were placed in such institutions at an early age and never left, even to go to school. Around the country, however, advocates were demanding that people with intellectual disabilities be allowed to live in community environments.

"That is who we were taking out of the segregated training school and placing into our regular high school setting in Connecticut," Thompson said. "We were showing how we could educate these young people from the institution while simultaneously assisting others who were working to close down the residential facility."

### **Working with parents**

In 2002, the state settled a lawsuit called *P.J. et al. v. State of Connecticut*, No. 291CV00180 (D. Conn., settled Feb. 28, 2002) and Thompson, who had joined the bureau in 1997, was asked to coordinate the settlement's implementation.

The agreement ended in August 2007, with a three-year window for plaintiffs to allege noncompliance, but they have not done so to date, Thompson said.

Thompson knew that the settlement would not be popular with everyone, according to Nancy Prescott, director of the [Connecticut Parent Advocacy Center](#).

"She was really able to look at the big picture of a very daunting task in a relatively short period of time and try to turn people's thinking around," she said, and that included families who harbored doubts about the ability of the public schools to do right by their children.

"She spent a lot of time meeting with groups of parents, trying to help them see the possibilities that could come with being in their neighborhood school with typical peers," Prescott said.

That respect for parents has continued, said Prescott, who recalled an OSEP conference last year at which the two women were on a panel together.

"We had never really presented together before," Prescott said, and the audience included Prescott's federal project officer. "For her to turn to me and say, 'I think Nancy has a good point about this' ... is, again, a validation that we were not just an add-on, that there was a real reason for us to be involved in this [as parents]."

### **Part of a new crew**

From a strictly legal standpoint, Connecticut was the defendant in the *P.J.* lawsuit, so it might be assumed that the state had resisted making the changes the plaintiffs were seeking.

Thompson was part of a new cohort of officials that was sympathetic to the plaintiffs' demands, however, according to Nancy Stark, who joined the bureau as a consultant on literacy and learning disabilities a year after Thompson was hired. Later, Stark became director of school improvement for the department as a whole.

In fact, Stark said, Thompson and her colleagues sought to fold all students with disabilities into the settlement's framework, not just those with intellectual disabilities.

The moniker of the day, Stark said, was "resistance to instruction" -- the idea that teachers should zero in on students who were struggling and see if, despite a more focused approach, the students were still having trouble.

Today, that concept is known as response to intervention, said Stark, who collaborated with Thompson in 1999 in writing new guidelines for identifying children with learning disabilities. Stark also went out into the field with Thompson to teach people how to use them and help such students gain access to the general education curriculum. But the principle hasn't changed, she said.

"What we really were trying to change is exactly what the response to intervention is saying, 'Let's give all the kids the help they need, when they need it, at the most critical junction, and that really you can't classify kids as learning disabled unless you've done that,'" she said.

### **Primed for a role**

These and other experiences made Thompson enthusiastic about the *P.J.* settlement, according to George Dowaliby, who became bureau chief in 1998, a year after Thompson came on board, and now works as director of Technical Assistance and Brokering Services for the [Capitol Region Education Council](#) in Hartford, Conn.

"It wasn't a case of convincing Anne Louise that this was the direction that the department and the state needed to go," he

said. "That was her belief anyway."

The same could not be said of all district administrators, however, he said.

"We took a hard line with districts in terms of letting them know that this was not an option," he said. "It was a very strong message that we weren't going away, that we were convinced of what we needed to do, and that we were going to ensure that we were bringing people along with us."

For Thompson, it was and is about giving people the tools to do things they may not have thought were possible, including placing a child with an intellectual disability in a general ed classroom.

"If nobody at the table knows how to educate that child, you're never going to put him there," she said. "That's how we've moved the system over the last five years, is [by] trying to [add to teachers'] skill bases, knowledge bases -- putting pressure on people to keep putting more children in regular classes while you're also making sure the staff knows how to do that."

In short, Thompson said, it would have been nice to persuade everyone of the virtue of a more inclusive approach, but a federal judge was watching, and results were what counted.

"I didn't have that luxury to wait until the whole world changed their belief system here in Connecticut," she said. "I'm going to help change your behavior," she would tell people, "and maybe along the way, your attitude will change about the benefits of children with disabilities being in a regular classroom."

*Mark W. Sherman, a Washington bureau correspondent, covers special education issues for LRP Publications.*

*Nominate a colleague for the 4<sup>th</sup> Annual JoLeta Reynolds Award, which will be announced at the 30<sup>th</sup> National Institute in Las Vegas. The deadline for submissions is **Jan 19, 2009**. Click [here](#) for more information on how to submit a nomination.*

**May 6, 2008**

Copyright 2008© LRP Publications