



SPEAK OUT

Connecticut Parent Advocacy Center, Inc.

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Change with the Times

Parents can be their child's best advocate because they have the greatest interest in seeing that their children receive the services they need.

Unfortunately, not all parents are prepared to act as effective advocates for their kids. They do not know the specific provisions of the state and federal laws which ensure that their children have a right to a free and appropriate public education. In addition, parents often feel intimidated, unsure or even guilty about requesting that their children receive services tailored to their individual needs. These feelings may be further complicated by the frustrations and anger that build after years of being told that special programs do not exist or are too costly.

—from SPEAK OUT, Winter 1983

As we prepared this twenty-fifth anniversary issue of SPEAK OUT, some of the staff at the Connecticut Parent Advocacy Center skimmed through past issues of the newsletter. We considered previous topics and wondered about trends. We read old editorials, book reviews, Dear Parent Advocate columns, and letters from families as we looked for ideas on how to tell the story of what has been happening with special education, equal rights and opportunities, and advocacy during the time our readership has grown from 75 to more than 19,500.

That some things have changed, and for the better, is obvious. Over the course of the last two and a half decades, new laws have strengthened earlier protections against discrimination and added further guarantees to an appropriate education for all children. Public schools are now required to provide all students, including those with disabilities, with a high-quality education and to include parents in making decisions and keeping track of progress. Advances in technology have led to the development of new assistive tools that help individuals with disabilities and their families in ways only dreamed of years ago.

But as our review of twenty-five years' worth of newsletters also brought home to us, some things, perhaps many things, have not changed. We came across the passage quoted above in a cover article and chose it as the opener to this issue not only because it dates back to our first year of publication but also because it serves as a reminder that although some progress has been made, more is needed. The story is not over yet.

Parents of children with disabilities continue to experience frustrations and anger as they face obstacles, lack of resources, and lack of understanding. They must work hard and at times challenge the system for educational opportunities for their children. They still often feel intimidated, unsure, or even guilty when requesting services.

Just as in the past, however, parent involvement is vital to children's success. Today's parents need to be prepared to act, know the laws that safeguard their children's rights, feel confident and knowledgeable when requesting services, and work with schools to ensure that their children have access to and benefit from the programs that can help them achieve all they can. After all, parents still make the best advocates for their children.

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**The Connecticut Parent
Advocacy Center, Inc.**

is a statewide nonprofit organization that offers information and support to parents of children with disabilities and the professionals who work with them. The center is staffed primarily by parents of children with disabilities who assist other parents in understanding how to participate more effectively in their children's education. A range of services is available, including telephone consultation; workshops and in-service presentations for parents, schools, and service providers; a website; and a lending library of books, CDs, videotapes, and DVDs.

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Celebrate the Season

Summer can be a great time to plan activities that the whole family can enjoy. For some outdoor fun, visit one of Connecticut's many parks, playgrounds, or nature centers that are accessible for children with disabilities.

At **Camp Harkness**, in Waterford, a state park designed specifically for people with disabilities, families can relax at the beach, explore along the boardwalk that stretches into the marshes, or picnic on the grassy lawns. Connecticut residents with physical or intellectual disabilities can obtain a no-fee pass for admission. This is the site of CPAC's annual Friends and Family Picnic, held this year on July 12, and we highly recommend it.

Jonathan's Dream Playground, in West Hartford, is a fun play place for children with or without disabilities. Designed to be universally accessible, it offers swings, ropes, ramps, sandpits, and slides. Admission is free.

The **University of Connecticut Animal Sciences Department**, in Storrs, opens its barns to the public for self-guided tours. Almost all the barns are wheelchair accessible. Children can get close to the horses, cows, and sheep, although petting and feeding are not permitted. The Dairy Bar offers ice cream made from cream and milk from the cows. Admission to the barns is free; ice cream, alas, is not.

Additional information on these and other fun places in our state can be found in **Accessible Connecticut: A Guide to Recreation for Children with Disabilities and Their Families**, by Nora Ellen Groce, Lawrence C. Kaplan, and Josiah David Kaplan (Yale University Press, 2002). A copy is available from CPAC's lending library.



Summer activities that families can share at home or around the neighborhood are described on CPAC's website, www.cpacinc.org. Click on the "Resources" tab and select "Summer Fun!" More ideas can be found in two guides available from our lending library: **Fun for Everyone: A Guide to Adapted Leisure Activities for Children with Disabilities**, by Jackie Levin and Kathy Enselein (Ablenet, 1990), and **Backyards and Butterflies: Ways to Include Children with Disabilities in Outdoor Activities**, by Doreen Greenstein (New York State Rural Health and Safety Council, 1993).

If summer offers some quiet time, consider a family discussion about disabilities. Reading one of these children's books, available from CPAC's lending library, can be a good way to start:

- **All Kinds of Friends, Even Green!**, by Ellen B. Senisi (Woodbine House, 2002)
- **Arnie and His School Tools: Simple Sensory Solutions That Build Success**, by Jennifer Veenendall (Autism Asperger Publishing Company, 2008)
- **Elana's Ears, or How I Became the Best Big Sister in the World**, by Gloria Roth Lowell (Magination Press, 2000)



For educational computer activities, try these interactive websites:

www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/hall/ • www.learner.org/jnorth/
www.starchild.gsfc.nasa.gov • www.coolmath.com



Dear Parent Advocate,

My daughter, who is just finishing fifth grade, worked very hard this year and really improved her reading and math skills. I am proud of her efforts and accomplishments. But I am also worried that she will lose ground during the summer vacation and will need to catch up all over again in September. Can you suggest some activities that will keep her mind working?

—Involved Mom

Dear Involved Mom,

Your concerns are well founded. Studies show that during summer, all children and teens experience learning losses when they do not spend time on educational activities. Most students lose about two months of math computation skills, and low-income students tend to lose more than two months in reading achievement.

But summer can present many opportunities for your child to learn. Sports, music, art, crafts, drama, and other activities at camps, parks, and community programs can help your child discover new interests or special talents, build self-esteem, and improve important skills, such as how to interact with peers, follow rules, stay on task, and use self-control.

You can also engage your child in learning activities at home, in the car, or at the beach, public pool, or playground. You can model literacy skills or show the practical uses of math during visits to the local library or the supermarket. These activities can be playful, fun, and free. Here are some ideas:

Literacy activities

- Encourage your child to listen to books on tape or CD, which are available at public libraries.
- Help your child organize a summer book club with friends.
- Have your child practice reading aloud to younger siblings or older relatives.
- Show your child how to write and send postcards to friends and relatives.
- Help your child create a journal of summer adventures with drawings, mementoes, and written descriptions.

Math activities

- Have your child round off prices of food items and estimate the total supermarket bill.
- Cook or bake with your child to practice measurement, fractions, and following directions.
- Help your child make a chart of baseball or other sport

statistics and use the numbers to practice adding and subtracting.

- Make up word problems for your child to solve with a calculator in the car or on the bus or train.

Study skills activities

- Post a large calendar and help your child keep track of outings and special occasions.
- Involve your child in planning a picnic by making a list of what to pack and drawing a map of a good location.
- Have your child make shopping lists with items organized by categories.
- Help your child learn keyboarding. Instructional books and audio materials (for example, *Mavis Beacon Teaches Typing*) are available at public libraries.
- Arrange for your child to try out an assistive technology device.

ReadWriteThink, the website of the International Reading Association and the National Council of Teachers of English, includes ways to help children and teens explore reading and writing. Activities are organized by grades and ages. Go to www.readwritethink.org and click on "Summer Activities."

Figure This!, the website of the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, contains math challenges for children and information for families in English and Spanish. Visit www.figurethis.org.

Sources:

"Doesn't Every Child Deserve a Memorable Summer?" Center for Summer Learning, Johns Hopkins University, www.summerlearning.org

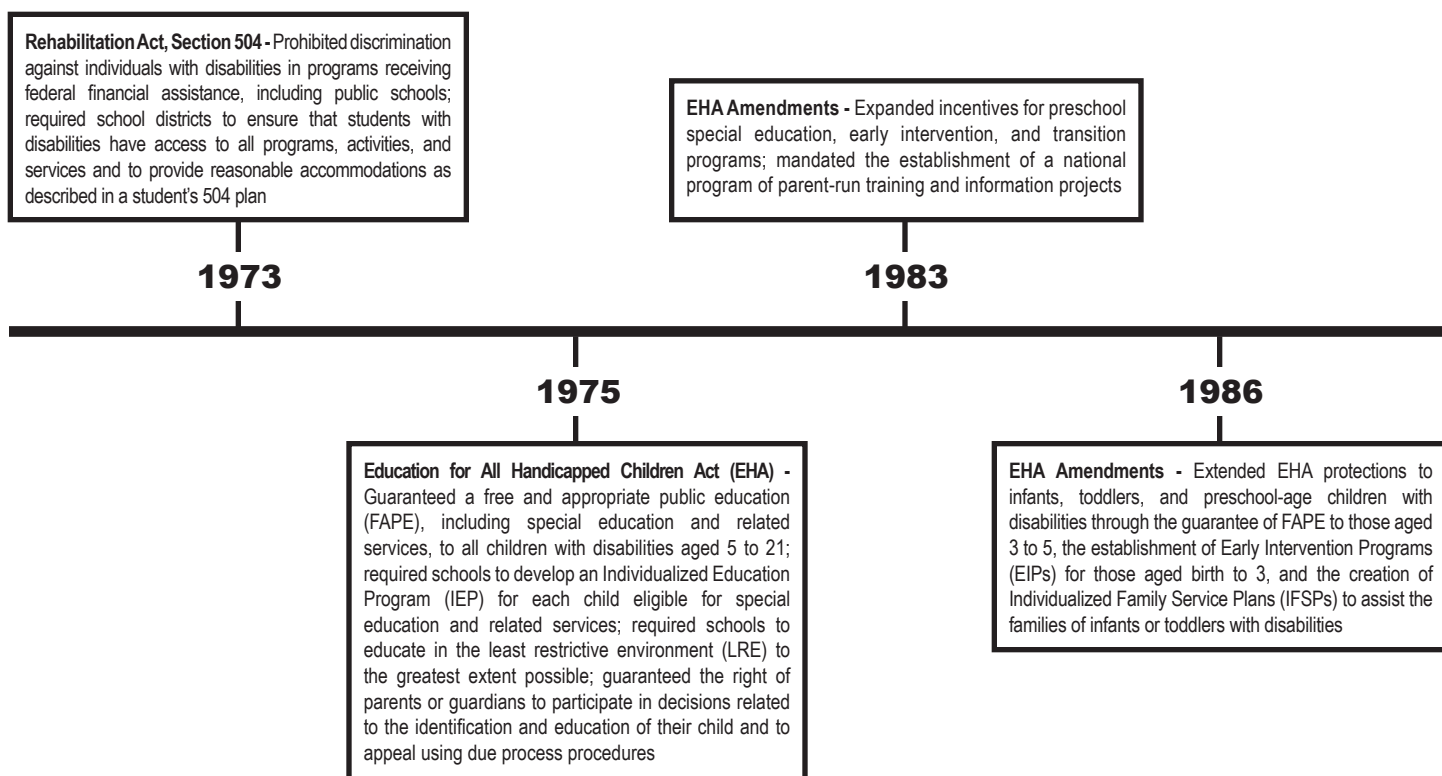
"Summer Activities for Kids with Learning Disabilities: Making Wise Choices," GreatSchools Inc., www.schwablearning.org

History in the Making

The story of disability legislation in the United States is a long one and begins in 1798 with a federal law that authorized the provision of medical services to disabled seamen. For most of our nation's history, however, federal disability laws dealt with the rehabilitation of war veterans, and the rights and needs of civilians with disabilities were largely ignored by the government until the latter part of the twentieth century. The impetus for more comprehensive legislation came with the civil rights movement of the 1960s, when a number of minority groups—including people with disabilities—organized and demanded equality. During the 1970s, the disability rights movement gained momentum, and the federal government responded by enacting two key pieces of legislation: the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHA) of 1975. These laws had major implications for children with disabilities and their families and are the foundation of the safeguards against disability-based discrimination and the guarantees of equal opportunities in our present-day education system. Congress has since passed many amendments to these laws, as well as several new pieces of legislation, which have provided additional protections.

Over time, public attitudes toward individuals with disabilities also improved, owing largely to educational efforts that accompanied new legislation. Perceptions shifted, and people with disabilities came to be seen as limited not by their disabilities, but by circumstances. Circumstances, however, can be altered by advocacy, political action, and legislation, and today, people with disabilities achieve more than was believed possible in the past.

None of these positive changes would have occurred without the hard work and persistence of many individuals dedicated to the



Resources:

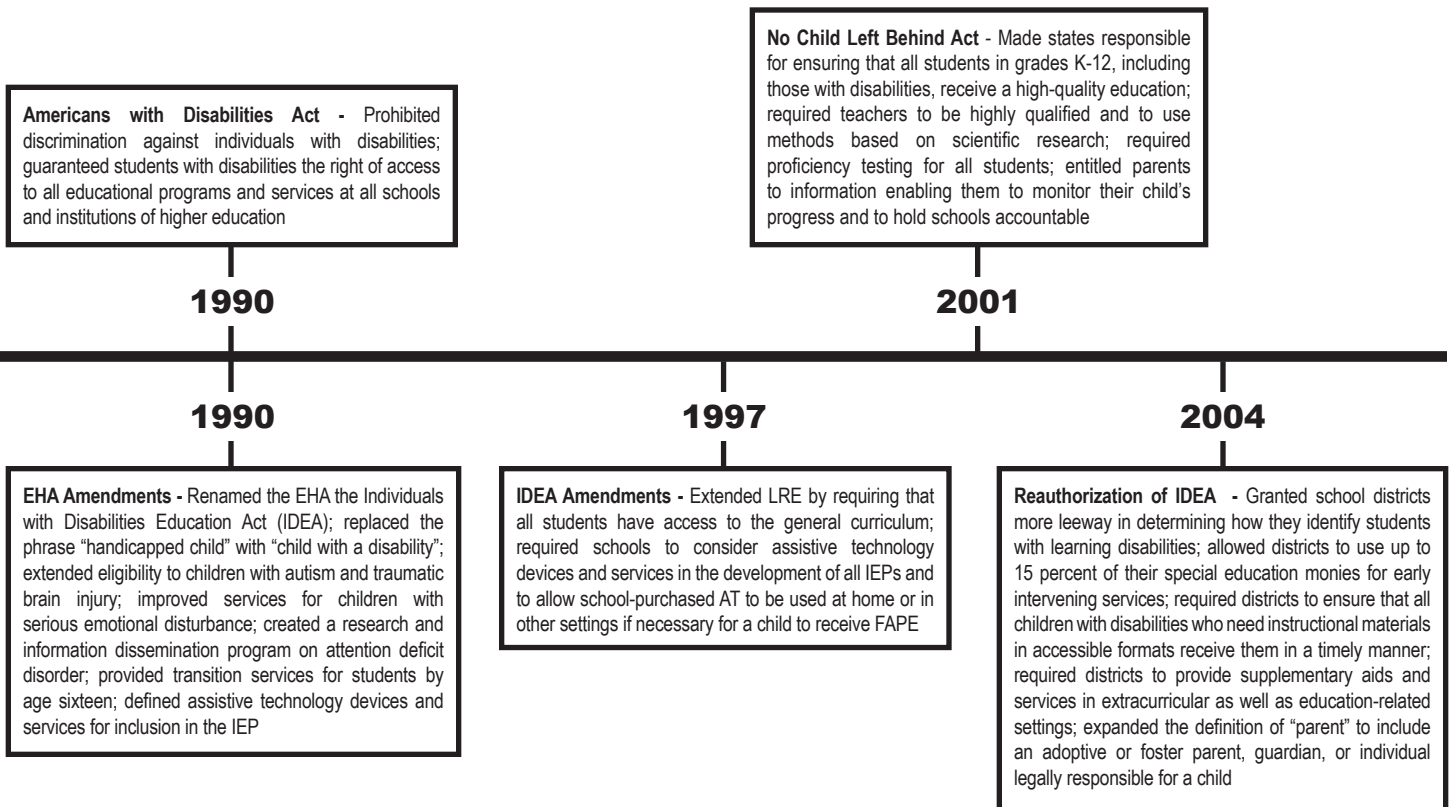
Negotiating the Special Education Maze: A Guide for Parents and Teachers, by Winifred Anderson, Stephen Chitwood, Deidre Hayden, and Cherie Takemoto (Woodbine House, 2008) First published in 1982, this classic guide helps parents, advocates, and special educators navigate the special education system. The updated fourth edition covers the latest changes in special education laws and offers advice on seeking an evaluation, planning an IEP, resolving disagreements between families and schools, and preparing for the transition from high school to adult life. A copy is available from CPAC's lending library.

A Parent's Guide to Special Education in Connecticut (Connecticut State Department of Education, 2007) This guide provides information about laws, regulations, and policies affecting special education programs and services. Its question and answer format aims to help families understand key concepts of the law and how to be effective partners with schools throughout the special education process. Contact CPAC for a copy, or view it online at www.sde.ct.gov.

Building the Legacy: IDEA 2004 is a training curriculum developed by the National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities. It includes handouts with information on accessing special education and related services, definitions of key terms in IDEA, and the 2004 changes in the law. To download "Top 10 Basics of Special Education" and "Overview of Key Changes in IDEA 2004," visit www.nichcy.org/training/A-handouts.pdf.

cause of equal rights and equal opportunities for people with disabilities. Among those at the forefront of this effort were parents of children with disabilities who formed coalitions to provide training and information to other parents. These programs grew in number and size, and by 1983, thirty such organizations were serving parents of children with a variety of disabilities. Congress acknowledged the significant role parents play in the education process and the effectiveness of the coalitions' peer model by including in its 1983 EHA amendments a mandate to set up a national system of Parent Training and Information programs (PTIs). This is when the Connecticut Parent Advocacy Center—and SPEAK OUT—entered the story.

In 1983, the Connecticut Developmental Disabilities Council granted funding for a parent-run training and information program, the Parent Advocacy Center. In the fall of that year, this agency and another new parent coalition called SPEAK (Supporting Parents and Educators Advocating for Kids) began joint publication of a newsletter titled SPEAK OUT. Its stated purpose was to provide "information about current legislation, area programs, resources for parents and professionals and a calendar of events." A year later, the Summer 1984 issue contained an announcement that the U.S. Department of Education had awarded a grant establishing the Connecticut Parent Advocacy Center, Inc., as a statewide PTI that would "offer workshops and assistance to help parents in their efforts to work with professionals in developing and obtaining appropriate special education programs." Twenty-five years after the first issue, CPAC continues to use SPEAK OUT to promote advocacy by helping families of children with disabilities keep current on the law, learn about resources, and connect with other families and with professionals.



Sources:

"Federal Laws and AT Use," Assistive Technology Training Online Project, www.atto.buffalo.edu; "No Child Left Behind," Connecticut Parent Advocacy Center, www.cpacinc.org; "A Primer on the IDEA 2004 Regulations," Council for Exceptional Children, www.cec.sped.org; "Digest of Education Statistics, 2004: Federal Programs for Education and Related Activities," National Center for Education Statistics, www.nces.ed.gov; "The Education of Children and Youth with Special Needs: What Do the Laws Say?" National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities, www.nichcy.org; "What Is the TAPP Network?" *Coalition Quarterly* 5, no.4 (winter 1987-88); "A Brief History of Disability Rights Legislation in the United States," Universal Design Education Online, www.udeducation.org



Technology Advances

In the past twenty-five years, one of the greatest changes we at CPAC—along with everyone else—have witnessed is the expansion of technology. Technology has become both more sophisticated and more accessible: in our everyday activities, greater numbers of us use increasingly “smart” tools to help us perform more and more tasks. When our agency started in 1983, staff used telephones and typewriters (and paste-on letters for the titles in *SPEAK OUT*). Today we rely on desktop and laptop computers, a server, a scanner, and a fax machine to help us maintain databases, communicate with families and professionals via telefax and email, learn about resources on the Internet, post information on our website and blog, create PowerPoint demonstrations and other training materials, and write and design our newsletter.

We also have seen how advances in technology have been applied specifically to developing devices that aid people with disabilities in overcoming challenges and living more independently. These devices, referred to as assistive technology (AT), are designed to level the playing field for people with disabilities by helping them participate fully in school, work, recreation, and social activities. Individuals with disabilities have been using simple, low-tech assistive devices, such as magnifying glasses and manual wheelchairs, for many years, and these aids remain invaluable tools for many people. But as technology in general has advanced, assistive technology has followed suit, and more high-tech assistive devices, including electronic and computerized equipment, are now available.

In the past twenty years, the federal government has sought to support the use of assistive technology through legislation. In 1988, Congress passed Public Law 108-3464, the Technology-Related Services for Individuals with Disabilities Act, which in 1998 was renamed the Assistive Technology Act. This law made funds available to each state for the establishment of an assistive technology program aimed at raising awareness of and increasing access to assistive technology for individuals with disabilities, family members, educators, employers, and professionals. The Connecticut Tech Act Project (www.cttechact.com) was launched in 1992. In partnership with other community organizations, it now operates AT demonstration centers, a device loan program, and an equipment recycling center. It also provides training and technical assistance and works to increase public awareness by participating in fairs, expos, conferences, and other events.

During this time, special education legislation has also addressed the use of assistive technology. Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, public schools are required to consider assistive technology during the development of a student’s Individualized Education Program (IEP), and parents have the right to request a formal assessment of their child’s AT needs. When assistive technology is included in an IEP, the school district is responsible for providing the devices and/or services, including training of teachers, aides, and the student.

Advances in technology have led to new ways for children with disabilities to communicate, move and travel, learn and study, participate in the classroom, stay connected with friends and the rest of the world, and transition to postsecondary education or employment. To take advantage of these developments, parents and educators need to stay informed about innovations and resources and work together to determine



which specific devices and services are most appropriate for a particular child. This is an ongoing process that requires not only keeping up with changes in technology but also reevaluating a child’s AT needs as he or she develops physically, cognitively, and emotionally. The increased opportunities and gains in independence are worth the effort.

Sources:

“About Us,” Connecticut Tech Act Project, www.cttechact.com; “Assistive Technology 101” and *Family Information Guide to Assistive Technology*, Family Center on Technology and Disability, www.fctd.info; “What Is Assistive Technology?” National Assistive Technology Research Institute, www.natri.uky.edu

Assistive Technology Toolbox

Thousands of AT options are available to help people with disabilities eat, dress, move, see, hear, communicate, learn, work, and play. Here are just a few of the many low- and high-tech options that can help students with disabilities access educational materials and instruction:

Reading

- handheld magnifiers
- large print text
- books on tape
- talking electronic devices for single words
- digital books or information for MP3 players

Writing

- word cards or word wall
- specialized pen or pencil grips
- paper with highlighted lines
- talking spell checkers
- computers with specialized keyboard or mouse

Math

- abacuses
- calculators with large keys or large display
- talking calculators
- tactile/voice clocks or rulers

Studying

- color-coded tabs or paper
- highlighters
- electronic organizers
- voice output reminders for tasks and assignments

Resources:

The **Family Center on Technology and Disability** offers a wide range of free information resources on assistive technology, many of them available in both English and Spanish. Contact CPAC to obtain a copy of the fact sheet “Assistive Technology 101” or to borrow the 2008 AT Resources CD-Rom. To download the comprehensive *Family Information Guide to Assistive Technology*, visit www.fctd.info.

The **National Public Website on Assistive Technology** provides assistive technology and disability-related information. To access their searchable database, which allows users to learn about and locate AT products and vendors, go to www.assistivetech.net.

Bookshare.org offers a library of more than 38,000 books and 150 periodicals in Braille, large print, or digital formats, with free membership for schools and qualifying students of all ages. For more information, visit www.bookshare.org.

Assistive Technology News provides information on assistive technology products, including the Read:OutLoud Bookshare.org Edition text reader. The text reader software offers reading comprehension strategies and instructional supports, as well as audio feedback, electronic highlighting, and note-taking features. The device will be available at no cost to qualifying students beginning in the 2008–09 school year. Additional information is available at www.atechnews.com/freetextreader.html.

The **New England Assistive Technology Resource and Education Center** provides AT information, demonstrations, expos, training, and professional development workshops. For more information or to browse online for new and used equipment available at the NEAT Equipment Restoration Center, located in Hartford, CT, go to www.neatmarketplace.org.

Achieving Success

Since the first issue rolled out of the photocopy machine twenty-five years ago, SPEAK OUT has served as a tool for providing families and professionals with information about changing laws and services, policy reforms, new technology and instructional practices, training programs, community organizations, and resources. Knowledge is vital to effective advocacy, and part of CPAC's mission is to educate. But having knowledge is not enough; effective advocacy also requires using that knowledge. It takes the will to act, determination, and persistence—those same qualities that families and educators reached for as they fought for the rights and protections our children have today.

With this in mind, SPEAK OUT editors over the years have used these pages not only to inform but also to inspire. Our favorite means to this end—and probably our readers' favorite part of the newsletter, too—is the “success story.” Parents often share with CPAC staff descriptions of their family's struggles and their child's successes. These accounts are moving (especially when they come with photographs), and with permission, we pass them on to our readers to offer encouragement and motivation.

In honor of SPEAK OUT's twenty-fifth anniversary, we decided to solicit four success stories that might provide both inspiration and a look at how, or whether, some things have changed since the newsletter's inception. In our mini-survey, we asked two teachers and two parents to answer questions about “then” and “now.” Although our sample is too tiny to allow us to draw conclusions about trends in parent

Then...

Thirty-eight years ago, my first teaching position was in a community-based day care center in New London. I had thirteen four-year-olds in my class, and at any given time, at least three of my students were diagnosed with disorders. I remember several children identified with hyperactivity (today referred to as ADHD), others with anxiety and autism. Since there was no special education law back then, none of these children received any special services from the school district, but community providers



encouraged families to send their children to our program because we had a reputation for accepting and successfully including all children, regardless of their needs. Parents worked closely with me and with their pediatrician and child guidance clinic staff to figure out how to support their child. The children thrived, and parents maintained a relationship with staff long after their children moved on to public school.

My training had prepared me to expect that I would be able to help every child be successful—to be engaged and participate in the class. I had taken some courses on working with children with specific disabilities, but my background in child development was what really helped me understand and respect learning differences in each young student. It also laid the foundation for me to expect that building relationships with families would be an important part of my work. I was trained in a laboratory school, so my background included several years

of experience working directly with children and parents, as well as valuable opportunities to observe experienced professionals as they interacted with families.

I had a great relationship with the parents of most of the special needs children I taught. A high level of trust allowed us to communicate openly about each child's unique needs. Informal sharing of information on a daily basis helped me know what to expect so that I could alter my plans for the day. This enabled me to ensure that I could include these children in activities and give them the support they needed to be successful in my class.

As a young teacher, I felt it was my responsibility to figure out how to reach every child, but in one instance I was not successful. There was a girl in my class whom I was not able to teach effectively. I knew she was not developing like other children her age, but no matter what I did, I wasn't able to help her be successful in that environment. I believe it was no coincidence that my relationship with this child's parents was not as strong as my relationship with the other parents. I couldn't make a connection with them, and because there wasn't that openness and sharing of information, we weren't able to figure things out together. This was a disadvantage for the child and for me as a teacher. I often cite my lack of success with this child as the reason I decided to go back to school to earn a graduate degree in special education.

expectations or teacher training, we feel safe in pointing out one thing that seems *not* to have changed since SPEAK OUT was first published: the importance of family involvement. A theme common to these four stories—and almost all the others we have heard, read, and shared in SPEAK OUT over the years—is that when parents and schools communicate openly about children’s needs and work as partners to meet those needs, children achieve success, however that may be defined or measured.

This observation is supported by a growing body of research. Studies show that children whose parents are actively engaged in the education process tend to be more successful students. They are more likely to earn good grades, attend school regularly, behave appropriately, graduate, and go on to postsecondary education. Strong family–school connections benefit children in all age groups and from families of all economic, racial/ethnic, and educational backgrounds. Read these stories and be inspired to strengthen your own connections and help the children achieve success.

Source:

A New Wave of Evidence: The Impact of School, Family, and Community Connections on Student Achievement, by Anne T. Henderson and Karen L. Mapp (National Center for Family and Community Connections with Schools, 2002)

Now...

As a special needs preschool teacher in the Lyme/Old Lyme Public School District, I work in an integrated classroom with children between the ages of three and six. There is a 50:50 ratio of children identified with special needs to children who are considered to be developing within a typical range. The program is play based with an emphasis on language and literacy, along with motor, adaptive, and social/behavioral skills. The measure of a student’s success is more than mastered goals and objectives; it is building a solid foundation for future learning. My role is to inspire each child to see the joy in learning and appreciate his or her individual strengths and abilities.

I have been in this position for almost twenty years, and during that time I have seen dramatic changes in the field of special education. When I began teaching preschool in the district, I had a self-contained classroom with as many as ten children, all identified with special needs. My students did not have the peer models they needed to maximize their learning experiences. Inappropriate behaviors were especially difficult to address without developmentally appropriate peers. Federal and state laws, as well as strong parent and teacher advocacy of children’s rights, have brought about positive changes. I see the benefits of integration daily as my students make amazing progress and are included in play dates with their friends. Special education teachers now work collaboratively with classroom teachers and within regular classrooms to support learning for all children. In addition, science and research guide us to recognize how individual children learn and how to meet their needs effectively. Continued professional development and education help teachers keep current with technology, educational strategies, and the role parents play in their child’s education.

The professional development I received through agencies such as The Early Childhood Network and Project Learn, along with NAEYC training, taught me the significance of establishing positive relationships with families. Parent involvement in school is essential to a child’s overall development and success. I respect the parents of my students as partners in all aspects of their child’s preschool experience. Communication is vital in developing a positive home–school connection. Regular dialog helps keep parents informed of their child’s progress and encourages consistency in supporting their child’s goals. I promote this through home visits, monthly calendars, weekly newsletters, telephone calls, emails, and a school journal that travels back and forth with each child daily.

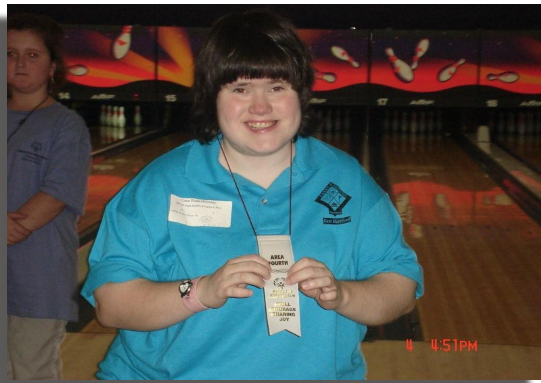
I had a four-year-old boy in my class who was making progress managing transitions independently and selecting and sustaining play activities appropriately in school. His parents were not seeing the same progress at home. Because we had established a good relationship, they were comfortable sharing their concerns and frustration with me. Together we were able to develop a working plan to address their son’s behaviors at home. With a picture schedule and a play choice board on the refrigerator, he had the structure he needed. His parents were determined and very consistent, and it wasn’t long before they could celebrate his success at home. The reinforcement his parents provided at home contributed greatly to his overall achievement.



Then...

My daughter Cara Rose is now twenty-four years old and employed through MARC, Inc., of Manchester. She works five days a week with a job coach and several other workers at Lutz Children's Museum in Manchester and CT Works in Vernon doing light housekeeping and caring for the animals. Cara has intellectual disabilities and fine and gross motor disabilities. Doctors have never been able to give her a diagnosis, but it is clear that she has a rare syndrome. She is extremely sociable with a wonderful sense of humor, and she has many friends both at work and through Special Olympics and her social clubs.

Cara started with Birth to Three and CREC at eighteen months of age and proceeded to the town public schools, which she attended through graduation. Our main concern for Cara was for her to become as independent as possible, be happy with her work, and be challenged in her work.



We had a roller coaster ride with the school system from the time Cara was three until she was twenty-one. Oftentimes school personnel either did not know what their responsibilities were or refused to follow the IEP. With the help of CPAC, we were able to understand what Cara's state and federal rights were and encouraged the school system to comply. Information was shared using a communication book that accompanied Cara to school each day, and we had meetings with school personnel, sometimes monthly, to follow her progress.

Our relationship with the school system definitely affected Cara's success. Cara would not be as independent and active as she is if we had not been as involved with developing her school program, especially as she transitioned to high school and to a work setting. The school system was not prepared for

children like Cara. Other children with special needs have benefited from the new programs developed because of our interaction with the school system.



Now...

When our son Matthew was diagnosed with PDD-NOS, we were stunned. We had never heard of such a thing. Would he grow out of it? Were there therapies to treat him? Would he ever be normal? We held out a vague wish for him someday to be able to live independently, happily, and with a family of his own.

Luckily, we quickly connected with the area Birth to Three providers, who supported us during our initial shock and confusion. From there, Matthew was directly enrolled in Danbury's reverse mainstream preschool. His teacher and special education supervisor worked with our family to help us get the services and supports Matthew needed to learn and participate. Through this early experience of trust and teamwork, which included regular communication, the stage was set for our expectations of what future partnerships with the school's staff would look like. Matthew has had the good fortune to have had some truly gifted teachers who, through monthly meetings, emails, and phone calls, have worked with us to help him build on his strengths and to support him in his struggles. It is in this continuous sharing and collaboration that Matthew understands we are in partnership with the school and are working together with keen interest and high expectations.



Today, at twelve, Matthew is able to successfully participate in the regular education classroom with his peers. Recognizing that peer and adult relationships will remain a struggle for him and that real success for Matt comes from the happy connectedness he wants to feel within his peer group, we continue to make social skills a top priority. So ten years after his identification, we see that our vague wish for Matthew's independence and happiness is in fact a viable reality.

PTA's National Standards for Family–School Partnerships

The National Parent Teacher Association, working with leading experts on parent involvement and school–community partnerships, has updated its National Standards for Parent/Family Involvement Programs to reflect recent research and improve parent and community involvement practices. The updated National Standards shift the focus from what schools should do to involve parents to what parents, schools, and communities can do together to support student success. To reflect this change, the standards have been renamed the National Standards for Family–School Partnerships.

- Standard 1:** Welcoming all families into the school community – Families are active participants in the life of the school, and feel welcomed, valued, and connected to each other, to school staff, and to what students are learning and doing in class.
- Standard 2:** Communicating effectively – Families and school staff engage in regular, meaningful communication about student learning.
- Standard 3:** Supporting student success – Families and school staff continuously collaborate to support students' learning and healthy development both at home and at school, and have regular opportunities to strengthen their knowledge and skills to do so effectively.
- Standard 4:** Speaking up for every child – Families are empowered to be advocates for their own and other children, to ensure that students are treated fairly and have access to learning opportunities that will support their success.
- Standard 5:** Sharing power – Families and school staff are equal partners in decisions that affect children and families and together inform, influence, and create policies, practices, and programs.
- Standard 6:** Collaborating with community – Families and school staff collaborate with community members to connect students, families, and staff to expanded learning opportunities, community services, and civic participation.

Excerpted from "National Standards for Family–School Partnerships," National Parent Teacher Association, www.pta.org

Resources:

Each year, the **Council for Exceptional Children** pays tribute to students who have excelled despite their disability. To read the inspiring success stories of this year's winners of their Yes I Can! Award, visit www.cec.sped.org. Click on the "About CEC" tab, scroll down to "Yes I Can Awards," and select "Meet the 2008 Yes I Can! Award Winners."

Beyond the Bake Sale: The Essential Guide to Family-School Partnerships, by Anne T. Henderson, Karen L. Mapp, Vivian R. Johnson, and Don Davies (The New Press, 2007) Written for parents, teachers, administrators, and policy makers, this book shows how to build strong relationships between families and schools. It offers practical advice on how to improve interactions between parents and teachers and is packed with useful tips, checklists, and resources. Contact CPAC to borrow a copy of the book or to obtain a one-page excerpt.

Tomasito's Mother Comes to School, by Ellen Mayer (Harvard Family Research Project, 2007) This storybook is designed to engage children, inform and inspire their families, and help educators build connections with families. Presented in both English and Spanish, the story tells how one second-grade boy reacts when his mother visits his school. An informational guide and discussion questions are included. For a free copy of the book, contact CPAC or visit the Harvard Family Research Project website at www.hfrp.org/family-involvement and select "Storybook Corner."

Connecticut Parent Advocacy Center, Inc.

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To Whom It May Concern:

I am a seventeen-year-old graduate of White Oak School in Westfield, Massachusetts. I enjoy soccer, music, dance, hanging with my friends, and being with family. I work part time at an ice cream shop and a day care center. Even though I had to deal with many challenges growing up with disabilities, I also learned how to deal with adversity. I hope my story will inspire young students never to give up.

I clearly remember the first day I found out I had to wear hearing aides. At age six, I was diagnosed with moderate to severe hearing loss because I was asphyxiated at birth. At the beginning of second grade, I had no choice: if I wanted to hear well, I had to wear two hearing aides and an FM system. A few years later, I found out I had a learning disability called phonological dyslexia.

During my twelve years in school, I've learned to cope with my disabilities. The accommodations of a small classroom, preteaching and reviewing of material, one-on-one support, and the fact that my schoolmates have similar disabilities have helped me become the well-rounded student I am today. I am able to self-advocate and express my needs. I am a conscientious student with a strong drive to do well. I've even participated in a high school partnership program at a community college, which was a struggle at first but gave me a lot of confidence.

I will be attending Asnuntuck Community College in the fall and later hope to complete my degree in early childhood or speech and language pathology. My goal is to give back to children what my teachers gave to me. They always made me feel they cared and wanted to guide me in the right direction, and now I am able to go to college. I will always be thankful for all the people who believed in me and made me a better student. I know college will be another challenge, but I will never stop learning just because I have difficulty.



Sincerely, Katie Fahey