

In an article on the contributions of Siegfried Engelmann (*Utah Special Educator*, May 2006, (p. 10-11) I described the period from the mid-60's to the mid-70's as the "Wild West of Special Education Services." I arrived in Utah in June, 1969, and found myself in the middle of a period of massive change. I had just spent the previous two years as the director of a community-based deinstitutionalization program. The Eugene, Oregon community had moved past the question: "Should we give a priority to community-based support of persons with disabilities?" to the question: "How do we provide effective community-based support to a wide range of persons with disabilities?" In Utah, both questions were being addressed concurrently. In the following discussion I make extensive reference to persons with Down syndrome because of considerable documentation over the decades discussed. The major issues and concerns applied to a far wider range of persons with disabilities.

The heroes of Wild West of Special Education services were the state and local administrators, who, in the late 60's and early 70's, anticipated and supported the goals of Public Law 94-142. The Law was passed in 1975 and implemented in 1977. These heroes understood the implications of institutional segregation, and took action, daily, to build effective alternatives to the institutional segregation practices of the day. In Utah, in the early 70's, the four administrators most centrally placed were Woody Pace, State Director of Special Education; Geri Clark, Coordinator of Mental Retardation Services; James Wheeler, Director of the Utah Division of Family Services, and Bill Long, the Coordinator of Mental Retardation Services for the Division. These administrators, supporting staff, and their counterparts at the school district and community levels were the heroes of the "Wild West of Special Education Services." It should be remembered that Public Law 94-142 was not a "quick fix" with unanimous support among school

# Heroes of the Wild West of Special Education

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In 1970, most states, did not require public schools to serve children defined by the local school district as "uneducable." For many parents, the choice for their child with disabilities was one of placement in a state institution or instruction at home. In many school districts a child with Down syndrome was classified as "uneducable," and the decision to classify many similar students as "uneducable" was supported by many of the special education textbooks in use in universities at that time. The problems for parents seeking community-based services was further compounded by a lack of agreement among parent organizations. Some organizations were clearly focused on increasing resources for state institutions. Some organizations focused on a transfer of resources to community-based support. In 1971, a court decision in Pennsylvania indicated a change in the status quo. A parent organization successfully contested a state law allowing school districts to deny services to children who had not attained "a mental age of five years."

Growing public awareness preceded these legal precedents. One of the most powerful awareness vehicles was the photographic essay, "Christmas in Purgatory," released in 1966. In 1965, the authors, Burton Blatt and photographer friend, Fred Kaplan, visited five "state institutions for the mentally retarded." With the aid of a small camera, concealed from most observers, Kaplan took photographs documenting the dehumanizing conditions, despair, and loneliness of the residents. The photographs were not all about dehumanizing conditions. A few photographs from a Connecticut institution exemplified more appropriate settings for the time. These small numbers of more positive images only served to emphasize the far more numerous and degrading conditions in photographs from the other four institutions.



administrators. Federal legislative discussion on the content of 94-142 was initiated in 1971. By 1973 at least 45 states had passed some form of legislation, which included educating students with disabilities. Unfortunately, many of these laws generated local segregated programs administered by a central state institution. In many cases these state laws were not enforced at local or state levels.

Those charged with the provision of services to persons with disabilities faced a wide range of challenges on a daily basis. The power and role of institutionalization forces often threatened the role and resources of those advocating community and educational alternatives. These heroes suffered many threats, not only to their advocacy role, but also to their continued employment. Institutionalization, was such a protected priority that many decisions were made at birth. In the 1960s many states and many countries of the Western world required parents to decide, at birth, on commitment of a Down syndrome child to lifelong institutionalization. Some physicians would visit with parents before they saw their baby and offer institutionalization. The issue was not as polarized as it might appear. The issue was not always defined as “for” or “against” institutionalization. The issue was often about client access to community-based alternatives, particularly educational services in the local school district. Despite the questionable policies and administrative practices of the time, there were individuals who took client-focused action. Some institutional staff taught communication and language skills informally, even though no such instruction was required. Some nurses and medical personnel adopted Down syndrome babies from hospital wards before they could be transferred to a state institution for life. The developing linkage between disability advocates and civil rights advocates added to the ferment. In 1973, amendments to Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act increased the linkage between the civil rights movement and advocacy for persons with disabilities.

The university community often added to the confusion. In 1969, Professor Arthur Jensen published an article with clear racial implications in *The Harvard Educational Review*. This article used I.Q. test data to suggest an innate, hereditary, hierarchy in intelligence that followed a century of university discussion, “documenting” the superiority of the white male. This debate served as an ongoing distraction until 1981 when Steven Jay Gould’s book “*The Mismeasure of Man*” systematically countered the conclusions and instructional relevance of Arthur Jensen and associates. The last thing the special education community needed at this time was an unwarranted inflation of the role of I.Q. testing and a focus on student classification at the expense of an increased emphasis on the quality of instructional interventions. The heroes of the day advocated access to quality instruction for all, regardless of I.Q. test scores. Fortunately, the university community of the day also included supporters of Burrhus Frederic Skinner, who questioned the importance of I.Q. testing and emphasized the role of systematic environmental interventions. Unfortunately, Skinner’s most provocative book, “*Beyond Freedom and Dignity*” was released in 1971. The book challenged the cherished belief that an individual’s “strength of will” could overcome most environmental forces. The confluence of the 1960s and 70s was indeed a time of intellectual fervor that had major implications for those serving students with disabilities. This was all taking place with a background of public unrest with the war in Vietnam. It took a major professional effort to keep the focus on student outcomes. Those choosing to avoid accountability to clients and families could find plenty of distracting and instructionally irrelevant alternatives disguised as scholarly debate. It should be noted that the heroes were addressing life and death decisions, even though their professions emphasized educational and social services. In many settings the move from institutional placement to community placement doubled the lifespan of the individual. Too often the short life span of institutionalized individuals was blamed on the individual’s genetic and developmental disabilities and not on the institution’s practices. At the 2000 World Conference on Down syndrome the observation was made: “Of course there are difficulties to be faced, but the quality of life from



infancy to old age is determined more by the quality of health care, education, and social inclusion offered to individuals than by the developmental difficulties that are associated with Down syndrome.”

Those state and community administrators advocating for community-based education and social services, did not “go with the flow.” Their advocacy sometimes came at a personal and work related price. As a university faculty member, I was never facing the risks the heroes faced. In more than 30 years of work in western countries and in third world settings, the most abusive and threatening communications I received came in the early 70’s. These communications came in response to my grants and advocacy positions for community-based investments. Without the professionalism of the heroes previously listed, things would have moved far slower. Given the federal source of 94-142, I lost count of the number of the times the heroes client advocacy was attributed to federal interference in state affairs.

In many ways, the 1975 passage of 94-142 was only the beginning of the challenges for the “heroes.” The federal law placed the emphasis on the second question: How do we provide quality community-based educational services? This law, passed in 1975, did not take effect until October 1, 1977. Essentially, 94-142 was discussed, developed, and implemented during a seven-year period. During that time the special education client community depended on the advocacy, determination and professional actions of state and district special education leaders. A walk through any district or state education office would quickly exemplify a major challenge. The political power and fiscal resources were clearly vested in the departments of elementary and secondary education. The department of special education, as an impoverished newcomer, was very much dependent on the passion, commitment, technical competency, and advocacy of state and district special education leaders—the heroes of the “Wild West of Special Education Services.” ■