TASK

GUIDANCE | EDUCATION | SUPPORT

The Birth of TASK
(Team of Advocates for Special Kids)

In 1973 something occurred that would have an enormous impact on me, and on millions of other families as well; yet it was something about which most people were completely unaware… unaware that it had happened and unaware of its importance. I learned that year that important legislation was in the works and I knew that would ultimately change many lives.

It was 1975 when Congress passed that legislation called Public Law 94-142, The Education for Handicapped Children Act. This law mandated that, for the first time, children with handicapping conditions had a right to public education. Statistics that were available at that time indicated that 8 ½ million children in our country were either denied any education at all or were in programs insufficient to meet their needs. This law codified that such children were to be evaluated and then given an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), which described the educational goals and objectives for that child; and which would be re-evaluated at least once a year as the child progressed. The IEP team who prepared the plan consisted of a variety of individuals: school psychologists, teachers, special education consultants, the special education superintendent or proxy, and other professionals such as speech therapists, adaptive physical education teachers or (finally—for the very first time ever), PARENTS!

My friend Jan Buell McHugh had a child with cerebral palsy as did I, and we were both overjoyed at learning about the passage of 94-142. This act opened avenues for our children that had never been available before, and we were ecstatic. In just a few short years our little ones would be ready to enter kindergarten, so Jan and I began documenting our children’s abilities and disabilities in order that we would be capable of providing appropriate information when it came time to develop their IEPs. Both our kids were in pre-school (although different schools since Jan’s son was hearing impaired in addition to the CP); and we worked closely with the professionals who were in supporting roles with the children so that we could gain more knowledge and expertise and, therefore, provide important information.

We went to as many conferences about disability as we could find. At one of those conferences we met attorneys from the Disability Rights California (Catherine Blakemore) and Western Center on Law and Poverty (Terry Friedman.)

These two representatives from public interest law firms in Los Angeles guided us through the complicated terrain of the law. They were happy to be helping us because they had discovered a fly in the ointment. That fly was the apparent backlash from a majority of school districts in southern California, coupled with little or no information about this law. That, Jan and I believed, would result in parents having a difficult time learning of these new rights granted to their children. And if parents did not know about these new rights, it was inevitable that the progress of this law would be extremely slow. So, with our children's futures riding on this law, Jan and I put our heads together. We consulted with all the professionals we knew who had worked or were working with our kids. We gathered parents' names. We read. We listened. We learned. And we formed a non-profit, parent-run organization called TASK (Team of Advocates for Special Kids). With the assistance of the public interest law firms, we created training materials and began holding classes for parents. The mission of TASK was to provide support, share information, help parents understand the law and teach them how to advocate for their children.

The ensuing years brought growth we never imagined. We were successful in obtaining funding from the US Department of Education which resulted in broadening the services we could provide. In addition to the advocacy component, we wrote and introduced a play with two puppets named Kevin and Tracey; one disabled and one not. The program was presented in elementary schools in south Orange County as a way to introduce the general population to disability. After the presentation, the children could interact with equipment such as wheelchairs, crutches, braces, a blindfold along with a Braille book, and more. The children were encouraged to touch and use the equipment and to learn about how this interaction increased their knowledge of the disabled community.

The federal funding also connected us with other parent organizations across the country, and that proved to be a saving grace for us. As the years passed, we began to see more and more successes at getting children with disabilities into the classroom that was appropriate for them. It was slow, and it was not easy, but we were, quite literally, moms on a mission. Then, in the late 1980s, we heard a rumor that the law was going to end because the federal funding was being cut from the budget submitted to Congress by President Ronald Reagan. We were, quite frankly, shaken to the core because we knew first hand that the law was working for both the parents and the children.

We immediately hooked up on a conference call with the other parent groups across the country and discussed our options. We then outlined a plan. First, we would flood congress with letters demanding that congressional hearings be held around the country to determine the success of the legislation. We held open houses for parents to come to our facility and write letters; together with the other parent organizations across the country, 40,000 letters and cards were delivered to Congress—an extraordinary number at a time when there was no internet or other social media. We soon learned that congressional hearings were indeed going to be held around the country, and there would be one in Los Angeles. Along with us, the other parent groups planned their strategy for testifying before the congressional committee. Here is what we did:

I had recently celebrated my 40th birthday, and a friend had built a black, wooden coffin (to show that I was now ‘over the hill’ as they say). It had remained in our garage for a bit and we thought we could use it to advertise the upcoming hearings. A sign on the side of the coffin read, “Here lies PL 94-142 – Rest in Peace.” Lying on top of the coffin was a cluster of dead flowers. We marched with hundreds of other parents through the streets of Los Angeles to the site of the hearings. Our testimony was broken into four segments that matched the four main parts of the law, under which the children were entitled to (1) a free, appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment; (2) support services required such as transportation, an aide if needed, speech therapy, etc., (3) an unbiased assessment; and (4) due process when there was disagreement about the assessment or the IEP.

We then decided who would handle each section, and I was given the 'least restrictive environment' because my daughter was being mainstreamed in our local school, along with an aide.

Here is my testimony:
"My daughter, Tracey, is in the 1st grade. She has an aide in the classroom to assist her with things she is physically unable to do. The aide assists the other children as well when Tracey doesn't ask for the help. The teachers love having Tracey in the class because they know that extra help came along with her! One morning, the teacher asked the children to open their math workbooks and tear out a specific page. Tracey's aide moved to tear out the page for her, but she refused the aide's assistance and asked to do it herself. And she did; one-handed, and very slowly. When the last bit of the page was released from the workbook, one student jumped up and yelled to the teacher: "Mrs. Shipman, Mrs. Shipman, look what Tracey did! She pulled out her own page!" whereupon all the kids jumped up, clapping hands and shouting "yea!" while Tracey sat beaming.

Ladies and gentlemen of the commission, I understand that some people question how much time is taken away from the typical children by having a disabled child in the class. And I acknowledge that this particular incident did indeed take a few moments away from teaching the math lesson. But surely the lesson learned by all the children, and the teacher in this class, has great and lasting educational value."

Epilog:
My only regret is that I have no information on the other three segments. But the law stayed in place. And TASK has stayed in place! Soon we will be celebrating 50 years of service for families. I am truly proud of TASK and equally proud of both our board members and our supportive staff. And I am honored to currently sit on the Board of Directors. TASK has continued to grow and now serves thousands of families every year."

Jean Turner

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