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### THE COMMITTEE FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION

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### A BRIEF HISTORY

1972 - 1990

In 1975, the landmark bill, PL 94-142, was passed nationally. It mandated appropriate education for every student with support services as needed. It became one of the purposes of CSE to interpret this bill through the kind services of teacher members and to lobby for full enactment through the parent members. At even though it was seen as a godsend, the language and meaning involved probably led to a great deal of haggling that left the student in the lurch and wasted time and money on the legal mentality.) Nevertheless, it was a national right to education for handicapped students. About this time, CSE decided, under the presidency of Fran Jacobs, to broaden its scope and include parents of Learning Disabled (LD) and Socially and Emotionally Disturbed (SED) students. Parents of the MR students feared that these new folks would overwhelm their students with numbers and disregard the particular problems of the MR population.

It was only a year or so later that the parents of the Mentally Gifted (Challenge) were invited to join. Judy Van Allen, then president, challenged the parents to understand that their early strength lay in numbers. Mr. Sweigert and Sybil Gilmer, Master Teacher of the Challenge, continued to support the efforts in trying to help all the parents understand that since money came from one line in the budget, parents of all special needs

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In 1975, the landmark bill, PL 94-142, was passed nationally. It mandated appropriate education for every student with support services as needed. It became one of the purposes of CSE to interpret this bill through the kind services of teacher members and to lobby for full enactment through its' parent members. (It was a Lawyers' Bill, however, not an educator/parent Bill and even though it was seen as a godsend, the language and thinking involved probably led to a great deal of haggling that left the student in the lurch and wasted time and money on the legal mentality.) Nevertheless, it was a national right to education for handicapped students. About this time, CSE decided, under the presidency of Fran Jacobs, to broaden its' scope and include parents of Learning Disabled (LD) and Socially and Emotionally Disturbed (SED) students. Parents of the MR students feared that these new folks would overwhelm their students with numbers and disregard the particular problems of the MR population.

It was only a year or so later that the parents of the Mentally Gifted (Challenge) were invited to join. Judy Van Allen, then president, challenged the parents to understand that their only strength lay in numbers. Mr. Sweigert and Sybil Gilmar, Master Teacher of the Challenge continued to support the officers in trying to help all the parents understand that since money came from one line in the budget, parents of all special needs



students had to understand that the real challenge lay in educating each other to specific needs so that the greater school community could be made aware of the good result of an appropriate education for EVERY child.

With the support of Mr. Sweigert who reviewed the agendas and helped interpret district decisions for the Committee, it grew. The Committee for Special Education arranged to have all its meetings in public facilities not owned by the district, e.g. public library meeting rooms, church meetings, etc. School administrators were invited guests, not providers. On several occasions when feelings were running high over the increased demands parents were able to place on districts, via the new law, PL94-142, over one hundred persons turned out to challenge the delays, or interpretation of the new plans. The Education Law Center served as a reference and support to the Committee and to individual families regarding the Law.

By 1975 the President of the Committee for Special Education had a seat on the Interschool Council with other Home and School presidents. The Council became a strong supportive ally of the Committee as it fully realized that the more appropriately one student was educated, the more effective was the education of all students. As a result of Interschool Council support, the Committee got its first real budget. After years of out of pocket living, this was truly inspiring. A plan was adopted by Interschool Council to give an allotment per child in each school as dues to the Committee for Special Education.

In 1977 the Committee was invited with other Home and School officers to interview the candidates for Superintendent in 1978. Dr. Pugh was the only candidate to recognize a trick question for a set up and it impressed everyone there - not just parents of the educationally different. He was hired. On his first morning in office, Officers of the Committee for Special Education were his first appointment and had his attention for a good two hours. At one point he remarked, "Just who are you people anyway?" We were to remind him of that plaintive question many times in our frequent appointments. He was an administrator who made himself available to the Committee with regularity and interest.

A major focus of the Committee has been the development of vocational education options. Early in Dr. Pugh's career at Lower Merion, CSE members escorted him to Camden County with Dr. Dodds, acting Director of Pupil Services. They toured a nationally recognized model for vocational education for the disabled. The program was built around a cluster of areas of employment including food service and horticulture.

The administration in Lower Merion acknowledged the absence of options in the district and started the search for a Vocational Education Director. This enabled the district to qualify for



federal monies slated for vocational education development. Mr. Tom Pivnichny was hired. His first efforts were to purchase slots at the existing vocational school, Central Montgomery County Area Vocational Technical School.

Special and regular education spaces were purchased. He also worked with parents to develop the first of a proposed cluster of special needs education options within the District and the Penn Valley Cafe was opened at the Penn Valley Elementary school. Here, students planned, purchased and prepared meals for the community served that the cafe one day weekly. When a need for elementary classes developed, the Cafe concept was adapted and moved to the Lower Merion High School where the goal of supported employment in the community was pursued. In addition slots were made available at the Marple Vocational School for special and regular students in a wide variety of specialties. Thanks to Mr. Pivnichny unsafe and outmoded work areas in the 1930's Lower Merion Vocational area were identified and eliminated.

Just about the time PL94-142 was passed, parents of Mentally Retarded students attending Elwyn School despaired of improving a bad bussing situation. They sued the Board of School Directors who settled out of court. One happy result of that settlement was the Board's agreement to meet twice annually with the Committee for Special Education. The Board formed a committee of itself of three members to fulfill this requirement. For the first bitter years only three came.

When the Committee had its first meeting mandated by the out of court settlement, the constituency was still the Parents and Professionals of Mentally Retarded Students. The numbers of that group were small and they decided to hire a lawyer to present the agenda to the Board of School Directors' Special Needs Committee. The Committee decided that no one would present the facts with the required intensity and research as well as a parent of the special needs child. The next year the job was ably handled by Fran Jacobs, a tiny woman with a mammoth brief case. Joan Steinberg, Judy Van Allen, Bernice Gully, Arlene Jarrett, Ruth Thornton, Bobbi Wolf, Karen Frederick, Miriam Passarella, and Bev Kupperman preceded Kathy Fleischman.

Some of the history of the CSE can best be presented through the various agendas prepared for the meetings of the Special Education Committee of the Board of School Directors and the Committee for Special Education. The Committee requested and received Bus Aides and a review from the Transportation Director; Kindergarten for Special Needs; Support services such as Occupational Therapy, Adaptive Physical Education, Physical Therapy and increased use of Speech and Language Therapy; Vocational Education; the Penn Valley Cafe (modeled after a program from Camden County Special Needs Vocational School); Recognition for the Master Teacher position which had support and resource jurisdiction for all Special Needs Classes and



Resource Rooms in the District; Resource Rooms which serve one population in the Middle and High schools; definition and redefinition of the IEP and the IEP process; evaluation of the services and consumer satisfaction of the Child Study Institute which formerly provided all psychological services for Lower Merion school district; evaluation of the Programs for the Gifted; Recreational opportunities for students unable to compete in team sports; Summer camp opportunities for the Mentally Handicapped in Lower-Merion district; greater concern for the disabled in the Work Study program; and Sensitivity of the school community at large to the needs and presence of special needs students in its midst; Transition services for the world of work.

Communication has always been such a challenge since Lower Merion correctly observes the right of privacy. The Committee always had to hunt for the families with special needs children. Elementary school directories were searched for lists of children under a teacher known to be special needs. Parents courted the folks at Main Line Times so that they would give good placement to notices of meetings. The staff at Main Line Times have always been extremely kind and cooperative. Parents wrote down the names of any child their own children mentioned meeting in Resource Room. Files were color coded to try and keep abreast of the progress through the twelve grades. Early each year to help new families find out about the existence of the Committee, a coffee is held. The Pupil Services office handles the invitations and mails them directly to the new families. The District cooperates by listing the Committee as a resource with the IEP as well. All of these measures took years to achieve.

After 94-142 was passed, so many teachers under the leadership of Judy Vietri, first to become the Master Teacher for Special Needs and Lynn Fields, Coordinator-Handicapped Classes, cooperated to prepare and present to colleagues workshops of the IEP and the process to write them. They committed a whole Saturday morning to offering a workshop to parents to better understand this new tool for cooperation between home and school built around the program for a special needs child.

The Middle School (then Junior High) team of Special educators and they were indeed special, wrote and received a grant from the Montgomery County Intermediate Unit to create a week of interaction between special and regular educators and regular and special parents. With the principal, Don Eckert, the group attended workshops at the Community College and hammered out understandings to bring back to the parent and education communities.

Under Karen Frederick's leadership the officers were invited to a County wide symposium on Parent Associations hoping to inspire districts without this component to be able to form associations of their own.



It was discovered that night that out-of-state parents calling the State Department of Education were advised to move into the two districts in Eastern Pennsylvania which had active and assertive Parent Associations, one of which was Lower Merion. It is no doubt that the input of a parent group had made a significant difference in the quality of education offered to special needs students.

The physically limited students were the latest to arrive in the public schools. Penn Valley school was the first to be adapted for these students. It was ironic in light of the fact that in a public meeting of administrators, an earlier principal of that building had said, "I don't want any of those kids in my school. Send them somewhere else," referring at that time to newly forming classes of LD and SED elementary students. The administration spoke proudly of its newly adapted buildings, with elevators, etc. It is also known that the father of a physically limited student threatened suit each time the student faced promotion to a new and untapped building. Hopefully, that was happy coincidence.

Nevertheless, now the physically disadvantaged can join their siblings in the public schools and the Committee was a part of raising the consciousness of the District so that it could happen.

Bobbi Wolf focused on sensitivity as the major theme of her Board presentation. At that time, the "Kids on the Block Puppets" were made available by their creator from a workshop in Washington, D.C. The Kids represented various kids with disabilities and impairments. They required by patent a strict adherence to the accompanying scripts in order to insure maintaining the integrity of the sensitivity training they set out to achieve. Funds were a problem. The School District refused to buy them. The Committee was determined to present them for all the children in Lower Merion. Bernice Gully, then past President and her husband Richard garnered a truckload of Cabbage Patch dolls for the Committee to sell. The District let them be sold in the Lower Merion gymnasium. With the profits the puppets were purchased. With the untimely death of a volunteer puppeteer, Sandy Feder, a memorial fund for the upkeep of the puppets was established. Volunteers studied the scripts and the District promised to write the Kids puppets into the fourth grade curriculum on sensitivity training and a presentation by the puppets annually.

Over the years an important function of Committee was to serve as a support to teachers. Early in its history, under Joan Steinberg's leadership, they travelled across the city to purchase plants which were wrapped and hand delivered to every special needs teacher in the entire school district during American Education Week, as a small sign of our respect for the way in which they taught these special needs students.

Early every year the President with Mr. Sweigert and a few Committee members would visit each school and call on the principal. This was done to promote good will to the principals, the official presenter of every child's IEP and the one responsible for implementation, to thank them for taking on this task with creativity and enthusiasm, hopefully and also to ensure that they broke out of the bad habit of assigning special needs children to basement rooms, too small rooms, old kindergarten rooms, etc. The Committee went to be received as well as to acknowledge the growing awareness of the building principals that someone was watching.

Later in the pursuit of thanking staff, always including the Teaching assistants who provide such an invaluable portion of the success of this special needs education, a Tea was established to be held at the Academy Building after school in the fall. Administrators, teachers, assistants were welcomed as the guests of the parents.

The history of the Committee for Special Education is a history of advocacy. It involved visits and entertaining; education and exhortation; plea bargaining and threats; thanksgiving and recognition. The parent is a consumer and has access to advocacy positions that no professional no matter how committed can achieve. In our neighbor district, an inquiring parent was told by the administrator in charge within the year, "No matter what you want, your child will never attend public school in our district. We will fight you in court for twelve years if we have to." The Committee for Special Education is one piece of the reason that that does not happen here. Parents and educators must continue to face the challenge of educating special needs children from two sides of the table but the eyes on one goal. We surely have been blessed by the presence of those kinds of parents and those kinds of educators in Lower Merion School District.