



evanston citizens for
appropriate special education

Newsletter **January, 2010**

Dear Evanston CASE members:

I hope you had a peaceful holiday season. As we begin 2010, I want to take stock of the important events in District 65 that impacted our children's lives in 2009, and the issues looming on the horizon.

In June, 2009 District 65 Administrators announced the planned implementation of inclusion for all pre-school and kindergarten students beginning in September, 2009. Parents and staff were shocked and angered that the District revealed this sweeping initiative in the last days of the '08-'09 school year, with no time for review or discussion. Parents and staff organized and protested, asking for the Administration to slow down, evaluate, and plan carefully before proceeding. Unfortunately, this fell on deaf ears.

In September, many children in the SPPAC (Services for Pre-Primary Age Children) and those who had been referred to self-contained, diagnostic kindergarten classrooms were placed in general education inclusive classrooms and programs. Diagnostic kindergarten classrooms ceased to exist. IEP's had to be re-written to reflect these changes. Some parents were pleased; others were deeply concerned and frustrated by the lack of planning and preparation. In addition, an impressive pilot program began at Orrington School. Students with disabilities at Orrington would be fully included; grades K – 5th with co-teach support.

Across the District, students with emotional disabilities like Aspergers Syndrome, Bipolar Disorder and ADHD were removed from self-contained programs and placed in general education environments. Some continued to have a self-contained "home base." While children with more severe behavior problems and learning disabilities remained in "cross-categorical" classrooms, in particular at Haven Middle School.

In October, Director of Special Services, Ms. Geneva Oatman resigned abruptly. Evanston CASE in collaboration with Marian Casey of ASK, submitted an open letter to the School Board and Dr. Murphy signed by more than 120 people. We requested that the district conduct a nationwide search for a highly qualified person with experience in the implementation of inclusion. We also requested that parents and stakeholders be involved in the search process. Dr. Murphy said this was an administrative decision that he would address in the spring. Ms. Margie Lenoir, former Assistant Director of Special Services, was appointed Interim Director.

In November, a committee was formed to work with the District's inclusion consultant, Dr. Cassandra Cole. This committee was charged with the task of creating an "inclusion plan" to

guide the District in the implementation of the inclusion initiatives. The School Board voted to approve the Inclusion Plan on November 30th. The District then formed a Leadership Team whose function would be to “oversee the implementation of the inclusion plan” going forward.

In recent weeks, the Administration began to implement an aspect of the Inclusion Plan without the oversight of the Leadership Team – the inclusion of students from Park School, a school for children 3-21 years of age with severe/profound developmental disabilities. The District would begin with pre-school and kindergarten students, and planned to place them in self-contained classrooms in general education schools rather than at Park. This move was met with outrage by the parents.

Unfortunately, the roll-out of the inclusion initiatives has not been smooth in many cases. Parents and staff have been left out of the process. At this point, parents from the SPPAC program, parents of children with emotional disabilities, and parents of children from Park School are deeply concerned about inclusion for their children. Evanston CASE supports the concept of inclusion, however, only when appropriate and based on the individual child’s needs. Inclusion must be done responsibly, with the support of shared values, and not in the service of a philosophy.

The most troubling developments involve the removal of placement/program options. Children in SPPAC and pre-k and kindergarten students at Park will not be referred to self-contained or separate facility placements going forward. This is an administrative decision, not an IEP team decision. The distinction is important because children’s services, supports and placements must be determined based on their individual needs in the context of an IEP meeting. It is crucial that parents understand their rights and how to preserve the services and supports that their children need if they are moved into inclusive settings.

IEP’s are legal contracts. They provide a road map for educators and a safety net for children. The IEP protects your rights, but only if it is written appropriately. If you believe your child could be successful in an inclusive environment, make sure that their services and supports continue at the same level in the general education setting. If you are told that your child’s program or placement will no longer be available because of the inclusion plan and you feel this would put your child at risk, feel free to contact CASE for consultation and support.

CASE will continue to advocate for inclusion when it’s appropriate, and will support parents who believe their children will not be successful in inclusive settings. But more importantly, the parent community and our support systems must stand together to address these developments. Even if you are happy with your child’s services, there are others who are fearful for their children’s well-being. Please do your part to support them.

- Talk to your PTA representatives to see how they can help families in your school.
- Write to the school board. Tell them to insist that the Administration preserve a full continuum of services including self-contained programs and Park School placements. Urge the Board to provide the oversight they were elected to ensure.

- Engage parents of typically developing children. Educate them about the implications of inclusion for your child, and for theirs.
- Ask the professionals that work with your children to write letters in support of preserving a full continuum of services and programs.
- Support and encourage the staff who work with your kids. Their jobs are on the line and it may be difficult for them to advocate for you.

As we begin 2010, we must dedicate ourselves to the continuing mission of protecting the rights of children with disabilities in our community. Our children have the right to a Free Appropriate Public Education in the Least Restrictive Environment. Sometimes least restrictive is a self-contained classroom or separate program with highly trained staff, specialized equipment, therapy, and a loving community of support. These options must remain available in District 65.

Sincerely,

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