EQUITY IN SPECIAL EDUCATION

Special Education has come a long way. You might recall that familiar movie scene when Forrest Gump’s mother tried to enroll him in his local Greenbow, Alabama, elementary school, and the principal responded with the shocking news that “the state requires a minimum IQ of 80 to attend public school,” informing her that her son would be turned away. While that was a fictional depiction of 1940’s America, you might be surprised at how accurate it actually was.

Before 1970, over 4.5 million children with varying degrees of disability were denied access to sufficient education based on the fact that there was no official legislation requiring public schools to address the needs of all learners. That means only one in five children with disabilities were being educated in a public school setting. In fact, many states at the time still enforced laws that actively excluded certain students from school, including children who were deaf, blind, emotionally disabled, or cognitively impaired.

When it passed in 1975, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (P.L. 94-142) guaranteed a “free and appropriate public education” in the “least restrictive environment” to all children with disabilities. “Free and appropriate” meant services and supports at no cost to parents, and “the least restrictive environment” meant services in the general education classroom alongside typically developing peers (to the greatest extent possible). With this legislation, students with disabilities would now have access to a quality education, providing them with opportunities that before felt out of reach.

Over the years P.L. 94-142 experienced a number of revisions, improving on its original concept. Amendments during the 1980s broadened the age range of the mandate to include children ages 3 to 21, guaranteeing early childhood interventions and more scaffolded transitions into adulthood. Further amendments during the 1990s changed the name to the “Individuals with Disabilities Education Act” (IDEA), and mandated supports to facilitate the transition of individuals with disabilities from high school to adult living. With this new focus, public schools began to provide research-based, effective special education programs implemented by highly trained professionals, and students were able to reap the benefits. In adopting and amending this landmark piece of legislation, Congress opened public school doors for millions of children with disabilities, and secured our national commitment to ensuring “equity” in public education for all students.

At the heart of equity is giving each child the resources and supports needed to succeed. We all live the concept of equity on a daily basis. I remember when my daughter Jordann went to bed as a small child, she needed a bedtime story read to her. My son Nathan needed not only the story, but also someone to lay with him for a while. Collin, my youngest, was a quick hug and off to bed. As parents, Tania and I never considered declaring, “Everyone gets the same bedtime routine, no matter what!” Rather, we constantly practiced equity and gave each child what he or she needed.

District 29 practices this same concept. In an equitable, as opposed to equal, classroom, each student is given the support and scaffolding she/he needs to optimize her/his educational experience. This means that some students will have different expectations for performance, extra time to complete tasks, additional support from a specially trained adult, and even specialized equipment and instructional materials. These extra resources and accommodations do not make the classroom more “equal.” In fact, some students are getting more support, time, and attention than others. But they do make it more “equitable,” as additional resources are allocated to students with greater needs.

In this edition of the District 29 Board of Education Newsletter, we highlight our efforts to ensure equity in public education for our students with disabilities, and truly live the “One Child at a Time” component of our mission statement.

Dr. Edward Stange
Superintendent, District 29
DIVERSITY OF NEEDS

One might think that a small District like Sunset Ridge, with approximately 500 students, would not have many students that qualify for special education. However, in 2018, approximately 15% of District 29 students had an identified disability, similar to the incident rate of 14% across the state of Illinois. This amounts to approximately 75 students from age three to eighth grade that qualified and received some form of special education support from District 29 during the 2018-2019 school year.

Speech and language impairments range from transient challenges with the articulation of certain sounds, to pervasive impairments with receptive and expressive language. Health impairments include a diverse array of medical (e.g., diabetes, significant allergies) and mental health (e.g., anxiety, depression) challenges. Perhaps the fastest growing population of students with disabilities are those served under the category of “Developmental Delay.” In District 29, most of these children are between the ages of 3 and 5 years, and thus too young for Kindergarten enrollment. In response to this growing trend, in 2017 District 29 facilitated a unique partnership between the Northfield Community Preschool and the Northern Suburban Special Education District (NSSED) to provide service for these students in their community preschool setting.

A CADRE OF SPECIALISTS

Meeting the unique learning needs of students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment requires a cadre of specially trained personnel. In District 29, eight certified special education teachers and 16 teaching assistants provide the primary services and supports for students with disabilities in Kindergarten through eighth grade. Three full-time mental health staff (i.e., school counselor, school psychologist, behavior-intervention specialist) provide targeted behavioral/emotional assessment and intervention services, and two full-time speech and language pathologists provide language and articulation assessment and intervention services. Medical and dietary supports and accommodations are facilitated by two full-time nurses, and occupational and physical therapy supports are contracted through external providers. (cont. on page 3)
Beginning this school year, District 29 partnered with NSSED to open the Structured Learning Environment (SLE) classroom at Middlefork School. The SLE classroom brings an array of highly specialized NSSED staff to Middlefork to support the educational needs of students with complex developmental disabilities in Kindergarten through third grade. The presence of the SLE classroom at Middlefork will ensure that K-3rd grade District 29 students with significant developmental disabilities can have their special education needs met in their home school alongside their typically developing peers.

CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT IN SPECIAL EDUCATION

The District 29 Strategic Plan Goal Area III specifically targets the topic of “Meeting the Needs of Learners.” During the 2019-2020 school year, we will be conducting a comprehensive review of our Special Education services and supports to identify strengths and opportunities for continued improvement. The review will include a synopsis of best practices research relative to supporting the needs of students with disabilities, feedback from our various stakeholders (e.g., staff, students, parents), and guidance from special education experts at NSSED. The findings from the review will be presented to the Education Committee of the District 29 Board of Education in the spring of 2020. It is our collective goal to continue to implement supports and services for our students with disabilities that maximize equity and reflect the values of the District 29 community.
www.sunsetridge29.org

Cultivating a learning community that engages the hearts and minds of students, one child at a time

### UPCOMING EVENTS

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<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Location</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NOV 12</td>
<td>Education Committee Meeting</td>
<td>Sunset Ridge School</td>
<td>6:00 p.m.</td>
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<tr>
<td>NOV 12</td>
<td>Board of Education Meeting</td>
<td>Sunset Ridge School</td>
<td>7:00 p.m.</td>
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<tr>
<td>DEC 10</td>
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<tr>
<td>JAN 14</td>
<td>Finance/Facilities Committee Meeting</td>
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### DISTRICT BOARD MEMBERS

- Adelbert Spaan, President
- Nancy Detlefsen, Vice President
- Amanda Alpert Knight
- Bill Hayes
- Anne Peterson
- Scott Subeck
- Rory Welch

Contact board members at: d29_schoolboard@sunsetridge29.org

### DISTRICT 29 ADMINISTRATORS

- Edward Stange, Ph.D., Superintendent stangee@sunsetridge29.org
- Ivy Sukenik, Ed.D., Sunset Ridge Principal sukenik@sunsetridge29.org
- Mary Frances Greene, Ed.D., Associate Superintendent & Middlefork Principal greenem@sunsetridge29.org
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- Corey Dreher, Director of Buildings and Grounds dreherc@sunsetridge29.org