

A Tale of Two Students

Revolutionary Common Sense by Kathie Snow, www.disabilityisnatural.com

Like other 18-year-olds, Ryan enjoyed all the hoopla reserved for high school seniors: the prom, senior “skip day,” and the once-in-a-lifetime graduation ceremony. Unlike the majority of his graduation class, Ryan has Down syndrome, he’s learned academics “his way” (in general ed classrooms) via a variety of curriculum modifications, and instead of a diploma, he received a “certificate of attendance.” Despite these differences, Ryan—like many of his classmates—will have a summer job and will enroll in a university or community college in the fall!

He may receive transition services from the public school system when he attends college; he’s eligible for these services under federal special education law (IDEA-Individuals with Disabilities Education Act). For example, he could receive transportation assistance (a related service) or other individualized help. On the other hand, he may have all the assistance he needs from the disability services office at the college or university, combined with *informal* assistance from friends and classmates.

Three of Ryan’s high school friends—Eric, Thomas, and Zach—along with Ryan, his parents, a family friend, and a variety of educators attended Ryan’s IEP meeting shortly before graduation. The three classmates shared their ideas about Ryan’s strengths and needs, and what it will take for Ryan to be successful in a summer job and as a college freshman. Ryan worked last summer, so he has some experience under his belt. But Eric and Thomas will help Ryan find the best summer job—as teens in the community, they’re connected and are experts on the teen job market! They’ll attend the community college, and if Ryan enrolls there, too, he’ll ride to school with them when the fall semester rolls around. Ryan will audit some classes, and he’ll take others for credit. *Whether he ends up with a degree is unimportant.* Thousands of other young people enter college every year for a variety of reasons: to grow up; to get away from mom and dad; to party; to find a mate; to

learn academics and/or technical skills; and—oh, yeah, some will end up with a degree. Ryan’s college experience will provide lifelong benefits he could receive nowhere else! The costs of his education will be paid through a combination of student aid, work-study programs, Ryan’s savings, and his parents’ checkbook.

During Ryan’s IEP meeting, the assistant principal and the special ed director repeatedly shook their heads in amazement, saying, “We’ve never seen anything like this...” What hadn’t they seen before? A student being in charge of his IEP meeting, a life filled with wondrous potential, a young man with a disability who had friends who were there for him, and more. In response to the professionals’ amazement, Ryan’s family friend responded, “This is what’s possible for *all* students with disabilities when they’re included: they have friends, they can learn in the general ed environment, they can be in charge of their lives, and their futures are unlimited—just like students without disabilities.”

Contrast Ryan’s experiences with the life of another student with a disability in this same high school. Brad has been a “visitor” in a few general ed classrooms through the years, but most of his school career has been spent in segregated special ed classrooms. His parents didn’t think “inclusion was right” for their son. Brad has never been to a school dance or participated in any other extracurricular activities. He does not participate in his own IEP meetings. Brad has no friends.

At age 20, Brad attends high school five days a week—in the same resource room where he’s been taught the same “life skills” for more than five years! He’ll remain in the resource room until he turns 22 (permitted under IDEA), and then he’ll “graduate” to the world of adult services (a group home and a day program/sheltered workshop). Will he wonder why his life ended up this way? If given a choice, *is this the path he would have chosen?*

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Why such a difference in the lives of these two students? Both have significant disabilities and both attended the same high school at the same time. But Ryan's parents and teachers have had high expectations, and have done whatever was needed to ensure his success. Throughout Ryan's life, his parents *rejected the opinions* of experts who insisted they weren't being "realistic" and who accused them of being "in denial." They dreamed big dreams and the self-fulfilling prophecy was realized.

Brad had none of those things. There's no doubt his parents love him, but love is not enough. His parents had no dreams for Brad; they never believed he had any potential for learning academics, for real employment, or a real life on his own one day, with whatever supports he needs. They've always felt Brad's future is bleak; their self-fulfilling prophecy is also being realized. As Henry Ford once said, "If you think you can, you're right; if you think you can't, you're also right."

In general, each of us must live with the consequences of our actions. But Brad's parents won't suffer the consequences of *their* actions, Brad will. Similarly, Ryan will reap the benefits of his parents' actions!

Our children's futures are in the collective hands of parents, teachers, principals, physicians, service providers, and others who have influence, power, and control. If we don't open the doors of opportunity for relevant and meaningful learning, we're limiting their potential. If we don't ensure they're included at school and in the community, they won't learn how to live in the real world, and they'll be at the mercy of the human service system and government assistance. If we don't believe in them, it will be difficult for them to believe in themselves. If we don't dream big dreams with them, how will they know how to dream for themselves?

At some point, children take responsibility for their own lives. But our efforts lay the foundation. If *you* were a child with a disability, would you want a life like Ryan's or like Brad's?

Post-Secondary Special Ed?

Like many others, my son, Benjamin, is a successful college student who happens to have a disability. It's been a delight to share with other parents that college is *nothing* like traditional special ed in public schools—no contentious IEP meetings, no segregated classrooms, and more.

Sadly, this is changing, as human service agencies and colleges/universities team up to create special ed in college! In one program, students with disabilities live with, and are mentored by, students without disabilities (*who are paid*). To cover the annual estimated \$11,700 fee, students with disabilities are required to apply for, receive, and turn over their SSI funds (estimated at \$7,500/annually) and provide an additional \$4,200 per year. In return, students must adhere to their "service plans," participate in 66 hours per week of "training" (including weekends for 50 weeks each year), "earn" free time through a convoluted process, and participate in "required voluntary activities." (If an activity is "voluntary" how can it be "required"?)

Many of these programs "allow" students with disabilities to audit regular college classes, but most of a student's time is spent in special ed-type life skills, leisure and social activities, and other *segregated* classes, as well as one-on-one training, and the student must have some type of "plan" (like an IEP)! Haven't these students already spent *years* in such classes in public school? And why haven't their parents been teaching them life skills since birth?

"College special ed" might seem like manna from heaven for many parents. In some cases, parents are the driving force behind these programs! But did they help their kids even *try* "regular" college, or did they assume the only path was a special program?

There's a broad effort to *eliminate* the segregation of children and adults with disabilities in the public school system, in community activities, and in the employment arena. So how can higher education *justify* going backwards in the creation of special, segregated programs for people with disabilities?