

THE **TICKET** TO INCLUSIVE SCHOOLS

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

Frustrations, fights, and even lawsuits are often part and parcel of parent/educator relationships during parental efforts to achieve an inclusive education for their children with disabilities. As defined in this article, inclusive ed means children with disabilities attending age-appropriate, general ed classrooms in the neighborhood school, where students and their teachers receive the supports they need for success. And while the word “inclusion” isn’t in special ed law (IDEA-The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act), the regulations *do* reflect inclusive practices. Specifically, the law states, “*The child’s placement is as close as possible to the child’s home . . . Unless the IEP . . . requires some other arrangement, the child is educated in the school that he or she would attend if nondisabled . . . A child with a disability is not removed from education in age-appropriate regular classrooms solely because of needed modifications in the general curriculum.*” (The law can be read at <http://idea.ed.gov>.)

The number of inclusive schools—schools where all children with disabilities are included in general ed classrooms and where no segregated, special ed classrooms exist—is minuscule. However, many educators might dispute this statement, based on how they define inclusion. One principal told a mother that her child *was* included (he was in a segregated special ed classroom) because the student was in the same *building* as students without disabilities. Some parents and educators describe the following as an inclusive placement: the child is in a special ed resource room for most of the day, but he attends regular ed art, PE, and/or music. This is “visitation”—the child “visits” certain classes. This lack of consensus can create extraordinary friction between parents and educators.

Typically, parents advocate for inclusion for their own child. Some are successful *for that one year*; oth-

ers are not. And unless the entire school or district is *already* inclusive, parents who are successful one year may need to gird their loins for another battle when the next school year rolls around. So we’re making progress toward inclusion from the outside, one-child-at-a-time. It’s a worthwhile—but slow—process. The *speedier* solution is change from the *inside*!

At many schools all across the country, *school policies*—not IDEA—dictates the placement and education of students with disabilities. So the way to create systems change is to influence school policy from the inside—as a member of the school board. Yes! I’m suggesting *you* run for the school board!

Before you say, “I couldn’t do that,” consider that most school board members are people just like you: parents of students in the district and/or concerned citizens. A few board members may be lawyers or accountants who have been recruited as heavyweights, but all are “regular people” who put on their underwear just like you!

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As members of school boards, supporters of inclusion can make inclusion a reality by making it *policy*! Think about all the policy decisions made by school boards: which textbooks to use, where the senior prom will be held, and everything in between. School board policies have far more power over the daily goings-on at schools than any federal or state laws! (Never mind the fact that this might not be the way it’s *supposed* to be; let’s deal with reality, not just theory!)

If you decide to investigate running for the school board in your community, take it slow and learn as much as you can about the process and the current board members. You can start by attending school board meetings. In general, they can be pretty boring; much of the work goes on during committee meetings and/or at closed executive sessions. Still, you can learn a lot!

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There are other ways to get your foot in the door. Ask a board member to mentor you and/or help you learn about the board, how the district operates, and more. (At this point, don't share your interest in running for the school board—you need time to learn more.) You can also serve on committees at the district level, which will provide access to board members and the district's inner workings (politics!).

As you gather information, gather allies, too. You'll need them when you announce your candidacy! In general, you should *not* position yourself as a "special ed" candidate! Others will perceive that you represent a "special interest group" or that you have a "separate agenda" which is not relevant to the majority. To win, run on a platform of general interests: smaller class size, increased graduation rates, improved fiscal responsibility, and so on.

Once you're elected, do the right things, "pay your dues," demonstrate your value and competency, and acquire more allies along the way. Then begin educating other board members about inclusive ed issues. You might be surprised (or maybe you won't) that other board members might not have a clue about kids with disabilities in your district, or they may know only what they've been told by administrators. Few may have any personal knowledge or experience. A school board member visited my children's inclusive elementary school one day, and happened to see my son wheeling down the hallway. I was volunteering that day and overhead the man say to his companion, "I didn't know we had kids like that in our schools." The principal (Mike) had created an inclusive school without the knowledge or "permission" of the board.

When I told Mike I wanted to speak at a school board meeting to recommend that the other schools in our district adopt the inclusion model, Mike replied, "We're doing some pretty progressive things

here, and if the school board finds out everything we're doing, they'll try to make us stop." I then realized how important it is to learn about the politics in the district!

In addition to being unaware of special ed issues, board members may not like being "told what to do" by the Feds—via Federal special ed law. So some may chafe at what they perceive as the heavy hand of "outside" interference. (But they don't mind receiving federal funds!)

Your job is not to ram special ed law and inclusive ed issues down the throats of your fellow board members, but to help them understand how inclusive schools are better for all kids, all teachers, and society-at-large. Instead of presenting all the *problems* of segregated education, present *solutions* for inclusive ed.

One of the biggest perceived barriers to inclusion is funding. But an inclusive school or district

doesn't have to cost any more than a non-inclusive school or district! As I've detailed in other articles, inclusion can be achieved through reallocation of existing resources, collaboration, a change of attitude, and positive, dynamic leadership.

If being a school board member isn't in the cards right now, you can still impact school board policy by making allies of school board members and others who have influence. Get up close and personal with a current school board member, and informally provide info about inclusive education. Serve on a district committee. Attend every board meeting so others will see you as an interested, supportive constituent.

What kind of school board exists in your community today? What kind do you want it to be? How can you contribute to making positive change and developing allies? Why shouldn't *you* be a school board member? You have the qualifications: you're a resident of your community and you care about your community's schools. Your leadership, your vision, and your talents are the ticket to inclusive schools!

LEADERSHIP: The art of getting someone else to do something you want done because he wants to do it.

Dwight D. Eisenhower