

Canaries in the Coal Mine

Who could forget the image of the Little Rock Nine—students requiring the protection of federal troops to force the integration of the racially segregated high school in Little Rock, Arkansas? Much like canaries in a coal mine, metaphorically these students “tested” the system, clearing the way for all who followed. Students of education history know that though the struggle for civil rights was primarily geared toward achieving racial equity in public life, the ensuing legislation—especially the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* case—influenced the nation’s perspective on equal education opportunity. That the case for civil rights was significantly played out in our education system speaks to the school’s special place in developing and reflecting American culture. As schools go, the nation follows.

It’s not hard to make the connection between *Brown’s* focus on equal opportunity, regardless of race, and the ensuing legislation on students with disabilities. The 1975 Education for All Handicapped Children Act, reauthorized in 1990 as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), appropriately turned the lens on providing the 6.8 million children and youths who have disabilities with an equal education opportunity.

A less common connection, however, is that these students also serve as figurative canaries in the coal mine because strategies to ensure their success inevitably help us to gauge the viability of the system as a whole. When we prioritize making provisions to ensure the best quality education for students with disabilities, we inevitably raise the bar for all intervention strategies. Planning special education services and early intervention strategies helps all education stakeholders take a step back to clearly envision the importance of both valuing and developing the whole child, the coordination of services, early childhood education, and the important role that families play in ensuring lifetime success. These characteristics are imperative for students with special needs, as well as for all children.

Principals Make a Difference

In 1970, only one in five students with disabilities was educated in public schools. In the more than 30 years since IDEA was passed, schools and principals have embraced inclusion, assuring that significantly more students have access to a high quality education. About 96 percent of students with disabilities attend public schools and more than half of these students spend 80 percent of their day in general education classrooms. That means that each day dedicated and committed principals, teachers, and specialists are working with parents to help their special-needs children be successful in school and in life. In addition to planning inclusion models



and collaborating with intervention specialists, and a host of other early childhood and special education staff, principals play a significant role in assisting parents along this journey.


Many parents don’t know where to turn when they see developmental delays in their child, and unfortunately doctors are sometimes hesitant to identify disorders. Often, it’s the school system that evaluates these children and ultimately determines if intervention is needed.

Working With Parents

The dramatic overall increase in education services and the quality of instruction is evidence of schools’ commitment to students with special needs. But schools don’t do it alone—parental advocacy and involvement are essential. I have witnessed firsthand the impact that parents can have on the educational outcome of children with special needs. My own stepsister thrived in public schools, despite her severe learning disabilities, due to the partnership that existed between my parents and her teachers and principals. That was a long time ago, but I am often reminded of the importance of the relationship between the schools and parents of children with disabilities by an NAESP friend and colleague who updates me regularly on the progress of her 2-year-old son, who is on the autism spectrum.

Through the district’s preschool Child Find program, which consists of several screenings by counselors and psychologists to determine special education needs, my colleague was able to understand her son’s delays and the need for an individualized education program (IEP). In just two months since he started school, his vocabulary and desire to communicate have increased, and his motor skills have improved. My colleague’s eyes shine when she shares that her son called her “Mama” for the first time!

My point in sharing this experience is not to sentimentalize, but rather to reiterate the important role that parents play in this equation, and to illustrate the characteristics that facilitate successful special education interventions, such as early intervention and support networks that include parents, schools, and coordinated services, benefit all children. For example, although IEPs have long been used to support students with disabilities, more recently they are being used for struggling students in regular education classrooms as well.

Today, my colleague’s son is making significant progress in a mainstream classroom. And though we don’t know yet what he will be when he grows up, we do know that, not unlike a canary testing the air quality of mines, his journey will help us to develop new learning strategies and support networks for the students that follow. 

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