

Vignette

A Ride to School

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Opening Reflection

It's almost 10:00 AM in the West Virginia Parent Training Center office (WVPTI), and the phone is ringing. Parent Training Centers throughout the United States are federally funded projects designed to support parents and families of children with disabilities. The Parent Training Center is staffed with parent engagement specialists. In one region of the state, a specialist is training parents on their rights, and the rights of their children, to request evaluations for suspected disabilities. In another region, a specialist is training a single parent who was forced to resign her job, because of numerous calls from the school to pick up her son, who had autism and behavior problems. Her job was her only source of income.

A typical family wakes up each day and gets their children ready for school. Many families start their days with little stress; however, families of children with disabilities do not find mornings so routine. These children often have difficulty transitioning from one activity to another. It can be difficult to determine what triggers will affect the children, thus causing behavior issues. Children with disabilities frequently find challenges at school, including learning deficits, limited social interactions, and bullying. These students are at the mercy of the school system. Many lack the ability to communicate about their school and peer experiences. More often than not, teachers and aides are not certified or trained in the children's areas of disability. A large number of substitute teachers find themselves in classrooms without support or training for their students with special needs.

Children with disabilities have a right to public education but obtaining it is often a struggle. Parents and families reach out to us when things are not going well for their children. When we get a call or e-mail, we know that parents are searching for information and support to make things better for their children. Parents trust other parents who have been through the same process. WVPTI staff members are parents/family members of children who have educational or medical special needs. Families are referred to us by family doctors, specialists, therapists, psychologists, teachers, and other parents. Most children have an Individual Educational Plan (IEP), 504 Plan or Health Care Plan that is written to meet their special needs. The IEP is a legal blueprint that designates the services that have been determined to support children in the least restrictive environment.

As the Executive Director, I have worked for more than fifteen years with families of children with disabilities. It has been an eye-opening experience to me. I worked with one family who had a six-year-old child in kindergarten. This child was diagnosed with a developmental delay, a physical disability and asthma. To catch the school bus, he was required to walk up a steep hill every day. The little boy had a leg-length discrepancy and the thought of him struggling to breathe while dragging his little leg up a snow-covered hill, was both shocking and heartbreaking. The parents requested transportation from their house but got no reply from the school district. Transportation is a service that is listed under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) for students with IEPs. In the interim, I discovered that the county school bus picked up the star quarterback of the high-school football team who lived next door. Although parents are mandated to be equal partners on IEP teams, this mother had been excluded from discussion by the IEP team and excluded from actively advocating for her child. However, we were told they would discuss the issue and let her know the district's decision after the Christmas break.

Attending this meeting with the family proved to be a needed support. The school district came prepared to say 'no' to the family's request for transportation *...and they DID say NO*. They lined the table with teachers, the transportation director, and a school nurse. I sat on the other side of the table beside the mother and the little boy. The transportation director started the discussion, "There is no room to send a bus to pick up this little boy." The little boy was sitting close to me looking wide-eyed and frightened by the rising level of voices. I could hear the mother choking back tears, and she put her arm around her son. To get the meeting on track, I pointed out that there were buses that were already picking up students, who lived next door. The mother provided the medical doctor's recommendations that the little boy should not be walking uphill with his physical disability, or walking in cold weather because of his asthma. The school nurse concurred with the doctor's recommendation. The county's special education director then announced, "This meeting is over." She stated that the team would meet privately and consider the matter further. The mother would be given their decision when school convened after the holiday break. This itself was a violation of special education regulations because parents are mandated to be equal members of the IEP team and are allowed to give input. With that, I asked that the team not only consider the recommendations that were brought to the meeting, but also the age and the individual needs of this child. We were only requesting that this little boy be provided reliable transportation to school to ensure the accommodations that were written into the IEP.

The holiday break seemed to fly by and we heard nothing from the IEP team. I kept thinking about the frightened face of the little boy and the tears on the cheek of his mother. Two days before school was to restart the mother called. "Brenda, I'm nervous; I haven't heard from anybody. School will be starting in a couple of days and it's snowing here. I don't think Sammy can make it up the hill. Even when his dad holds his hand, he can't do it. Am I going to be in trouble for truancy?" I told her that if the school denied our request for the bus, we would reconvene the IEP team and ask that the accommodations reflect the doctor's recommendation. If we did not do this the mother could be charged with truancy and fined. At around nine o'clock the night before the children were to return to school the mother called. She was out of breath and first apologized for calling so late. She had just hung-up after a call from the transportation director telling her the bus would pick up her son at their house the following morning at 7:45 am.

Under City Lights

We both shared happy tears that this struggle had been met head-on and for this night and the beginning of the new year, all was calm and bright.

Author Note

The author is solely responsible for the contents of this vignette. The contents do not necessarily reflect the position of the organizations and communities that she serves. The author has no financial conflicts of interest.