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Why Home Schools for Students with Significant Intellectual Disabilities¹

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In 2000, a coalition of parents of children with disabilities, professionals and other disability rights advocates, including Disability Rights New Jersey, the Education Law Center, the Statewide Parent Advocacy Network and The Arc of New Jersey, recognized that far too many students with a wide array of disabilities were not receiving individually appropriate educations in the least restrictive environments. They filed a complaint in federal district court against the New Jersey Department of Education in 2001. A team of experts, including Lou Brown, to assist in the gathering and analyzing of relevant information was established. Initially, it was intended that Brown and his colleagues develop instruments that could be used to evaluate information obtained from reviewing cumulative student records, interviewing special and general education teachers, school administrators, and parents of children with disabilities and observations in actual instructional and related settings. However, in effect, the court only allowed access to 3 years' worth of IEPs for 147 randomly selected students.² After that court ruling, most thought developing the instruments was moot. However, the Plaintiffs' team judged that at least some of the instruments being considered for development might be helpful to parents, lawyers, teachers, therapists, school administrators and others. While the court case was concerned with all students who functioned with IEPs in

¹ "Students with significant intellectual disabilities" refers to the lowest intellectually functioning 1 - 2 % of a naturally-distributed school-age population. Most have been ascribed such labels as "severely/profoundly developmentally disabled," "autistic," "multiply handicapped," "cognitively disabled," "mentally retarded" or their synonyms.

² IEPs" refer to the legally required Individualized Education Plans that must be provided when students are declared eligible for special education and related services.

New Jersey, Brown and his colleagues focused their attention on students with significant intellectual disabilities. Specifically, these instruments address intellectual factors that must be considered when developing IEP objectives, the importance of authentic assessment and instruction and school to post-school transition plans. In addition, they produced educational manual which is designed to be helpful to parents and this paper which is focused on why students with significant intellectual disabilities must attend the schools of their brothers, sisters, friends and neighbors - their home schools.³ No doubt, the instruments can be adapted for use with students with different kinds and levels of disabilities.⁴

Special education laws require that the school placements of students with disabilities be provided as close to their homes as possible. They also require that, if IEPs do not describe specific restrictions, they are to be educated in the schools they would attend if they did not have disabilities - their home schools. It is extremely important that students with significant intellectual disabilities attend the schools that serve the preponderance of peers without disabilities who live in their neighborhoods because important opportunities and experiences can be provided in home schools that simply cannot be provided in non-home schools. In essence, anything important that can be provided in a non-home school can be moved to, or

³ Home” rather than “neighborhood” is used to refer to such schools because students without disabilities do not attend schools in their neighborhoods for several reasons. So contact with students who are perceived as powerful negative influences can be escaped or avoided. Some districts operate “magnet” schools, and students choose to travel long distances and experience the associated inconveniences in order to attend them. Some districts transport large numbers of students across traditional attendance boundaries for racial balance purposes. Some districts set aside percentages of their capacities and allow “choice” or “random selection” to a limited number of students who do not live in their attendance zones. Much of the information presented here is taken from Brown, Long, et al. (1989).

⁴ Versions of the instruments can be obtained from the Inclusion Campaign website of Disability Rights New Jersey - www.inclusioncampaign.org and the website of Lou Brown - www.website.education.wisc.edu/lbrown

otherwise provided in, a home school - the “portability assumption” (*Ronker v. Walter*, 1983). Environments that are restrictive of important opportunities and experiences are illegal and educationally and otherwise unacceptable.

Home schools, by definition, serve natural proportions of students with disabilities. Clustered schools are general education schools, but they serve unnaturally large proportions of students with disabilities. Often, a general education school with available space is selected and three, four or five classes of students with disabilities are placed or otherwise established therein. For the overwhelming majority of students with disabilities, the clustered school is not the one they would attend if they did not have a disability. This disallows important opportunities and experiences and makes them unduly restrictive and therefore unacceptable.

Segregated schools are attended only by students with disabilities. They are rejected as acceptable options for at least the following reasons.

Students are categorically restricted from opportunities to learn to interact, and develop a wide range of social relationships, with peers without disabilities.

The only persons without disabilities who are there are paid to be there.

They are devoid of good language, social, behavior, dress and other important models.

Their very nature requires expensive, counterproductive and unnecessary specialized transportation services.

Students who attend them must spend unusual amounts of time and energy traveling long distances getting to and from them.

Family Involvement. It is acknowledged by almost all involved in public education that the more family involvement, the more effective the schools and the less family involvement, the less effective the schools. Transporting students with significant intellectual disabilities out of their neighborhoods overburdens, inhibits or otherwise restricts family involvement in schools

and vice versa. This is particularly problematic for single parent families and those with low incomes. Home schools are better for at least the following reasons.

The logistics associated with planned and unplanned visits by parents, both during and after - school hours, are more convenient for all involved. Thus, communication and cooperation between parents and school personnel can be enhanced.

The time and money needed for parents to get to and from school conferences and other school events are decreased.

After-school activities can be experienced and coordinated more efficiently; and,

Disruptions in family life are minimized, especially when near age siblings attend the same schools.

Travel. The specialized and segregated transportation services typically provided during school years simply do not, and there is no logical or empirical reason to expect that they could, prepare for cost efficient integrated transit at school exit. This makes most specialized and segregated transit during school years restrictive, counterproductive and cost-wasteful. In the relatively few instances when placement in a non-home school, and/or specialized transportation, is absolutely necessary, they should be arranged. However, except under extreme circumstances, the less time and money spent getting to and from school, the better it is for all involved (Brown et al., 1984; Brown, Toson & Burrello, 2015). Consider the following.

When students with significant intellectual disabilities attend non-home schools, they must endure substantial amounts of time in transit that is usually “non-instructional” in nature and they must waste valuable waking state energies.

The best companions with whom to travel to and from school are brothers, sisters, friends and neighbors, with and without disabilities.

Many students with significant intellectual disabilities are not, and will never be, physically, intellectually or otherwise capable of driving an automobile safely. However, with individualized instruction over long periods of time, the overwhelming majority can learn to travel safely and effectively with individuals with and without disabilities in an array of conveyances. Thus, the individualized and systematic instruction of integrated travel skills should be included in every IEP across school careers.

At times, a travel aide, a mobility specialist or other professional may be needed to teach or monitor important travel skills while walking to school, riding busses, etc. However, in many instances, once a student starts to learn to travel to and from school and elsewhere safely and effectively, extra support can be reduced and, in some instances, removed.

All school vehicles used to transport students should be made accessible to those with disabilities. Over time, doing so will save millions of dollars. Adapting traditional school vehicles so students with disabilities can attend home schools can be paid for with money saved by reducing specialized transportation services.

It is particularly important for students with significant intellectual disabilities to learn to travel to and from the integration - school work and related environments that

are so critical for successful, integrated post-school vocational and related outcomes.

If converting from segregated and/or clustered schools to home schools results in reductions in travel costs, those savings should be used to provide instruction in authentic non-school settings and activities.

School Sponsored Extracurricular Activities. Attending home schools offers important opportunities to experience a wide array of integrated school sponsored extracurricular and non - academic activities. When students with significant intellectual disabilities attend non-home schools, involvement in integrated school-sponsored extracurricular activities is sometimes possible, but extremely unlikely, because of prohibitive transportation costs, conflicting schedules and times and the need for parents to travel relatively long distances at inconvenient times to pick up their sons and daughters after an activity. When students with significant intellectual disabilities attend home schools, they can walk, wheel or ride a bus home with co-participants who do not have disabilities or be transported in car pools by neighborhood parents.

Non - school Instructional Environments. Due to well-documented skill transfer/generalization difficulties, many of the most individually appropriate environments in which to provide instruction are those that will actually be used during non-school days and times and during post-school years (Brown, Kessler & Toson, 2015). When students with significant intellectual disabilities attend home schools, more frequent, direct and individually appropriate instruction in the actual integrated environments they will use during non-school days and times and in post-school years can be provided. If individuals without disabilities who function in neighborhood environments continually witness someone with significant intellectual disabilities learning to function effectively therein, they are more likely to get to know, learn to communicate with, protect

and assist her/him. Additionally, neighbors without disabilities will realize how important it is to help someone cross a street, get off at the right bus stop and push a grocery cart down a busy aisle. Learning when and how to provide individually appropriate voluntary personal assistance comes best from direct experience over long periods of time in real life situations. Direct instruction in the actual environments utilized by brothers, sisters, friends and neighbors also increases practice probabilities. For example, if parents are aware that their son can purchase three items in their neighborhood grocery store, they are more likely to take him when they go, send him with brothers and sisters or send him alone.

Social Relationships with Peers without Disabilities. A social relationship, in this context, refers to a positive personal interaction between a student with significant intellectual disabilities and a peer or other person who does not have a disability. The millions of students without disabilities currently enrolled in schools are future firefighters, nurses, store clerks, teachers, job coaches, legislators, secretaries, physicians, school board members, employers, voters, doctors, lawyers, job creators, budget determiners, policy analysts, co-workers, crime fighters and taxpayers. Many will become parents of children with disabilities. A larger proportion will have a friend, neighbor or relative who is the parent of a child with a disability and many others will be paid to provide services to individuals with disabilities. It is extremely important that many individuals without intellectual disabilities become involved in their lives. There is no better way to prepare those without disabilities to function responsibly in a wide variety of integrated environments and activities than to have them grow up with natural proportions of students with significant intellectual disabilities in their schools and neighborhoods. If all students with significant intellectual disabilities attend their home schools, all students without disabilities, not just some, will grow up with peers who have disabilities. Perhaps the most important reason students with significant intellectual disabilities must attend home schools is so they can experience the opportunities needed to develop an array of social relationships and

ultimately meaningful interpersonal networks. Students without intellectual disabilities have the social, physical, athletic and other attributes that allow them to attend schools that do not serve many, or any, students who live near them and still develop critically needed interpersonal networks in their neighborhoods. Students with significant intellectual disabilities cannot or do not. If they do not attend schools that serve the preponderance of peers without disabilities who live in their neighborhoods, they are restricted from the frequent contacts and common experiences over long periods of time which are so necessary for them to build social relationships at school and then to express them during non - school days and times in their communities. Far too often, the tragic result is social isolation, loneliness, harsh pressures on family members, low self-esteem and under-achievement. Specifically, they spend inordinate amounts of time in solitary activities. They spend excessive amounts of time with adult family members and paid caregivers who almost always become unnaturally intrusive in their lives. Extraordinary pressures are placed upon family members to arrange, provide, pay for and transport to and from time-filling activities of dubious social value and the activities most often are segregated. Attending a home school does not guarantee the development of a decent social relationship range, but it does afford reasonable opportunities to do so.

Eleven of the many non-mutually exclusive kinds of social relationships that should be parts of the life of every individual with significant intellectual disabilities are outlined in Table 1. Each IEP should include a component specific to the development, maintenance and enhancement of a healthy range of at least these 11 relationships. In fact, a school day should not pass without a student experiencing at least three or four of these relationships. The Madison Social Relationship Inventory (Brown, Udvari Solner, et al., 1994) and six other social relationship development manuals that can be used to engender supportive companion relationships for eating, traveling, tutoring, extracurricular activities, after-school and weekend activities and general education class activities are listed in the

reference section. They can be easily adapted to develop other supportive companion relationships. A manual that can be used to develop real friendships does not exist. Until it does, at least we can focus on the relationships we know how to develop.

Table 1. Social Relationships between Students with Significant Intellectual Disabilities and Peers without Disabilities

Relationship	Description
1 - Companion for eating	A peer without disabilities who agrees to function with a peer with disabilities during lunch times. While the student without disabilities may provide assistance, the relationship is primarily for companionship, rather than instruction.
2 - Companion for art, home economics, industrial arts, music, physical education, etc.	A peer without disabilities who agrees to provide assistance and encouragement to a peer with disabilities in integrated instructional and related activities arranged by relevant professionals.
3 - Companion in general education class	A peer without disabilities who agrees to sit next to and assist a student with disabilities with general education classroom activities.
4 - Companion during free time in school	A peer without disabilities who “hangs out” with a student with disabilities during free times at school. The purpose of the relationship is social and it may be manifested at many places and times throughout the school day/week.
5 - Companion for extracurricular activities	A peer without disabilities who guides, assists and attempts to ensure that everything goes well for a student with disabilities during school - sponsored extracurricular activities.
6 - Companion for after-school projects	A peer without disabilities who interacts with a student with disabilities in the process of completing school projects.

7 - After-school companion	A peer without disabilities who “hangs out,” plays with or attends an activity with a student with disabilities during non-school days and times.
8 - Travel companion	A peer without disabilities who helps, guides, or just spends time with a student with disabilities as she/he goes to and from school and related environments.
9 - Neighbor	A non-paid person without disabilities who interacts with a student with disabilities constructively in non-school environments and activities during non-school days and times.
10 - Peer tutor	A peer without disabilities who provides instruction to a student with a disability. The primary purpose of the relationship is for the student without disabilities to teach something that has been approved by an adult in authority.
11 - Friend	A reciprocal, mutual, nurturing and sharing relationship between a student with disabilities and a peer without disabilities.

Students with disabilities who attend home schools have realistic opportunities to develop and maintain the social relationships delineated above and many others, over long periods of time, in school and non-school environments, activities, days and times. Those who attend clustered or segregated schools do not for two major reasons.

First, when unnaturally large proportions of students with significant intellectual disabilities attend clustered or segregated schools, segregated areas and services for them are almost always established. It is then more difficult to engender individualized social, educational and other kinds of integrative relationships. Thus, proclivities toward establishing separate classrooms, bathrooms, wings, classes and other segregated settings and groupings are attenuated. That is, it is much easier to arrange for them to function in the integrated classrooms, classes, etc. in which they would function if they did not have disabilities (Brown, Kluth, et al, 2002). Second,

many relationships that begin in home schools can be practiced, enjoyed and enhanced in non-school environments and activities during non-school days and times, because the students with significant intellectual disabilities who attend home schools live near, and have better access to, neighborhood peers without disabilities. Few, and in most instances no, students with significant intellectual disabilities who attend clustered or segregated schools live in the same neighborhoods as their schoolmates without disabilities.

Summary

Consider the positive and much needed opportunities and experiences associated with attending home schools. Then contrast them with the dearth, even the inverse, of similar opportunities and experiences associated with attending clustered or segregated schools. Home schools are inherently superior, less restrictive and otherwise the best option.

In order for a home school to work, students with a wide range of abilities must function in the same spaces and the adults who function with them must be competent and responsible. In order for home school to work well, to contribute joyously to the celebration of differences and to prepare all children for integrated lives, parents and guardians of all children who attend should contribute to its general functioning. The professionals in the school should be creative, compassionate, ingenious, flexible and committed to generating environments and activities in which individual differences are respected and honored. The human, financial and other resources so critical for growth and achievement in a complex and heterogeneous society should be made available. Local, state and national officials should interpret statutes, regulations, procedures, policies, etc. in creative, supportive and integrative, rather than in categorical, restrictive and segregative, ways. The dignity and worth of each individual should be honored and celebrated. Attitudinal and other barriers to achievement should be obliterated so that all of us can be the best we can be. C

Constitutional and other protections afforded those without disabilities should.....

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