

Talking out of school

Parents could have more say on special ed

By LAURA E. GUARINO



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Ignorance is our greatest enemy in an age of increasing complacency, it can result in the greatest disservice one can do to one's family, one's child and one's self.

For parents of handicapped children, ignorance of the workings of the massive special education bureaucracy is understandable. Many find themselves confused by the system and trapped in a maze of contradictions, rules, regulations and red tape.

More than any other group, parents of handicapped high school students fall into this category. Unfortunately, those students are perhaps the most neglected and the most in need.

The handicapped high schooler is at the end of the road, facing his last chance and knowing that upon graduation, there is little help to move him into the mainstream of the real world.

For Sonja Braniff, a parent of a handicapped child and former member of the central Board of Education's Committee on the Handicapped, the problem was severe enough to make her take a job with the Board of Education, trying to help those parents.

Mrs. Braniff is the Island's advocate in a new federally funded program called Reach Out to Parents of Handicapped Children in Urban Secondary Schools (ROPO for short).

Only three schools in the city were chosen for the program, Susan Wagner, John Jay in Brooklyn and Flushing High School in Queens. Long a parent advocate, Mrs. Braniff discounts suggestions that she has "gone over to the other side." "If ever I think I'm being used," she said, "I'll have no hesitation about quitting."

The purpose of the program is to bring parents of handicapped high school students together in workshops, as well as individually, to help explain the workings of the system, the purpose and effectiveness of mainstreaming, to open up parental discussion about vocational training and, in general, to help parents understand their rights and the rights of their children.

A major aspect, Mrs. Braniff noted, is involving the parent in the educational process. Within the framework of the special education laws, parents have the potential to play a very large role in determining the course of the students' education.

One of the most important aspects of that potential is the Individual Educational Prescription (IEP), which is filled out every year by parents and the student's teachers. The IEP is designed to outline long-range and short-term goals for the student as well as potential for mainstreaming and future objectives.

Under law, the teacher has an obligation to consult with the parent while preparing the IEP. However, if the parent cannot be reached or chooses not to participate, the report can be prepared without that consultation.

Unfortunately, Mrs. Braniff said, far too many parents don't participate in the IEP's preparation and miss out on a very important opportunity to affect the child's education.

One of the major thrusts, she plans, is to get parents more actively involved in the preparation of the education plan. Additionally, she said, she hopes to get parents thinking about vocational education and what opportunities are available for the handicapped after high school.

The ROPO project is the first of its kind nationwide and to determine its effectiveness, control schools have been established in each of the participating areas. For Staten Island, Curtis High School will be the control.

Additional studies will be done now and at the end of the one-year project, Mrs. Braniff said, and will be used to evaluate the program, comparing Susan Wagner and the control school to determine how parental attitudes in the ROPO school were affected by the project as compared to attitudes in the control school.

A major factor will be changes in the number of parents who participate in the IEP.

Mrs. Braniff hopes that if the program is successful, it will ripple down into all levels of education, providing all parents with an advocate to answer questions, help them understand the program as well as to advise them of outside agencies providing other kinds of assistance such as vocational training.

"I'm not there to do the job of the educator," she pointed out, "but to help parents take part in a process that they often don't understand."

Mrs. Braniff, who has been involved in special education for several years and was one of the leaders of the local parent advocate movement, sees a change in attitudes.

"The way the climate is at this point," she said, "I can see some real positive changes in the thinking."

In accepting the \$13,000-a-year position, Mrs. Braniff didn't see it as working for the Board of Education; rather, it seemed a natural extension of the parent advocate role she had played for so many years.

She admits that program coordinators shy away from calling ROPO an advocacy program, but that is at its essence.

Throughout her involvement with special education, Mrs. Braniff said she's always wanted to "know what's there, use it and if that's not enough, augment it or change it."

"If I can instill that in someone else," she concluded, "I'll have accomplished something."