

SEAA History

It is difficult to imagine an educational world without special education and opportunities provided to children with disabilities, but that was the standard in the United States, and certainly in Arizona prior to 1973. SEAA was the pioneer in forging the first special education programs for children in Arizona. There were several major events that led up to the creation of the Special Education Administrators Association, now known as The Special Education Administrators of Arizona.

On April 9, 1965 Lyndon Johnson signed into law the Elementary and Secondary Education law as a part of his "War on Poverty." It allocated federal funding to states that passed through to school districts to provide educational services to all elementary and secondary students disadvantaged by poverty. This later morphed into Title I funding. However, it did not really address the fact that many of the disabled students were excluded from public education and sent home to their parents.

On October 8, 1971 the Pennsylvania Association For Retarded Children sued the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, indicating that the children in institutions were not receiving an education. The court sided with the students and mandated that those students become the responsibility of public-school districts, and that public schools needed to provide educational services for disabled children.

On December 17, 1971, just two months later, a ruling from a suit known as Mills versus the Board of Education in the District of Columbia required the public schools of the District of Columbia to serve students with intellectual disabilities, dyslexia, and behavioral challenges. This suit raised a red flag for all districts across the country and was acknowledged as a precursor of change.

Meanwhile, in Arizona, the opportunities provided to parents to educate their disabled children were extremely sparse. Most public schools did not offer any programs other than regular classrooms with no additional support. Public school administrators and governing boards strongly resisted the shift in responsibility from state institutions to public schools regarding the education of disabled students. They perceived the new responsibility as extremely expensive without adequate funding, and was an area of education with medical considerations in which they lacked personnel and expertise.

Arizona had the State School for the Deaf and Blind located in Tucson and parents were expected to send their hearing-impaired children at age 4 to live in the residential facility in order to be educated.

There was a state institution for intellectually disabled people located in Coolidge, Arizona and parents were expected to send their moderately to severely intellectually disabled children to that facility, where they would live until they died. Later, a second facility was located in Phoenix at approximately 48th St. and McDowell. That facility was demolished many years ago.

The Arizona State hospital was the major provider of services for severely emotionally or mentally disabled children and adults. Until the mid-70s, there was no educational programming at that hospital for students, and they spent all day in the wards with no educational preparation for leaving the facility.

Mesa School District and Washington Elementary School District were some of the first in Phoenix to implement programs for students with disabilities and did so with no federal or state funding.

As parents scrambled to find options to educate their children and allow them to stay at home with their families, several non-profits emerged to provide those services. The Foundation for Blind Children was led by Margaret Bloom with preschool and elementary programs. The Upward Foundation was established by Joyce Ridge and served intellectually disabled students from preschool through the secondary level. Devereux served emotionally disabled students in addition to several other programs that no longer exist, such as Jane Weyland and Lucky 13. Gompers Rehabilitation Center provided educational and therapeutic programs led by Francie Austin that served deaf children and orthopedically disabled children and provided speech and language services, counseling, OT, PT and medical evaluations. Almost all of these programs depended on old fashion fundraising in order to survive, because there was no governmental financial support. Bake sales, rummage sales, ice cream socials, door to door magazine sales and car washes were held continually in an effort to provide the services.

In the early 1970s administrators and parents from the above nonprofits launched a campaign to mandate the public school district provision of special education in Arizona. The first year it was defeated in almost every committee and was never heard by the full house or senate. The group reorganized, and when the bill was re-introduced the second year, the administrators of the non-profits brought adorable little special education preschoolers to each committee meeting and lined them up on the front row directly below the committee members. It was nearly impossible to vote against such precious children struggling to overcome their disabilities; and the bill was passed but with no financial allocation. The third year, the legislature allocated what was considered to be enough money to educate every special education child in the state. The amount was \$250,000.

On November 29, 1975 President Gerald Ford signed public law, 94-142 into law which required that all public schools provide special education programming to disabled students.

Public schools began to hire special education directors to build required programs; however, there were very few guidelines with regard to what type of programming should be provided, what forms would be necessary to document assessment data, IEP's, progress reports, etc. Each district began to develop its own program parameters, placement protocols and associated forms and documentation. Regulations poured out of the federal government continually. Superintendents and governing boards were still very resistant to the inclusion of special education as a public school district responsibility and frequently gave new special education directors very strict and unrealistic budgets that they could not exceed. There was a hidden perception that districts wanted to spend no more money on special education than was absolutely required by law and that the financial support of these students was not a good investment. In addition, there was considerable pushback from principals who did not want special education classes on their campuses. Many teachers strongly resisted the process of "main streaming" special education students into their classrooms on a part-time or full-time basis.

It was against this backdrop, that the first Special Education Directors struggled to implement appropriate programming for special education students. It quickly became apparent that collaboration among districts and a collective voice in communicating with superintendents, governing boards, and the Arizona Department of Education was far stronger than speaking as individuals.

The original four directors who met and established SEAA were Gene Austin from Madison District, Arnie Gronski from Cartwright District, Bill Hall from Phoenix Elementary District and Francie Austin from Creighton Elementary District. The goal of SEAA was to be the professional organization of special education directors and to represent the best interests of special education students throughout the state. It was to collectively interface with the legislature, the Arizona Department of Education, and

other professional organizations. It was to provide support and mentoring to new and existing special education directors, and to freely exchange information and best practices among members. It was to provide professional development for its members and their respective staff. It was to establish itself as prominent enough to be the organization asked to provide input to the legislature and the Arizona Department of Education before bills or regulations were implemented.

SEAA grew quickly and had 30 to 40 directors who met each month in rotating district locations. Various committees provided informational updates on legislative activities, pending changes on the federal level, legal issues, Medicaid, private day schools, and DES programs and changes. Professional development was a part of each agenda and included presentations from members as well as outside speakers. The goal was to have directors well prepared for the next evolution of programming and regulations. ADE members were on the agenda and provided updates.

Throughout the years, there have been many challenges to various aspects of special education evaluation of students, programming, teacher certification, best practices, and funding. SEAA members have always established relationships with decision makers in advance, rallied to have their collective voice heard with clarity and have had substantial impact in assuring that the best interests of special education students in Arizona have been recognized.