Lobbying for Special Education

Ernest R. House and Gordon A. Hoke

Two curriculum specialists recount the growth of special education programs in Illinois. They note that strong professional advocacy and political know-how help to promote such programs, but warn that problems of implementation can arise.

Many of us are reasonably familiar with the recent educational outcomes of special-interest lobbying in state and federal arenas. Among the measures lobbyists have achieved are career education; emphasis on consumerism and the environment; accountability standards; and special education provisions.

Those groups working to improve education for the handicapped have been particularly successful, and today, special education exerts a strong influence on many school programs. A study of actions taken in the state of Illinois suggests how special education proponents have attained major goals and what problems now need to be resolved.

Early Advocates in Illinois

Illinois has long been regarded as a trend-setter in special education. The General Assembly has approved an unusually large amount of legislation in the past quarter-century, a period when Congress, too, was favorably responding to efforts waged on behalf of handicapped children and youth.

Undoubtedly, the missionary zeal of parents and their spokesmen was a prime factor contributing to this era of success; but in Illinois, activities were enhanced by the presence of two singular individuals: Ray Graham and Sam Kirk.

Graham was one of four “advocates” cited most often by authorities on special education who responded to a telephone inquiry.

1 A recent issue of Exceptional Children contains the opinions of leading authorities in the field of special education relative to the trail-blazing efforts of pioneers in the education of exceptional children, and to the historical milestones in this area. See: “A Sense of Our History.” Exceptional Children 42(5):244-52; February 1976.
conducted by the editor of Exceptional Children. He was hailed as “an untiring administrator producing a nationwide movement in programs for exceptional children.” The same judges were also “overwhelming” in their appraisals that the work of Samuel A. Kirk has had a “major effect on many areas of special education.”

Kirk was a senior professor in the Department of Special Education, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Graham was ensconced as a central figure in the Department for Exceptional Children, Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (now Illinois Office of Education). During the 1950’s these two men, working in tandem, built a statewide umbrella of programs; succeeded in establishing the prestigious Institute for Research on Exceptional Children (IREC) on the University campus; and gave unstinting support to other advocates for special education functioning in local, state, and national circles.

Ray Graham suffered an untimely death in 1961; Kirk and his chief associate, James J. Gallagher, left the University of Illinois a few years later. The combined leadership of Graham and Kirk is sorely missed because successes of previous years have ironically spawned a series of problems for public schools and state agencies in Illinois that are trying to implement the myriad statutes pertaining to special education.

Maintaining a Delicate Web

“Development, it must be kept in mind, exploits a delicate web of human acceptance.” Programs for the handicapped have maximized the web of acceptance. They have ridden the crest of support provided by a wave of emotional, political, scholarly, and legal endeavors. Despite the loss of certain powerful advocates, lobbyists for special education have continued to exert considerable influence in legislative sessions throughout the 1960’s and into the current decade.

However, some opposition does exist. In Illinois, a member of the School Problems Commission—the general assembly’s guiding beacon on educational matters—has openly criticized pressures exerted by the special education lobby as “detrimental to the best interests of public education in Illinois.” Some school administrators and board members view mandated programs for the handicapped as seriously threatening to both the fiscal and legal integrity of local districts. And, in the spring of 1976, the incumbent chief state school officer warned that “insufficient funds” were available to underwrite costs of all mandated programs, including those in special education.

Faced with yearly mandates, reluctance or inability of the general assembly to fund fully new special education commitments, and delivery problems linked to low-incidence populations, many school districts in Illinois are subject to serious strains, given other contemporary pressures.

In a very real sense, events in the realm of special education are whipsawing local districts. Recent state legislation declares that public schools are legally responsible for the education of handicapped children and youth, aged 3-21. Title VI programs of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act that were

2 Ibid., p. 249.
3 Ibid., p. 249.
4 The building at Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, housing classes for students preparing to teach the handicapped is known as Ray Graham Hall.
FOR OPENERS...

two ASCD books take a comprehensive look at open education, in theory and in practice.

Open Education: Critique and Assessment edited by Vincent R. Rogers and Bud Church (611-75054, $4.75)—describes the concept of openness, its British origins, and how cultural differences have determined the direction of open education in the United States. Case studies explore the successes and failures among open programs, including a lucid summary of research in the field.

Open Schools for Children by Alexander Frazier (611-17916, $3.75)—provides a provocative exploration of the opportunities and problems in freeing space, structure, and curriculum, as well as how it will all add up in the long run.

__________________________  _________________  _________________
Name                                    City                              State        Zip
Street

No. of Copies

Enclosed is my check payable to ASCD.

Please bill me □.

Postage and handling extra on all billed orders. All orders totaling $10.00 or less must be prepaid by cash, check, or money order. Orders from institutions and businesses must be on an official purchase order form. Discounts on orders of the same title to a single address: 10-49 copies, 10%; 50 or more copies, 15%.

Return to:
Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development
1701 K St., N.W., Suite 1100
Washington, D.C. 20006

It is becoming increasingly apparent that rural areas, in particular, are witnessing the creation of two systems of public education. One mirrors familiar elementary and secondary schools of the past; the other is a far-flung arrangement characterized by joint agreements between local educational agencies (normally operating on a countywide basis or beyond) and Title VI regions comprised of several counties. “Local control” becomes a very ambiguous term amidst all these overlapping bonds.

General Observations

Let us make a few observations about special education in Illinois that seem to apply generally:

1. For programs to develop at either the state or local levels requires strong advocates such as Graham and Kirk. The advocates orchestrate forces necessary to bring about action.6

2. The advocates must capitalize on or incite public concerns. Special education is a “promotable” issue; education for the gifted is not.

3. At the state level, the advocates must be well connected with the state department of education. No one else has the ear of the legislature long enough to apply extended, persistent pressure. At the local level, one must have the backing of the central office staff, which has initiating power and access to the board of education.

4. It is highly desirable to back political pressure with professional expertise such as that represented by Kirk. No one will support a program known to be "professionally poor." The program is legitimated by bringing in outside experts to testify or to serve as consultants.

5. The advocacy pressure must be maintained over a long period of time. If it goes away soon, it will have no lasting effect.

6. Passing laws or making board policy does not mean the program will be implemented. There are still hundreds of school districts and thousands of teachers with whom the program must be negotiated. All have the power to resist successfully. At each level, acceptance entails a lengthy political process.

7. Once implemented, any program creates new problems and has unanticipated consequences far beyond what anyone can see. There is a strong element of indeterminacy.

8. The program also assumes a life of its own, for it creates new constituencies and, eventually, counterpressures.

**Political Considerations**

What has emerged in Illinois is a condition common to school systems in all parts of the nation; a number of elements unique to this state dramatize the situation.

On the one hand, provisions for educating the handicapped encompass a variety of public and private institutions and agencies with interconnections among local-regional-state-federal levels of governance. On the other hand, at all levels, there is great difficulty in relating services and organizations in such a way that effective programs can be implemented.

Those of us who view public schools as immune to the trials and tribulations of the political scene would do well to ponder the words of Congressman Richard Bolling of Kansas. Several years ago, he warned:

I would hope that all of you who are disillusioned by the political process, who think you can escape the political process, would recognize that the framework of the society within which you work and plan is based on the political process.\(^7\)

---

\(^7\)E. F. Schumacher. *Small Is Beautiful: A Study of Economics As If People Mattered*. London, England: Blond & Briggs, Ltd., 1973. p. 188. The author writes, "It is not enough merely to have a new policy: new methods of organisation are required, because the policy is in the implementation."


**Ernest R. House and Gordon A. Hoke**

are Professors of Education, Center for Instructional Research and Curriculum Evaluation, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.
Copyright © 1976 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.