

Book Review

Title: *Negotiating the Special Education Maze: A Guide for Parents & Teachers, 4th Ed.*
Authors: Winifred Anderson, Stephen R. Chitwood, Deidre Hayden and Cherie Takemoto
Publisher: Bethesda, MD: Woodbine House, 2008
ISBN: 978-1-890627-46-1, Paper, 275 pages
Price: \$21.95
Reviewer: Michael Bailey

”When I use a word,” Humpty Dumpty said in rather
a scornful tone, “it means just what I choose
it to mean – neither more nor less.”
Lewis Carroll

We expect no simple answers to complex questions. At the same time we long for simple answers to simple questions. And they are in short supply.

In 1962 the United States Supreme Court in *Baker v. Carr* provided a simple answer to the question “who may vote?” The court opined “one man—one vote.” Simple enough, but we all have a way of making incomprehensible that which should be simple. Nearly 50 years on, one Presidential election is forever tainted and litigation over who may vote is at an all time high. Congress has even gone so far as to enact the Help America Vote Act which in a few thousand words attempts to explain the simple one man—one vote rule.

Another seemingly simple question was addressed by Congress in 1975 with the passage of P. L. 94 – 142. To the question “can children with disabilities be educated with their peers?” congress said yes. That law became the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and now, proving that governments can have a sense of humor, it is called the Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement Act.

That law is startling in its simplicity. Every child with a disability has the right to a free and appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment. Congress chose to make this a right. A right, such as the right to freedom of speech, is not negotiable. Kids with disabilities get to go to school just like everyone else. And when they get there they must be educated in the least restrictive way. Congress even added a statutory method for achieving this. An Individual Education Plan for each child. This is pretty simple. It is not hard to understand. But it has proven hard to implement.

Like the simple premise of *Baker vs. Carr* legions of bureaucrats, functionaries, lawyers, administrators and reactionaries have created a system of complex federal rules, state rules, local rules and honored but bogus local customs to turn the simple dream of IDEA in to what can only be described as a maze of nearly incomprehensible gibberish.

Maze (a confusing network of passages) is well chosen as the title of the 4th Edition of *Negotiating the Special Education Maze: A Guide for Parents & Teachers*. Authors Winifred Anderson, Stephen Chitwood, Deidre Hayden, and Cherie Takemoto are a good mix of professional special education persons, scholars, advocates, and parents. And the great strength of the book is their ability to take into account the points of view of a number of players.

This expertise is helpful in creating a text that, in spite of the complexities of modern advocacy, is clear, concise and does what a reader would expect. It explains in understandable language the principles of IDEA, guides one through the IEP process, and concludes with transition to adulthood.

But what makes this work stand out and what justifies yet another edition is the focus on relationship building between families and professionals. Litigation, mediation, etc., are all well and good but are generally beyond the emotional and financial tolerance of families. This book is a fine guide to decision-making and a reminder of the importance of keeping the educational needs of children as the focus of attention.

The system is not a simple system to deal with and this book is not a simple thing to read. But it comes as close as we are likely to get to taking participants by the hand and guiding them through this maze of special education complexity. If their advice is followed – and that's not a foregone fact – their work will help assure that when a child with a disability finally reaches his or her 21st birthday and is finished with school, there is a great probability that education will have prepared that child to lead a happy and independent life. And for that this book and its authors deserve our thanks.

The book is not particularly accessible to people with disabilities but it is certainly worth the purchase price and I recommend it to anyone.

Michael Bailey is the author of *Special education: A parent's guide to a child's success*. He is President of Disability Rights Oregon as well as Vice President of the National Disability Rights Network. He can be emailed at mtbclarion@comcast.net

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