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Disabled students' educational opportunities have grown through the decades

By ANDREW WIND, Courier Staff Writer

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WAVERLY --- Brent Westmeyer enjoys the life he has made.

For the past decade, the 44-year-old has washed dishes in the kitchen at Martin's Brandenburg Restaurant. He lives in an apartment a couple blocks away and regularly walks to work. He sees his parents frequently and enjoys going on country drives with his father.

"He has a learner's permit that we renew every two years," said his mother, Betty.

That allows Brent, who is mentally disabled, to be behind the wheel on those drives while his father is the passenger.

"That's a real asset as far as where he came from and what we thought he could do," Betty said. "He understands the principles of driving."

She credits Brent's education at River Hills School in Cedar Falls for his ability to reach such milestones. The Area Education Agency 267 school serves people with moderate, severe and profound developmental disabilities from birth to 21 years old. The school, with an enrollment of about 140 students, has played an important role in educating disabled people across the Cedar Valley since opening 40 years ago.

Today begins Disability History Week in Iowa. Earlier this year, the Legislature approved a resolution commemorating the history and achievements of physically and mentally disabled people during the third week of October.

According to the resolution, nearly 400,000 Iowans are disabled, making them the state's largest minority group. The document also noted disabled people face higher unemployment rates than the general population and are often stigmatized for their condition.

Access to education has been essential to improving the quality of life for mentally disabled people and providing options within their own community. Even 50 years ago people with mental disabilities were regularly institutionalized, receiving little or no education or life-skills training.

About that time, organizations like the National Association for Retarded Children formed to help people with disabilities. A Black Hawk County chapter was established in 1954.

"We advocate for persons with Down syndrome, cerebral palsy, autism and other cognitive, intellectual and developmental disabilities," said Dolly Fortier, president of the local association, which is now called Arc of Cedar Valley.

Fortier got involved after her daughter Julie, now 49, was diagnosed with profound mental disability as an infant because of an injury at birth.



Brent Westmeyer, left, and chef Martin Vollmer joke around in the kitchen during the lunch rush recently at Martin's Brandenburg Restaurant in Waverly. Westmeyer, who has some mental disabilities, has washed dishes at the restaurant for a decade.

RICK CHASE / Courier Staff Photographer

"The stigma that had been attached to mental retardation had to end," Fortier said. "People felt uncomfortable; well, that was their problem. (Disabled children) needed to have schools, they needed to live in their own community, they needed to be taught."

Volunteers with Arc and several other groups started the metro area's first educational program for disabled children in 1955, according to a history written by Fortier. Held in a home, the effort consisted of games, story time, a rest period, lunch and a session jumping on a large mattress. Seven boys and one girl participated.

The program grew rapidly and went through several moves. Organizers operated out of First Lutheran Church on High Street in Waterloo when Fortier enrolled her daughter in 1965. About the same time, officials with Exceptional Persons Inc. and the Joint County School System were seeking funding to build a school for disabled students.

A \$200,000 loan from the Minnie Crippen Foundation and a \$296,900 federal grant helped get the project off the ground, according to Fortier's history. Total cost was about \$800,000.

River Hills School opened Sept. 5, 1967, at 2700 Grand Boulevard in Cedar Falls. The Joint County School System operated the facility with some dollars from Black Hawk County's mental health fund.

Normal life

Mark McCalley, who has Down syndrome, was one of the first students to enroll. His mother, Mary, is grateful River Hills was available at that time.

"It allowed children to be in the home and in the community," she said. "It just allowed for a normal life for the handicapped folks."

Betty Westmeyer said when her son was school age "there really wasn't anything out there for him."

"Even through the doctors and school principals, nobody had any direction for us," she said.

A pediatrician in Waterloo told the Westmeyers about River Hills. Brent admitted two years after the school opened.

Brent and Mark learned skills during their years at River Hills, such as identifying street signs, riding the city bus, woodworking, cooking and cleaning. They also gained work experience in the community.

Mark is now 46. He lives in a group home with nine other people with disabilities and rides the bus to his job at Wal-Mart in Waterloo.

"They worked on the skills that he would require," Mary McCalley said. "The emphasis was more on the skills that would make his life better rather than to learn how to read or do mathematics. I feel he could have done some of that."

The emphasis slowly shifted to include more academics and bring disabled students into regular education classrooms as state and federal laws were passed.

In the early 1970s, the state of Iowa said school districts must provide special education services for eligible students from birth until they are 21. In 1975, Congress approved the Education of All Handicapped Children Act, which entitles disabled people from 3 to 21 to receive a free and appropriate public school education in the "least-restrictive environment."

The federal law passed about the same time Iowa launched 15 area education agencies across the state that merged county school systems and took over their duties, including support services for special education. The Cedar Valley was served by AEA 7, which has since merged with two other agencies to form AEA 267.

"They required a whole array of services for handicapped children," said Larry McDonald, River Hills' first principal.

That meant hiring support staff such as speech pathologists and school psychologists.

The law provided options for families, including regular education schools, where disabled children could be placed in self-contained classrooms or be integrated into settings with other students to varying degrees. Parents helped make those decisions through an individual education plan.

"It was a whole new field of under-served individuals," McDonald said. The problems ran the gamut: physical and mental disabilities, hearing and sight loss, emotional and behavioral disorders.

Services have developed over the decades "through many talented people who searched the country for programs," he added.

"It was a tremendous learning curve and sometimes a frustrating learning curve."

Frank Darrah, an AEA 267 special education coordinator, said creating individual education plans for each student was a positive development.

"The structure that the (plan) provides really has improved our accountability," he said.

When Darrah started working as a special education teacher in 1969, educators did "what felt good" and seemed to work.

"Now, we have data to back up what we do," he said. "We're more scientific in what we decide."

But at the same time, Darrah said an increasing amount of time "is spent chasing paper" to ensure student and parent rights.

"I would never say we're still not doing good things for kids, because we are," he said. "But we've lost our focus a little bit."

Increased integration

Mary Stevens, AEA 267's director of special education services, said the federal law is broader than what the state required. But "along with the federal mandate there was funding," she said.

The original intent was to federally fund 40 percent of special education costs. Stevens said the figure still hasn't surpassed 18 percent, though. Some increases were provided during multiple congressional reauthorizations of the law as further requirements were added. The state also provides funding levels that depend on the number of students served and the nature of their disabilities.

Initially, "the emphasis was on identifying children with special needs and including them in the school system," said Stevens. Now, "we're really focused on identifying what are the educational strategies that are needed to increase their achievement and even accelerate their achievement."

That usually means finding ways to bring disabled students into more regular classrooms.

"We do have a state goal that we want 75 percent of our students with disabilities participating 80 percent of the time or more in a general education environment by 2011," Stevens said. "Statewide it is about 53 percent, so we're moving in that direction."

She added, "you always start with the general education classroom. So, the students at River Hills or any of our special schools, really it's the (individual education plan) team that has determined that's the least-restrictive environment."

Some want to ensure that River Hills will always be there, though.

"I will, to my death, support it as an option for parents," McCalley said.

"I understand that there are some really good things going on in the public school system, as far as integration and mainstreaming, but I do not believe it is for every individual with a disability."

Peg Ehrenman wanted to her two disabled sons to be integrated into regular schools as a way to increase understanding and acceptance in the community.

Her younger son, Sean, is now 22 and attended Waterloo Community Schools throughout his education. He was born with spina bifida and mild mental disability. He was in a regular elementary classroom with the help of an associate. In middle and high school, he attended special education classes.

It was more difficult to place her older son, Ryan, who is now 30. He has a severe mental disability and is autistic. After briefly attempting to place him in a district elementary school, Ryan spent eight years in facilities around Iowa and in Wisconsin before returning home at age 16.

By that time, more programs were in place to help disabled students and the family tried enrolling him at West Intermediate School. But the ringing bells bothered Ryan, he would not sit down in class and he needed assistance in the restroom.

"For Ryan, it didn't work," said Ehrenman. So instead he attended River Hills, where the teachers had received training to work with autistic students.

"Everybody knew him and everybody knew the same techniques," she said. "So, actually, it was less restrictive for him. He did fine there."

Kittrell Elementary School has been the right place for Kim Hansen's son, Daniel, who has Down syndrome. The fourth-grader has received AEA services since infancy, including preschool. But when it came to starting school, the family was interested in a general education setting.

"We had our choice," said Hansen. "We've talked to people, we visited River Hills." She and her husband felt that Daniel wouldn't gain much more than socialization skills at the school.

At Kittrell, he is in a self-contained special needs classroom for most subjects and integrates with other fourth-graders for gym, music and art classes. Hansen said he is "too distracting" to be in general education for other subjects.

Daniel has been learning to read, spell and do basic math plus working on skills like telling time and counting money. He had one teacher in kindergarten through second grade and will have his current teacher until finishing elementary school. He also has individual and group sessions with a speech pathologist.

While Hansen has been happy with her son's progress at Kittrell, she still believes there's room for special education schools.

"I know that there's people out there who don't feel like River Hills is needed," she said. But Hansen believes it is important to provide the option for parents who don't feel comfortable putting their child in a general education setting.

Betty Westmeyer has been on the board of what is now AEA 267 since 1982 and feels "very strongly" about the necessity of River Hills all of the agency's services for disabled students.

"I think parents have become very complacent about (the services) because they didn't need to go through what we did," she said. Disability services are available from birth, Westmeyer noted, and educators have a better understanding how to address the difficulties students face. Problems can sometimes be corrected before children reach school age and many of those who continue to use services throughout their education are advancing further than her son.

That's a good sign, as far as Westmeyer is concerned.

"Hopefully, the children today will have increased benefits that his generation didn't have the opportunity to grow with."

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