

Meeting of the Assessment Committee of the FILIUS Institute

Students with disabilities face little opportunity and many hardships, especially those students coming from schools located in poorer areas of Puerto Rico. The conditions of many of these schools are in a state of rapid deterioration, as federal money is trapped in the tight web of government bureaucracy. As a direct result, the futures of many children with disabilities will be grim. A substandard education will condemn many of these children to a life of unemployment and unfulfilled potential: at best completely dependent upon their families; at worst, shunned by society or incarceration.

If education for children with disabilities is to improve, change must occur on all levels of society. This is an enormous undertaking. Parents, teachers, and administrators need to work together with the government to build strong communities focusing on schools as the heart of the neighborhood, thereby creating a network for information sharing. In the same light, researchers need to work with schools to develop a common language and a well-defined process of mutual education so that parents, educators and researchers understand each other, thus ensuring that current research is better understood and implemented by both teachers and parents. Improvements in these areas will also enable communities to become more involved in the decentralization of government resources, so that the money available for students with disabilities will end up in the hands of those who will put it back into the communities in need.

Presently, schools have ceased to function as the heart of the communities in which they are located. Parents, teachers and educational institutions often function as individual satellites revolving around an impenetrable federal bureaucracy. Economic hardship is the fundamental reason for the disconnection between parents, teachers,

schools and government. Many parents in poorer school districts are unable to invest time and money in their children's education because there is little of either to be had. Many families are broken apart and many children are raised by single mothers who must scrape a living together forcing the child's educational needs to take a lower priority. Likewise, teachers are also overworked and underpaid. Classrooms are often times filled to capacity and for this reason, teachers are not able to give students with disabilities the individual attention they need and deserve.

When children and families are dealing with both learning and physical disabilities, the situation becomes even more desperate for parents and teachers. Many children with disabilities need around-the-clock care and the strain of doing this single-handedly becomes too much for parents, especially those raising children on their own. Parents are not aware of the few resources available to them. There is very little medical, legal, and economic support available for the poorer communities of Puerto Rico. The unfortunate result is that many children with these disabilities remain locked-up in the house, avoiding school altogether.

Children with disabilities who are able to attend schools also face major obstacles to living a self-sufficient adult life. Many students with disabilities will enter into vocational training, which usually takes place from about 14 to 22 years of age. After vocational training, these young adults will experience a transition period, where they must re-enter into society and find work. This is a difficult and sometimes dangerous period for most young adults with disabilities. Due to lack of assistance, many are lost in this transition period and remain at home, unemployed or worse, in jail.

Educational institutions should function as an intermediary between the student with special needs, the educational requirements of the community and the limitations imposed by government. However, many of the responsibilities which fall under the jurisdiction of these institutions are perforce taken up by the individual teacher, administrator or parent. The examples are numerous: teachers will often call parents directly when they will be absent, as there are few substitute teachers to be found. Schools cannot afford trained coordinators to assist with the transition period of students with disabilities, so these students are left to their own defenses, if they are not lucky enough to have a mentor. Even things such as basic plumbing needs are taken care of out-of-pocket by a few involved individuals, in order to have the problems fixed within a decent amount of time, due to the sheer amount of paperwork which makes it virtually impossible to take care of these situations in a timely manner.

The problem is not due to lack of funding. There are plenty of grants, both federal and private, which provide large sums of money for education. Rather, the problem lies in the inability of schools systems to obtain and distribute these government funds to make important improvements.

The power of the Department of Education is highly centralized, creating a bureaucracy that is slow to respond and money gets delayed or even lost in the authorization process. Those who have an in-depth knowledge of the changes that schools need to make, such as school principals and educational program directors, have little authority to implement their knowledge and abilities. Likewise, the inability to obtain money in combination with a lack of governmental checks and balances, contribute to the rampant corruption that exists in the government, thus leaving the

communities' hands tied. Most schools buckle under the vast amounts of paperwork. All of these problems stand in the way of progress. The result is that many schools exist in substandard conditions and it is usually the children with disabilities who are left the furthest behind.

Stagnation of progress and rampant corruption have greatly contributed to an overall feeling of insecurity and instability among school workers and parents. The Department of Education holds meetings in order to provide a forum for educators, parents, administrators and researchers to discuss these issues, however attendance has dwindled. Many have lost interest due to lack of results. It is evident the current system is just not working, and is progressively deteriorating. Moreover, schools continue to lose teachers. The system fails to allow teachers to live in or near the communities they come from so many leave the profession. Those teachers, principals and administrators who remain have also lost hope for their own schools that they serve. There is a pervasive feeling of cynicism, distrust, and immobility in schools. Over time, educators and parents have grown accustomed to their hard work not having any results.

What needs be done, then, to improve educational opportunities for the student with special needs? One possible first step in resolving this situation is to make the school the heart of the community, as it was a few decades back. If these schools once again become the center of the community, then the community will have a common ground upon which to stand and join forces, and thereby reactivating interest and rebuilding a network to reconnect and strengthen the community.

Next, improving access to information is also an important factor in this situation faced by communities and school. Parents of children with disabilities and

teachers do not have much information regarding which resources, economic or otherwise, are available to them. Parents and teachers of students with disabilities need to join forces and learn their rights. If schools were once again the center of the community, parents and teachers would have access to vital information. A process should be put in place to consistently provide vital information to all affected parties. Parents will see first-hand the conditions of the schools and have a common ground upon which to explore solutions regarding necessary changes.

Access to and dispersal of information are not the only challenges faced by the community. The quality of the information is of utmost importance. Researched-based objectives and methodologies must be made available for implementation in an understandable format at some point as it is passed from researchers to educators. Much of the research that exists is not properly implemented because is not understood by parents and educators. First, researchers must work with educators to develop a common language, so that the information being presented is understood. Then, open dialogue among all stakeholders must take place so that operational solutions can be found.

Next, researchers and schools need to work together to prioritize the issues in research which will be most beneficial to the community, schools and parents to better the futures of students with disabilities. Two pressing issues which need immediate attention are the integration of regular students and those students with disabilities, so that these students can learn independence and develop self-esteem. Secondly, much research is needed with regard to how to successfully bridge the transition period of students with disabilities back into society.

Only once the community has a place in which to meet and discuss the educational needs of the community and a network along which useful information is passed, and knowledge of how to implement the current research, only then they can come together to demand the money that is rightly theirs from the government and once again make the educational process truly local. The only way to begin to unravel the centralized power of the government is to reactivate interest and boost morale within the community. The only way to reactivate interest within the schools is to bring the community in touch with their schools again. It is schools in poorer neighborhoods that face the worst conditions. It is the families within the lowest economic bracket that face the most hardship. A vicious cycle repeats itself. Today the jails are filled with children with learning disabilities who had few community or educational resources to empower them. As a result, many turn to illegal jobs while they are still young because, having lost interest and faith in an educational system which does not serve their needs.

Decentralization of the educational bureaucracy will result in more efficient access to and utilization of the money that is there for the education and support of children with disabilities. To the degree that communities become involved in changing the status quo, their schools will progress toward providing the best hope for children with special needs - a safe haven where the skills required for independent living are taught and hope for a better future prevails.