



Ellen Chambers reflects on SPEDWatch's 10th Anniversary

Ten years ago today, January 13, 2006, SPEDWatch was incorporated in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. (It was a Friday the 13th, of course!)

The spark that started SPEDWatch actually occurred somewhat earlier, in June of 2005. That's when I had what people call an epiphany. I had returned to my office after yet another utterly ridiculous school Team Meeting. Something along the lines of a high school student with average intelligence being found ineligible for special education services despite an independent evaluation diagnosing dyslexia and years of failing grades.

I fell into my office chair. I was tired, damn tired. Tired of the cavalier way schools ignored clear evidence of learning disability. Tired of bearing witness to parents' angry tears. Tired of hearing about Massachusetts' stellar reputation as a national leader in the field of education.

I felt useless, and that shook me. All my life I had worked hard at things and usually succeeded, sometimes excelled. Yet here was an insanely dysfunctional system that simply would not yield to my efforts. In the eight years that I had been practicing as a professional special education advocate, *nothing had changed*. My clients faced the same obstacles regardless of year, disability, age, or income. Schools spouted the same disrespectful and misleading rhetoric. Children continued to be shackled to the lifelong consequences of needless academic failure. There seemed to be no way out.

Here came the epiphany (part one, anyway):

I realized I could advocate for individual children for the rest of my life, but I would only have helped those children whose families could afford to hire me. I would go to my grave having helped a handful of children, but having done nothing for hundreds of thousands of others. I couldn't live with that, just couldn't.

"I decided to form a group that would provide the leadership and structure needed to organize parents into a civil rights, social change movement. Our mission would be to secure the educational rights of all Massachusetts school-children with disabilities. Our strategy would be the proven techniques of nonviolent direct action. We would have one overarching demand: that Massachusetts students with disabilities be given the education to which they are legally and morally entitled. No more. No less. No compromise."

Ellen Chambers
SPEDWatch Founder

But what to do?

In a leap of faith, I quit my job and spent the next six months reflecting on that question. Researching, talking to colleagues, probing ideas, lying awake at night. Massachusetts had one of the strongest advocacy communities in the nation, yet districts across the state continued to brazenly ignore the law and deprive schoolchildren of their right to an appropriate education.

How was that possible?

Attorneys, advocates, parent training and information centers, disability specific organizations were all out in full force, every day, year after year. These people were doing great work, critically important work. Something, then, must be missing from the advocacy equation in Massachusetts.

What was it?

I happened to be reading Martin Luther King Jr.'s book "Why We Can't Wait" at the time, and that triggered epiphany, part 2:

Parents!

Parents were the missing (and most important, I'd argue) variable in the fight for special education rights. But we weren't organized. We were scattered across the state, frustrated, angry, expending enormous energy fighting for our kids – but all in isolation. What might happen if we all connected? What might happen if we harnessed all that energy and directed it strategically at changing the education system itself?

Thankfully, I then soon discovered the work of Dr. Gene Sharp, who founded the Albert Einstein Institution at Harvard University to promote research, policy studies, and education on the strategic uses of nonviolent struggle in the face of dictatorships, war,

"If the liberation of oppressed people is to happen and be genuine and durable, it must therefore be essentially self-liberation."

Gene Sharp
Harvard University

genocide, and oppression. With Dr. King and Dr. Sharp as inspiration, I decided to form a group that would provide the leadership and structure needed to organize parents into a civil rights, social change movement. Our mission would be to secure the educational rights of all Massachusetts schoolchildren with disabilities. Our strategy would be the proven techniques of nonviolent direct action. We would have one overarching demand: that Massachusetts schoolchildren with disabilities be given the education to which they are legally and morally entitled. No more, no less, no compromise.

Early going was predictably difficult. The consensus was that SPEDWatch was nothing more than a fringe group of disgruntled parents, needlessly upsetting other parents - a flash in the pan that would fizzle out quickly. I remember getting an angry phone call

during those first months asking “On what authority is SPEDWatch acting?” as if we somehow needed permission to advocate for our children. My reply? “On our own authority as citizens of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts and the United States of America to petition government for redress of our grievances.”

Parents were skeptical. SPEDWatch was putting forth uncomfortable ideas involving protest demonstrations and, in the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., forcing districts and government to “*commit ... brutalities openly, in the light of day, with the rest of the world looking on.*” A new and provocative organization, parents feared retaliation if they associated with SPEDWatch. It was difficult for people to embrace a group that cautioned social change of the sort SPEDWatch was seeking would take many years, decades even. We Americans are notorious for wanting a quick fix, but social norms change grudgingly.

We forged ahead with a small handful of selfless volunteers. In April of 2007, we published our signature report Broken Promises: Special Education in Massachusetts, which revealed, for the first time, in one easy to understand document, the widespread noncompliance with special education law in Massachusetts schools and its horrific human repercussions. That November, yielding to pressure from SPEDWatch, Boston’s Channel 5 television station aired a one-hour program about parents’ experiences in the Massachusetts special education system. This was the first time that the parent perspective had been explored by mainstream broadcast media. The show was so popular that it was rebroadcast the following March.

In January of 2008, SPEDWatch demonstrated outside the MDESE headquarters building in Malden in sub-zero temperatures. A large color photograph of the event was published on the front page of the Boston Globe’s Metro Section the following day. Membership started climbing.

We traveled around the state holding community meetings. We helped parents in Reading, Mansfield, Medford, the Wachusett Regional School District and others organize and change district operations.

In November 2008, Channel 5 veteran reporter Pam Cross interviewed SPEDWatch about parents reaction to then vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin’s remarks about disability advocacy in the White House. By July of 2009 we were sitting in Governor Deval Patrick’s Statehouse office, briefing him on the plight of schoolchildren with special needs in the Commonwealth’s schools.

“For the tyrant has the power to inflict only that which we lack the strength to resist.”
Krishnalal Shridharani
Indian sociologist

The Mental Health Legal Advisors Committee of the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court began citing to SPEDWatch as a reliable source of information about special education rights.

Membership pushed past the 1,000 mark. We could no longer be ignored.

Today, we continue to slowly dismantle the walls behind which school districts and government hide their neglect of students with special needs. We didn't fizzle out, and we're not going away.

People often ask me "how is SPEDWatch different from other advocacy organizations?" The best way I can answer that question is to use an analogy from the field of medicine.

Educational neglect of students with disabilities is a debilitating disease. Other advocacy organizations, through education, litigation, policy work, legislative lobbying and other interventions, are doing the critical work of treating the symptoms of that disease. They are effecting positive change for those individuals they are able to reach. The disease itself, however, rages on, infecting new victims every day. SPEDWatch is working on the cure, on eradicating the disease itself, by changing the societal values that allow the disease to thrive.

There is no guarantee that I will see the end of this fight in my lifetime, and I'm okay with that. I only know that the fight will never be won, if it's not begun.

SPEDWatch has begun the fight.

The children are waiting,

Ellen M. Chambers, MBA

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