

Group Aims to Boost Advocacy Skills for Parents of Students With Disabilities



By [Christina A. Samuels](#) — February 09, 2016 | Corrected: February 18, 2016 ⌚ 9 min read



Sophomore Miguel D'Agostino, 17, looks down the hallway before the start of a learning-support class at Coatesville High School in Coatesville, Pa.

— Charles Mostoller for Education Week

Corrected: An earlier version of this article incorrectly described Superintendent Cathy Taschner as a co-founder of the Citizens Who Seek Educational Equity group. The independent group was founded by Rob Marshall, who later worked with Taschner in the group's involvement with the Coatesville school system on behalf of parents of students with disabilities.

A Pennsylvania town roiled by a controversy that led to the resignation of its superintendent three years ago has found an unusual path back to trust between the community and its school district: a volunteer effort that so far has helped support dozens of parents of students who have disabilities.

The chain of events began in 2013, when the then-superintendent of the Coatesville Area School District, 40 miles west of Philadelphia, was found to have exchanged dozens of sexist and racist text messages with a district staff member.

Meetings held in the wake of that scandal revealed other deep-rooted problems in the 7,000-student school system, including allegations that district officials discriminated against students with disabilities and minority students.

Cathy Taschner, an administrator in another district, stepped into the maelstrom when she was hired as Coatesville's permanent superintendent in June 2014. The former superintendent, Richard Como, resigned in September 2013.

During a months-long community listening tour, Taschner searched for ways to rebuild ties between the district and the families it serves. Around the same time, Rob Marshall, a Coatesville native who was completing a divinity degree, was looking for ideas to meet a community-service graduation requirement.

Taschner and Marshall found in each other like-minded spirits. From their partnership came Citizens Who Seek Educational Equity, or Citizens Who S.E.E., a group of volunteers who serve as advocates for parents of students with disabilities.

The volunteers—educational heavy-hitters who include the superintendent of another Pennsylvania district, a retired school psychologist, and a former youth-justice specialist—sit right alongside parents at meetings on their children's individualized education programs, or IEPs, helping to hammer out plans for services and supports for those special education students.

The volunteers draft letters as needed, asking for extra testing, school records, or additional meetings to resolve problems.

And in an educational area that is filled with often-bewildering requirements, regulations, and timelines, the volunteers also equip parents with enough knowledge that they can advocate for

their own children.

“I feel more empowered in getting the school to do what they’re supposed to do,” said Marcia Stringfield, a parent who credits the group with helping her get appropriate services for her son James, a 17-year-old senior. “There’s a big difference with everyone’s attitude.”

Volunteers involved in Citizens Who S.E.E. stress that they are not employees of the district. They will butt heads with school officials if necessary in support of parents.

But while special education advocates and school administrators often view each other with suspicion, Taschner has made it clear that the organization’s leaders have her ear. She meets with group leaders regularly, introduced Marshall to district employees during an in-service meeting, and has adopted suggestions that the volunteers have gleaned from their interactions with families.

Hard-Nosed Advocacy

For example, parents said they felt uncomfortable being asked to sign unfamiliar documents at IEP meetings, which is where school staff members, parents, and students draft academic goals. Taschner directed school administrators to ease up on the pressure.

Taschner said she told Marshall, as the program launched: “I will push from the school part if you push from the outside. And together we can push our children right up to the top.”

The district’s focus on students with disabilities, particularly black students and low-income students, came from the painful anecdotes that bubbled up during the listening tour from parents who felt they had been ignored or intimidated.

But Taschner's own history with special education makes her a particularly receptive administrator. As a principal in another Pennsylvania district, she received an award from the disability-advocacy group TASH for her work in inclusive education. She also served for five years on a state advisory panel that monitored a settlement agreement between Pennsylvania and advocacy organizations that said the state had failed to educate students in the least-restrictive environment that met those students' needs.

"It was career-changing when you watch what happens to families who work so hard and fight so hard to get their child the education that they're already entitled to, but can't access because of the barriers that schools enact between them and this education," Taschner said.

"I never dreamed there would be an educator who would say, 'Your child can't come here.' And what I learned is there are parents who go through that every day," she adds.

Marshall said the Citizens Who S.E.E. group has worked with about 40 families so far, with nibbles of interest from people outside the district as well. He's partnering with a local Hispanic church to get Spanish-speaking volunteers.

"I'm really trying to keep [volunteers] in Coatesville. But I tell you, the word is out. And it's hard for me to tell people that, no, we can't help you," said Marshall, who had no prior experience with special education before embarking on this project.

"But if we can do this one family at a time in Coatesville, I think some things will turn around," said Marshall, the associate pastor of New Life in Christ Fellowship in Coatesville, which has lent meeting rooms to the effort. "We should advocate ourselves out of a job."

Offering a Lifeline

Coatesville is in Pennsylvania's Chester County, among the wealthiest counties in the country by median income. The town was built around Lukens Steel, which supplied steel for the World Trade Center towers in New York. Taschner's mother worked at Lukens Steel for some 40 years, and her grandparents lived in Coatesville.

The town of about 13,000, however, is much poorer than its neighbors. The steel mill still exists as a part of a multinational company, but employment in the industry is far less than it was in

Coatesville's boom days, and the town has struggled to regain its financial footing.

The Coatesville district is about 49 percent white, 32 percent black, and about 16 percent Hispanic. About 55 percent of students are designated by the state as economically disadvantaged, and 17 percent are in special education.

Citizens Who S.E.E. is still so new that its members and the district cannot quantify its impact. But for the families, it has been a lifeline.

For years, Stringfield worried about the educational progress of her son James. And for years, school administrators told her not to worry, and that her son's progress was fine.

"They were just reassuring me that they were on top on things," Stringfield said. "They would throw this language at me I couldn't understand."

But as a junior in high school, she said, James could not write an essay. He struggled to count money.

With the help of a Citizens Who S.E.E. volunteer, Stringfield's son is getting tutoring, and will receive a more in-depth educational evaluation. But she realizes she only has a few months left—James has shown no interest in staying in school to age 21, as permitted under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.

The advocate "is fighting for everything she can for my son," Stringfield said.

Michele D'Agostino-Miles said she was told that her 17-year-old son Miguel, diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and oppositional defiance disorder, needed no particular accommodations. She was able to get him an educational plan that allowed him extra time to complete work and provided some counseling, but she said his teachers weren't following it.

Working with Citizens Who S.E.E. volunteers has made a huge impact, she said.

"The demeanor of some of the counselors and the school psychologists really changes," she said. "They can't just sit there and tell me what to do."

Her son, a sophomore, made the honor roll last grading period—something he hasn't done since elementary school, D'Agostino-Miles said.

“The group is phenomenal,” she said.

Getting Prepared

Debbie Willett, a mother of 12 and a former family-support specialist with a local faith-based nonprofit, is the volunteer who worked with D’Agostino-Miles. Willett, who had 10 children go through the Coatesville district, advocated for her own children who had special education needs. Seven of her children attended or are currently enrolled in the district.

She remembered how valuable it was to have someone with her just to make sure that the right questions were being asked, and that she was getting the answers she needed.

A piece of advice Willett was given that she now relays to other parents is that they should be able to look at any educational evaluation that precedes the development of an educational plan and recognize their child’s specific areas of strength and weakness.

“If the evaluation isn’t very good, the IEP isn’t going to be very good,” Willett said.

Could the effort in Coatesville spread to other districts? Willett says it’s possible, if the right ingredients are in place.

“With Rob being the CEO, he has the heart for it,” she said of the group’s founder. “And if we didn’t have the support of the superintendent, I don’t know how welcome we would be.”

Monica McHale-Small, the superintendent of the 2,200-student Saucon Valley district in Pennsylvania and a native of Coatesville, has trained volunteers with Citizens Who S.E.E. on what to expect during IEP meetings. She’s also worked directly with parents, helping them write letters to request special education evaluations.

McHale-Small chose to put all four of her children through Coatesville schools despite the option of transferring them to the smaller, more affluent districts where she has worked. She did so even though Coatesville is still recovering from what she calls the “trauma” of the text-message scandal and the subsequent allegations, she said.

Sharing the Model

“I do feel that Dr. Taschner is definitely supporting this work, but there’s a lot to do,” said McHale-Small, who started her career as a school psychologist. “Coatesville is a financially strapped district as it is. She’s got a very tough job.”

And trust is still a primary concern, McHale-Small said. “We need to make sure that school district people and people in the community know that we’re working collaboratively with the district, but we’re not the district,” she said.

The problems in Coatesville are far from over. The school system is still working to regain its social standing in the community. And Pennsylvania is one of the top states when it comes to special education legal actions, which could be one avenue that parents pursue with their volunteer-advocates.

Taschner said she is not concerned by the specter of due process hearings.

“Here’s what I worry about,” she said. “Every day that we as the adults don’t figure it out, I have children who aren’t learning. We have children who don’t learn over long periods of time, and parents who can’t communicate over a long period of time. Out of that comes a need to have someone who is able to help create different decisions.”

She added: “I worry about the lawsuits that would come when there aren’t enough people in the room who care about kids.”



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