



CAC NEWSLETTER

CELEBRATING 50 YEARS OF IDEA: A PARENT’S PERSPECTIVE

This year marks the 50th anniversary of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), landmark legislation that transformed public education in the United States. Before IDEA, millions of students with disabilities were excluded from school altogether or placed in settings that didn’t meet their needs. With its passage, the doors of public education opened wide, affirming that every child deserves access to a free and appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment. To honor this milestone, we sat down with Suzi Hoge, a retired educator in Pasadena Unified School District and proud parent of Karen Hoge, her 40-year-old daughter with Down syndrome, who also attended school in Pasadena Unified and who are both residents of South Pasadena.

Suzi’s story highlights both the progress made since IDEA and ongoing work needed to ensure meaningful inclusion for all.

A Time Before IDEA

Suzi began teaching kindergarten in 1973, just two years before IDEA became law. She recalls that “in the small rural school, there was a special class.” Segregation was the norm, and many students with disabilities never stepped into a general education classroom. By the time her daughter Karen was born in 1983, early intervention services were beginning to take shape. Karen received occupational therapy at 3 months old through Regional Center and later attended inclusive infant and toddler programs. Still, when it came time for kindergarten, Suzi encountered resistance from her local school district. “They didn’t believe Karen should go to school with the other kids,” Suzi explained. But with persistence—and the help of a supportive colleague—she found an inclusive program where Karen was welcomed. “It wasn’t special treatment,” she said. “They found a place for everybody. That was just what they did.”

IDEA’s Lasting Impact

Suzi reflected on how IDEA shaped her daughter’s educational journey. “All along, Karen had stellar related services,” she shared. “When she went to middle school, she learned to go shopping, fill out forms, and be safe in the community. She was part of the school and included in classes. The majority of her inclusive experiences were good. Overall, all the accessibility pieces that come with IDEA and ADA—accessible buildings, buses, community awareness—make the world accessible.”

Yet, Suzi also emphasized that IDEA isn’t just about laws and services. It’s about families who may not have the same knowledge or connections she had. As both a parent and later a school principal, she made it a priority to help other families navigate the system. “Because I knew the law as a parent and a professional, I would help parents seek what their children needed,” Suzi continued. “Sometimes I closed the door and gave them real advice — helping them advocate for themselves.”

Challenges Beyond School

Today, Karen is thriving as an adult. She works at a paid job two days a week and volunteers three days, proudly saying, “I work five days every day!” Still, Suzi sees the challenges families face once the protections of IDEA no longer apply. “Regional Center is not as effective as it once was,” she shared. “The systems don’t talk to each other, and it leaves the consumers and families to figure it out on their own.” She believes that stronger collaboration between SELPAs, Regional Centers, and Family Empowerment Centers could make a tremendous difference: “Add in their knowledge and resources, and you can have a dream team.”



Protecting IDEA’s Legacy

As we celebrate IDEA’s 50th anniversary, Suzi reminds us that its promise must continue. “They might not be cutting SSI benefits or IDEA,” she used as an example, “but if they cut all the people behind these programs, then they can’t be implemented. The important thing now is to protect it.” Her advocacy also highlights the ripple effect IDEA has had. “You can be an advocate for your child, but you can also be an advocate for someone else’s child—or for a child who doesn’t have a parent to advocate for them. That makes the community special.”

Fifty years later, IDEA continues to stand as a civil rights milestone, ensuring inclusion, access, and opportunity. Families like Suzi and Karen’s remind us that while progress has been made, our responsibility is to protect and strengthen this legacy for generations to come.

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