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## Executive Director's Column

by Patricia S. Lemer, M.Ed., NCC, M.S. Bus.



# Looking at Education, Then and Now

**T**oday Penelope turns two. You may recall my column the day after her birth, when I reminisced about how the world had changed since her mother was born almost 35 years ago. In that Editorial, I compared standard practices of a generation ago to those of today in the areas of healthcare, parenting and education. I offered some common sense guidelines for healthcare professionals, educators and parents to balance out unforeseen obstructions to development that changes in educational practices brought with them. Two years later, I still have concerns about many of educational practices, especially the accelerated curriculum that ignores children's needs to move. (See *New Developments* 11:4, or go to [www.devdelay.org](http://www.devdelay.org) and click on "Patty's Blog" for the posting.)

In this issue, long-time DDR Professional Advisory Board members and parents write about changes in medicine, sensory processing disorders and parenting. Here are a few observations about education.

### Special Education

Jerry Miller, DDR Counsel, became a special education attorney to help parents obtain a free and appropriate education for their children, as guaranteed by federal law. Miller recalls a case in which a due process hearing judge ruled in favor of a school system that claimed its placement of a student in a regular public high school could implement the individual education plan (IEP). Following a shocking visit to the school by the child's father and therapist, he appealed the judge's decision, because the setting was completely inappropriate for the child.

What the visitors found were overly crowded classes and an extremely chaotic and loud environment, to which the student would have been subject every time he changed classes. After Miller brought concerns to the court judge about the impact of the environment on the student, the judge reversed the hearing decision and directed the school system to pay tuition for a private special education school. Without the parents' efforts, he might not have succeeded.

For many years I advocated for families, attending due process hearings as an expert witness. We often won cases because of timeline violations, such as taking too long to perform an evaluation. Cases are not won so easily now as they were 15 years ago.

School systems are more likely to provide services "in house" than pay today's premium private school tuitions. Parents cannot always rely on schools to do what is right for children. Without full and active parental participation, children may not receive the services to which they are entitled. For instance, while occupational and speech therapies are readily available in the elementary schools, few systems provide these related services in middle and high school. Many students with autism and learning disabilities continue to need OT for their entire school careers. Sometimes hiring a special education attorney is necessary to prevail.

### Regular Education

Evelyn Vuko, a lifelong educator, former "Teacher Says" columnist for *The Washington Post*, and author of *Teacher Says: 30 Foolproof Ways to Help Kids Thrive in School*, offers the following observations:

"While computers have replaced writing in many classrooms these days, I believe that most kids would trade outdoor games for computer games any day of the week. Physical education (PE), once a proud pillar of American education, is threatened with extinction. Even art and music classes could go the way of poor old tyrannosaurus rex.

Educators have learned that curriculum guidelines are qualified, quantified and cauterized, leaving little wiggle room for creative instructors or kids with creative learning styles. Algebra is now at the heart of fourth grade math, whether a nine-year-old is ready or not. Expectation levels in all areas of curriculum are higher than ever, pushing kids who just figured out how to balance a bike without training wheels to navigate an ice-slicked street in a speeding turbo Porsche. Is it any wonder that there are now antacids formulated just for kids?

Teachers also know that despite all the whirlwind changes in education in the last fifteen years, that kids, thank their thumping little hearts, will always be kids. And stealing time from a frenetic schedule to teach a befuddled second grader how to do a five-step math problem still creates a smile and a bond and a love of learning that will last for the rest of their lives."

I worry about how the rapid changes in education will affect my granddaughter. In shopping for developmentally appropriate gifts for her birthday, I was appalled at how many "toys" incorporated letters and numbers. Presents she received from well-meaning family and friends included lacing blocks and puzzles with the alphabet, a battery operated letter station into which she could place a letter, and a robotic voice sang its sound in a little song, and CDs that emphasized counting and spelling!

I opted for a retro pink kitchen, complete with dishwasher and oven (no, not a microwave), and a Tom T. Hall CD with silly songs for kids, including, "Sneaky Snake," "I Love," and "Let's Play Remember." She LOVED them! I relished watching her "cooking" make-believe food on the stove until the timer went off, and then presenting it to me on an imaginary plate, while we listened to the music of my daughter's childhood. What fun, and so much better than drilling letters and rote counting!

What does pre-school hold for my precious Penelope? Will she be permitted to go to the playground daily and swing endlessly, run up and down the ramp, slide down the slide again and again, and play until she is too big to fit through the child-sized door without bending over? So many of our "experts" wrote of the importance of these activities for brain development. Hopefully my daughter will find a school that understands that kids need to move to learn, and that adult-like learning can wait!