

Leslie Brinkman George has plans to keep TCASE on the move

By Michelle Moon Reinhardt

“Life is like riding a bicycle; to keep your balance, you must keep moving.”

— Albert Einstein

Leslie Brinkman George knows a lot about moving forward — no matter the obstacles. When she was diagnosed at age 11 with juvenile rheumatoid arthritis and restricted to a wheelchair, she maintained her school schedule while her parents searched for an effective treatment. Eventually, her disease went into remission, but she never forgot what it was like to have a disability.

“It was a difficult time, and I grew up faster than a lot of kids,” says George. “That experience is certainly what encouraged my interest in special education.”

George will bring 20 years of experience in special education and a lifetime of balancing obstacles and opportunities when she takes the role of president of the Texas Council of Administrators of Special Education, in July. She is the current director of special education and student services for Jacksonville ISD.

“I think we’re in a very exciting time for special education,” says George. “We know what works. We have the data to prove that early intervention is successful. We should be putting more money behind what research indicates are best practices. But at the same time, we can’t leave kids out who might have come in under the old model.

“It’s a matter of effectively transitioning to this new way of thinking about special education; we can’t drop the ball,”

George continues. “It’s an ethical question. We only have so much money [in the public school system], so how do we continue to be effective and financially responsible?”

George has some concrete ideas for moving the goals of TCASE forward; they center on working with stakeholders: parents, educators and lawmakers.

“TCASE has been successful in proactively working in the legislative direction,” she says, noting that the organization has hired two legislative advisors, one at the national level and one at the state level. “We administrators and educators have to tell our stories too. We have to tell lawmakers what works and why it works. Instead of being reactive, we have to focus on being proactive.”

George would like to see the focus include full funding of the Individual with Disabilities Education Act.

“We were told the federal government would pay 40 percent of the excess costs of educating these students, but we’ve never received more than 18 percent,” she says.

Another component of bringing change to special education is building relationships with parents. George says rebuilding the trust between parents and educators is one of her main goals.

“We both have the interest of our kids at heart,” she says.

George says the last critical part of this equation is bringing the latest research on best practices to all educators — in

both general and special education. Plans include offering more training for TCASE membership, including frequent regional conferences to reach far-flung districts, where new information is slow to arrive.

“Special education is not static; it’s constantly changing,” says George. “Our membership depends on us to help them put in place best-practice programs. If we can get the latest research into the hands of educators, we can have a tremendous impact.”

George says combining best practices with the latest research gives educators the ability to change how we all view special education.

“I foresee that if we can truly, universally screen all kids, identify their areas of weakness, then address those areas and build them up, we may be able to forego the need for special education for many children,” she says.

George admits she’s a bit of an idealist, but her attitude may have served her well as someone who can balance “the world we have with the world we can create.” **TSB**



TCASE President-elect Leslie Brinkman George plans to work with all stakeholders — parents, educators and lawmakers — to ensure children with special needs get a first-rate education.

Editor’s note: We are highlighting TCASE’s president-elect in this issue because the organization’s current president, Stephanie Blanck, was the subject of “In the Spotlight” in our July/August 2007 issue.