

WINARC

An Historical Perspective

by *Arthur T. Cummings*

In September 1956, I began teaching math at Winthrop Junior High School. The interaction with students and parents introduced me to the challenges associated with the educational and special needs of what we refer to today as students with developmental delays.



In 1963, I was invited to be a Board member of the Winthrop Association for Retarded Children/Citizens (WINARC). A small but dedicated group of parents of mentally and/or physically disabled children had banded together as a self-support group to

reinforce one another and to advocate for their children through WINARC. This was a time of limited resources and programs for disabled children.

The WINARC Board members (most of whom were mothers since they were the stay at home caretakers) were a committed group. Charter members such as Lois Belcher, Rose Rosenthal, Virginia Amerault, Arthur Stone, Peg Driscoll, Rose Mahegan, and later Ginny Sennott,



Dolores Fabiano, and others advocated and lobbied for services and programs for their children.

Educationally, students with Downs Syndrome and other physical or learning disorders were placed in segregated classrooms. These students

were labeled educable, trainable, or custodial, according to IQ and other benchmarks. Classes for both educable and trainable students were further determined by age: school age to 15 years and 16-22



years. They were transported to school by van in off-set school hours with classrooms most often located in the basement of the school. This included the E.B. Newton, Shirley Street (Chase), Highland (Dalrymple) and Jr. High School (Willis) Schools which further stigmatized them. Example: at the Willis School, the preschool program shared what had been the boys' locker room with a remedial reading program. The trainable class was scheduled into what was formerly the girls' shower room with no frills and no interaction with the general school population.



1963 was a pivotal year for change. John Maloney was hired as Jr. High Principal, and I was appointed his Assistant Principal. John was in Winthrop for only two years, but his progressive thinking and aggressive administration changed the educational landscape for special needs. Special education students were scheduled into regular class homerooms, art, music, and physical education classes. If a special education student could meet regular class standards for a core subject, he or she would be placed accordingly.



Bridges of communication with local and state officials were cultivated. State department officials were invited to meetings of WINARC yearly to educate the membership on new legislation and available programs. It also afforded WINARC an opportunity to lobby for their initiatives. State Representative/Speaker of the House Bob DeLeo has been, and still is, an advocate for the disabled and a supporter and valuable ally of WINARC.

The initiatives promoted by WINARC had a watershed effect that resulted in an inclusive rather than exclusive educational experience. The doors were open! But “change” didn’t just happen. Teachers such as Howie Sherman, Sally Shuman, Mala Strassfeld, Moira Walsh, and Dot Kelly



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made it happen! They nurtured a positive, professional, and personal association with staff members that permitted and encouraged inclusion to become an integral part of the school philosophy and practice. This is reflected today in Chris Donnelly's Life Skills Program. One of the more rewarding aspects is the mentoring program where a high school student is paired with a special education student. The positive direct and indirect benefits of this program are staggering!



It is interesting to note that when 766 legislation was formally approved in 1972, Winthrop was ahead of most every other community because many teachers were already practicing the recommended changes.

WINARC has a long history of establishing partnerships with public agencies (Winthrop School Department, North Suffolk Mental Health Center, Winthrop Police and Fire Departments, and Winthrop Senior Center), businesses (Winthrop Market Place), organizations (Winthrop Lodge of Elks, Cottage Park Yacht Club, Winthrop Yacht Club, Winthrop Playmakers, Piers Park Sailing Center), and families. This has ensured the successful operation of its current programming to fill the ever growing needs of children and adults with disabilities. Consider these programs that have evolved due to the vision, leadership, and persistent hard work, and sacrifices of WINARC members: YALE, WINARC on the Road, socials, bowling, outings, Special Olympics, fundraisers, and more.

Going back over 50 years, WINARC has become a major force in improving the quality of life of children and adults with disabilities. WINARC has provided services and become a conduit for members and non-members alike. This is due in part because spouses and siblings become involved, making it a family affair.

What a wonderful legacy!

Arky Cummings has been a member of the WINARC Board for 49 years.