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## **Educating All of America's Children**

In the early 1970s it was rare for a student to see a child with a disability in the hallways of their school. The disabled were invisible; their education was provided in isolated programs that rarely allowed them to access what every other child enjoyed. The landmark legislation, ***Education of All Handicapped Children Act*** (1975) and the subsequent revisions, ***Individuals with Disabilities Education Act***, dramatically changed the face of public education. This law recognized the right of every child to a free and appropriate public education. It determined that students could not be denied access to educational resources because of a disability. As a result, education of children in Muskegon County looks much different today than it did in the 1975.

With an original intended focus on children with physical disabilities, special education programming has grown tremendously over 35 years. Today, special services are provided to students with a wide variety of physical, emotional, cognitive, learning, visual, and hearing disabilities. Services range from specialized classroom instruction and assistive technologies to social work services, speech, occupational and physical therapy, and transportation.

In Michigan, special education services are provided to individuals between the ages of 0 and 26; no other state covers as wide a range. Only public schools are required to provide special education services, so almost all disabled students attend local public schools. Although all public school districts in Muskegon County provide special education services, the size of the populations served in districts ranges widely from a low of 10% of the total student population to a high of 22%. In total, over 5,100 students participate in special education programs in our county.

Funding for special education services comes from four sources: local districts' general funds, a countywide millage, and federal and state grants. Federal and state sources do not come close to covering the costs of services, however, making special education the largest underfunded mandate school districts face. The remaining costs must be met out of the districts' local budgets. Districts with larger populations of disabled students must use a greater percentage of local funding to meet these obligations. This disparity results in a pattern of inequity throughout the State of Michigan.

To combat the scarcity of funding, districts have developed cooperative programming. Services for some of our most severely disabled students are offered in partnership with the Muskegon Area Intermediate School District. The North Service Unit, comprised of North Muskegon, Reeths-Puffer, Whitehall, Montague and Holton, offers programs for cognitively and emotionally impaired students. The Eastern Service Unit, comprised of Fruitport, Ravenna, Orchard View and Oakridge, offers similar programming. Nine local districts have partnered to create the Northeast Unit, a program for severely emotionally impaired students. Muskegon, Muskegon Heights and Mona Shores also share programs.

Today students with disabilities are just part of the rich fabric that makes up the American public school system. Their talents and unique perspectives add substance to the educational experience of all children, and we are better for it. It is a legacy for which we all should be proud. It is one that is uniquely American in its breadth and depth.

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