



## The Arc of Texas

**Senate Education Committee  
Committee Hearing  
June 23, 2008  
Austin, TX**

**Testimony by Laura Buckner ( Longview, TX)**

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Good morning! My name is Laura Buckner, from Longview Texas. Ron Buckner and I have been married for 24 years and are the parents of 2 fine young men, David (age 18) and Michael (age 14).

Some of you may remember me from your hearing on Scooter's Law a year and a half ago, when I told you about David's successful high school athletic career. David is a four-year Varsity track and Cross Country athlete, and a 5 time Regional Qualifier. He has received special education services his entire school career. David just completed his senior year. He was voted "Most Compassionate" by his classmates, and received the Council for Exceptional Children's "Yes I Can!" award this spring at their annual conference in Boston. David crossed the last finish line of his high school career on May 30 and has that all-important piece of paper to prove it – his diploma.

But let me digress for just a moment and tell you about a summer trip we took with David's Cross-Country teammates and parents last week. Have any of you ever climbed Pikes Peak in Colorado? It's what they call a "14-er" – a mountain that stands over 14000 feet above sea level. I hiked down from that mountain 3 days ago.

There were 17 of us, 10 teen-aged distance runners and 7 adults (in not nearly as good physical condition!). We began planning our hike last November, led by one of the team-members' Dad, an experienced hiker with Pikes Peak already under his belt.

Our leader helped us prepare for the climb. We learned about external and internal frame backpacks and the pros and cons of each. We talked about altitude sickness and how we could try to avoid it. He ensured that we had clothing for every possible form of weather we might encounter – heat, cold, rain or even snow at any point along the trail was possible. We packed healthy snacks to fuel our bodies and carried as much water as physically possible – an essential element in the very dry climate and high altitude. Another critical element of our preparation was our shoes. Good, sturdy hiking boots, well worn-in. Although I wore mine many times, they still needed more wearing and I have 2 quarter-sized blisters on my heels to attest to that. And of course, even the best planning and equipment in the world could not replace good cardio fitness and physical training for the journey.

The climb was grueling with a hot sun, thin air and a steep incline. I carried a 40+ pound pack on my back. The 6.7 mile hike to the half-way point took us nearly 6 hours to complete. It was one of the hardest things I've ever done in my life.

So what does my little mountain climbing experience have to do with transition planning in our schools? EVERYTHING. There are countless parallels...

The 1997 Reauthorization of IDEA – the year that my son David began 2<sup>nd</sup> grade – stated that its purpose was to prepare students with disabilities for further education, employment and independent living. The subsequent 2004 Reauthorization – the year David began high school - stated that its purpose is to prepare students with disabilities for employment and independent living. Even prior to the 1997 Reauthorization, before David was even born, Texas recognized the need for transition planning and had begun paving the way for it to happen for students with disabilities. *Transition planning is not a new concept.*

For my son and so many other students with disabilities, employment and independent living are real-life mountains they must face. IDEA is supposed to ensure that they will have what it takes to successfully climb those mountains, and yet my personal and professional experience tells me that far too many are not at all prepared, and they fail on the mountain. Many more never even set foot on the trail. Why?

One problem is the fact that we don't require transition planning to begin until age 16. My younger, college-bound, 14-year old son Michael will begin high school this fall. We began planning for his graduation in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade by selecting courses that count for high school credit. He enters high school this fall with 2 credits already under his belt. This past spring, as he was completing the 8<sup>th</sup> grade, counselors met with parents and students to create a graduation plan which, when completed, will carry him to a diploma on the "distinguished" plan and will include several AP and dual-credit courses that set him on a path to college. This planning began for him at the age of 13. Why do we think that we can do the kind of planning (and more) that is required for most students with disabilities in less time than we allow for typical kids? Can you imagine how different Michael's transcript would look if we were to wait 2 more years (to the end of his sophomore year) before beginning his plan? A sad fact is that, by the age of 16, many youth with disabilities have dropped out of school. Perhaps with earlier planning they might have been able to see the possibilities for their lives and a real way to move forward toward those goals. Transition planning for students with disabilities needs to begin much earlier than 16. By 16 it's often too late and is the equivalent of my throwing a few odds and ends in a backpack and setting off up Pikes Peak with little to no advance planning. It's a recipe for failure.

Now that our schools are required by federal law to measure whether or not students are receiving transition planning, I imagine we will see more schools actually doing something they call transition planning. The danger is that they will do what they often do, which is to create "great paper". In other words, all the boxes are checked in the appropriate places, but lives – and the preparation to tackle real-life mountains – are no better off. How will the state truly know the difference between a pile of "great paper" and real outcomes for real people? How will you know if a student actually climbs the mountain or if they just talked about climbing the mountain? We need specific criteria by which we can evaluate whether real transition planning is going on.

David had transition planning, but the only reason the planning was anything more than "great paper" was because I was constantly pushing for real-life translations of that paperwork. Still there were no real transition services available. . For example, if you look at David's transition plans through the years, his interest in small engine repair and in lawn maintenance is well-documented. Yet nothing was ever done to attempt to carry that interest into actual experience, despite my repeated suggestions and requests that the school could allow him to get experience in the maintenance department or to help take care of the school's lawns. They just couldn't seem to figure out how to make that happen, because there wasn't a "program"

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in place for such an endeavor. Sure, I could have forced the issue, but I am a parent weary of forcing issues. We found ways for him to gain that experience at home and in our community. It was a series of missed opportunities on the school's part. Most of David's real-life translations have been thanks to great professionals who developed a personal relationship with David and took a vested interest in helping him prepare for the mountain.

Last fall, we had a meeting with a newly-hired "transition specialist", a consultant working with numerous districts in the area. The meeting was a perfunctory 30-minute blur during which the specialist pointed out the strengths and weaknesses of David's high school resume and gave us advice on the things we could accentuate. When I asked about where David could get training on small engine repair, he told me he wasn't aware of anything closer than Dallas (2 ½ hours away). Again it would be up to me and my husband to figure out how to make that happen. The one piece of information I walked away from that meeting with was the knowledge – and this was news to me! – that David was required to register with the selective service at the age of 18. He was already 6 months overdue for that. We also left this "transition meeting" with a packet of information, much of it related to college scholarships. Not much help to parents whose son has a significant cognitive disability. I'm sure a box was checked somewhere documenting that we'd done "transition planning." If all you look for is that checked box, you're not truly evaluating what's going on for kids facing a mountain.

We did do a completely different kind of transition planning in the spring of David's junior year, at my request. The counselor worked with me to organize it, and I arranged for a trained facilitator (and personal friend) to come from Austin to facilitate the meeting. There were real, measurable outcomes as a result of that meeting. If you'd like to know more about what we did and why it worked, I hope you'll ask me about it at the end of my testimony today. Sadly, to my knowledge, that model of transition planning has not been utilized for any other student at our school. It *is* being utilized by some districts that I am aware of.

I want to close by talking about what I think is the greatest detriment to successful transition planning: training. Would you set off to hike Pikes Peak without some knowledge of where you're going and what you'll need? If you did, you wouldn't get far! Would you follow someone up the mountain who had never hiked a mountain or who knew nothing about hiking a mountain? That's where our students with disabilities, and their parents, find themselves. Many professionals just don't have adequate knowledge and training about the mountain themselves. How *can* they prepare others? Opportunities for training and practice exist, but too few take advantage of those opportunities for whatever reason. I get the sense that they are as overwhelmed by the mountains as we are. And – bottom line – they don't have to be there to watch climbers fall and fail on the mountain. They don't have to see their students, now adults, live out quiet lives of boredom, poverty, and loneliness as their peers head off to the summits of their mountains.

Students and teachers need training and practice to provide person-centered planning which can help the student and family identify strengths, desires and goals for the future. They need training and practice to support those students to actively participate in their own ARD and transition planning meetings. Self-advocacy and the empowerment that comes with it, is not bestowed at the graduation ceremony. It must begin early and be practiced often. Many opportunities exist in high school for typical students to develop their personal skills, to speak for themselves, to empower themselves. It should be no different for students with disabilities. Think of it like these hiking boots. I bought them in December and wore them often to get used to them, to break them in – and still needed to spend even more time. Students with disabilities need to be given their hiking boots early, and have plenty of opportunities to wear them in before setting off up the mountains of their lives.

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In the spring of this year, as we shared in the excitement of David's prom, senior celebration and graduation, I was simultaneously trying to navigate a new and foreign system, the adult systems of SSI, DARS, and life beyond high school. Realistically, the school and the transition planning process should have been working alongside me in this endeavor, but they are no more knowledgeable about these systems than I am. There is a total disconnect between the school and the adult service system. It has been a daunting task, and I am a former special educator and have worked professionally in the field of disability for over 20 years. I can only imagine how much more daunting that mountain is to most parents and students with disabilities. I fear many just assume the mountain is insurmountable.

Four days ago I stood just above the tree line of Pikes Peak, at 12000 ft. and surveyed a vast, magnificent view from far above. It was breathtakingly beautiful and one I could not have imagined in the earlier hours of the hike, when the brush was thick, the hike was challenging and all I could do was watch my feet take another step and another. I realized that the higher you get, the better the view! But you have to do the hard work of getting there.

I want that same view from the mountain for my son and other students with disabilities. The higher they get, the more opportunities there will be, the more vast their array of choices. Our kids WILL face that mountain. IDEA has been saying for 11 years now that they will be prepared for the mountain, but our outcomes are dismal. According to the Texas Effectiveness Study of several years ago, 49% of students with disabilities were unemployed or not currently working one year after leaving high school. 54% had received no additional training beyond high school and 51% were not attending any postsecondary school. We know that the national unemployment rate for adults with disabilities is approaching 75%. That's a whole lot of our kids who will never see the view I took in from 12000 ft. They are graduating to their living room couch.

Will you do what it takes to ensure that these kids have a chance at that view? Will you help them prepare? Will you make sure they have what they need to survive?

Begin transition planning early and do it for real, using person-centered practices that are proven effective. See that schools and teachers receive the training they need to be experienced mountain guides by teaching them how to translate "great paper" into measurable actions with real outcomes. Ensure that students have time and opportunity to wear in their hiking boots by giving them training and experience in self-advocacy, the earlier the better. Require schools to create meaningful, age-appropriate programs for students aged 18-22 that will allow them to continue practicing their skills and preparing for the mountain in real-life kinds of ways. And measure real outcomes, not just great paper. Evaluate our state's efficacy by measuring how many students have jobs before leaving school, how many students leave school at age 18 (before their entitlement for services ends) and why students leave school. Find out how many students are actively wearing their hiking boots by participating in person-directed planning and in leading and/or participating in their own ARD meetings.

There's a mountain waiting. The view can be spectacular but you won't get there if you don't do what it takes.

I thank you for your time today and welcome any questions you might have.

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*The Arc of Texas is the state's largest non-profit volunteer organization creating opportunities for persons with intellectual and developmental disabilities to be included in their communities and to make the choices which affect their lives. Since its founding in 1950 by a group of parents of children with intellectual and developmental disabilities, The Arc of Texas has been instrumental in the creation of virtually every program, service, right, and benefit that is now available to more than half a million Texans with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Today, The Arc continues to advocate for including people with intellectual and developmental disabilities in all aspects of society. For more information about The Arc of Texas visit us at [www.thearcoftexas.org](http://www.thearcoftexas.org).*

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