

Who Is In Control?

Mr. Bruce Wood, local rancher, horseman, and newly elected school board member in Evergreen, pulls his feet off the table and sits up straight. He looks incredulously at Superintendent Steve Dilliard, superintendent of schools and asks, “How in heck can the federal government tell our schools and our teachers what to do? If I remember correctly, education was left to the states. The U.S. Constitution says nothing at all about education. If that is true, why do we have to follow all these rules? Who really is in charge of our schools?”

“Bruce, education has been a federal concern for a long time. You know how prominent education was in the election platform of our last two presidents. Our district is a poor district. We have a poor tax base. The federal lands and the state lands are not taxed. The agriculture exemption for ranchers and farmers lowers the value on all that property. That leaves us with a small amount of business property and all the residential properties to tax. The rest of our operating funds must come from the state and the federal government. In fact, your wife’s sister is employed in this district only because of a federal grant. By accepting federal dollars, we have committed ourselves to following the federal government requirements.”

“Well I don’t like it one little bit. I wish we could do without any of that federal money. I know my sister-in-law needs that job, so I suppose I will have to learn more about this and stop griping.”

“When I review the budget with all the board members, you will see just what federal grants and state grants this district has.”

“Do all the other board members really think that taking so much direction from the federal government is good for this district?”

“When I explained how the federal money was targeted for special populations of students, such as bilingual students, special education students and vocational students, all objections seemed to disappear. We need to do what is best for our children.”

“I’m still not convinced, but it seems like I will be a minority of one if I express my objections. Well, I’ll see you later this week. I have to go pick up my wife. Maybe you can make me a believer as you have made the other members of the board believers.”

The next day, Mr. Dilliard happened to be reviewing rule changes proposed by the U.S. Department of Education for dealing with special needs students, when Mr. Wood stopped by the office. Mr. Wood was the only new school board member elected this time. Two incumbents had successfully defended against two challengers in the recent board election. Unfortunately, thought Mr. Dilliard, none of the board members has a special needs child. Surely that would help all board members understand the need for large expenditures of money on a relatively few number of students. Mr. Dilliard knew that a couple of the teachers had been complaining about all the paperwork associated with disabled students. That was just the tip of the iceberg. When Mr. Wood learned how much these students cost the district, he would probably be most unhappy. One of the rule changes, if finalized, might save a little money. The U.S. House of Representatives had passed a bill to have an Individual Education Plan (IEP) drawn up every three years rather than annually. But the rules were not yet finalized, so maybe that was just a pie-in-the-sky dream of teachers and administrators.

What worried Mr. Dilliard most were all the rules for day-to-day documentation of exceptional students. The teachers were correct. They did have to spend extensive time completing all the required paperwork. Students were not able to have the full attention of their teachers all the time. Aides often stepped in to take over the teaching role when the teachers decided to complete some of the numerous required forms. Teachers did not have the time to read the most recent research, to plan better lessons, or to interact with each other.

Mr. Dilliard remembered how exceptional children were treated before the U.S. Congress got involved. There were many very sad stories. Oftentimes, these children would never be brought to school. At least now districts were required to search out such students and serve them appropriately. Requiring free and appropriate education (FAPE) for each child by the federal government was a good thing, but the federal government did not provide much monetary support. The state financial situation had deteriorated in the last couple of years; therefore little assistance came from the capitol. The local taxpayers were being asked to pick up more and more of the burden. Adding more fuel to the fire was the increasing numbers of children who were being identified as special needs. Budgeting money to meet all the needs and the requirements was becoming more and more difficult for smaller districts like Evergreen.

The phone was ringing again. Mr. Wood's sister-in-law, who served as a special education aide, was on the phone. She said, "Mr. Dilliard, I am sorry to have to call you but I have been searching for our principal and I cannot seem to locate him. I think he went to a principal's meeting at the service center. His secretary would know but she is out sick. We need to make a decision about how to handle one of our major discipline

problems. He returned to class today after 5 days in in-school suspension (ISS). He has been very disruptive again, and is becoming more agitated as time goes on. His IEP says he can have a maximum of five more days in ISS. First we have to have a meeting to decide if his condition is contributing to his behavior. We need an administrator present. Would you play that role for the meeting?"

"Yes, I will. I will be over in just a few minutes. We should be able to take care of this situation satisfactorily."

The next day, Mr. Wood stops by Mr. Dilliard's office again. He says, "Please explain to me why we cannot take care of our discipline problems immediately. It seems ridiculous that we cannot send a disruptive student home. I know there was a situation with a handicapped student yesterday. My sister-in-law tried to explain it. It just doesn't seem reasonable to me. It seems like the Feds are running our school."