What got you interested in special education?

My mother—who was also my mentor—was one of the original teachers to develop a pull-out remedial model of reading instruction for students identified with learning disabilities in her public school district in the late 1960s. She also tutored many children in the evenings in our home. Her energy, commitment, and passion for improving the academic outcomes for her students motivated me to want to accomplish the same goals.

Because of my mother’s influence, I decided to study special education when I went to college and I received endorsements in Learning Disabilities, Cognitive Impairment, and Emotional Impairment. That was the beginning of my career in special education. Since then, I have taught high school and middle school special education, received my master’s in special education administration with approvals for Supervisor and Director of Special Education, and have held multiple administrative roles in the Grand Rapids and Kent Intermediate School Districts.

How will your past experiences and professional roles inform your leadership of CEC?

My day-to-day experiences supporting more than 14,300 students with disabilities in 20 local districts and 23 charter schools helps me identify the needs of our educational system, which gives me a better sense of direction and support for CEC’s work regarding advocacy, professional development, and standards. My leadership experience at the CEC unit and division levels has also provided multiple opportunities for quality networking at a national and international level.

Being part of the Council of Administrators of Special Education’s (CASE) Policy & Legislation Committee and participating in the legislative summit for 11 years has also helped me to become a stronger advocate on state and federal issues, to impact change, and have a deeper understanding of some of the unintended consequences we face.

How did you first get involved with CEC?

My first exposure was as a college student attending the Michigan CEC (MCEC) Conference. I became more involved with my unit after MCEC asked me to be their representative to the Special Education Advisory Committee (SEAC) to the Michigan State Board of Education. I also spent ten years on the MCEC Board going through the officer ranks. This led to my involvement with the Michigan Foundation for Exceptional Children, and then ten years on the CASE Executive Committee.

What are your thoughts about the challenges facing educators today?

They are deep and wide—from strained budgets trying to meet the unfunded mandates to personnel shortages in the classrooms. The critical shortage of special education personnel, particularly around retention, is a major challenge.

I am hopeful that through partnerships, CEC will identify strategies, resources and professional development opportunities to increase the retention of the current qualified practitioners. This is attainable through loan forgiveness programs, an increase in administrative support, a reduction in workloads, and the creation of financial incentives not only to draw new teachers to the profession, for the responsibility they take on daily to prepare future generations.

You’re framing your presidency around the phrase “With change, comes opportunity.” What does that mean?

As Winston Churchill stated, “There is always something valuable that can be derived out of difficulty, adversity, or change. We just have to look for it with open minds.” As difficult as change can be, I am a firm believer that it can create new opportunities to become even better. Look at data, trends, results, impacts, outcomes, and opinions. What can be done differently to recruit and expand volunteer leadership, strive for higher goals, be intentional about meeting our members’ needs, and to advance our successes? As a team we can create new opportunities and create positive change!

What are you hoping to accomplish during your year as president?

I have many aggressive but attainable goals I would like to accomplish during my presidency. My primary goal is to ensure the successful implementation of the new governance model by working closely with the CEC Board of Directors, the Leadership Development Committee, and our CEC members in meeting the activities and timelines identified for this year. In working closely with the board, I am hopeful we can meet, if not exceed, the goals identified in our strategic plan as well as increase participation with our units, divisions, and international partners.

Any last thoughts for our members?

In January, I challenged you to take on three “smart” resolutions: become an advocate, celebrate your profession, and take time to do something to strengthen your skills. I hope to continue to provide all members an opportunity to meet their resolutions.

The first resolution of advocacy can be met by joining us for the 2018 Special Education Legislative Summit in July in Washington, D.C. Your voice is more critical now than ever before—CEC needs you and our students and families need you!

We must highlight and celebrate all the wonderful accomplishments, results, and outcomes we are attaining that are often overshadowed with the negative media coverage. So, let’s celebrate all our success, the big and the small! Lastly, increase your skills by participating in the great webinars and reading the great publications CEC provides. CEC is my first choice for professional development and I hope it is yours too.

Thank you for all you do for our students every day; I celebrate your hard work and commitment! Please let me know how CEC can help you.

Laurie VanderPloeg Fast Facts

Current Position: Director of Special Education, Kent Intermediate School District in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Adjunct Professor in the Special Education Administration Program at Grand Valley State University.

Years as a CEC Member: 17

First Job: High School Special Education Teacher

Primary Job: Special Education Administrator

Career Focus: Support, mentor, and develop instructional leadership competencies in current and future teacher and administrator leaders

Leadership/Service Positions: Member of the Equity Coalition for Special Education in Charter Schools; Professional Development Chair, President Elect, President, and Past President of the Council of Administrators of Special Education; Member of the Michigan Foundation for Exceptional Children Board; President Elect, President, Past President of Michigan CEC; and Chair of CEC’s Interdivisional Caucus

Personal Interests: Spending time with grandchildren and networking with great colleagues