Mary Lynn Boscardin began her term as Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) president in November 2018. She is a professor at the College of Education, University of Massachusetts, Amherst. Her other roles include editor of the Journal of Special Education Leadership and project director for the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, Personnel Preparation Leadership Grant.

Her personal interests include spending time with her family, reading, listening to music, enjoying art (particularly the French impressionists and sculpture), and all types of sports.

TEACHING Exceptional Children interviewed Boscardin to learn more about her views on special education and the future of CEC.

**What drove your interest in special education?**

My interests and career in special education have been driven by my face-to-face encounters with many dedicated and talented special educators who generously shared their time with me. To this day I do not think that my career would be what it is today had my professional interactions, planned or serendipitous, been limited to social and instructional media.

My first encounter working with children with exceptionalities was as a water safety instructor and lifeguard in high school. At the time, instructional swimming programs were not available to children with exceptionalities. As a team, our small but mighty band of swim instructors decided to use our lunch hour to teach children with physical disabilities (e.g., cerebral palsy, traumatic brain injury, blindness) to swim. We carefully transitioned some of our charges from wheelchairs into the pool and back out again without the benefit of ergonomic equipment that is available today and successfully taught each of them to swim.

My second encounter was being a teaching assistant (i.e., paraprofessional) in a preschool classroom for children with exceptionalities during my sophomore year of college. My extroverted mother learned one of the area school districts was starting an innovative preschool program for students with exceptionalities during my sophomore year of college. My extroverted mother learned one of the area school districts was starting an innovative preschool program for students with exceptionalities and was looking for someone to work part-time. She suggested I apply for the position.

Special education was a brave new world that offered hope for many where there previously was none. As I acquired new knowledge and experiences through my interactions, observations, and questions—lots of questions—my passion and desire to work in the field of special education grew. These important positive early
How did you get involved in CEC, and how has CEC influenced your career?

My first experience with professional associations came with pursuing a career as a speech and language pathologist. This experience showed me the importance of belonging to a professional association that provides resources to continually support my career.

When I shifted my focus to special education administration, I was equally excited to learn about the resources and opportunities CEC offered. I was introduced to CEC by the special education faculty as a graduate student at the University of Illinois–Urbana during my doctoral program. The Illinois special education faculty shared a contagious passion for the field that, in part, came from belonging to and participating in the work of CEC. Involvement over the course of my career has included serving on the Special Education Legislative Summit Steering Committee, the CEC Program Advisory Committee, Representative Assembly, State of the Profession Work Group, and Inter-Divisional Caucus, and as a Council of Administrators of Special Education president, executive committee member, journal editor, and research committee member. Along the way, in each of these positions, I have met incredible special educators who have either directly or indirectly influenced my career.

What do you see as the major challenges in special education today?

One of the major challenges facing a field that is plagued by shortages is developing a surplus of special educators and administrators who are prepared to address achievement gaps, disproportionality, safety, transition, early intervention, and the host of other special education issues.

A recommitment to recruiting special educators through financial incentives, such as federal and state loan forgiveness programs, is needed to ignite the field. It is no secret that educators thrive and remain in their positions when they are supported by well-prepared, vibrant colleagues working in environments where budgets are not constrained by unfunded mandates that impact educational programming.

Another challenge is finding multiple ways to tap into a highly knowledgeable, skilled, and diverse CEC membership to increase professional development offerings and resources to build capacity of the field. Last, we, as members of CEC, must not tire of advocating at the local, state, national, and international levels for opportunities that will result in positive learning experiences for the students and families we serve.

What initiatives does CEC have under way to address these challenges?

CEC continues to advocate in collaboration with professional organizations, education agencies, and Congress in an effort to achieve full funding of the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and shape education policy and legislation that first and foremost benefits students with exceptionalities.

Through activities such as the Special Education Legislative Summit, CEC continues to engage multiple stakeholders in review of the Every Student Succeeds Act and its alignment with IDEA in order to improve graduation rates, retention, educational achievement, performance on state assessments, and college and career readiness for students with exceptionalities. Through hyperengagement that saturates all areas of education of children and youth with exceptionalities, CEC has solidified its position as the “go-to” organization for advocacy and professional development.

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

By working closely with the CEC Board of Directors, the Leadership Development Committee, all CEC standing and advisory committees, workgroups, CEC members, and CEC staff, I hope we can meet, if not exceed, the goals identified in our strategic plan. I see my presidency as an opportunity to continue to search for ways to increase member engagement in CEC and maintain CEC’s position as the “go-to” organization for all things regarding special and gifted education and early intervention. This is best achieved by developing positive collaborations that are aligned with CEC’s goal of increasing capacity through expanded professional development offerings and resources to members. Another goal includes continuing to make changes where necessary to the CEC governance model so it truly serves the organization well. My third goal is to encourage member engagement in CEC and not just membership. Opportunities are available at the local, state/provincial, special interest division, and international levels.

Please tell us something about yourself that most CEC members don’t know

I intensely dislike ironing, weeding the garden, and compulsory exercise, though when all are done consistently, they usually yield very good, if not beautiful, results. I believe getting outside our professional roles and not
always doing things we enjoy lend new perspectives to the important work we all do, leading us to better serve our students and families.

Last Thoughts?
I invite each of you not only to belong to CEC but to participate in all that CEC has to offer! We need everyone to participate. With lives that are crowded with personal and work demands, CEC offers many different types of opportunities for each of you as members to engage, refresh, and reinvigorate your passion for the field of special education.

I invite you to join a division, become involved in local and state/provincial CEC activities, write for one of CEC’s publications, and take advantage of CEC’s professional development opportunities. There is so much important work to be done that exceeds what one person alone can do.

I invite you to share the above opportunities with at least 10 other colleagues who may not be members of CEC by inviting them to belong and participate in all that CEC has to offer.

Make your invitations personal rather than relying solely on technology! Use face-to-face get-togethers, telephone conversations, and invitations to workshops, short courses, and conferences to share the benefits of belonging to CEC.

Thank you for all you do for CEC and our students. Your efforts and commitment do not go unnoticed. Please let me know how CEC can help you.

Al Rickard
Interim Publications Manager
Council for Exceptional Children

Ad Placement Information

TEACHING Exceptional Children (TEC), published six times a year, is a full-color journal specifically for teachers, administrators, and other professionals working with children and youth with disabilities and/or gifts. TEC features practical, peer-reviewed articles that present methods and materials for classroom use and discusses current issues in special education teaching and learning. TEC is one of CEC’s most valued member benefits.

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