December CAN Do: United Nations Day of Disability and CEC’s International Advocacy

This week, CEC celebrated the United Nations International Day of Persons with Disability. The commemoration of this day raises awareness for the 15% of the world’s population who live with disabilities and promotes accessibility across the globe. U.N. Enable has declared this day’s theme to be removing barriers to provide an accessible and inclusive society for all. If this sounds familiar, that’s because CEC’s goals are just the same! In honor of this day, this CAN Do Newsletter is going to review some of CEC’s recent advocacy efforts internationally.

United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

Despite the support of 328 disability and veterans organizations and passionate leadership and advocacy by Senators John Kerry (D-Mass) and John McCain (R-Ariz), the Senate voted 61-38 against ratification of the U.N. Convention on Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). Unfortunately, while many thought this might be an ideal moment for the CRPD to pass, several outside groups began spreading incorrect information about the impact of the treaty – most notably that it would infringe on the rights of U.S. citizens, especially those who home school their children. While this is false, and it is without question that ratification of the treaty would have no impact on federal law, the fear created by this misconception was difficult to counter.

The Convention puts forth the universal rights of people with disabilities and seeks to empower individuals with disabilities to achieve economic self-sufficiency, independent living and inclusion and integration into all aspects of society. It also serves to advance an ideal vision of disability policy and practice by establishing international standards regarding the rights and freedoms of people with disabilities and a common basis for greater civic and political participation and self-sufficiency. It reflects core values and principles, such as dignity of the individual, access to justice, importance of family decision-making, and access to education, independent living and employment.

Currently, there are 155 signatures to the Convention and 126 ratifications of the Convention including the European Union. While it is encouraging that so many States have signed the Convention, less than half of all eligible States have ratified it. But, ultimately legislation will not be enough to ensure effective implementation of the Convention. To truly implement the Convention, people and governments must change their perceptions of people with disabilities. Instead of viewing them as objects of assistance, we must view people with disabilities as citizens with rights.
CEC’s Work With Step-by-Step

CEC has been actively working to support the inclusion of children and youth with disabilities in schools in Eastern Europe and, recently, Africa through its work with the International Step by Step Association (ISSA) which is a membership organization that connects professionals and organizations working in the field of early childhood development and education. ISSA promotes equal access to quality education and care for all children, especially in the early years of their lives. Established in the Netherlands in 1999, ISSA’s network today stretches across the globe from Central and Eastern Europe to Central Asia, Asia, and the Americas. Step by Step offers an innovative and comprehensive approach to international institutional reform of early childhood education systems.

CEC’s partnership with the Open Society Institute (OSI) – which supports ISSA – enable CEC to provide vital training and technical assistance on inclusive education for children with disabilities in all Step by Step Programs in participating countries. To this end Deborah Ziegler, CEC’s Associate Executive Director for Policy and Advocacy, Deb Ziegler, travels regularly to various participating countries such as Ukraine and Estonia to provide trainings and support to special educators. Additional work is starting to expand into Africa!

Today, 29 countries have Step by Step parent education programs and preschool, primary, and middle school classrooms in which students, teachers, parents, and the community actively take part.

Training Gate International

Training Gate International (TGI) is a non-profit organization established in July, 2009. As the first and the only one of its kind to operate in Kuwait, Training Gate focuses, in collaboration with international partners, on training and skills development for people with disabilities, their families, advocates, teachers, supervisors, co-workers, and related professional service providers in both the public and private sectors. TGI services also include activities in this field such as organizing exhibitions, conferences, and training and entertainment camps.

This year is the second that Deb Ziegler has traveled Kuwait to celebrate United Nations International Day of Persons with Disability (IDPD). TGI annually hosts the Kuwait celebration of the IDPD in participation with international celebrations activities. As part of the celebration, TGI holds an Open Forum for the public which features specialists who share their responses to the annual IDPD theme. The conference features workshops on policy and advocacy, special education, community leadership and transition. Deb is a featured speaker on these topics at the IDPD.

By working with training gate CEC hopes to encourage inclusiveness and opportunity for children and youth with disabilities and provide support to special education teachers in Kuwait.

And, as always, if you have any questions, comments or concerns, please email us at sarad@cec.sped.org or give us a call at 703-264-9498.