

Report to President's Commission (from p. 3)

norm-referenced assessment procedures will lead to less specificity in regard to the nature of the learning problem and, consequently, greater inequities in service delivery.

Recommendation

The AASP recommends that the current IDEA regulations remain essentially unchanged. Most current disability classification categories in the IDEA are well-supported by psychological diagnostic criteria. Further, we support the use of norm-referenced cognitive assessments and complementary alternative measures for determining special education program eligibility and program planning. We also support the use of norm-referenced assessments of academic achievement and complementary alternative measures to provide the necessary benchmarks for yearly performance monitoring, as suggested in the Report. We recommend that the ability/achievement discrepancy formula should be eliminated as a mandate. Language should be included in the reauthorized legislation that discourages the use of an ability/achievement discrepancy formula as the sole or determining measure of the presence of learning disabilities. To wit:

The American Academy of School Psychology recommends that the current IDEA regulations be reauthorized with some amendments. In particular, we recommend that the current regulations on criteria for determining eligibility for students with specific learning disabilities 1300.540.541,5421 should be amended to discourage the use of an ability-achievement discrepancy formula as a sole or determining measure of the presence of learning disabilities.

September 17, 2002 American Academy of School Psychology Ad-hoc Committee on the Report of the President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education:

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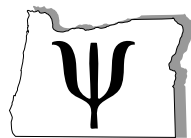
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Oregon School Psychologists Association

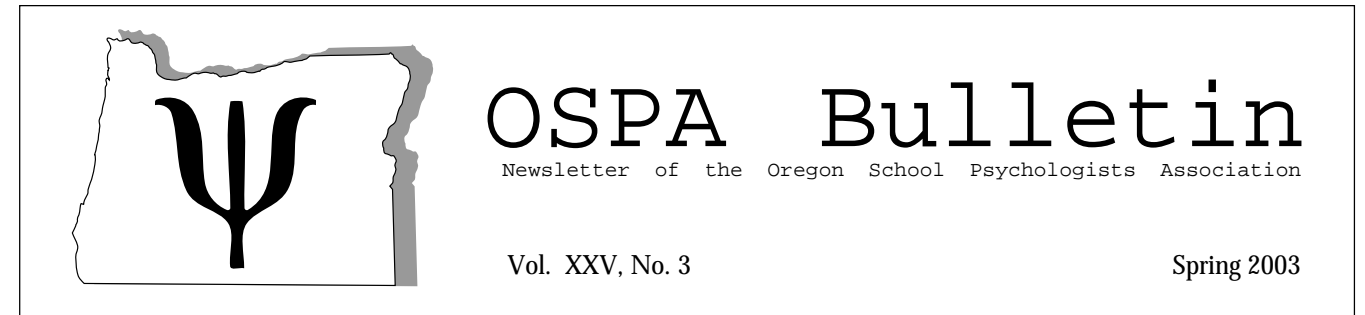


OSPA

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The Oregon School Psychologists Association provides leadership in creating a brighter future for all Oregon children through professional affiliation, collaborative problem-solving, and promotion of practices that are both innovative and based on solid psychological and educational research.



American Academy of School Psychology Response to the Report of the President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education

The American Academy of School Psychology (AASP) consists of all holders of the Diplomate in School Psychology awarded by the American Board of Professional Psychology (ABPP). The AASP maintains a charge to promote the highest professional standards in school psychology. In so doing, the AASP strives to represent a balanced voice based on the views of very experienced professionals who are broadly trained to blend scientific evidence with clinical experience in school psychology practice.

The AASP is greatly concerned about certain aspects of the Report of the President ~ Commission on Excellence in Special Education (hereafter called the President's Commission Report or the Report) that propose drastic changes to the

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). This position paper represents the views of the majority (92%) of members of AASP and its ad hoc committee on this issue. We seek to clarify these concerns and offer our recommendation about needed changes in IDEA.

The President's Commission Report recommends that the special education identification process be drastically changed, particularly in the area of learning disabilities. Although we agree with the Report's emphasis on early intervention to prevent academic failure, we are concerned with the Report's focus on the shortcomings of an IQ or composite score in identifying the core processes that cause learning problems. The Report's perspective on this matter appears to reflect the thinking

of only one constituency in a long, ongoing debate about the nature, diagnosis, education and treatment of students with learning disabilities.

We assert that there is definitive evidence that children with bona fide learning disabilities, as currently understood by most neurologists, psychologists and researchers, have problems with typical academic learning. These problems may be biologically-based and affect, in widely-varying degrees and patterns, the ability to process, remember, and produce information. Further, the diagnosis of disability and development of interventions in this area is complex and is dependent on the scientific knowledge and practical experience of skilled practitioners. For ex-

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A Personal Perspective on the Learning Disability Issue

by Steve Haskell

Clearly at least the operational definition of what constitutes a learning disability, if not the definition itself, will be re-visited in a serious way with the re-authorization of IDEA. The use of a discrepancy model based on statistical measures of intelligence and norm referenced achievement tests has been roundly criticized for both statistical and educational reasons.

One proposal as an alternative is to use different points of time in the evaluation process to measure whether a student has made adequate growth in a domain such as reading when compared to others who receive instructional help. Consider two students, both scoring very low on curriculum based measures in reading in the first grade. One student makes good enough progress given interventions, the second student continues to struggle

compared to peers. The first student does not show a discrepancy given expected growth rate, the second does.

The data to be considered by the eligibility team is ipsative in nature, that is change within the single student, but with reference to expected growth patterns for peers. Standardized measures of intelligence and academic skills, taken at one point in time, are not critical measures in this model. Some might say these measures are irrelevant. Presumably the team would still consider whether special education was necessary to correct the reading difficulty, which is one of the current standards for eligibility.

Another approach could be to discard the construct of discrepancy in expected achievement, whether this is between intellectual ability and academic skills or between expected growth versus actual growth given appropriate interven-

tions, and apply a delay model which is the standard for Title 1 programs. If the child is delayed in reading he or she is thereby eligible for services. Shaw and Gouwens addressed this issue very well in the *NASP Communique*, December, 2002. Estimates are that about 14% of the school population could be considered in this pool of delayed achievers, i.e., slow learners. And since the category of learning disability accounts for about one-half of a school's 12% or so of disabled students at least in Oregon, some students won't be served by special education unless the proportion served overall grows considerably.

How the matter plays out through the re-authorization process remains to be seen, obviously. There are several draft recommendations underway, including one by NASP articulating a three tier system that aligns with the public

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presidential perspective



From almost any angle it's been a difficult year: shrinking resources, heightened needs resulting from our crippled economy, the harsh reality of war, and it would be easy to continue the list. And while some of us await the summer as a time to recover, others may be spending more time speculating about whether they will have positions to return to in the fall. In the midst of all this gloom and doom I hope you'll excuse me for relating an aspect of my own practice that's helped me cope with the very

unfavorable situation we're experiencing.

I've always felt that I could reach far more students by emphasizing the role of consultation in my practice and in an earlier column I indicated that I had chosen to make that a particular point of emphasis during the current school year. However, as the number of holes in the good ship that we know as our public school system began to mount I had more than a few reasons to question my commitment to this goal. Being more of a fool than an angel however, I continued to rush into situations that might best have been avoided, often with surprisingly positive results.

In spite of all the hardships I have been impressed again and again with the efforts that I see taking place in classrooms every day. While many staff rooms are pretty gloomy places these days I don't see that gloom reflected in the classroom and I also don't hear it being used reflexively to justify poor student performance. In fact, I continue to be encouraged by the willingness of teachers to develop and implement intervention plans that invariably call for extra work on their part. I can't say enough good things about teachers who are willing to come early or stay late just to check a student's planner, provide a few minutes of

encouragement, or make data available to shape an evolving plan. I've also been impressed by the willingness of several teachers to accept the fact that some of their students are making far less than adequate progress and that this fact implies the need to change the way those students are being taught.

While there have been disappointments as well as successes, I have seen more than enough progress to convince me to continue this emphasis in my practice. In some respects adopting this goal, as bad as the timing may have been, has helped me face the rising tide of bad news. For me, the lesson is that even under the worst of circumstances a little self-examination and a change in focus can bring unexpected rewards.

I'd like to close with a few observations regarding OSPA. During the course of the phone survey this February I had the good fortune to speak with a number of you and I know that you are facing many of the same challenges. Like many teachers I work with in the Springfield School District I found you to be far more positive than one might expect given our current circumstances. It was a pleasure speaking with you and I want to thank all of you who took time to respond to our questions and to provide input on OSPA future direction.

It was clear from our phone survey that OSPA will need to undergo significant changes in the future. For the time being elected officers will become a thing of the past and we will need to rely on a more fluid operational structure. Other changes may be needed as well. In spite of these changes we can continue to offer exciting opportunities for professional development to keep you connected and informed through the use of the listserv, the website and the bulletin. In these difficult times OSPA has an absolutely critical role to play. For those of you that would like to join us in the effort there are many opportunities to participate and I would encourage you to join us.

Best wishes for a good end to the school year. And save the date for the fall conference. Vinny, Mark and their crew have put together a great set of plans; perhaps you'll find a focus that can change your school year.

Alex Granzin

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ample, children with learning disabilities may have concomitant psychoeducational problems such as Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, behavior management needs, and/or low self-esteem.

We contend that appropriately trained and knowledgeable school psychologists, often as part of a multidisciplinary team, are needed to assess children, adolescents, and young adults with potential learning disorders in order to determine the presence, nature, and severity of a disability. Specific knowledge gained from the assessment provides a scientific basis for recommended treatment and intervention plans. Assessment is a complex process that requires multiple sources of information, including standardized, norm-referenced tests, interviews, observations, curriculum-based assessments, and informed clinical judgment. Because of this, we believe that some of the delimiting statements in the Report will be damaging to the effective utilization of a comprehensive approach to the identification and education of individuals with learning disabilities.

Use Norm-Referenced Tests Appropriately in Learning Disabilities Assessment and Programming

The AASP believes that psycho-educational assessment, using psychometrically sound norm-referenced instruments, is an important part of school interventions. These are tests that have been nationally standardized on large numbers of individuals to derive a measurement tool that is dependable and accurate. Reliable and valid psychometric instruments provide documentation of both ability and disability, assist in identifying needed services and interventions, and provide the necessary benchmarks for yearly monitoring of academic performance. As part of a comprehensive assessment, reliable and valid tests are necessary for an objective understanding of the core psychological processes that influence learning. This is known as cognitive assessment.

Cognitive assessment provides useful information about an individual's capabilities including, but not limited to, an overall measure of general intellectual ability. Rather than testing solely to obtain an IQ score, cognitive assessments should more appropriately be used to identify the core processes or functions caus-

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ing an academic problem that are amenable to intervention or that require educational accommodations. Importantly, norm-referenced documentation of limitations in cognitive processing is required for legal protections and the provision of a rationale for the need for accommodations. In addition, cognitive assessments provide the link between identification of special education needs and intervention plans. Students' strengths and weaknesses in cognitive abilities are used to design specific academic interventions. Strengths and weaknesses in different cognitive processes are linked to identification and treatment of specific learning disabilities, including memory storage and retrieval, auditory processing, processing speed, attention, abstract reasoning, and language development. Finally, cognitive tests are useful for early identification of information-processing weaknesses (such as a delay in auditory processing or phonological awareness) that can lead to academic failure if left untreated.

Although not all referral concerns require norm-referenced assessment as a precondition of intervention plans or instructional modifications, in order to qualify for special education services, students should be evaluated on an individual basis and objectively assessed for the presence and severity of intra-individual differences in cognitive abilities, language capabilities, behavior, and areas of academic achievement. Additionally, a comprehensive evaluation should include multiple sources of information, including standardized, norm-referenced tests, interviews, observations, curriculum-based assessments, and informed clinical judgment. However, the core of a comprehensive evaluation is an accurate, norm-referenced assessment of student strengths and weaknesses in a variety of cognitive processes.

Eliminate the Mandated Discrepancy Formula But Not Comprehensive Assessment

Many Fellows of the AASP are senior school psychologists who share an historical perspective on the Education of All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA, now IDEA). In 1975, when the EAHCA was first enacted, many states reported problems with establishing objective criteria for identifying a learning disability. With the goal of establishing objective criteria for identifying children for services, the criterion of a discrepancy between intellectual ability and achievement was suggested in an effort to help make a distinction between children with learning disabilities and those with other academic problems. From the outset, however, the concept of an ability/achievement discrepancy was controversial. The criterion has resulted in much dissatisfaction, particularly as it is interpreted in various state statutes and implemented by local education agency practices.

Today, conceptualizations of the presence and nature of specific learning disabilities are changing. The concept of an ability/achievement discrepancy has outlived its usefulness and should no longer be used as a necessary condition for provision of special services.

Broaden Rather Than Delimit the Tools and Techniques Available To Diagnose Learning Disabilities

Based on the language suggested in the IDEA, many state regulations required that determination of a learning disability to be dependent on a specific degree of discrepancy between a child's intellectual ability and achievement. In many states and local education agencies, this created a litmus test for identification of a learning disability. In some local education agency practices, the presence of a defined ability/achievement discrepancy was used as the sole, determining criteria for service provision. As a consequence, these local education agencies have been out of compliance with the intent of the federal legislation because they have been using a single score to drive eligibility decisions (An ability/achievement comparison between any two tests results in a single discrepancy score). In contrast, the IDEA [300.541 (a) (3)] requires that a variety of sources must be considered in making eligibility decisions. Thus, the sole use of a discrepancy score, despite claims that it represents results from two tests, violates the requirement that eligibility must not be based on a single test or procedure.

Consequently the AASP recommends that the criterion of an ability/achievement discrepancy should not be viewed as essential to qualify a student for services. Many students with neurologically based learning disorders do not exhibit an ability/achievement discrepancy. A learning disability can affect intelligence test performance as well as achievement test performance. Scores on both ability and performance measures may be lowered by the disability to the extent that there is not a severe discrepancy between the two. Granted, however, an ability/achievement discrepancy can sometimes be used to document a type of intra-individual variability that may have educational implications. Alternatively, other evidence of intra-individual variability in cognitive processing and academic achievement, such as evidence of specific processing deficits that contribute to lower ability and achievement scores, should be acceptable evidence toward documenting the presence of a learning disability.

As experienced school psychologists, we believe the development of effective interventions is dependent on a variety of approaches. Therefore we are always looking to broaden our perspectives rather than to be bound by legislative mandates, which may reflect only one particular methodology or interpretation of research. We caution that any single, mandated method for assessing and diagnosing learning disabilities that excludes reliance on reliable and valid assessments will be inadequate. Although alternative identification procedures have been proposed (and we do not rule out their use to compliment other procedures), none has achieved general acceptance in education or professional psychology. None of the proposed alternatives meet the criterion of technical adequacy. Any alternative procedure that does not include an emphasis on technically sound assessment will necessarily produce untoward variability in service delivery due to reliability, validity, and administration problems. The alternative procedures may be more likely to deny services to students with specific learning disabilities while granting services to students who do not show evidence of special educational needs. Ultimately, less reliance on comprehensive,

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Now this was not automatically a welcome idea. These kids love school, they really do, and they want to go there. Ivory looked at me as if I were developmentally delayed. But we loaded Samantha, the last passenger, and I "phoned in" to Dairy Queen our orders — seven Oreo Blizzards, six cokes and a senior coffee — on the intercom. Yes, I have an intercom. It echoes inside the bus like the voice of God.

"He's kidding," Samantha reassured Ivory. "See, we're going to school."

I stopped the bus at Pier Park and opened the door and "took in" our orders plus napkins from the woods. Jacoby distributed the goods, and we had a good lip-smacking time of it. Story is powerful to these kids. Anthony got so happy he wet his pants. Continuing on to school, I scolded Hurricane Lee for eating too fast and warned Ashley not to spill any. By the time I got them to school, Hurricane Lee was retching and two others rolled off the bus with tummy aches.

Ivory tolerates, but does not relish, such foolishness.

What Ivory likes are the classics. Snow White is her favorite character. Ivory asks for that story when the other kids have been dropped off, when only she and I are bound homeward. But "Snow White" does get tiresome and has too many characters if you ask me, and so I also tell her "Snow White and the Beanstalk." "Snow White and the Three Bears." Ivory really gets into that one. I tell the story slow enough that she can repeat the best lines. Pretty soon she is only listening, rapt. I get to the part where Somebody has been sleeping in my bed, and Ivory goes, "OH-MY . . . (deep breath) . . . GAAAWD!!!"

Explain this to me. I've taught King Lear. I taught Sometimes a Great Notion to sharp sophomores. Yet I don't recall any classroom experience more satisfying than when Ivory Broom breaks into "Snow White and the Three Bears" with "OH-MY ... GAAAWD!!!"

I get the willies, you know? The good willies.

Now this Hurricane Lee whom I have mentioned once or twice is a turbocharged seven-year-old in flashy athletic gear who sprints across the lawn and leaps onto the bus each morning while still getting dressed, swinging his backpack, papers flying in his wake. I thought at first the Hurricane spoke a squeaky language all his own. In fact he just talks unintelligibly fast. He has a smile that can light up all of February, but the boy cannot sit still. Ivory keeps an eye on him for me. "BUS . . . DRI . . . VER . . . LOOK . . . WHAT . . . HUR-RI . . . CANE . . . LEE . . . IS . . . DO-ING!!!"

On the ride home, the Hurricane sleeps.

One afternoon my nerves were shot. While loading the kids at school, I suggested that Hurricane Lee drive the bus today, and I would go in the back and sleep.

Ivory, stern as royalty, said. "NO!!! YOU . . . DRIVE . . . THE . . . BUS."

So it's not exactly true, what I said before, that Ivory thinks everything is funny. In the story that is our bus ride, nonsense is not funny. We each have our roles to play, and Ivory keeps us straight.

Oh, Ivory, I was just pulling your leg.

Now that, to her, is funny. Hilarious.

"PULL-ING . . . MY . . . LEG!!!"

Ivory loves the words. She takes the full flavor of new ones and makes them her own. She doesn't miss much unless the words go too fast for her. She does struggle with words that come over the two-way radio, and will ask me for clarification. But she never complains. That's the thing. Her flamboyant lack of self-pity. Can you imagine? I pick her up at 6:53 a.m., and we don't get to school until nearly 8:00. She is six, and she can't move on the bus. At school she takes nourishment through a tube straight to her stomach. She is only now learning to eat. On the way home Ivory is often exhausted. "I . . . AM . . . NOT . . . TIRED." But then her eyes don't track, and her little hands won't work right. Even then, she will not complain.

Are you comfortable back there, Darlin'?

"TEN-FOUR. THANKS."

See, I try to explain this and my eyes get watery just on their own. This is Ivory Broom's story, but it is my story, too. I can't wait to get up and get going each day. Fire up the bus. Hear what Ivory has to say.

I told you how Ivory loves "Snow White and the Three Bears?" Well, there's a problem with the ending to that story, and Ivory knows it. I didn't know it until she kept giving me that puzzled no-reaction, a baffled silence, whenever I finished. Like, Is that all? Snow White just ran out of there and fled through the woods? Because if you think about it, Snow White should never have gone into the three bears' house in the first place.

So then what? I asked Ivory. What happened to Snow White?

Ivory thought it over. "AND . . . THEN," she said, "SNOW . . . WHITE ... SAW . . . A . . . BLUE . . . BUT-TER . . . FLY."

So you see: now we have a satisfactory ending to that story.

*Editor's note: Robin Cody, one of Oregon's finest writers, is the author of a novel, **Ricochet River**, and a Columbia River travelogue, **Voyage of a Summer Sun** (Oregon Book Award). This story is reprinted with his permission and that of the University of Portland's **Portland Magazine** (Spring 2003) where "Miss Ivory Broom" first appeared.*

*School Psychologist of the Year
... Nomination Time*

It's time to nominate candidates for the Outstanding School Psychologist Award for 2003. One individual will be selected from among those nominated and will be recognized during the statewide conference in the Fall. Nominees must be members of OSPA, and must have made exemplary contributions to the profession by providing direct services to students, parents, schools, and communities.

To receive a nomination packet, contact Nominations and Awards Committee chair Colleen Caulfield at <ccaufield@bendcable.com>. Nominations are due by May 30, 2003.

Personal Perspective (from p. 1)

health model of primary/secondary/tertiary prevention with special education eligibility being the last stop in the evaluation process. Here are several concerns I have; perhaps some readers also share them.

First, school psychologists might consider being careful what they ask for and what they say regarding the place of general ability measures in the evaluation process. Statements or things said that give the perception that measures of general ability are irrelevant or useless in understanding learning issues for a child seem extreme to me. Generally school staff and parents want to know about a child's intellectual strengths and weaknesses as well as how the student does in achievement areas. School psychologists are the best trained people to provide that information. The challenge is how to address the criticisms of IQ measures and their relationship to the current definition of learning disability without casting them out of the process. The eligibility team decides on an assessment plan but within the parameters set by the definitions of disabilities.

Second, the current eligibility criteria require that efforts be made to correct academic deficiencies, e.g., regular education interventions, Title 1, before special education is considered as a sort of last resort. Unfortunately, as school funding becomes a crisis in states, classroom teachers find themselves with more students and fewer resources. In Oregon, one of the first funding streams to be cut was money for school improvement to target primary age children with reading acquisition problems. Therefore, a model based on general education providing adequate interventions first e.g., it's their problem, may fly in the face of draconian budget cuts.

Finally, the current federal definition of what constitutes a learning disability is broad and includes not only academic areas such as reading, but listening and thinking. Certainly tremendous advances have been made and substantiated in the literature for early identification and intervention for children with reading difficulties. A number of districts in Oregon and elsewhere have creatively re-structured

grade alignments, grouped students, used Title 1 dollars, in order to provide intensive instruction in reading readiness and reading skills. Those students who gain the least are the ones who present with well documented learning problems.

The challenge is how to build an operational definition of learning disabilities that includes those students who may have learning problems in other areas such as math and writing and also may experience difficulties at a later time as in the intermediate grades or secondary grades. Hopefully calm heads prevail and political posturing is kept to a minimum as we enter into the process of re-authorization. The good news is that a lot of preparation has already been done, the issues are well known, and major organizations such as NASP are working diligently on the matter. If you have something to say I encourage you to do so and become part of the process.

(Steve Haskell, Ph. D., is past president of the Oregon School Psychologists Association and OSPA's current Legislative chairperson)

*Nominate a colleague for school
psychologist of the year
(see info on p. 6)*

About the Flier in this issue...

So... the *OSPA Bulletin* staff was out visiting a school with a high Latino population a few months back, and came across a bright yellow leaflet from a national parenting association announcing, in Spanish: "Resources for Parents." "Nice idea," we said to one another, and released our Hispanophile researcher from his other *Bulletin* duties to check out the leaflet's internet suggestions.

Lots of resources, but nothing—*nada*, zip—in Spanish. What we had was a nicely translated leaflet proffering pulchritudinous pages of precious advice which, in themselves, had never been translated from English.

The enclosed double-sided sheet (feel free to reproduce it) represents the *Bulletin* staff's best attempt, in a couple of weeks of research, to do what the leaflet didn't: suggest solid, helpful internet sites that might be of use to Spanish speaking parents who have access to the internet.



The *OSPA Bulletin*, the official publication of the Oregon School Psychologists Association, is published four times a year and distributed to members as a membership benefit. OSPA is a nonprofit, nonpartisan, educational association of professional school psychologists. It is dedicated to providing for the educational and mental health needs of all children and to advocating for their achievement of independence, dignity, and purpose of life.

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The *OSPA Bulletin* invites contributions. Professional issues and news, articles, questions, reviews, letters and graphic works should be sent to David Streight, 7735 SW 87th, Portland OR, 97223, or <streight@rsiss.net>. Changes of address should be sent to Brian Craig, Membership Chairperson, 2727 Old Fort Rd., Klamath Falls OR, 97601, or <bcraig@cvc.net>.

Bulletin deadlines for future issues:

Summer, June 15, 2003
Fall, September 15, 2003

Miss Ivory Broom

Little girl. Huge spirit.

By Robin Cody

I am in love with a six-year-old. She is in the first grade and rides in a wheelchair on my school bus to a special education class at Sitton Elementary School, far north in St. Johns, near the University. She is the first child I pick up each morning. We have some quality time together.

First a little background on the human neural tube. In embryonic development, the neural tube begins as a flat plate of cells that folds down the center. The two edges loop to form a tube. The tube then develops into the brain and spinal cord.

Unless it doesn't. Something goes haywire in the unfolding of genetic instructions about how to make and run a human being. If the upper end of the neural tube (near the brain) stays open, it's fatal. If the lower end of the neural tube stays open, it isn't fatal, and surgeons can repair this condition soon after birth, but what you get is an incomplete child. You get spina bifida. You get Miss Ivory Broom. Only her top half works.

Knowing this, I was a nervous wreck before I even got to Ivory's house the first day of school. I'd practiced the hydraulic lift and tie-downs on a spare wheelchair at the bus yard, but you never know how a fragile child will fit securely. What if I have to brake suddenly? What if some idiot runs a stop sign and hits us broadside?

Anyway here she came, that first day, wheeled out from a low green house by a young mother in purple bath thongs. Ivory herself was not at all the pathetic broken creature I'd prepared myself for. She was fair-skinned with freckles and big fearless blue eyes and light brown hair that her mom had fixed into a complex French braid. No bigger than a large chinook salmon, Ivory came rolling toward the bus strapped tightly into her wheelchair and wearing an eager lopsided grin like this was a yellow amusement park ride and she was the luckiest girl in the world to get on it. Ivory waved her little fingers at me as the lift took us up, and I thought, Uh-oh, she lacks arm control, too. But no. She was showing me — so proud — her two-tone manicure.

I had focused so hard on what's wrong with Ivory that she just floored me with what's right! Her tiny fingers. Her pretty hair. Her spirit. Turns out this kid has huge spirit.

She also has the lungs and brass voice of a squad sergeant. Although her brain works slowly, Ivory has language. She bellows it out one syllable at a time. Like the other day I told her she was lucky to have a mom who loves her so much, and she said, "YOU . . . GOT . . . THAT . . . RIGHT."

I told Ivory I love my own daughter, and my daughter's name is Heidi.

She thought that was very funny. Ivory thinks almost everything is funny. When she was through laughing — one har at a time — she said, "BUS . . . DRI . . . VER . . . YOU . . . ARE . . . A . . . CHAR-AC . . . TER."

Well, I guess that's not exceptional, now that I write it. Maybe you had to be there. You had to hear the life-loving relish with which

she belts it out. Or just the other morning we were almost to school. I had a full load of six broken kids on the bus and Ivory back there said, "OOOH . . . GROSS!!!"

What's gross, Ivory?

Never, on this run, is everyone's attention beamed in one direction. But here she'd nailed all of us. We waited. The dramatic tension was exquisite.

"MY . . . SNOT," she said.

Because, you see, when Ivory has the sniffles but fumbles her tissue onto the floor she cannot pick it up. She was just letting me know so I could stop the bus and let Jacoby get up to assist her. Oh, that's the other thing. Jacoby. Jacoby Hagens is (or was, at the start of the school year) a tough sullen fifth grader who got kicked out of his neighborhood school for defiance and for not trying. Self-pitying, resentful for having to ride this short bus "with the retards" to his own special ed program, Jacoby can poison the air inside my bus just sitting there if he chooses to. At first, he chose to. Or maybe, I think now, he was just scared. Lost. But anyway, Ivory's daily greeting — "JA . . . CO-BY..I . . . AM . . . HAP-PY . . . TO . . . SEE . . . YOU." — began to coax a smile out of him.

Soon Jacoby began sitting opposite Ivory's wheelchair and talking to her.

And just the other day — this really got me — I saw in the mirror they were holding hands across the aisle back there. Jacoby now has a spring in his step to the bus each morning. He is teaching Ivory her numbers. He also helps Ashley (brain-squashed, from the car wreck that killed her mother) and Anthony (developmentally delayed) fasten their seatbelts, which they cannot do themselves. His teacher tells me Jacoby is doing his schoolwork. (!) The little ones recently elected him President of the Bus.

So you see. Ivory would not let Jacoby brood. What we have here is a busload of children who have every reason to feel sorry for themselves. But despair? Ivory Broom won't have it.

So anyway. You've seen school buses. Mine is a short one, a special ed bus with never more than half a dozen kids aboard. You get to know them. This bus has five seats and two wheelchair spaces. The lift folds outward from the right rear. What I do is I drive these birth-damaged or world-beaten children to schools often far from where they live. I make several runs and put 90 miles on the bus each day. It's not all candy and balloons like on the Ivory Broom run. Some kids are "special" because their behavior was too disruptive where they were. I glimpse some home lives that reek of desperation. Every day I see despair. I hear it in the children's voices.

"My daddy's in jail."

"We're not having Christmas this year. Dad says we can't afford it."

"Mom didn't come home last night."

When I asked one girl her plans for the weekend, she said, "We're canning." That's nice, I thought. Putting up preserves. But it became clear she meant scavenging the trash for aluminum cans.

Some unimaginable sadness. Some things I never would have thought of. One middle-schooler was so increasingly hyper on the ride home I called his mother out to the bus. She was too zonked to make sense of me. Later, the boy's teacher explained to me it's not unheard of for a parent to take a kid's medications, to be downing the meds herself.

Not that I could say for sure that's what happened. But boy . . .

Despair is when you're Devon and you're twelve and you have a slow brain and bad teeth and the wrong clothes and got kicked in the nuts by those girls on the playground and told you are dirty because you are black, and YOU got in trouble because you fought back. The teacher wrote it up — fighting with girls — and now your dad will fly into a rage when you get home. You're the last rider on this demeaning short bus. You rock in your seat and your eyes are wild with fear and your shoulders begin shaking. Your eyes meet those of the bus driver in the overhead mirror, and it all comes gushing out.

"My dad won't believe me," Devon sobs. "I'm always in trouble. I'm stupid. I'm ugly. It's not fair." Devon wails, and this is the rock-bottom truth. It's just not fair. He hopes nobody will be at his home, and I will have to deliver him to Children's Club. Try to imagine. How would you like to be terrorized at school and afraid to go home? Devon is not a bad boy.

Suck it up, Devon. I'll talk to your dad when we get there.

But hey. You have kids? Hug your children. We can beat back despair on my Ivory Broom run because those children come from loving families. They get a kiss good-bye from Mom or Dad, and smiles when I deliver them home. It just goes to show you. What a difference to the damaged ones a warm family makes.

Now here comes Samantha, a late addition to my Ivory Broom run. Another wheelchair girl. Samantha is twelve, with breasts and makeup. Belligerent, self-absorbed, foul-mouthed, she came wheeling out that first day from a squalid house by an unwashed uncle with mean dull eyes. Right away Samantha informed me, "I have an attitude."

Please, Samantha. Not on my bus, you don't. Consider these sweet other children.

Ivory, of course, adored Samantha from the start. You know how little girls look up to big girls. Only more so: Samantha's wheelchair is motorized.

One morning before loading, Samantha threw a feeble punch at her uncle and kicked off a wheelchair footrest and — with Ivory watching, wide-eyed — screamed obscenities skyward. I closed the lift and drove off and left her on the sidewalk. And because she would much rather go to school than stay home, her

behavior improved in succeeding days. But then another morning Samantha told me, as I was lifting her, that she was tired of living. She didn't want to go on living. Think of this. Your heart goes out to a young person so desperate, so despairing. And so in the privacy of the lift I whispered to Samantha that if she comes out with the F-word one more time — just once — I am going to wring her neck.

Not really. I didn't say that. You can't threaten a student. There are school psychologists for this sort of situation.

But what I was saying was I took this bus-driving job just hoping for routine. Routine, I'd thought, might kill dread. And it's true, there is something to be said for scheduledness. But the real deal is story. You've got all these little characters, and each of them is a story. You can't help thinking who, or how much, they are.

Story, it turns out, is the assassin of despair.

This began to dawn on me on a different run. I had a busload of five sad little autistic K-1 boys who had no words in common except "Uh-oh," and "No." There was a brief, one-block descent on that run where I turned from Southeast Sacramento Street and dropped off the Alameda ridge on 60th. The bus nosed down and Eddy Lavares said "Uh-oh" and all the boys screamed bloody murder until I wheeled left onto Thompson and announced, "We made it!"

This is a very short story, but it is. The boys never tired of it. Day after day. "Uh-oh." Screams. "We made it!"

What I'm saying here is these boys didn't have words, but they had story. We were our own story. This story brought them great joy. Still, I didn't quite realize what we had there until the children on my Ivory Broom run — with more complexity because three of them are what you might call verbal — came up with the same story. Yes.

We were cruising west on Lombard in the pre-dawn dark. Light rain. Mushy leaves lined the street.

"Bus Driver!" said Ashley, in high alarm. "Car behind us!"

They all, except Ivory, turned to look. Ivory cannot turn. "WHAT?!" she said.

"Car behind us!"

Well, on Lombard there is always a car behind us. But now Hurricane Lee, as rear gunner, aimed over the back seat and made machine gun sounds. The others (who could) formed pistols of their fists and forefingers and blasted away at the offending vehicle. I don't encourage guns on the bus, but what the hell. It's a story. We were one step ahead of the Federales, my little desperadoes and me.

"Ditch them," Jacoby said.

I have to stay on my route, always, but coming up was a turn off Lombard onto Charleston Street. And there — sure enough — as I wheeled to the right, the Federales sailed on down Lombard and away.

We ditched them. We made it!

One morning I was messing with their heads. OK, kids. No school today. We're going to Dairy Queen.

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