



30 years of advocating for Massachusetts students with special needs: A story of five exceptional people

By James V. Major, Executive Director, Massachusetts Association of 766-Approved Private Schools (maaps)

When I'm asked to describe my 30 years leading our commonwealth's association of schools serving students with special needs—the Massachusetts Association of 766-Approved Private Schools, or maaps—I don't really think about me.

Rather, I think about five specific people who together tell the story of the extraordinary honor I've had of leading this organization of "exceptional schools for exceptional children," dedicated to advocating for the nearly 8,000 students our member schools teach and serve.

Two are now-famous political leaders. One was a passionate advocate for children with special needs. And two are students whose lives were rescued and transformed by maaps member schools, just two of the countless stories that epitomize the very best of what our schools can achieve and do every day.

1. **House Speaker Robert DeLeo:** Back in 2000, before Bob was Speaker DeLeo or even Chairman DeLeo, forces at the State House were pushing for "reforms" that threatened to severely limit Massachusetts' special education laws, programs, and services. No rank-and-file legislator argued more passionately and successfully against the worst of these proposals than Bob DeLeo, at considerable risk to his political career. I remember watching him speak out against the service cuts at a public hearing and thinking that he would have to pay a price for his courage. In an extraordinary display of values and commitment, he spoke truth to power about how devastating the worst of these changes could be, and he saved children from cutbacks in the level and quality of services that would damage the arc of their entire lives.
2. **Senate President Karen Spilka:** Not many people know this, but the Senate President began her career as a social worker in one of our member schools. Trained as a social worker at Cornell, President Spilka began her career at the former ISEC School, which was affiliated with the Boston University School of Medicine's Department of Child

Psychiatry at what today is BU Medical Center. This is one of many reasons why the Senate President has always understood the importance of delivering high-quality special education. I happen to be a native Arkansan, and when I go back to visit family, the contrast reinforces a dramatic difference: Here in Massachusetts, it's clear that one of the things we most deeply value and cherish as a society is education, and for every student to achieve their maximum potential, even those with challenging special needs and disabilities. In Speaker DeLeo and President Spilka, Massachusetts, and especially its children with special needs and their families, are deeply lucky to have leaders who "get it" when we talk about why quality education for ALL matters.

3. **Martha Ziegler:** The founder of the Federation for Children with Special Needs, Martha passed away in 2014 after a life that transformed opportunities for literally millions of children across our country. Two years after Massachusetts enacted its nation-leading Chapter 766 in 1972 that guaranteed all children a right to "free, appropriate" education, Martha founded the Federation to help parents learn how to use the law to get their children the education they were promised. Her own daughter, Mary Ann, who had autism, was among the children who at that point were forbidden to enroll in school and forced to stay home. I will never forget a session one night in Newton where Martha was explaining to a crowd of parents the meaning, requirements, and provisions of the law. I began to hear muffled sobs, even crying, from the people in attendance. These were tears of joy—the joy of parents who were learning that for the first time, their child who'd been locked out of school because of a disability would finally be welcomed in to get the special education and support the law promised them. That was the night I decided to make this my life's work, too.
4. **Joe:** A tall, handsome, blonde athlete, Joe was one of the students who joined maaps for our annual legislative briefing days in which maaps leaders, member schools, and the students and parents they serve would meet state senators and representatives to put a human face on the positive impact of these schools—including the thousands of Massachusetts public school district students they serve whose education needs cannot be met in conventional public schools. I looked at this college-bound young man and saw someone whose life and future seemed outwardly perfect. What Joe was courageous enough to share that day was how long and how hard he had struggled with depression, even making several attempts at suicide, before he finally found his way into one of our member schools that serves students with behavioral health challenges. The room fell silent as he shared how the school had saved his life and put him on the path to college, a degree in English, and a successful working career. We were stunned to hear that he had faced such hardship and had overcome so much. I have never forgotten that story, and his courage in telling it, and it has served as an inspiration to me.

5. **Louise:** Like Joe, Louise was another student who came to one of maaps' State House briefing days. Louise had been born deaf in China and by the time she arrived in this country as an immigrant, had never acquired any language of any kind. It was only when she enrolled at The Learning Center for the Deaf in Framingham that she began to learn to read and to communicate, using American Sign Language. Louise blossomed. Years of pent-up potential were finally set free. The day she spoke to us, it was as the school's valedictorian. Today, she is a college student in New York, majoring in international and global studies, studying to become an ASL teacher—and also now learning Japanese Sign Language so she can teach deaf students there. Just imagine how many children will be “paid forward” by the devotion of Louise and the teachers who empowered her to be who she is today.

Serving as Executive Director of maaps and supporting the schools that do this life-changing work for students from across our state, nation and even world has been the central honor of my life. It was inspired by Martha. It's involved decades of advocacy and policymaking input with wise, sensitive leaders like Speaker DeLeo and President Spilka.

And at the end of the day, it's been all about changing the lives and unleashing the awesome potential of students like Joe and Louise.