

Educators, attorneys collaborate for special-needs planning

BY KELLY LIYAKASA
kellyl@westfairinc.com

It is estimated that 14 percent of children in the U.S. are classified as having special needs.

Nearly 22 percent of all households with

children have at least one child with special needs, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Special education and early identification are crucial to individual survival and development.

"People with disabilities are living lon-

ger now," said Bernard A. Krooks, founding partner of Littman Krooks L.L.P. in White Plains, Fishkill and New York City, and past president of the Special Needs Alliance.

"Years ago, if you had Down's Syndrome or another disability, you lived until 30 or 40. Now, we see kids on the autism spectrum liv-

ing normal, typical lifespans."

That lifespan has lengthened to even age 50 or 60, Krooks said.

Modern medicine has played a role as have more advanced methods of identifying children and adults with special needs.

"Over the past 10 years, a significant change has occurred in special education in traditional schools," said Nicole Schimpf, director of special education and student services for the Mount Pleasant Central School District. "There has been a real push to integrate kids with special needs into typical classrooms with many integrated into co-teaching environments."

The co-teaching model breaks special needs students into groups for individualized instruction by a general teacher and a specialized teacher.

There are self-advocacy and behavior modification components to introduce life skills, safety and communication to the students.

"Unfortunately, with the cutbacks in education on the federal and New York state level, money available to allocate for these issues is drying up," Krooks said. "Parents are on the edge whether or not they need these services."

Special education advocacy attorneys are often on the front lines connecting families and school systems in transition planning to prepare students for jobs.

The majority of special needs funding rests on the school districts, Schimpf said, but she lauded community partnerships as an integral part of the joint collaborative equation.

Krooks, a board member of Westchester Arc, an agency serving those with developmental disabilities and their families, has employed a woman with a developmental disability as an office assistant at his law firm for the past five years.

She was hired through Westchester Arc's programs. Krooks called her "a terrific employee who always comes in, sits down and does her work."

The perception of the special needs student and worker is changing, but there is much room for growth.

"The misconception is often that the person is different, but they're just unique," Krooks said. "I think that's what's great about (Westchester) Arc and organizations like it. They don't view the developmentally disabled as a problem to solve, but rather - what can they contribute to the community."